Liminal Spaces
Migration and Women of the Guyanese Diaspora

Edited by Grace Aneiza Ali

Liminal Spaces is an intimate exploration into the migration narratives of women of Guyanese heritage. It spans diverse inter-generational perspectives – from those who leave Guyana, and those who are left – and seven seminal decades of Guyana's history – from the 1950s to the present day – bringing the voices of women to the fore. The volume is conceived of as a visual exhibition on the page; a four-part journey navigating the contributors' essays and artworks, allowing the reader to trace the migration path of Guyanese women from their moment of departure, to their arrival on diasporic soils, to their reunion with Guyana.

Eloquent and visually stunning, Liminal Spaces unpacks the global realities of migration, challenging and disrupting dominant narratives associated with Guyana, its colonial past, and its post-colonial present as a 'disappearing nation'. Multimodal in approach, the volume combines memoir, creative non-fiction, poetry, photography, art and curatorial essays to collectively examine the mutable notion of 'homeland', and grapple with ideas of place and accountability.

This volume is a welcome contribution to the scholarly fields of international migration, transnationalism, and diaspora, both in its creative methodological approach, and in its subject area – as one of the only studies published on Guyanese diaspora. It is essential reading to those studying women and migration, and scholars and students of diaspora studies.

As with all Open Book publications, this entire book is available to read for free on the publisher's website. Printed and digital editions, together with supplementary digital material, can also be found at www.openbookpublishers.com

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13.

A Daughter’s Journey
from Indenture to Windrush

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Maria del Pilar Kaladeen

Figure 13.1

The passport page features the portrait of my father, Paul Kaladeen, who left Guyana (then British Guiana) in 1961. It would be forty-five years before he would see his country of birth again. Maria del Pilar Kaladeen Family Collection.

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https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0218.17
I grew up knowing nothing about the history or culture of my father. Courtesy of the British Empire, I am the by-product of two mass migrations: the migration of my great grandparents from India to Guyana in the latter part of the nineteenth century as Indian indentured laborers; and the migration of my father, Paul, from then British Guiana to the United Kingdom in 1961. Paul was part of what later became known in Britain as the ‘Windrush Generation.’ The first of his four siblings to leave Guyana, he was also the only one who chose to come to the United Kingdom, while his siblings were part of a later migration to Canada. He left British Guiana’s capital Georgetown by boat. Accompanying him were a childhood friend and two other young men, who all shared a cabin in a three-week journey to Plymouth in South West England. My father had hoped to see the world, yet within four years he had permanently settled in London. In his third year in the city he met a woman from the northwest of Spain who had also made her home in London. Within a year they were married. A procession of babies, of which I was the last, terminated any ambitions either of them may have had for themselves.

My parents’ attitude toward who their children should be, in a country to which they had both migrated, inadvertently rendered me a cultural orphan. I have always felt that I was left unarmed in a society that did not accept me. As an undergraduate, I discovered a small section in the university library on Caribbean literature. It included novels and works of poetry by Indian-Caribbean writers. From these books I learned that I was part of a community and by reading as much as I could, I slowly absorbed the story of indenture in the Caribbean and began a journey that continues to this day.

Two things have shaped the direction of my adult life: my father’s silence about his ancestry and the racism that my brothers and I experienced as children of Guyanese-Spanish heritage growing up in West London in the 1970s and 1980s. This was a time when every institution that carried authority attempted to convince immigrant parents that a sense of cultural identity was an obstacle, rather than a lifeline and a necessity. ‘You were born here,’ my parents would say. ‘You’re British.’ I remember these years as being darkly lit, gloomy. The prevailing attitude of this time in Britain was a bleak one where racism was an everyday experience. My dad was brown and my mother, although white, was not much better. As far as our little island was concerned, they were both ‘fucking foreigners.’

For much of my early life, I struggled to understand my father’s heritage. As a child, I knew the part of me that was most hated in the place I called home came from him. This never changed the love I had for him. To the contrary, I clung to my connection to his identity as a constant solid thing because I believed I had nothing else. I wasn’t Spanish-speaking, I had no Spanish family, and nothing connected me to England beyond the accident of having been born there. In these circumstances, all I could be was my father’s daughter. The only thing that people saw when they looked at me was a face that didn’t fit; if I wanted a role model in un-belonging, I need not look any further than my father—the progenitor of my incongruity. Yet everything I knew
about his background was fragmentary. He was from a country called Guyana. It used to be a British colony. Inexplicably he was both Indian and South American. And this meant that the children who pelted the word ‘Paki’ at us in the streets were essentially correct. Correct in the sense that this word was used in the UK, as a derogatory term for anyone of South Asian origin.

One night, some neighborhood children threw dog shit against the window of the room that I was sleeping in; this is one of my earliest memories. They had wrapped it in pink toilet paper and some of this paper stuck to the window. There was no joy in the fact that they were forced, either by the police or their parents, to wipe it off the following day. They lived on that street and for the foreseeable future, we would have to see these little fuckers on a weekly basis.

What wears you down more in the end: the big incidents like these? Or, the incessant daily questioning of identity:
‘Where are you from?’
‘No, where are you really from?’
‘But where are you from originally?’
‘And before that?’

I understood I wouldn’t be permitted to belong to the UK in a myriad of ways. Maybe I was even conscious of it before I could speak. My mum once told me people would shout abuse at her in the streets as she pushed the pram. I wonder how this must have felt for her and for my brothers. They would have been old enough to understand that she was a target because we bore no resemblance to her. Her skin was white, her hair straight and fair and her eyes blue. We, on the other hand, had varying shades of brown skin, brown eyes, and dark brown wavy hair. In my primary and junior school there were no children of South Asian heritage; in my secondary school there were two. If there were South Asian families living in our area, I didn’t know any of them. We certainly didn’t know any other Guyanese families. There were a lot of Spanish immigrants who made their home in West London in the 1970s and 1980s, but we were so obviously beyond their understanding that there could be no way forward there. Like so many children who have no other way to put themselves in context, I found solace and succor in the local library. I never read a book about anyone like me until I left home to go to university, but in weekly, and sometimes daily, visits I managed to leave a world in which I was largely unaccepted and alone.

I remember the past in snapshots. My dad, perennially exhausted from the oppressive hours he worked as a waiter, was almost always unsmiling. I don’t imagine that he intended to be mysterious or unavailable, but he was. I spent a lot of time watching him as a child. I would watch him shave. I would watch him cook. For a man battling the challenge of steering four dual-heritage sons through an institutionally racist country at a time when unemployment rates were high, a daughter who read books must have been a thing of great relief.
My parents’ attempts to keep my brothers out of trouble were hampered by their own explosive relationship. Any hopes they had for us were repeatedly dimmed as the two eldest served prison sentences and the two youngest were lost to drugs and alcohol. The next few years were ones where the library became more important to me as I abandoned homework to hide in paper, spines, plastic covers, and stories where I no longer had to inhabit the grey, unrelenting concrete misery of West London. I was fierce on the outside, perennially dressed in black clothes and Doc Martens boots. One October morning, age fifteen, I walked out of school and never went back. Too young to work straight away, I was determined not to return to school. From that autumn, to my birthday in the spring of the next year, I would walk at least twice a week to my local library and then on to Kensington Central Library, which was bigger and had more books. I walked deliberately, absorbed in my Walkman; hopeless, rootless, untethered.

I started full-time work as soon as I was sixteen. The afternoon I told my dad, he sat in a chair with his head in his hands for an hour. I believe he always imagined that what had happened was a hump in the road, a blip. I would go back to school. Many years later he told me about a similar hour he had spent with his father when he was leaving British Guiana to come to England. My father had what I imagined must have been a decent enough job in Georgetown as an apprentice court reporter in the Parliament Building. Why would he want to leave his family and go to a foreign country where he knew no one? After a couple of years, I saw my life ahead of me, doing the same shitty jobs for the same shitty pay; I finally understood that in leaving school so young I had trapped myself. I signed up to a distance learning college and began the long journey to university.

Challenging years followed. I had no study skills, I had been intellectually absent from my short secondary school career and this was never more apparent than when I attempted to write an essay or complete an assignment. I failed as many exams as I passed. In the background I could feel my dad willingness me to succeed. Hoping against all present evidence that one of us might be saved. ‘Don’t be me.’ He had silently screamed at us our entire lives. ‘Don’t drown in this immigrant shit. Be more, be better.’ He had told me once that he felt his greatest tragedy was never really knowing what he wanted to do with his life. Any aspirations to explore those desires when he left British Guiana for the UK had been abandoned to take on the harsh reality of supporting a family of five children. Was it easier for him to let his future go because it had never really been fully defined?

And then came the impossible thing, the moment when the years of reading paid off. A succession of failures was obliterated by the reception of an ‘A’ grade in the Advanced Level English Language and Literature—the exam that got me into university. This was easily the most important moment of my life. More so than any moment that followed it, including completing a doctorate. It was the first tangible
proof that a future was possible. I could go to university. That much was clear from this qualification. The blurry outline of an elite institution where I could be blanketed by knowledge was nudged closer and I dared to think I might have a path distinct from that of my brothers; one that did not involve prison, regret, disappointment, and drugs.

As a mature student with a patchy educational history I was summoned for an interview by all six of the universities I applied to. Three of these were outside London and required long train journeys for what amounted to no more than a thirty-minute interview. I remember each of these interviews in great detail; for the first time I was able to talk about my favorite books to people who seemed to love them as much as I did. In train rides to York, Leeds, and Manchester, I felt myself moving forward, away from the past and its shame: the dogshit at the window, the racial abuse, the endless sense that nothing would go right for me. Positive responses trickled back. Royal Holloway, University of London, where I would eventually complete my PhD, gave me an unconditional offer. It was based in Egham, just outside London and this was a problem. It seemed to make sense that I should start a new part of my life in a different city.

In the end I chose Leeds, where I spent the best, but hardest years of my life. In the final term of university, I began to reflect seriously on the question of my cultural identity. I remember a lecturer asking me why my grandfather had ‘moved’ to British Guiana. I had no idea how to answer this question. I didn’t even know whether or not my grandfather had been born in India or British Guiana. In fact, I barely knew or understood what the system of indentured labor was. Having reached my final year of university without dropping out or doing anything that had been expected of me, I earned the right to have questions about the past answered. There were long telephone calls from Leeds to London where my dad would attempt to give satisfactory answers to my questions about his family and how and where he’d grown up. It helped that around this time his two sisters came from Canada to visit him and they made a journey north to see me. The four of us walked around Leeds city center all day, stopping here and there for lunch, for coffee, and talking endlessly about great-grandparents and grandparents. By the end of their visit I had a basic understanding of the paternal side of my father’s family. His years of silence about Guyana had ended. My aunts had legitimized my curiosity by answering my questions in front of him. Their stories about my great grandparents filled me with pride and countered the shame racism had taught me to feel as a child. I learned that my father’s great grandmother had made the journey to British Guiana alone with a young daughter. The man that her daughter eventually married, my father’s paternal grandfather, had achieved near folk-hero status by attacking a bullying plantation overseer and narrowly escaping prison.

Two books bracketed my undergraduate degree, the most important I read as a young person. In my first year as a student I found a copy of Hanif Kureishi’s first
novel *The Buddha of Suburbia* in a bookshop in the city center. Like many dual-heritage readers before me I was floored by the first line that stood as a challenge to everyone who had questioned my right to articulate my own identity: ‘My name is Karim Amir, and I am an Englishman born and bred, almost.’ Immediately I was at home in these pages, relieved that I had finally found a book about someone like me—the child of an intercultural marriage trying desperately to stay afloat. Then there was *The Intended* by the Guyanese-born author David Dabydeen. One of the university libraries had an impressive selection of Caribbean literature. Although I didn’t need any of the books on these shelves, I had taken to sitting next to them while studying for my penultimate set of exams before graduation. In breaks I could scan the shelves and pull something out without even leaving my chair. I discovered in *The Intended* the story that would decide the course of my eventual academic career.

In *The Intended* I found I was not alone. The novel’s depiction of a young Indian-Guyanese boy struggling to make a life for himself as his friends struggled with mental health problems and fell into crime echoed my own experiences growing up with my brothers. By then my frustration with them had ceased and I had begun to understand how much of their behaviour was connected to their sense of unbelonging. I could identify with the main character in his attempts to bury his past and seek sanctuary in study—all the while conscious that the one thing he could never escape was himself. What this book meant to me went beyond the recognition of a representation of my life and the lives of young men I knew growing up in London. It was the first sense that there was something worthy in the narratives of the descendants of indentured laborers. This was a work of fiction about the experiences of indentured immigrants and their descendants. Were there more? The very act of putting this story into the world decimated any lingering ideas I had that my father’s silence meant that my history was something to be discarded and abandoned in favor of being ‘British.’

In the following weeks I formed the semblance of a plan. I would carry on studying and in the way that they always had, the libraries would help me. I knew the key for me lay in postgraduate study. I took a job in London and worked for a year, all the time searching for universities to apply to. I fell back in love with London as I trawled around antique shops looking for pieces of Guyana’s indentured history. I frequently found and bought early twentieth-century postcard images of ‘free’ and indentured Indian laborers at work in British Guiana. I became aware of the Centre for Caribbean Studies at the University of Warwick and was accepted to pursue a Master of Arts by Research. In 2002, I quit my job and went to Toronto for a few months to spend time with my father’s family. There I discovered for the first time an Indian-Caribbean community! I had timed my journey to coincide with the celebration of Indian Arrival Day and was amazed by the number of Canadians of Indian-Guyanese descent who were interested in their history. Was my dad just an anomaly? I read books, of course, lots of them, most memorably *A House for Mr. Biswas* by V. S. Naipaul, which made me
ache with both pride and the pain of recognition. For the first time I ate pepperpot, souse, black pudding, and curry with roti. My strongest thought during this trip to Toronto concerned how and when I might travel to Guyana. With no family that I knew of living there, this seemed like an impossible task. Yet I was determined to go. I had stumbled through much of my life and now something had changed—I had a sense of history and I was on a mission to contribute something positive, to honor the exceptional men and women who were part of my family story.

The year at Warwick passed in a blur. I was exhausted all the time; a job on campus as a cleaner provided me an opportunity to pay my major expenses and in this vital year, I learned how to be a researcher. Bouncing around London’s archives, I felt as though I were putting the pieces of a jigsaw together, poring over resources to recover a particular piece of indentured history. I completed my MA on the minority South Indian community of Guyana, exploring their presence in the indenture system and studying their religious traditions and literature. During the course of this research, I learned that my father’s maternal grandfather was the son of an indentured laborer from South India. The very fact that I now had access to a family who wanted to talk to me about their childhood visits to the Kali Mai Puja (a significant South Indian festival in Guyana) was a world away from the cultural silence that I had been stifled by as a child. A kindly Guyanese writer of South Indian heritage living in England, Peter Kempadoo, agreed to allow me to interview him in his Coventry home. ‘Where are you from?’ he had asked me on the phone before we met. When I replied that I was the product of a Guyanese-Spanish alliance he laughed: ‘Ah, then you’re what we call a “mix-up girl!”’ While this was undoubtedly the case, what I was no longer was a mixed-up girl. That period of my life was over.

Then in 2006 came Guyana. I registered at Royal Holloway to complete my PhD. It was inconceivable that I could continue my work without visiting Guyana’s archives. My husband was the son of a man who had spent his life travelling. Consequently, he was instrumental in convincing me it could be done. Straight away my father told me he was coming with us and by the end of the month we had accrued five more returning family members. The first week I felt lost and longed to leave. I marveled at my husband, a Scotch-Ghanaian born in Lesotho and brought-up in Malawi, as he strolled around Georgetown in the manner of a man who had never lived anywhere else. Yet I quickly came around. For a girl who had barely left London, seeing the interior of Guyana for the first time from a tiny airplane was indescribable. Although I never managed to find the documents I sought in the archives, I was happy to make unexpected connections with the people I met in the city, my father’s old school friend, distant cousins, librarians, and archivists.

The morning we arrived we went to see a first cousin of my father’s, Aunty Meena. I cannot forget her changing expression as an uncle patiently reminded her of a journey she had made with her mother in 1961 to wave off a boat that was carrying a young
man, her relative, to England. Slowly I saw it dawn on her as she repeated, each time more confidently: ‘Me remember you, me remember you.’ I cherished our visits with this aunt who appeared to love me for no other reason than that I was somehow her kin.

Our time in Guyana was over so quickly. And yet, forty-five years had passed since my father left. I think that he must have believed he would die without seeing the country again. A taxi took us to the airport. I didn’t realize that from the back of the car my husband had taken a video of us leaving. In one scene, my head is poking out of the window in the back seat as I strain to get a last look. My father, sitting in the front seat, is smiling. I imagine that this was the smile of a man of little means, who after revisiting the land of his birth realized that he did after all have something of value to give to one of his children.

Figure 13.2
My father’s return to Guyana in 2006 after forty-five years. Photo by David V. Y. Wallis. Maria del Pilar Kaladeen Family Collection.

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Bibliography


Notes

1. The phrase ‘Windrush Generation’ refers to a period of large-scale migration from the Caribbean to the United Kingdom. Roughly, this movement of people took place from 1948 through 1971. For more information, see ‘Postface: A Brief History of Migration from Guyana.’
