Liminal Spaces
Migration and Women of the Guyanese Diaspora

EDITED BY
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Liminal Spaces is an intimate exploration into the migration narratives of female 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 field 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.

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Introduction: Liminal Spaces

Grace Aneiza Ali

How was it that till questioned, till displaced in the attempt to answer, I had scarcely thought of myself as having a country, or indeed as having left a country?

Vahni Capildeo, ‘Going Nowhere, Getting Somewhere’

In 1995, my mother, father, older brother, younger sister, and I migrated from Guyana to the United States. We became part of what seemed like a mythical diaspora. It is estimated that more than one million Guyanese citizens now live in global metropolises like London, Toronto, and New York City, where they are the fifth largest immigrant group. Guyana itself has a modest population of approximately 787,000. Yet, for a country of its small size, it has one of the world’s highest out-migration rates. Having gained independence from the British in 1966, Guyana has spent the last fifty-four years trying to carve out its place on the world stage. Yet Guyanese people have long known migration as the single most defining narrative of our country. We are left to grapple with the question: When we have more Guyanese living outside the country than within its borders, what becomes of our homeland?

Since its independence from British colonial rule, the last five decades in Guyana have been defined by an extraordinary ebb and flow of its citizens. In an episode of the BBC Radio series Neither Here Nor There, host David Dabydeen, the British-Guyanese writer who left Guyana and migrated to England in 1969, examined the tremendous growth of the Guyanese diaspora since its independence. He remarked that Guyana ‘is a disappearing nation’ that has ‘to an unrivaled degree, exported its people.’ The young nation continues to grapple with the remnants of a colonial past and a postcolonial present: entrenched poverty, political corruption, repressive government regimes, racial violence, lack of education, unemployment, economic depression, and a withering away of hope for a thriving future for the country.

For those who leave one place for another, impelled by choice or trauma, remaining connected to a homeland is at once beautiful, fraught, disruptive, and evolving. Making the journey with my family when we left was a handful of photographs. For many

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families like mine who were poor with few possessions, owning photographs was a privilege; they were among our most valuable things.

We had no negatives, no JPEGs, no double copies—just originals. Decades later, these photographs serve as a tangible connection to a homeland left behind. In her novel *White Teeth*, the British-born writer of Jamaican heritage Zadie Smith writes, ‘The end is simply the beginning of an even longer story.’ Indeed, the family photograph (Fig. I.1) taken at Guyana’s Timehri International Airport in the 1970s captures a moment in time between concluding an old life and preparing for a new one. In the photograph, my mother (center in floral pink dress), in her early twenties at the time, poses with her mother, aunts and elder sister. They are bidding farewell to her sister (back row) who was leaving for Barbados, and who would later embark on a second migration to Canada. For the next two decades, as she grappled with a stifling poverty gripping many Guyanese, as well as the loss of her parents, my mother
watched as her brothers and sisters, one by one, boarded planes to leave Guyana for neighboring Caribbean islands, and then later for Canada and the US, using student visas, work visas, marriage visas—whatever it took. The photograph reveals movement and transition as the constants in our lives where airports often served as sites for family reunions. Before I too boarded my first plane at age fourteen to depart Guyana on a one-way flight bound for New York’s JFK Airport, I had long resented planes as the violent machines that fragmented families and broke friendships. When in 1995 the immigration papers finally ‘came through,’ as we say in Guyana, after a decade of waiting, it was our turn to be the ones leaving. We followed the blueprint that my mother’s family had mapped in their departures from Guyana. We made our way to North America to join her siblings who were now split between the US and Canada.

While witnessing the exodus of her entire family from her homeland was unbearable, nothing prepared my mother for the trials of being a new immigrant in the 1990s in the Washington, DC suburbs where we eventually settled. There she transitioned from a housewife in Guyana to a mother supporting three children on foreign soil with nothing available to her but minimum-wage jobs. When my mother got on that plane with her children and left for the unknown, did she think of her act, and the acts of what so many Guyanese and Caribbean women had done before, as brave or remarkable or necessary? Did she understand at the time how mythical the ‘American Dream’ was, deciding nonetheless to go after it? Was she prepared for the disappointment? What I do know for sure is that, like so many Guyanese women, my mother single-handedly rerouted the course of her children’s lives, forever changing who we would become in the twenty-first-century world.

Since leaving Guyana at fourteen years old, I’ve now lived in the US longer than I’ve lived in Guyana. I am no longer confined by the term ‘Resident Alien,’ as my American green card first branded me. I have other labels now: Naturalized Citizen. Guyanese-American. Immigrant. I am deeply unsettled about how our global society regards the immigrant. Where some see autonomy, others see dependency. Where some see courage, others see weakness. Where some see a desire to take charge of one’s destiny, others see a threat. Where some see dignity, others see failure. And at times, we are simply not seen. In an interview for *The Atlantic*, Haitian-American writer Edwidge Danticat poignantly steeps the activism of the immigrant within the poetics of an *art* practice. She writes:

That experience of touching down in a totally foreign place is like having a blank canvas: You begin with nothing, but stroke by stroke you build a life. This process requires everything great art requires—risk-tasking, hope, a great deal of imagination, all the qualities that are the building blocks of art. You must be able to dream something nearly impossible and toil to bring it into existence.
Danticat’s reading of the immigrant’s journey as akin to art-making was inspired by a passage she read in Colombian-American Patricia Engel’s memoir *It’s Not Love, It’s Just Paris*, in which the author’s father says: ‘All immigrants are artists because they create a life, a future, from nothing but a dream. The immigrant’s life is art in its purest form.’ It is with this beautiful spirit of creativity and imagination that *Liminal Spaces: Migration and Women of the Guyanese Diaspora* gathers fifteen women of Guyanese heritage to explore their relationship to migration through the literary and visual art forms of memoir, creative non-fiction, poetry, photography, curatorial and art essays. These women are artists, activists, scholars, teachers, photographers, poets, writers, playwrights, performers, journalists, and curators. The Guyanese women whose stories are laid bare in *Liminal Spaces* reinforce Engel’s notion of the immigrant as artist. These women remake, reinvent, and rebuild their lives, as many times as needed. Collectively they reveal that we are all, in some sense, immigrants, embarking on the constant work, the hard labor, privately and publicly, of dismantling one life to make a new one.

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The word ‘liminal,’ from the Latin word *limens*, means ‘threshold’—a place of transition, waiting, and unknowing. It is to be caught between worlds—one known and one to come. In tandem, the title *Liminal Spaces* reflects the ways in which Guyanese women bear witness to what drives them from their homeland as well as what keeps them emotionally and psychically tethered. It is a title meant to encapsulate how they examine the notion of homeland as both fixed and unfixed, a constantly shifting idea or memory, and a physical place and psychic space. *Liminal Spaces* also underscores how these women trouble and redefine ideas of migrant, immigrant, and citizen. Some directly engage with present global migration debates while avoiding the vitriol those debates are steeped in. Others challenge the labels of alien, foreigner, and outlier. Many poignantly and apolitically shine a light on the universal themes of departure, arrival, loss, up-rootedness, persistence, and faith. Collectively, the women in *Liminal Spaces* represent two spectrums of the migration arc: the ones who leave and the ones who are left. Some have stayed rooted in Guyana even as they watched their loved ones leave, year after year, for both neighboring and far-off lands. Some, although born in Guyana, maintain the rituals and traditions on the diasporic soils they now call home. Some return to Guyana often, and some rarely. Some never.

*Liminal Spaces* traces seven seminal decades of Guyana’s history, offering a portrait of a colonial and postcolonial nation continuously evolving. The fifteen intergenerational cohort of voices range from women in their twenties to their seventies. Their personal and political histories are rooted in Guyana’s multi-cultural heritages—Amerindian,
British, African, Chinese, Indian, and Portuguese. Their first-person narratives span the 1950s through present day, mirroring Guyana’s journey from a British colony to an independent republic to a ‘disappearing nation.’ For some women in this book who were born in British-ruled Guyana, bearing witness to the tumultuous birth of an independent nation and a simultaneous struggle to shirk a colonial past catalyzed their departures. The younger women, who have only known their homeland as an independent nation, still made the difficult decision to leave it. Other women who contributed to this collection have never lived in Guyana and connect only through their parents’ migration narratives. As first-generation citizens of the United States, United Kingdom, and Canada, they grapple with what survives and what is mourned once their Guyanese-born parents, their direct ties to Guyana, are gone. Some of these women once lived in Guyana, and later migrated to the country’s largest diasporic cities of New York, Toronto, and London. All in all, Liminal Spaces centers the narratives of grandmothers, mothers and daughters, immigrants and citizens—women who have labored for their country, women who are in service to a vision of what Guyanese women can and ought to be in the world.

Guyana’s legacy of migration mirrors the broader emergence of Caribbean people around the globe. The narratives featured in Liminal Spaces counter a legacy of absence and invisibility of Guyanese women’s stories. This collection—the first of its kind—is devoted entirely to the voices of women from Guyana and its expansive diaspora. Although the contributors share experiences specific to Guyana, their stories speak to migration as the defining movement of our twenty-first-century world and the tensions between place and placeless-ness, nationality and belonging, immigrant and citizen. Etched throughout the book’s literary and visual narratives is the grit, agency, and artistry required of women around the world who embark on a new life in a new land or watch the ones they love do so. Within these beautiful, disruptive stories lies a simple truth: there is no single story about migration. Rather, the act of migration is infinite, full of arrivals, departures, returns, absences, and reunions.

* One of the most defining movements of the twenty-first century is global migration. Few of us remain untouched by its sweeping narrative. In its World Migration Report 2020, the United Nations reported, ‘The number of international migrants is estimated to be almost 272 million globally, with nearly two-thirds being labor migrants.’ Equally important, forty-eight percent of those migrants are women. In other words, women comprise almost half the people migrating globally. As more women migrate, it means that a growing number of them are also migrating independently and becoming the breadwinners for their families. Each day, more women like my mother do whatever they need to; they board planes and boats and
ships and make-shift rafts, or walk across borders, fences, and walls to carve out a better life for themselves and their families. Yet, where do we find their real stories? Where is the poetry of their lives? Can we turn to art, to language, to poetry, to the image to find their voices? How can the photograph map the emotional terrain of separation from a motherland? Instead of narratives that allow us to see the real lives and dignity of these women—now in the millions—their stories of migration are often hijacked by politics, policy, sensational headlines, and data.

For the past fifty years, women have been the driving force in migration from Guyana as the UK, US, and Canada looked to the Caribbean as a source for blue collar, domestic, clerical, and healthcare workers. In ‘Caribbean Migrations: The Caribbean Diaspora,’ Monica Jardine writes that the pivotal role of women served as a catalytic shift in contemporary Caribbean migration:

[I]n the Anglophone Caribbean world, in particular, modern migration became identified with women’s labor and women’s risk—that is, with the decision of women to internationalize their labor, to migrate alone in the first instance [...] and [...] to more clearly expect that their household and legal status would become more equal to that of men after migration.16

In 1948, the British Nationality Act gave ‘full citizenship’ to all people living in its commonwealth countries and full rights of entry and settlement in Britain. Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, many ambitious dreamers in then British Guiana and from other British colonies throughout the Caribbean took advantage of the 1948 Act and made their way to England. They became part of what was known as the ‘Windrush Generation,’18 named after the SS Empire Windrush, the inaugural ship that brought a total of 492 Caribbean immigrants to Tilbury Dock in Essex, England on June 21, 1948. Fourteen years later, a backlash against the increasing number of the colonies’ Caribbean-born workers and their families moving into Britain’s neighborhoods led to the 1962 Commonwealth Immigration Act, which would overturn the Nationality Act of 1948, condemning it as an unregulated approach to immigration. Most recently, in 2018 as the British marked the 70th anniversary of the Windrush Generation, the ‘Windrush Scandal’ erupted leaving many Caribbean immigrants wrongly detained, denied legal rights and benefits they were entitled to as citizens, and threatened with deportation or wrongly deported from the United Kingdom.19 In Liminal Spaces, contributor Maria del Pilar Kaladeen writes of the racism she endured growing up in England as a daughter of immigrants, and the pressures, including from her parents, to shirk her cultural identity to be monolithically ‘British.’ Born in London to a Guyanese father who was part of the notable Windrush Generation, Kaladeen shares in her essay, ‘A Daughter’s Journey from Indenture to Windrush,’ how mythical the promises of citizenship were for those who migrated from Guyana to England. She
explores the impact a vitriolic culture of racism had on Caribbean immigrants and their descendants:

[I]f I wanted a role model in un-belonging I needn’t look any further than my father—the progenitor of my incongruity. Yet everything I knew about my father’s 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.

Further, the newspaper stories of the inaugural ‘492 West Indian’ migrants, as the British headlines boldly declared, who first arrived on England’s shores via the Empire Windrush, has largely minimized the experiences of the Caribbean women who embarked on the thirty-day voyage. For example, the opening paragraph of a 1948 article, in *The Guardian*, entitled ‘Why 492 West Indians Came to Britain,’ leads with the question: ‘What were they thinking, these 492 men [...] as the Empire Windrush slid upstream with the flood between the closing shores of Kent and Essex?’ In ‘How Many Women Were on the Empire Windrush?’ Mirko Casagranda writes:

In its monadic and monolithic characterization, the all-inclusiveness of the figure ‘492’ excludes women from the founding myth of arrival, as in the accounts of the time and in many subsequent recollections of the event, the passengers are homogenously defined as black male economic migrants from Jamaica, which reinforces ‘a patriarchal model of travel’ and enhances the stereotype of the male explorer looking for new places to settle in and form a new family as soon as *his* woman joins him in the new country.

In fact, what the ship’s data from the Empire Windrush passenger log does reveal is that of the 257 women aboard, 188 were traveling alone. Casagranda continues:

It is no surprise that in the British national consciousness and collective memory of this symbolic moment, there is no space for women as they have been rather considered as a consequence, almost an appendix, of the arrival of their men.

[The number] ‘257’ [...] challenges the idea of an exclusively male migration from the West Indies. [...] Although the majority of the passengers were adult males (684), these women, especially those who made the crossing alone, question the cultural assumptions of the time about gender.

In the Passenger List of the Empire Windrush (Fig. I.2), the names of six British Guianese women are listed as traveling alone to England. They are summarized in the records as follows and checked under the passenger log’s subcategory of ‘Female’ and ‘Not Accompanied by Husband:’
Mary Forbes, 41 years old, ‘household domestic’
Muriel Fraser, 39 years old, ‘bank teller’
Edna Thompson, 32 years old, ‘servant’
Phillis Teesdale, 35 years old, ‘household domestic’
Ivy Wcolley, 53 years old, ‘household domestic’
Marie Worley, 54 years old, ‘household domestic’

The stories of Guyanese women like these from those early decades who migrated to the UK—and those of so many others who migrated later, uprooted their lives and bravely embarked on unchartered territories—remain mysteries. In a 2018 essay I wrote, titled ‘Unfixed Homeland: Artists Imagining the Lives of the Guyanese Women of Windrush,’ for a special issue of London’s *Wasafiri Magazine* marking the 70th anniversary of the Windrush Generation, I could only pose questions about the women listed on the ship’s manifest:

How did these women end up aboard the SS Empire Windrush—travelling accompanied by neither family members nor husbands—and what were their lives like once they arrived in England? Who were these women? What were the circumstances that led to them to travel by themselves unaccompanied? What were they fleeing in British Guiana? What future were they hoping to build once they arrived in England?25

What happens when the archives fail us? Where do we turn when their limitations can only take us so far in excavating the lives of these women?26 When confronted with the absences in the archives, the women writers and artists in *Liminal Spaces* must rely on their creative imaginations to tell Guyanese women’s stories. The essays and poems of British-Guyanese contributors like Maria del Pilar Kaladeen and Grace Nichols reconstruct the narratives of Guyanese women in the United Kingdom and counters their invisibility in the records. Their artistic and creative imaginings echo a call to action to look beyond the archives. Their compelling work serves as a balm for the longing that still haunts many of us who want to know how these British-Guyanese women navigated an unwelcoming place and rose out of hardship to make their way.

In a similar way as in the UK, over the past five decades, Guyanese women increasingly began to make their way to the US, particularly New York City, as they saw migration as a means to improve their economic and social status and the educational opportunities of their children. The majority of the contributors featured in *Liminal Spaces* are women who live in New York City—a reflection of how the city has framed the landscape of Guyana’s migration narrative. One only need walk through Flatbush and Crown Heights in Brooklyn and the Ozone Park and Richmond Hill sections of Queens (the latter affectionately known as ‘Little Guyana’) to witness an abundance of Guyanese ‘Bake Shops’ and ‘Roti Shops.’27 As the Guyanese community grew to be
Figure I.2
Passenger list of the SS Empire Windrush

June 1948

The National Archives, Public Domain.24
the fifth largest immigrant group in New York City, Guyanese women emerged to claim, ‘one of the highest rates of female labor force participation among New York City immigrants.’ Underpaid or paid under the table, Guyanese women found jobs that were domestic in nature or in food service, healthcare, and hospitality industries. They were often part of an invisible workforce as private household workers—nannies, housekeepers, and home care aides. In *Liminal Spaces*, many essays acknowledge the Guyanese women who took on such jobs. In ‘Memories from Yonder,’ artist Christie Neptune features Ebora Calder who left Guyana in the 1950s as a young woman to work as a home care aide in Brooklyn, New York City where she remained until she reached retirement. In ‘Concrete and Filigree,’ curator Michelle Joan Wilkinson writes of her mother’s arrival in the late 1960s to work in Manhattan’s Garment District. And, in those first years in the late 1990s, I write in my essay ‘The Geography of Separation,’ about the minimum wage jobs my mother took on including as a college cafeteria server and nursing home assistant. These experiences are not unique to Guyanese women; they are a common refrain of many immigrant women in search for a better life for themselves and their families.

Along with London and New York City, the city of Toronto possesses one of the largest and oldest Guyanese populations outside of Guyana. Beginning in the mid-1950s, Guyanese became part of a larger trend of Caribbean people shifting to Canada and specifically urban cities like Toronto. The West Indian Domestic Scheme (1955–1960), which allowed women from Guyana and the neighboring islands of Jamaica and Barbados to immigrate as domestic workers, paved the way for a second and larger wave of Caribbean migration in the 1970s. In her essay for *Liminal Spaces*, ‘A Trace | Evidence of Time Past,’ artist Sandra Brewster, who is Canadian-born, reminds us that the first Toronto Caribbean Carnival in 1967, also known as Caribana, took place during the second wave of migration to Canada. Brewster notes:

[It] was a gesture of generosity—a gift from the Caribbean community to Canada on its 100th birthday. I see this gift as an action that permanently transferred the community’s existence onto the city, creating an undeniable presence in Canadian history.

As the testament to that abiding gift, today the Toronto Caribbean Carnival is regarded as North America’s largest street festival, with over one million global visitors a year. The Canadian Immigration Act (1976) further allowed more people from the Caribbean into Canada and, coupled with Canada’s increased need for labor from developing nations, the Caribbean community thrived. By the early 2000s, Toronto emerged as, and remains, a prominent node in the Caribbean diaspora where Guyanese in particular are the city’s third-largest Caribbean-immigrant community.

As Guyanese women continue to drive migration to the UK, US, and Canada, they have in turn ushered in a new kind agency. As early as the 1960s, Caribbean women
immigrants were increasingly regarded as ‘principal aliens’ allowing them to sponsor visa applications for family members. In her essay, Brewster explains the pivotal role her aunt played, serving as the catalyst for bringing almost her entire family from Guyana to Canada:

Auntie Gloria being the eldest, left Guyana first to find a place for everyone to live and to figure out the lay of the land so that when the others came she could direct them on what to do and where to do it. She was basically their orientation guide.

In New York City, in particular, women of the Guyanese community, more than any other immigrant group, utilize family sponsorship visas to bring members of their family to the US. However, a 2017 article in The New York Times reported that with the current US administration’s proposed immigration policies to severely curtail family sponsorship, Guyanese women ‘could lose the most from a new federal effort to cut legal immigration in half.’

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In her widely celebrated 2009 TED Talk, ‘The Danger of a Single Story,’ Nigerian-American author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie shares the constant indignities of having to encounter and absorb the dangerous single story of Africa as ‘a single story of catastrophe.’ She cautions us of the consequences when we are complicit in promoting a singular destructive narrative of a place:

The single story creates stereotypes, and the problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue, but that they are incomplete. They make one story become the only story [...] The consequence of the single story is this: It robs people of dignity. It makes our recognition of our equal humanity difficult. It emphasizes how we are different rather than how we are similar.

Like Adiche’s Nigeria, so too has Guyana been subjected to a dangerous single story rooted in catastrophe. On the world stage, Guyana has largely been portrayed in a complicated light. One need only browse the global headlines over the past fifty years. From the ethnic violence between Africans and Indians that stained Guyana’s struggle for independence from the British; to the tragic Jonestown mass murder-suicide in 1978; to the revelation that by 1980, Guyana’s economic situation was so dire that it was ranked as one of the poorest countries in the Western Hemisphere; to widespread political corruption during national elections in the 1990s (and currently in 2020) that required the former American president Jimmy Carter to preside; to the World Health Organization 2014 report naming Guyana as the country with the highest suicide rate in the world; to the 2017 data declaring Guyana with the highest out-migration
rate in the world—the majority of the global reporting on Guyana has centered on violence, political corruption, poverty, trauma, and mass exodus. Furthermore, in the past decade, the major reporting targeting the Guyanese diasporic community abroad has been prone to negativity. Stories have focused on the lure of oil prospecting, the fragmenting effects of migration on families, political unrest, death and violence, and even unhealthy food habits. This is how the world sees and hears of Guyana. These are some of the dangerous single stories and headlines dominating international perspectives on Guyana and influencing a global understanding of who Guyanese people are.

More recently, the reporting on the promising yet tumultuous discovery of offshore oil and a chorus of viewpoints by international experts on why Guyana is ‘unprepared’ or too ‘corrupt’ or ‘ill-equipped’ to navigate the ensuing billion-dollar potential windfall have dominated the headlines. Notably, an extensive article in *The New York Times* in 2018 received severe backlash after its writer indulged in representations of Guyana that were dismissive and offensive. The *Times* lead paragraph in the article, ‘The $20 Billion Question for Guyana,’ portrayed Guyana as the impoverished tropic:

There are a few dirt roads between villages that sit on stilts along rivers snaking through the rainforest. Children in remote areas go to school in dugout canoes, and play naked in the muggy heat.33

Later in the article, the reporter characterized Guyana as ‘A vast watery wilderness with only three paved highways’ whose economy is ‘propelled by drug trafficking, money-laundering and gold and diamond smuggling.’34 The Guyanese diaspora united in an uproar against this reductive characterization. Dr. Oneka LaBennett, Guyanese-American scholar and professor, harshly critiqued the portrayal, writing on Twitter:

Misrepresenting Guyana as a place ‘forgotten by time’ where children ‘play naked in the muggy heat’ denies its complexity. Dangerous distortions like this inform the perilous trajectory of my homeland’s oil boom. Do better @nytimes.35

Guyana, like all nations, is a complicated place with its unique struggles. Nevertheless, it remains a beloved homeland for many of its citizens and those in its wide diaspora across the Caribbean, North America and Europe. The spotlight will continue to grow on Guyana as its future is now entangled with oil production. The world is now invested in how things play out in what the media is already framing as Guyana’s ‘rags to riches’ story. Yet, it continues to be a global malpractice that the majority of the stories told about us, are not by us, which in itself is its own kind of unique danger. Furthermore, as the 2018 *New York Times* article reflected, what the global public often sees of the visual culture of Guyana still centers on the exotic, tropical, colonial, and touristic. In
response, the artists and writers in *Liminal Spaces* are part of a contemporary movement to challenge and disrupt the reductive narratives often associated with the region. While the fifteen contributors in *Liminal Spaces* are honest about the hard truths of a country grappling with violence, poverty, and constant departure, they simultaneously offer, eloquently and unabashedly, restorative narratives of their homeland. In doing so, we see the persistent role of women in countering the dangerous single stories of Guyana through their first-person narratives and their art-making.

**Chapters**

*Liminal Spaces: Migration and Women of the Guyanese Diaspora* is organized into four parts: ‘Part I: Mothering Lands,’ ‘Part II: The Ones Who Leave . . . The Ones Who Are Left,’ ‘Part III: Transitions,’ and ‘Part IV: Returns, Reunions, and Rituals.’ Conceived as a visual exhibition on the page, the fifteen contributors’ essays and artworks are curated as a four-part journey—one that allows the reader to trace the migration path of Guyanese women from their motherlands, to their moment of departure, to their arrival on diasporic soils, to their reunion with Guyana, and all that flows in between.

‘Part I: Mothering Lands’ engages the tensions between *motherland*, the place of birth; and *otherland*, the space of othering. The essays take us through the voyages undertaken by mothers born in Guyana and their daughters born in the diaspora. Artists Keisha Scarville (United States) and Erika DeFreitas (Canada) and journalist Natalie Hopkinson with her mother Serena Hopkinson (Canada/United States) reveal how their mother-daughter relationships serve as a metaphor for their relationship with Guyana—a space frequently wrestled with as a mythical motherland. As they reflect on their immigrant mothers’ journeys, their gaze as daughters is full of compassion and tenderness.

In Part II, there are two spectrums of the migration arc: the ones who leave and the ones who are left. Yet, too often the narratives of the latter are constantly eclipsed. ‘The Ones Who Leave . . . The Ones Who Are Left’ counters the discourse and creative representations on migration that are overwhelmingly focused on the ones who leave. Through travelogue, memoir, art, and photography essays, I, Grace Aneiza Ali (United States), Dominique Hunter (Guyana), Khadija Benn (Guyana), and Ingrid Griffith (United States), center the stories of those who remain.

‘Part III: Transitions’ explores how Guyanese women unfold a life in a past land to construct a life in a new land; how they are made, unmade, and remade again. Poet Grace Nichols (United Kingdom) and visual artists Suchitra Mattai (United States), Christie Neptune (United States), and Sandra Brewster (Canada), detail the transition
from citizen to immigrant. Their stories implore us to ponder: How do we hold steadfast to our dreams, when in order to survive we must diminish parts of the self? Revealed throughout these essays is a commitment to use their artistic practices as spaces for Guyanese women to speak, to be heard, and to be seen.

For those of us who have left one country for another, how do we return and how do we stay connected? What tangible things do we cling to? In ‘Part IV: Returns, Reunions, and Rituals,’ Michelle Joan Wilkinson (United States), Maria del Pilar Kaladeen (United Kingdom), and Maya Mackrandilal (United States) write about their returns to Guyana and the ways in which they are tethered to the houses, lands, and sacred heirlooms embedded within their family legacies. They explore how daughters of immigrants rekindle, restore, and repair frayed bonds and illuminate how we lose, rediscover, and reunite with a place.

While, the voices of Guyanese women remain under-the-radar in literature, the women in *Liminal Spaces* are shining ambassadors of Guyana’s multiple stories. Our literary and artistic practices function as declarations that the women of Guyana will not disappear into history. What bonds us is a profound love for Guyana. With that love comes responsibility. What does it mean to love a place? How do we express that love, especially if we no longer live there? What is our accountability to this place? As I’ve poured over the work of these Guyanese women with multiple hats on—curator, editor, daughter of Guyana, immigrant—I see love embedded in the essays and art so generously offered throughout the pages of *Liminal Spaces*. I am moved by their brilliance and innovation, by the thoughtful and provocative conversations and challenging and disruptive questions their work allows us to have. We remain ever so grateful for a homeland that continues to shape all of our lives.

**Bibliography**


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**Endnotes**


5. For more information, see ‘Postface: A Brief History of Migration from Guyana.’


10. Although the term has varied meanings in the fields of theology, psychology, anthropology, and art, I am drawn to Richard Rohr’s theological definition, which frames ‘liminal’ as a journey in which one place is left for another. He notes: ‘It is when you have left the tried and true but have not yet been able to replace it with anything else. It is when you are between your old comfort zone and any possible new answer.’ Cited in Carrie Barron, ‘Creativity and the Liminal Space,’ *Psychology Today*, June 4, 2013, https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/the-creativity-cure/201306/creativity-and-the-liminal-space


12. See Dabydeen, ‘A Disappearing Nation.’


15. See *Women and Migration: Responses in Art and History*, ed. by Deborah Willis, Ellyn Toscano, and Kalia Brooks Nelson (Cambridge: Open Book Publishers, 2019) for a range of essays charting how women around the globe have articulated their experiences of migration in writing, photography, art, and film. I was honored to contribute Chapter 36, ‘The Ones Who Leave . . . the Ones Who Are Left: Guyanese Migration Story,’ pp. 473–489.


17. For more information, see ‘Postface: A Brief History of Migration from Guyana.’


22. The number 257 includes every woman above the age of twelve and those accompanied by their husband (69) and those travelling alone (188). Out of these 257 women, 203 were British subjects, which included every British citizen who also lived in the colonies and territories. Casagranda, ‘How Many Women,’ pp. 357–358.


29. For more information, see ‘Postface: A Brief History of Migration from Guyana.’

30. ‘The Guyanese community brings in more people through family preference visas than any other immigrant group in the city.’ Wang, ‘In Little Guyana.’


32. Ibid.


34. Ibid.

35. Oneka LaBennett, 20 July 2018, https://twitter.com/OnekaLaBennett/status/1020282351392362504


**About the Art, Photography, and Curatorial Notes**

*Liminal Spaces* is a visual feast of the art and photography of migration. Many of the contributors are contemporary visual artists who accompany their essays with compelling bodies of work informed by their unique experiences of migration. This collection is also teeming with photographs from the contributors’ personal collections: treasured and sacredly guarded images—family albums, archival images of British Guiana, contemporary photography on Guyana, passport photos, and scans of letters.

As the editor of this collection, I turned to my curatorial practice as a blueprint for its organization. Instead of walls, I conceived *Liminal Spaces* as a visual exhibition on the page. I open Parts I, II, III, and IV with ‘curatorial notes’ on each Chapter. They are meant to serve as brief introductions and to provide biographical and historical context where needed. They are invitations to the reader to delve deeper into the essays, poems, photography, and art. These curatorial notes are culled from my collaborations with the contributors, correspondences and conversations between us that have unfolded over a period of time, exhibitions I’ve curated, and my published writings on their work.

—Grace Aneiza Ali