Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Wasafiri

ISSN: 0269-0055 (Print) 1747-1508 (Online) Journal homepage: http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rwas20

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To cite this article: Grace Aneiza Ali (2018) Unfixed Homeland, Wasafiri, 33:2, 31-40, DOI: 10.1080/02690055.2018.1433272

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/02690055.2018.1433272

Published online: 25 May 2018.

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Unfixed Homeland

Artists Imagining the Lives of the Guyanese Women of Windrush

Grace Aneiza Ali

> 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.
>
> Patricia Engel

> 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.
>
> Edwidge Danticat

A Disappearing Nation

One of the most defining movements of the modern era is global migration. Few of us remain untouched by its sweeping narrative. For those who have left one place for another, fuelled by choice or trauma, the liminal space between arrivals and departures is at once beautiful, fraught, disruptive, and evolving.

Guyana has long been a country of migrations. Guyanese people have long known migration as the single most defining narrative of our country. A perfect storm of postcolonial crises – entrenched poverty, political corruption, repressive government regimes, racial violence, lack of education, unemployment, economic depression and, worse of them all, a withering away of hope for a country – are among the reasons why we have left a troubled yet beloved homeland.

In 1995, my family of five emigrated from Guyana to the United States. We became part of what seemed like a mythical diaspora — an estimated 2 million Guyanese citizens living around the globe while the country itself has a population of around 760,000. Guyana, the only English-speaking country in South America, celebrates its fifty-second anniversary of independence from the British this year. Yet the last eight decades have been defined by an extraordinary ebb and flow of its citizens. In other words, my homeland is one where more people live outside its borders than within it.

The BBC Radio series *Neither Here Nor There* dedicated one of its episodes (Radio 4, 28 Feb. 2017) to the presence of the Guyanese diaspora, examining how their migration experience has impacted their identities. Host David Dabydeen, the British-Guyanese writer who left Guyana and migrated to England in 1969, remarked that Guyana 'is a disappearing nation' that has 'to an unrivalled degree, exported its people'.

How then does one navigate the choice to say in a place defined by the ebb and flow of departure? Last year, I invited Dominque Hunter, an emerging artist living in and working in Guyana, to participate in an exhibition I curated in New York — the city with the largest community of Guyanese people outside Guyana. In fact, more Guyanese now live in the Tri-State Area (New York City, New Jersey and Connecticut) than in Guyana itself. In New York City in particular, Guyanese are the fifth-largest immigrant community (See Dabydeen). In tandem, the exhibition *Liminal Space* in New York City brought together sixteen Guyanese artists living in Guyana and the United States who explore the relationship between migration and the idea of the 'liminal' — from the Latin *limens*, which means 'threshold', a place of transition, waiting and unknowing.[1] Working within a variety of mediums, I queried how these

Wasafiri Vol. 33, No. 2, June 2018, pp. 31–40
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https://doi.org/10.1080/02690055.2018.1433272

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Figure 1. *Dominique Hunter, 'We Meet Here', I to XII, 2017. Digital photography collage. Courtesy of the artist.*

artists bore witness to what drives one from a homeland and simultaneously keeps one tethered to it. In her artist statement, Hunter echoed a similar sentiment to Dabydeen, sharing that from a very young age the Guyanese citizen is indoctrinated with an urgent call of departure. While Hunter moves in and out of several international spaces for artist residencies and opportunities, she is vocal about rooting her practice in Guyana. 'There is an expectation once you have reached a certain age: pack what you can and leave', she says. 'I am well past that age, yet I remain, stubbornly rooted in the land my parents spent their lives cultivating.'[2]

Too often in the discourse and creative representations on migration, the narratives of the ones who are left are eclipsed by those leaving. Hunter instead engages the idea of 'rootedness' in *We Meet Here* with a series of twelve photographs displayed in a grid composition. Via digital collage, she layers organic imagery reminiscent of Guyana's lush vegetation found on the sea wall of its Atlantic Coast. Within each individual piece, two things are a constant presence: a white silhouetted self-referential figure and a green morning glory plant that thrives amidst extreme elements of temperature, wind, water and sand. Questioning what it means to navigate the space between being rooted in one land and transplanted to another, Hunter states:

> The morning glory plant could be likened to those of us who, while rooted in a very particular space, find relief and discomfort at the cusp of both here and there.'[3]

Unlike Hunter's family, my family chose to leave. We followed the migration path that my mother's family had already mapped out. We made our way to North America to join her siblings who had migrated to the United States and Canada in the 1980s. We did not follow the migration path of my father's family. My grandfather left Georgetown, Guyana, in 1956 for London, England; he and my grandmother were never married but had three children together. He left Guyana and with that departure also left my father when he was just a toddler and, once in England, he started a new family. He never returned to Guyana. My father never saw him again. My grandfather passed away in England in the early 1990s. His story of departure coupled with his experience of being a Guyanese immigrant in England are points of deep curiosity and fascination for me; however, I have been reluctant to explore my grandfather's migration story to England. I am not certain it is either my place or the appropriate time to delve into a migration story so entangled with the pain and tumult of a son's abandonment by his father.

Yet it is that blurred line between curiosity and uncertainty that often has me combing through the British National Archives documents looking for photographs and papers on Guyanese immigrants, like my grandfather, in England. It is that curiosity that led me to discover Mary Forbes, a British Guianese passenger listed on the ship manifest of the SS Empire Windrush that arrived in Tilbury, Essex, England in 1948.[4]

#27, Mary Forbes, forty-one years old, British Guiana

The data of the 'British' passenger log of the SS Empire Windrush that docked in Tilbury in 1948, the original pages of which have been selectively digitised by the British National Archives, lists passenger #27 as Mary Forbes. She is written into the record as forty-one years old, and checked under the log's subcategory of 'Female' who was 'Not Accompanied by Husband or Wife'. Her 'Port of Embarkation' was noted as Kingston, Jamaica and she arrived at Tilbury Dock (Essex, England) on 21 June 1948. The passenger log denotes Mary Forbes's 'Profession/ Occupation' as 'HD' ('Household Domestic') and lists her 'Country of Last Permanent Residence' as 'British Guiana.'

Mary Forbes and the British Guiana passengers aboard the Empire Windrush never saw an independent Guyana.

W.t.45406/1929 30,000 2/47 W.H.&S. 666/42

P.M. 23

Name of Ship M.V. "EMPIRE WINDRUSH". Port of Arrival Tilbury. Date of Arrival 21. 6. 1948

Steamship Line THE NEW ZEALAND SHIPPING CO.LTD. Whence Arrived TRINIDAD,KINGSTON,TAMPICO, HAVANA,BERMUDA.

IMMIGRATION OFFICE (1) 22 JUN 1948 LONDON

NAMES AND DESCRIPTIONS OF **BRITISH** PASSENGERS.

	(1) Port of Embarkation	(2) Port at which Passengers have been landed	(3) NAMES OF PASSENGERS		(4) CLASS (Whether 1st, 2nd, Tourist or 3rd)	(5) AGES OF PASSENGERS: Adults of 12 years and upwards — Accompanied by husband or wife: Males	Females	Not Accompanied by husband or wife: Males	Females	Children between 1 and 12: Males	Females	Infants: Males	Females	(6) Proposed Address in the United Kingdom	(7) Profession, Occupation, or Calling of Passengers	(8) Country of last Permanent Residence*	(9) Country of Intended Future Permanent Residence*: England	Wales	Scotland	Northern Ireland	Eire	Other parts of the British Empire	Foreign Countries
						4	4	6	6	1	2												
24.	TRINIDAD.	Tilbury	DUGDALE	Joseph	"A"	29								Broxup,Bolton-by- Bowland,Nr.Clitheroe.	Planter.	Trinidad.						•	
25.	"	"	"	Stella	"		31							- do -	H.D.	"						•	
26.	"	"	EGBOLU	John	"			32						c/o Dir.of Col.Scholars, Colonial Office.W.1.	Student.	"						•	
27.	"	"	FORBES	Mary	"				41					St.Catherines Forres, Morayshire.	H.D.	British Guiana.			•				
28.	"	"	FRASER	Muriel	"				39					11,Marble Hill Gdns, Twickenham.Middlx.	Bank Clerk.	"						•	
29.	"	"	GANDY	Adelaide	"				47					Hillingdon,Farmbridge Park,Hants.	H.D.	England.	•						
30.	"	"	GRANT	Flora	"		59							41,Hardgate,Aberdeen.	"	Trinidad.							•
31.	"	"	"	Lewis	"	58								- do -	Merchant.	"							•
32.	"	"	GALLEY	Wilfred	"			25						38,Hartburn Lane, Stockton-on-Tees.	Agriculturalist.	Uganda.						•	
33.	"	"	HARRIS	Grace	"				45					Launton House, Launton,Oxon.	H.D.	England.	•						
34.	"	"	HICKSON	Audrey	"				30					c/o Lloyds Bank, 185,Baker St,W.1.	"	St.Lucia.							•
35.	"	"	~~HOOD~~	~~Hugh~~	"			39	~~38~~					62,Cardwell Rd, ~~Gourock.~~	Master ~~Mariner.~~	~~Trinidad.~~			•				
36.	"	"	HERON	Margaret	"				64					116,Queens Gate,S.W.7.	H.D.	"	•						
37.	"	"	HOBAN	Ivy	"				53					7,Clarence Gate Gdns, London.N.W.1.	"	England.	•						
38.	"	"	HAMEL-SMITH	Eric	"			36						98,High St,N.W.8.	Civil Servant.	Trinidad.						•	
39.	"	"	JONES	Alfred	"			37						Nutford House, Nutford Place,W.1.	"	"	•						
40.	"	"	JACKSON	David	"			23						5,Barrow Rd,Cambridge.	Student.	England.						•	
41.	"	"	JULUMSINGH	Arthur	"	50								30,Upper Berkeley St, London,W.8.	Civil Servant.	Trinidad.						•	
42.	"	"	"	Mavis	"		37							- do -	H.D.	"						•	
43.	"	"	KNOX	Lilias	"				35					16,Lamond Drive, St.Andrews,Fife.	Audit Clerk.	"						•	
44.	"	"	KWEBIHA	Zaccheus	"			36						c/o Dir.of Col.Scholars, Colonial Office,W.1.	Student.	"						•	
45.	"	"	KERR-PEARSE	Leila	"				38					84,Richmond Rd, Raynes Park,London.	Spinster.	"	•						
46.	"	"	LLOYD	Hugh	"				33					Burton House, Maiden Newton,Dorset.	Agricultural Officer.	Kenya Colony.						•	
47.	"	"	LYDER	Lilla	"				69					Basildon,Knoll Rd, Bexley,Kent.	H.D.	Trinidad.						•	
48.	"	"	"	Glory	"				38					- do -	Cable Clerk.	"						•	
49.	"	"	LUCKHOO	Joseph	"	61								10,Buckingham Rd, Harrow,Middlx.	Judge.	British Guiana.						•	
50.	"	"	"	Clare	"		52							- do -	H.D.	"						•	
51.	"	"	LEWIS	James	"	43								c/o Crown Agents,London.	Civil Servant.	"						•	
52.	"	"	"	Jessica	"		35							- do -	H.D.	"						•	
53.	"	"	"	Rosemary	"						2			- do -	-	"						•	
54.	"	"	LAIRD	Nancy	"				36					3,Matlock Rd, Eastbourne.	Spinster.	England.	•						
55.	"	"	LLOYD	Monica	"				22					Launton House, Launton,Oxon.	H.D.	Trinidad.						•	
56.	"	"	MARTIN	Lawrence	"			54						45,Mount Ephraim Rd, London,S.W.16.	Retired.	England.	•						
57.	"	"	McCALLUM	James	"			23						Aldobil House,Newtown Stewart,Co.Tyrone.	Student.	N.Ireland.				•			
58.	"	"	MASSIAH	Minola	"				50					-	Dressmaker.	Trinidad.					• +BE		
59.	"	"	MUDD	Sydney	"			38						59,Bevan Ave,Barking.	Joiner.	England.	•						
60.	"	"	MUIR	Ernest	"	68								29a,Crawford Avenue, Wembley,Middlx.	Medical.	"	•						
61.	"	"	"	Sophie	"		70							- do -	H.D.	"	•						
62.	"	"	MATHESON	Harry	"			24						Monkmusk,Largo Rd, St.Andrews.Scotland.	Student.	Scotland.						•	
63.	"	"	MILES	Kenneth	"	42								1,Yrpes Rd,Colchester.	Telegraphy.	Trinidad.	•						
64.	"	"	"	Helen	"		44							- do -	H.D.	"	•						
65.	"	"	"	Winifred	"						10			- do -	Student.	"	•						
66.	"	"	"	Margaret	"						9			- do -	"	"	•						
						11	11	14	21	1	5						15			1		21	3

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*By permanent residence is to be understood residence for a year or more. Northern Ireland and Eire are to be regarded as separate countries.

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Figure 2. Passenger List of the SS Empire Windrush, June 1948, The National Archives.

Before gaining independence from the British in 1966, Guyana would see the beginnings of an exodus of its citizens migrating first to the United Kingdom and then subsequently to the United States and Canada.[5] In 1948, the British Nationality Act gave British 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 British Guiana took advantage of the 1948 Act and began making their way to England, becoming part of what was known as the 'Windrush Generation' — named after the SS Empire Windrush, the very ship which brought Mary Forbes and a

total of 492 Caribbean immigrants to Tilbury Dock in Essex, England in 1948.[6]

For those ambitious dreamers of the 'Windrush Generation' who found their way to England in the 1950s and 1960s, it was necessary that they imagine a world beyond British Guiana. At the time, there was no university in British Guiana. The University of Guyana (UG), the first of its kind in the country, was established only in 1963 and initially offered limited evening classes under British governance. In other words, a desire for professional and economic advancement inevitably meant emigration. The late 1940s and early 1950s would also become a period rife with intense political unrest in British Guiana as the movement towards gaining independence became more forceful.

When slavery was abolished in 1834, the British instituted the system of indentured servitude that lasted until 1917, bringing Indian and Chinese labourers into the colony — a measure that would later define Guyana's modern multicultural landscape and also set the tone for decades of ethnic conflict and political rivalry between Africans and Indians. Often violent and explosive, the ethnic tensions fuelled and exploited by the British themselves would scar Guyana throughout the twentieth century. In April 1953, the colony had undergone its first democratic election and yet it would take another thirteen volatile years before gaining independence in 1966. Many, like Mary Forbes, did not wait; they orchestrated their own independence.

Discovering Mary Forbes name on the Empire Windrush's passenger manifest and her 'Last Known Residence' as 'British Guiana' was heartening to see. It answered existing questions – yes, Guyanese women were indeed travelling on the SS Empire Windrush – and it unfurled even more new ones (more on that below). Wading through the treasure trove of archival documents on SS Empire Windrush and researching its robust scholarship and literary narratives, it is challenging to find information on the migrants from Guyana and specifically the Guyanese women who were aboard the *Windrush*. The history and myth-making of the inaugural '492 West Indian' migrants who first arrived on England's shores have largely been a gendered one. In her essay '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' (Mead 2009: 141) 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.

Indeed, the overall numbers about the Windrush immigrants tell us that by 1958, 125,000 workers from British colonies in the Caribbean had arrived in Britain and 172,000 had arrived by 1961, the year which marked the official end of Windrush. 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.

And yet, there on the ship's manifest was Mary Forbes. Just below her was another fascinating entry — passenger #28, Muriel Fraser, who at thirty-nine years old was also travelling without a husband. She was noted as a 'Bank Teller' whose last country of permanent residence was British Guiana. As I pored over the ship's log, I found more British Guianese women making the journey on their own:

> 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'

According to ship's manifest log, these women were passengers on the ship together but their proposed addresses once they arrived in England were all different places. But among the ship's Caribbean passengers, these British Guianese women were not anomalies. What the data from the ship's passenger log does reveal is that of the 257 women aboard, 188 – the majority of them – were indeed travelling alone.[7] Casagranda writes:

> [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.

How did how these women end up aboard the SS Empire Windrush – travelling unaccompanied by neither family members nor husbands – and what were their lives like once they arrived in England? These questions led me to the work of Guyanese-American writer Gaiutra Bahadur and her groundbreaking narrative history on indenture, *Coolie Woman: The Odyssey of Indenture*. She charts the journey of her great-grandmother Sujaria, an indentured servant who embarked on her own 'middle passage' aboard *The Clyde* in 1903 as it sailed from Calcutta, India, to Georgetown, British Guiana. Alone and three months pregnant, what Sujaria met in British Guiana once she arrived was a burgeoning culture of violence, sexual exploitation and harsh labour.

Coolie Woman: The Odyssey of Indenture is pregnant with questions, profound and haunting. And fittingly so. The saga of what a quarter of a million 'coolie' women endured as they left India for the Caribbean, including British Guiana, under the British system of twentieth-century indentureship required rigorous interrogation on the part of Bahadur. She told me in a 2015 interview for *OF NOTE Magazine* that she 'dealt with the archives as an investigative reporter might'. I had many questions and

hypotheses about Mary Forbes's journey. So, I turned to my annotations and notes in Bahadur's book, borrowing from the blueprint of questioning she posed about her great-grandmother Sujaria's passage:

> Who were these women? Did they know each other before embarking on Empire Windrush? Did they get to know each other aboard the ship? 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?
>
> Were they victimized? Were they leaving British Guiana out of some act of desperation, or was it an act of activism? Was this an act of them choosing their own destiny? (For a series of questions from which my questions are adapted, see Bahadur chapter 4).

Imagining the Lives of the Guyanese Women of Windrush

While Bahadur has been able to collage the story of Sujaria, those of the Guyanese women of SS Empire Windrush, who bravely embarked on unchartered territories, largely remain mysteries.

What happens when the archives fail us? Where do we turn when their static limitations can only take us so far in excavating the lives of these women?

In my curatorial practice, I turn time and time again to the writers and artists of Guyanese heritage, who, when confronted with the absences in the archives, rely on their creative imaginations to tell Guyanese women's stories. To help me construct a narrative for Mary Forbes and her country women aboard the SS Empire Windrush, I turned to Grace Nichols, Roshini Kempadoo, Janice Lowe Shinebourne and Maria del Pilar Kaladeen. Their work to counter the invisibility of Guyanese women's presence and voice in the records of migration serves as a balm for the longing that still haunts many of us who want to know those who paved the way for us. These women's artistic and creative imaginings echo Bahadur's call to action to look beyond the archives as 'there really is no way to tell these women's stories without being creative and imaginative' (see Ali). To tell these stories, they have embarked on multiple criss-crossing migrations themselves, steeping their artistic practices in and across two lands – Guyana and the United Kingdom – whose colonial histories and contemporary sociopolitical landscapes deeply inform their work. These women intimately understand the liminal space of leaving and returning, of arrivals and departures. As they represent both the ones who *leave* and the ones who are *left*, these artists and writers examine what survives and what is mourned when we migrate.

When I attempt to construct reasons why women like Mary Forbes might have boarded the SS Empire Windrush to leave Guyana, I think of Janice Lowe Shinebourne's work. The Guyanese-born writer, of Indian and Chinese ancestry, migrated to London in 1970, a few years after Windrush ended. Shinebourne's oeuvre of novels, short stories and essays has significantly elevated the literature and public discourse on the Chinese Caribbean community, particularly the narratives of women. Through several characters across her body of work, one can trace the nuances of a migration story as they examine the lives of Guyanese over decades, traversing identities as citizens in their homeland and as immigrants in diasporic soils. In the short story 'An Immigrant's Lamentation', Shinebourne imagines the reasons why a young couple first departed Guyana:

> They cleared her house of all the furniture she and her husband Stanley used to have since they moved to England in 1964, when things were very bad in Georgetown and people were attacking each other in the street for no reason. They left Guyana out of fear and desperation, like many others. They did not think about it or plan it. At that time, immigration to England was very strict.

Guyanese-born poet Grace Nichols has lived in England for over thirty-five years — longer than she has lived in her homeland, Guyana. In 1977, just a few years after her countrywoman Shinebourne, Nichols too left Guyana for England. At the time, she and her young daughter and partner, the poet John Agard, were joining his father, who had migrated earlier from Guyana in the 1960s.

Of their reasons for departure, Nichols writes:

> We came with the hope of becoming professional writers. John and I had met as young journalists working for one of Guyana's national newspapers, *The Chronicle*. John had a slim volume of self-published poems before we left Guyana, and I'd already written about half of my first and only novel, *Whole of a Morning Sky*. Apart from a government-owned press, there were no publishing houses in Guyana.[8]

Their story of departure – rooted in absence and defined by *what did not exist* – is a familiar refrain for the many Guyanese families who were leaving Guyana during the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s, whether bound for the United States, Canada or England.

While steeped in new terrains of rolling hills and chalky cliffs of the south of England, it was the imagery of Guyana's landscape – its picturesque Atlantic coastline, deep waterfalls and vast rainforests – that was inescapable for the poet. They emerge as an impressive and reoccurring presence in several of Nichols's poems and in their titles. Nichols asks, 'How do you deal with living in another landscape when the older native one is so imprinted in your mind?'[9] As an answer to this question, the theologian Richard Rohr defines the experience of the *liminal* to be 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.

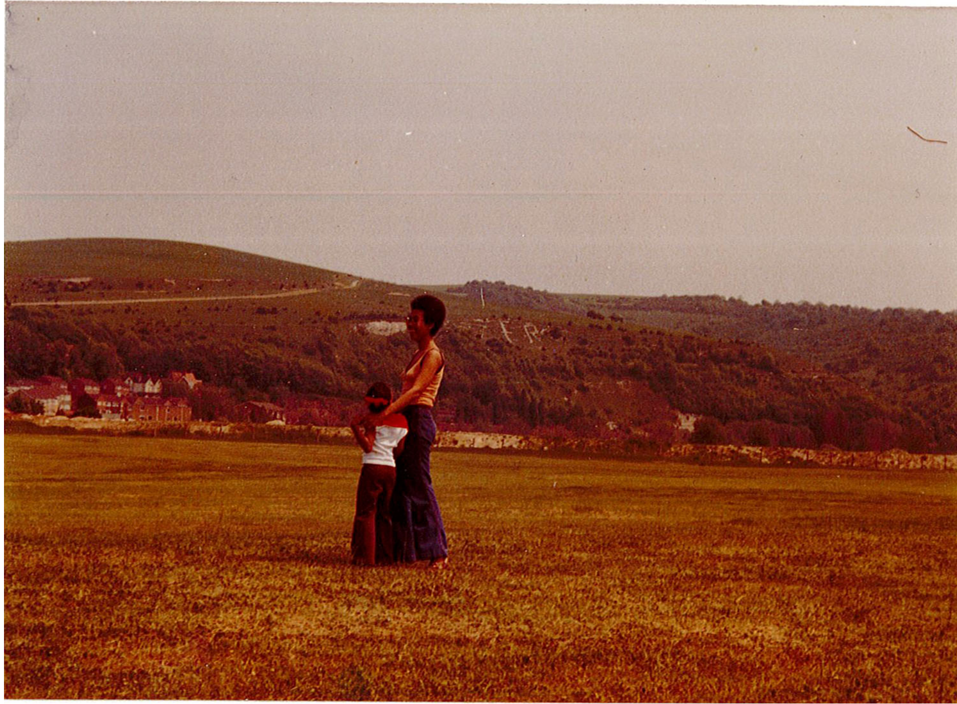

Figure 3. Grace Nichols with her daughter Lesley in Sussex, 1978 — a year after the family migrated to England. Photo courtesy of Grace Nichols.

Of that liminal space of transition, Nichols poignantly shares:

> Coming to England was a big adventure — one that I hadn't even thought through. I was unprepared for how much I would miss home. Accustomed to seeing my sisters and brother nearly every day as well as other relatives and friends, England seemed the antithesis of this. Dropping around spontaneously to someone's home was not advisable. I soon learned to change my 'calypso ways'. Perhaps it was this emotional separation from Guyana that made me turn more and more to poetry.[10]

'Wherever I Hang', the poem featured here, is a homage to the hit song 'Wherever I Hang My Hat' performed by the American soul singer Sam Cooke who was popular in the 1950s and 1960s. Written shortly after Nichols and her family arrived in England, the poem was the writer's response to the constant questions she received of when she was going 'back home' and if she was staying in England:

> The poem is a fairly light-hearted, tongue-in-cheek response to migration but it hints at that feeling of 'unbelonging', which we can all experience at times, even when we're living within our own culture. Now that I've lived in England for longer than I've lived in Guyana, I find that my sense of identity, my new-world-self, has grown more fluid. My 'Guyana-eye' still filters my experiences, but I'm also inspired by the chalk cliffs and rolling downs of Sussex where I've been living with my family for over thirty-five years and which I feel very close to.[11]

'Wherever I Hang' reveals a speaker for whom place and placelessness are inextricably intertwined. It is an exploration of how both the poet and the woman have been shaped and moulded by migration from Guyana to England into something else that she defines as her 'new-world self'. I read Grace Nichols's words, and I hear Mary Forbes's voice:

> Wherever I Hang[12]
>
> I leave me people, me land, me home,
> For reasons, I not too sure
> I forsake de sun
> And de humming-bird splendour
> Had big rats in de floorboard
> So I pick up me new-world-self
> And come to this place called England
> At first, I feeling like I in dream
> De misty greyness
> I touching de walls to see if they real —
> They solid to the seam
> And de people pouring from de underground system
> Like beans
> And when I look up to de sky
> I see Lord Nelson high — too high to lie
>
> And is so I sending home photos of myself
> Among de pigeons and de snow
> And is so I warding off de cold
> And is so, little by little
> I begin to change my calypso ways –
> Never visiting nobody
> Before giving them clear warning
> And waiting me turn in queue –

Now, after all this time
I get accustomed to de English life
But I still miss back-home side
To tell you de truth
I don't know really where I belaang

Yes, divided to de ocean
Divided to de bone

Wherever I hang me knickers – that's my home.
(Grace Nichols)

The photographic medium has historically played a critical, and often problematic, role in how as a society we *see* and *don't see* the black and brown bodies that cross international borders. Each day, more women, now more than ever, from all over this world get on planes and boats and ships and makeshift rafts, while many simply walk, to cross borders.[13] Treasured images like those from my family collection and Grace Nichols's family collection illustrate that we know more about where these women are headed and less about what and who they left behind. Yet we know there are two spectrums of the migration arc: *the ones who leave and the ones who are left*. The act of migration is an act of reciprocity — to leave a place, we reconcile that we must leave others behind. Too often, though, the narratives of the ones who are left are eclipsed by those leaving. I find myself often caught in this liminal space between those who leave and those who (must) remain because for many years it was my story, and, for many years before that, it was my mother's story.

Making the journey with us when my family left Guyana in 1995 were a handful of photographs chronicling our life. Owning photographs was an act of privilege; they stood among our most valuable possessions. There were no negatives, no jpegs, no double copies, just the originals. Decades later, these photographs serve as a tangible connection to a homeland left behind. Many of them, like the one on the next page, are taken at Guyana's airport during the 1980s and 1990s when we often bade farewell to yet another family member leaving. Movement and transition were the constants in our lives. Airports became sites for family reunions. Before I nervously boarded my first plane at fourteen years old, a one-way flight bound for JFK, I had long resented planes as the violent machines that fragmented families.

When I think of the women of SS Empire Windrush who uprooted their entire families and headed to England, I think of my own mother's migration story some thirty years later. Before my mother boarded that JFK flight at thirty-nine years old with her three children in tow, she had, in the years prior, witnessed her brothers and sisters all leave Guyana one by one. By nineteen, a cycle of poverty and – the final straw – the loss of both her parents within a few short years of each other ushered in a series of constant departures. Beginning in the 1970s, her six siblings joined the mass exodus of Guyanese leaving Guyana. They first left for neighbouring Caribbean islands, then, later, Canada and the United States, through student visas, work visas, marriage visas — whatever it took. During the three decades that my mother spent waiting for our family's visas and papers to be vetted by two governments, Guyana and the United States, she watched the ones she loved the most leave her country and leave her, multiple times over.

That precious 1974 photograph is a reminder for me of the grit it took for my mother to enact her own agency. The image of my young mother flanked by her family at Guyana's airport became an important catalyst for my curatorial practice as I've focused on the relationship and responsibility photography bears in representing our migration narratives. It is that focus that led me to Roshini Kempadoo's work.

Roshini Kempadoo is a London-based photographer, media artist and scholar. Born to Guyanese parents who migrated to the United Kingdom, Kempadoo spent much of her youth shuffling between England, where she was born and is currently based, and throughout the Caribbean, including Guyana where she was a student in the 1970s. The artist's multiple acts of migration have shaped much of her repertoire, which includes several bodies of work aimed at examining the role of the photographic image in the Caribbean diaspora and Britain in excavating Caribbean women's stories.

In 2016, I invited Kempadoo to show one of her most recent artistic projects, 'Face Up' (2015) in an exhibition I curated, *Un/Fixed Homeland* in Newark, New Jersey, which looked at how artists in Guyana and its diasporic cities of New York, Toronto and London were utilising photography to examine how a homeland can be both fixed and unfixed, a constantly shifting idea and memory, a physical place and a psychic space.[14] I found 'Face Up' to be a critical contribution to countering the invisibility of Caribbean immigrant women's stories, which still remain largely absent from historical records. While Grace Nichols and Janice Lowe Shinebourne illuminate the experiences of an elder generation of Guyanese women immigrants, 'Face Up' is an equally important commentary of the twenty-first-century experiences of a younger generation of Caribbean women, many of whom are daughters of the Windrush generation. Their stories too are largely absent from contemporary narratives.

A poignant example of this is London-based scholar Maria del Pilar Kaladeen who writes of the racism she endured growing up in England as a daughter of immigrants and of 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 Windrush Generation and a Spanish mother, Kaladeen shares in the essay, 'A Daughter's Journey: From Indenture to Windrush', how complicated the promise of 'full claim to citizenship' to those who migrated to England truly was and the impact this had on younger generations. She writes:

> [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.

Figure 4. My mother Ingrid (third row, centre) with her siblings and extended family at Timehri International Airport, Guyana, in the mid-1970s, as she bade farewell to a sister who was leaving for Barbados and would later embark on a second migration to Canada where she settled. Persaud Family Collection.

> 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.[15]

Because of this vitriolic environment, silences, absences and erasures defined Kaladeen's relationship to her culture. It was Kaladeen's desire to know the land of her father's birth that served as the catalyst ending his four-decade estrangement from Guyana. Their intertwined stories, of how we lose and rediscover a place, illustrate the toll migration takes on a family. It is also a story of agency, of how daughters of immigrants struggle to maintain and restore frayed bonds.

Similarly to Kaladeen's story, Kempadoo's 'Face Up' looks at our culture's current dependency on technology to maintain connections across the diaspora. She creates the character 'Deirdre' as one of the protagonists, a young Guyanese woman living in London who still has close ties to

Figure 5. Roshini Kempadoo, 'Face Up', 2015. Video, 11:35 mins. Video still courtesy of the artist.

Figure 6. Dominique Hunter, 'We Meet Here', I to XII, 2017 (detail). Digital photography collage. Courtesy of the artist.

her extended family in Guyana.[16] In the video, the viewer is made aware of distressing news about a family member's health in Guyana while simultaneously seeing Deirdre's engagement with multiple digital screens. From these engagements, the viewer witnesses the ways in which Deirdre stages and creates a self-image, curating and sharing her experiences with the world. Kempadoo imagines Deirdre's story:

> Deirdre checks her hair using the screen and switches her earplugs from the phone to the laptop. She is in her regular coffee bar near Regent Street around the corner from work, waiting for a Skype call. It is what she suspected … her cousin in Georgetown has gotten worse and needs medical treatment. Ordering another flat white, she downloads and forwards the visa forms, looks up airline tickets and checks her bank balance. The credit card balance has maxed, but she has managed to reserve flights from Cheddi Jagan International to Gatwick.[17]

Via her selfies, Deirdre's gestures of 'self-validation and visual confirmation' reveal a kind of myth-making. The diasporic Londoner is always 'negotiating journeys across and through spaces and media', says Kempadoo, '[she] knows about at least two places called "home" and keeps track of and maintains tenuous and multiple "identities" as a precarious life experience — hers and others'.[18] In 'Face Up', Kempadoo's digital photographic fusions function as gestures of resistance, declarations that these first and second generations born to the men and women of Windrush will not disappear into history either.

My discovery of Mary Forbes's name on the passenger list of SS Empire Windrush, and the complicated questions conjured up by her presence aboard that 1948 vessel bound for England, led me to the brilliant artistic imaginations of these women of Guyanese heritage outlined here, women with whom I've had the privilege to collaborate in my curatorial practice. Some of them return to Guyana often, and some rarely. Yet being the daughters of Guyana remain at the core of their identities. Their work has moved me in deeply personal ways for its intimacy and thoughtfulness to tell Guyanese women's stories. These women use their literary and artistic practices to explore the nuanced migration experiences of Guyanese women. Through their engagement with and beyond the archives, they unpack global realities of migration, tease out symbols of decay and loss, and avoid trappings of nostalgia by envisioning avenues out of displacement and dislocation. And, equally compelling, their work speaks to whom and what gets left, what survives and what is mourned, both the tangible and intangible things, in acts of migration.

Notes

1. *Liminal Space*, curated by Grace Aneiza Ali, at the Caribbean Cultural Center African Diaspora Institute (CCCADI), New York, 17 June 2017 to 30 November 2017.
2. Artist Statement submitted by Dominque Hunter for her digital collage work, 'We Meet Here, I to XII' (2017), featured in the group exhibition *Liminal Space* (see note 1 above).
3. Ibid.
4. Reference: BT 26/1237/9396. Selected passenger logs and historical details can be found online. Accessed 16 Jan. 2018. http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/

+/http://www.movinghere.org.uk//galleries/histories/caribbean/journeys/journeys.htm#after_windrush.

5 In the 1970s and 1980s, another movement of emigration unfolded as Guyanese began shifting to Canada and the United States. In fact, Toronto has emerged as a prominent node in the Caribbean diaspora as one of the largest and oldest Guyanese populations outside of Guyana.

6 However, a backlash against the increasing number of the colonies' Caribbean-born workers and their families moving into Britain's neighbourhoods led to the 1962 Commonwealth Immigration Act, which would overturn the Nationality Act of 1948, citing it as an unregulated approach to immigration.

7 The number 257 includes every woman above the age of 12 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. See Casagranda.

8 An unpublished essay by Grace Nichols, 'So I Pick Up Me New World Self', which is part of an upcoming collection, *Liminal Spaces: Between Arrivals and Departures*, edited by Grace Aneiza Ali, featuring narratives of migration from women of the Guyanese diaspora.

9 Ibid.

10 Ibid.

11 Ibid.

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13 The World Economic Forum reports that by 2016, '[w]omen will comprise more than half the world's 232 million migrants for the first time. A growing proportion of these women will migrate independently and as breadwinners for their families.' See Khalid Koser.

14 *Un|Fixed Homeland*, curated by Grace Aneiza Ali, at Aljira, a Center for Contemporary Art, Newark, New Jersey, 17 July 2016 to 23 Sept. 2016.

15 An unpublished essay by Maria del Pilar Kaladeen, 'A Daughter's Journey: From Indenture to Windrush', which is part of an upcoming collection, *Liminal Spaces: Between Arrivals and Departures*, edited by Grace Aneiza Ali, featuring narratives of migration from women of the Guyanese diaspora.

16 As a whole, 'Face Up' presents a series of characters whose stories are told through screen animation vignettes, and woven with text, images and sound, referred to by Kempadoo as 'snippets, sound bites, and fragments of life stories'. The work examines how our culture's reliance on phones, tablets and other mobile devices 'have radically affected how … [we] connect with others and … comprehend world events'.

17 Ibid.

18 Ibid.

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