



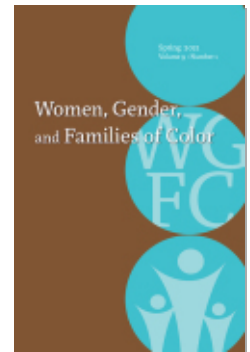
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Women, Art, and Activism in Guyana

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Abstract

This curatorial essay explores the dynamic role of Guyanese women artists and their persistence in using the arts to counter dangerous single stories of Guyana. These are women who have labored for their country, women who are in service to a larger vision of what Guyana is, can, and ought to be in the world. While honoring an older generation of Guyanese women, the essay simultaneously highlights a younger generation of Guyanese women across various stages in their artistic practices who have gained newfound power and an emancipatory vision through the arts. As a whole, this younger generation uses their artistic practices to resist a legacy of absence and invisibility of Guyanese women, even while the cadre of contemporary women artists of Guyanese heritage remains relatively under the radar—to both Guyanese people and on the world stage.

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 monolithic view of Africa as “a single story of catastrophe.” She cautions us of the consequences when we participate, even unconsciously, but worse yet when we partake, in the complicity of constructing 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. (12:49–14:00)

Like Adichie’s Nigeria, Guyana has been the victim of a dangerous single story rooted in catastrophe. As a nation that gained independence in 1966, Guyana is still a young country. It continues to carve out its place internationally, having only been independent from British colonial rule for just

over fifty years. On the world stage, Guyana has largely been portrayed in a complicated light. One only need browse the global headlines over the past fifty years, largely reported by British and American publications. 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 of more than 900 people in 1978, led by American cult leader Jim Jones; to the revelation that, by 1980, Guyana's economic situation was so dire that it was ranked, along with Haiti, as the second poorest country in the Western Hemisphere while also grappling with one of the highest HIV rates in the Caribbean region; to widespread political corruption during national elections in the 1990s that required the former American president Jimmy Carter to preside; to the 2014 report by the World Health Organization naming Guyana as the country with the highest suicide rate in the world; to the 2017 data declaring Guyana as a "disappearing nation" (Dabydeen 2017) with the highest out-migration rate in the world. The majority of the global reporting on Guyana has featured stories steeped in violence, political corruption, poverty, trauma, and mass exodus.

In recent years, the major reporting regarding Guyana and the Guyanese diasporic community has leaned negative. These 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 oil offshore 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* opening paragraph for the article "The \$20 Billion Question for Guyana" painted the country with a brushstroke of 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." Indeed, the first line characterized Guyana as "[a] vast watery wilderness with only three paved highways"; later, its economy was described as "propelled by drug trafficking, money-laundering and gold and diamond smuggling." The Guyanese diaspora worldwide united in an uproar

against this characterization of the nation. Dr. Oneka LaBennett, Guyanese-American professor and anthropologist, harshly critiqued the portrayal 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.”²

Of course, Guyana is a complicated place with unique struggles. Nevertheless, it remains a beloved homeland for many of its citizens and those in its wide diaspora globally and across the Caribbean. The spotlight will continue to grow on Guyana as its future is now entangled with oil production. The world is now watching how things will play out in what the media has begun to frame as Guyana’s “rags-to-riches” story. Nevertheless, it continues to be a global malpractice that most stories told about us are not by us—that, in itself, is its own kind of unique danger.

Women, Art, and Activism in Guyana

What has remained a bright light, however, is the persistent role of women in countering the dangerous single stories of Guyana through the arts. These women have labored for their country, women who are in service to a larger vision of what Guyana is, can, and ought to be in the world. As a curator whose curatorial research practice is steeped in Caribbean art, I am often saddened by the lack of awareness of the work of Guyanese women, particularly women of older generations who lived through the political fractures of colonial and postcolonial Guyana to blaze a path for the Guyanese women of my generation. Women like painter, art teacher, and arts advocate Bernadette Persaud (b. 1946, British Guiana; lives in Guyana). In Natalie Hopkinson’s *A Mouth Is Always Muzzled: Six Dissidents, Five Continents, and the Art of Resistance* (2008), which explores art and resistance in Guyana, the author dedicates a chapter to tracing Persaud’s nearly seven decades of living and painting and her unwavering championing of the arts as a tool for social change. Hopkinson writes, “[S]he has seen it all. British rule. African rule. Indian rule . . . Through sheer willpower . . . [she] has busted down the gates. She in turn has demanded inclusion for others: women, Amerindians—any original artists—as long as they are troublemakers” (32–34).

As a young woman who had just lost her job as an art teacher, Persaud launched an art practice in 1980 that immediately sought to confront the harsh political realities of postindependence Guyana. In her *Gentlemen in the Gardens* series of large-scale oil paintings, Persaud responded to the institutional powers within the nation and to those of the British Empire. Subverting

the notion of the nation's botanical gardens as paradise, Persaud camouflaged machine-gun-toting military figures within the painting's lush landscapes. "In a regime that crushed even the hint of public or private dissent," writes Hopkinson, "it was a bold critique of the militarization of Guyanese society. This brute oppression had been passed down through colonial-era military crackdowns and carried on in the first local regimes after independence" (2018, 41–42). Hopkinson's inclusion of a chapter on Persaud remains one of the few dedicated pieces of scholarship attempting to capture the artist's expansive career and arts activism.

In stark contrast, there exists a robust body of art criticism, art historical scholarship, exhibitions, and monographs focused on the artistic practices of several of Persaud's male counterparts whose work also addressed the nation's colonial history and its oppressive government regimes, such as Dennis Williams (b. 1923), Aubrey Williams (b. 1926), Donald Locke (b. 1930), and Frank Bowling (b. 1934). As Hopkinson notes, "In those heady days after independence, when the British first left Guyana to the Guyanese, [Bernadette] Persaud debated with Guyana's Great Men—always men—to redefine the role of art in a newly free society" (2018, 32). That art history has largely failed to notice Persaud's sustained dialogue with the political realities of the world in which she finds herself or her contributions to Caribbean art has in no way deterred a practice that continues to engage her present-day realities.

While Persaud used the canvas as her primary medium, other women of her generation used language. Women like writer Janice Shinebourne (b. 1947, British Guiana; lives in the United Kingdom), of Indian and Chinese ancestry, employed essays, short stories, and novels—most notably *The Last Ship* (2015)—to elevate Guyana's literature and public discourse on Chinese-Guyanese and Chinese-Caribbean history, particularly that of women. Across her body of work, she has been committed to the examination of the lives of Chinese-Guyanese women over seven decades, traversing their identities as citizens in their homeland and as immigrants in diasporic soils. Posing the question "How do the literary representations of Chinese West Indians *by* Chinese West Indians affect the depictions of the relationship between Chineseness and nation?" Anne-Marie Lee-Joy writes that Shinebourne's work "reveal[s] ways in which the Chinese can be imagined as valid members of their West Indian nations rather than as aliens and outsiders despite their Chineseness" (2010, 118).

In addition, indomitable poet Grace Nichols (b. 1950, British Guiana; lives in the United Kingdom), who is among a notable generation of Caribbean writers in Britain, has seen her work flourish globally with poetry collections

such as the seminal works *The Fat Black Woman's Poems* (1990) and *I Is a Long Memored Woman* (1983), which was awarded the prestigious Commonwealth Poetry Prize in 1983. In her commitment to centering the African-Caribbean woman as protagonist throughout her poetry collections, Nichols has, over the past four decades, consistently used her literary platform to articulate the experiences of the Black Caribbean immigrant in Britain. As Mara Scanlon notes, "Nichols counters historic voicelessness and oppression by forging a new standard of beauty and a new mythology surrounding her riveting character" (1998, 64). Like Persaud, these women have been doing important work—largely unrecognized—among those great men who have received international acclaim. Shinebourne, Nichols, and others like them deserve recognition amid Guyana's literary luminaries, such as Walter Rodney and Martin Carter.

Guyana's Artistic Landscape

In my curatorial practice, I have seen how contemporary Guyanese women artists of a younger generation are also eclipsed or overshadowed or simply left out of the conversation when it comes to their contributions to the artistic and cultural production of Guyana. I've found that, even within Caribbean and Latin American circles, the awareness of Guyanese artists is often tepid. Hazlewood (2010) posits that one reason for these absences is that Guyana is engulfed in a perpetual geographic and cultural balancing act, caught between its close cultural, political, and historical ties to the Caribbean Islands and its physical location on the mostly Latin mainland. The result is that this vital, multicultural, and multiracial former outpost of the British Empire is often overlooked in reviews of Latin American art and is only grudgingly admitted into an occasional Caribbean-themed exhibition.

That overlooking of Guyana has been glaringly palpable in the large-scale curatorial projects, often regarded as sweeping contemporary Caribbean art exhibitions, that have been mounted within the last two decades. Furthermore, if there is an awareness within these gatherings, it is largely dominated by notable male figures. The most recent, *Relational Undercurrents: Contemporary Art of the Caribbean Archipelago*, aimed at questioning the conceptual boundaries of what constitutes Caribbean spaces, included no Guyanese among its roster of more than 80 Caribbean artists (Flores and Stephens 2017). Similarly, five years prior, *Caribbean Crossroads of the World* (2012–13), which was spread across three museums in New York City

and boasted a blockbuster gathering of over 500 works of art spanning four centuries, included only one Guyanese artist, Frank Bowling (Cullen and Fuentes Rodríguez 2012). And its predecessor five years earlier, *Infinite Island* (2007–8), which gathered 45 emerging and established artists living within the Caribbean and its diaspora to engage the complexities of Caribbean history and identity, included Hew Locke as the singular Guyanese voice (Mosaka Tumelo and Ramirez 2007).

This curatorial essay highlights a younger generation of Guyanese women across various stages in their artistic practices and careers: Dominique Hunter, Khadija Benn, Maya Mackrandilal, and Suchitra Mattai. The work they do undoubtedly is made possible because of the visionary women—like Persaud, Shinebourne and Nichols, among others—who have defined a path of arts activism for them. In taking up the mantle from these women, these younger artists, as I illustrate through select works from their oeuvre, also bear witness to tumultuous times in the history of their nation while using art as a powerful platform of dissent and gesture of resistance. As a whole, this younger generation of women, like the generation before them, uses their artistic practices to counter a legacy of absence and invisibility of Guyanese women, even while the cadre of contemporary women artists of Guyanese heritage remains relatively under the radar—to both Guyanese people and on the world stage. What the global public sees of the visual culture of Guyana still centers on the exotic, the tropical, the colonial, and the touristic. The contemporary Guyanese visual artists-activists presented here are part of a movement to counter this historic malpractice by challenging and disrupting the dominant culture's paradise narrative often associated with the region. Through dynamic art practices, they generously lend their intelligence, thoughtfulness, artistry, and agency. Their work stands as declarations that the women of Guyana will not disappear into history.

By no means are the women presented here—Hunter, Benn, Mackrandilal, and Mattai—meant to be a complete or exhaustive list of the contemporary state of Guyanese women in the arts. At the end of the essay, their bios reveal a litany of accomplishments within Guyana, the Caribbean region, and internationally recognized art platforms and publications—among them invitations as featured artists in the Sharjah Biennial (United Arab Emirates), CARIFESTA XIII (Barbados), and Vermont Studio Center (United States). I have selected these four Guyanese women for the ways in which they have forged a transnational practice, despite the aforementioned limitations and barriers to public recognition, as well as battles for limited funds, resources, and support for the arts from both public and private spheres.

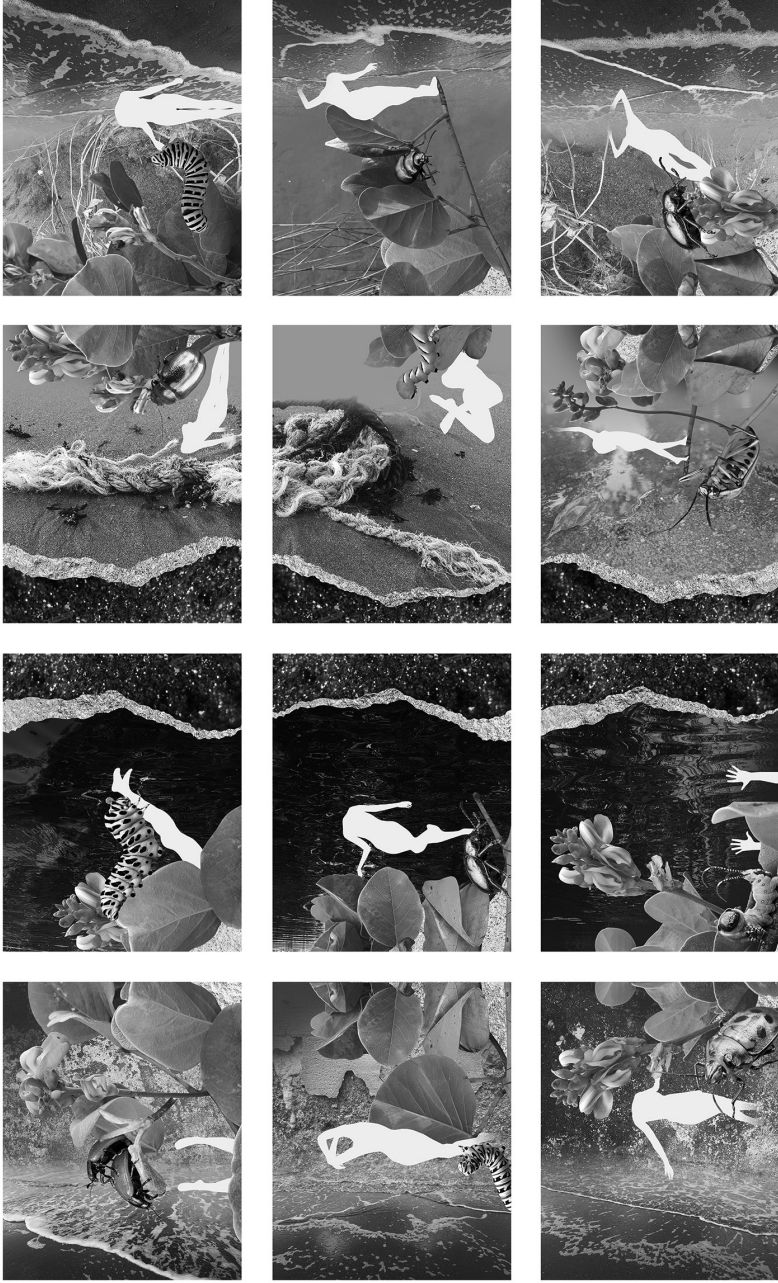


Figure 1. Dominique Hunter. 2017. *We Meet Here, I to XII*. Digital photography collage. Courtesy of the artist.

Dominique Hunter

When more Guyanese live outside Guyana than within its borders, what becomes of a homeland? An estimated two million Guyanese citizens live around the world in global metropolises like New York City—where they are the fifth-largest immigrant group (Lobo and Salvo 2013, 20)—London, and Toronto. In contrast, Guyana today has a population of around 760,000. Guyanese people have long known migration as the single most defining narrative of our country. In fact, for a country of its small size, it has one of the world's highest out-migration rates.³ The last eight decades in Guyana have been defined by an extraordinary ebb and flow of its citizens. In the BBC Radio series *Neither Here nor There*, one of its episodes examined the presence of the Guyanese diaspora, exploring how their migration experience has impacted their identities. Host David Dabydeen (2017), 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.”

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 must reconcile that we leave others. Leaving a place means someone and something, both tangible and intangible, are left behind. Regrettably, the discourse and creative representations on migration are overwhelmingly focused on the ones who leave. As a consequence, often times, the ones who are left, their stories, their experiences, are eclipsed by those doing the leaving. Dominique Hunter (b. Guyana 1987; lives in Guyana) is invested in the stories of those who remain. She is among the small artistic community of women photographers living and working in Guyana. Her work underscores that we must acknowledge what is left behind. Migration swirls around her. Yet she is an artist choosing to forge an artistic practice in a place where the drive is to leave, not to stay.

Hunter moves in and out of several geographic spaces within the Caribbean and North America for various artist residencies and opportunities in what she calls mini-migrations. Yet she is vocal about rooting her artistic practice in Guyana, a country defined by the ebb and flow of departure. Hunter shares that, from a very young age, the Guyanese citizen is indoctrinated with the following charge: “There is an expectation once you have reached a certain age: pack what you can and leave. I am well past that age, yet I remain, stubbornly *rooted* in the land my parents spent their lives cultivating.”⁴ What a spectacular thing for any citizen of any place to grapple



Figure 2. Khadija Benn. 2012–16. *Amalivaca*. From the series *Wanderer*. Digital photography. Courtesy of the artist.

with—to be, from birth, dispossessed of one’s own land. As both an artist and a citizen living in Guyana, Hunter bears witness daily to the personal and political consequences of Guyanese leaving their native land in droves.

With that experience to bear, Hunter uses the botanical concept of “transplantation” as a metaphorical device to engage dual and conflicting ideas of movement and rootedness in her mixed-media collages. In *We Meet Here, I to XII* (2017), she shepherds us through what she deems “a guide to surviving transplantation and other traumas.”⁵ The artist engages “rootedness” with twelve distinct photographs displayed in grid form. Via digital collage, Hunter layers organic imagery reminiscent of Guyana’s lush vegetation found in its Amazon rainforests as well as on its Atlantic Coast. Within each individual work, two things are a constant presence: the white silhouette of a self-referential figure and the green morning glory plant that thrives amid other flora and fauna in elements of varying temperatures, 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.”⁶ The silhouetted figure, seen in some iterations with body parts obscured, poignantly

points us to the rupture migration enacts on the body. In this symbolic artistic gesture, Hunter insists that, while migration swirls around us, for some, the act of staying, of being rooted, of choosing not to be transplanted is its own kind of agency.

Khadija Benn

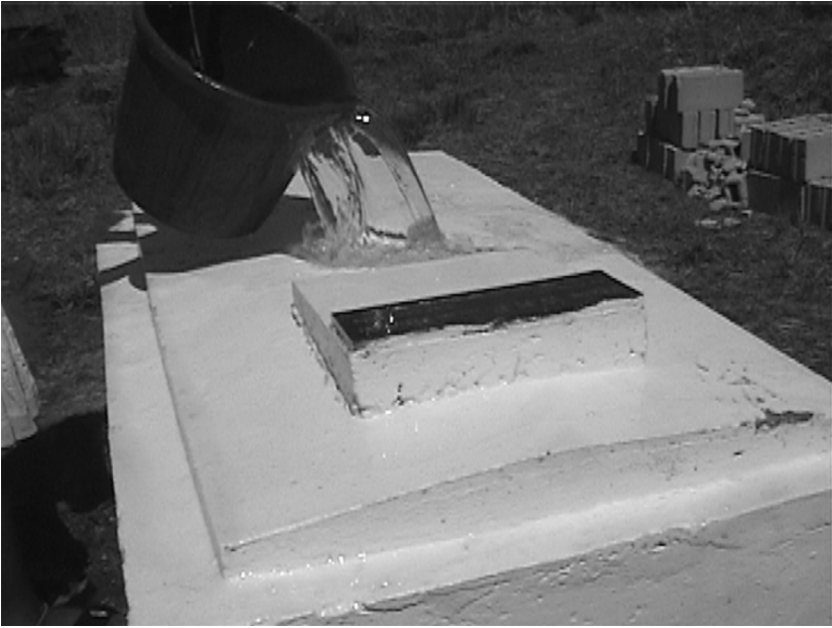
Khadija Benn (b. Canada 1986; lives and works in Guyana) is trained as a geographer and cartographer. Her work as a geospatial analyst in Guyana informs much of her digital photography practice and leads to places most Guyanese rarely have access to. The digital photographic series *Wanderer* (2012–16) is an homage to the “discovery and re-discovery of place . . . and the underlying histories that have created these complex spaces.”⁷ That this body of work relies on Guyana’s landscapes is a testament to Benn’s intimate relationship to home and land. The artist has witnessed the devastating effects of how we mine the land for its precious core and irrevocably transform it. Benn spent her childhood in the mining town of Linden, in the northeastern region of Guyana, where bauxite, a main source of aluminum, has been the town’s staple export since the early 1900s. Later in her life, the artist’s formal training as a geographer and cartographer would lead her on map-making and heritage preservation assignments across the country. In *Wanderer*, Benn takes us to the Rupununi grasslands and the Kanuku Mountains—remote communities where some of Guyana’s remaining 80,000 Amerindians call home.

At first glance, Benn’s polished painterly images, lush with color, a light and a heavy-handed brush of glamour and romanticism, might appear as a replica of the pervasive “picturing paradise” aesthetic we often see associated with the Caribbean. While Indigenous Amerindian peoples have called the Rupununi home since the early eighteenth century, this landscape has famously served as muse for the colonial European literary imagination, notably Arthur Conan Doyle’s *Lost World* and Walter Raleigh’s El Dorado quest. In her seminal book *An Eye for the Tropics: Tourism, Photography, and Framing the Caribbean Picturesque* (2006), on the visual representation of the Caribbean, Krista Thompson writes of concerted colonial efforts at the turn of the twentieth century to use the picturesque aesthetic to racially whiten Caribbean spaces: “By representing the islands as picturesque, authorities hoped that white tourists would become migrants. . . . Photographs were central to transforming, literally and pictorially, the islands from colonial outposts of exploitation to *societies* that seemed perfectly managed, domesticated, and stable” (23). It is this very narrative that Benn seeks to exploit

by inserting the female body, both her own via self-portraiture and those of other Guyanese women as collaborators. In this act of agency, of claiming space and ownership of these sweeping vistas, Benn notes, “Not wanting to contribute redundant pictorials of Guyana, I sought a re-interpretation of these places through portraiture . . . anchoring and abstracting the female body within the landscapes.”⁸ While foregrounding the body against these landscapes, Benn simultaneously employs what she notes as an “erasure of the faces of the women photographed”⁹ to remind us of the ways in which Caribbean women are often eroticized and objectified in Western art.

Historically, the Rupununi has seen much loss: two major measles and smallpox epidemics brought on by early European colonial arrivals to the Americas devastated populations of Indigenous peoples. Presently, Amerindian women remain among the most vulnerable in Guyana and the most impacted by the serious economic downturns over the past decades, when the decline of bauxite mining, coupled with little access to education beyond primary school, damaged these communities. While rendering the subjects’ faces obscured in *Amalivaca*, Benn implores the viewer to shift attention to her act of Amerindian naming in the titles of the work. *Amalivaca*, for example, is a little-known Indigenous mythical figure of Cariban-Amerindian legend who teaches harmonious existence with the environment. Operating in Benn’s *Amalivaca*, and throughout the *Wanderer* series, is a visual language of protest, contestation, and critique of colonialism. Benn’s dual countering acts of imaging and naming in her work underscore how, as Thompson (2016, 24) writes, “Spaces crafted for tourism become locations for acts of civil disobedience against the colonial state.”

Both Hunter and Benn are among the few women photographers living and working in Guyana. Another powerful connective thread between their art practices is their provocative engagement of the female body within Caribbean landscapes and seascapes. Both *We Meet Here, I to XII* and *Wanderer*, as well as numerous other works, challenge the ubiquitous, often hypersexualized, photographic presence and placement of Caribbean women’s bodies within Caribbean sites. Placed within two specific geographic spaces of the Atlantic—landscapes and waterscapes of Guyana—Hunter and Benn counter the use of the Caribbean woman’s body as a familiar trope of the picturing paradise narrative. Instead, their images explore and define their own complex and nuanced relationship with the land and the sea and their evolving Guyanese identities. Through the use of their own bodies as subject and via various artistic gestures that push the boundaries of portraiture, their insertion of the Guyanese—and by extension, the Caribbean woman’s



Figures 3. Maya Mackrandilal. 2014. Still from the film *Kal/Pani*. SD video with sound, 8:53 mins.

body—within spaces that are all at once remote, pastoral, turbulent, safe, familiar, strange, picturesque, and grotesque signal deeper political and subversive acts: to disrupt dominant global narratives of the Caribbean picturesque; to indict the ways in which perceptions of the Caribbean woman’s body continue to resonate; to reclaim these Caribbean spaces from the colonial imaginary as sites of conquest and exploration; and, simply but profoundly, to counter the historic absence and erasure of Caribbean women from master narratives of art and, instead, place them at the center.

Maya Mackrandilal

“Embrace the void, or embrace the land,”¹⁰ says Maya Mackrandilal (b. 1985, United States; lives in the United States) as she narrates the video *Kal/Pani* (2014). We never see her. We only hear her voice. The artist’s poetic meditation floats over a scene of a moving ritual as preparations are made for her maternal grandmother’s funeral on the family’s farm, located on the banks of Guyana’s Mahaicony River. With bare hands, her aunt washes down large, white concrete, above-ground tombs containing elders past with generous buckets of water. In this moment of reverence, Mackrandilal tells us, “Nanie

asked that we build her tomb high above the ground, so the flooding river would not touch her body.”¹¹

Water is a key symbol throughout *Kal/Pani*. The work’s title *kal pani* is Hindi for “dark waters”—a phrase that reflects the Hindu belief that to cross the sea, to leave India, was taboo. Time and time again, Mackrandilal paints vivid scenes that mirror the perilous nineteenth-century crossing of Indians to the Caribbean. They are meant to conjure the dehumanizing system, orchestrated by British colonialism, of the Indian indentured system of labor in British Guiana that replaced the brutal enslavement of Africans. Between 1838 and 1917, over 500 ship voyages deposited more than a quarter-million men and women from India to Guiana’s Atlantic coast. They would spend over eight decades toiling on sugar plantations and rice fields. Mackrandilal says in the video, “They called the sea *kal pani*, black water. To cross it was a rupture, a separation from the land, from culture, from caste, to be forever outside, forever a nomad.”¹²

While the representations of water—as symbolic of history, healing, death, trauma, spirituality—figure prominently in Caribbean art, Mackrandilal’s *Kal/Pani* is notable for two distinct assertions. First, it situates itself into prominent trope, articulated by poet Derek Walcott as “the sea is history,” and simultaneously implicates how little attention the migration by sea of Indian indentured laborers to the Caribbean—including Guyana, Trinidad, Jamaica, St. Lucia, Grenada, St. Vincent, St. Kitts, and Guadeloupe—has been received in the visual language of contemporary Caribbean art. Yet Mackrandilal is invested in using *kal pani* to push the conversation beyond the historical and instead points us to consider how the crossing of those dark waters in the nineteenth century continues to reveal deep fractures and fissures in twenty-first-century Indian-Guyanese selfhood and identity.

In *Kal/Pani*, we meet Mackrandilal in the tenuous space of returning to an ancestral place in the midst of loss and death. To make *Kal/Pani*, the American-born artist returned to Guyana in 2011, to the rice fields where her Guyanese-born mother grew up until she too left as a young woman. Like the majority of the indentured laborers who never returned to their motherland of India but made their borrowed land their new home, so too have the artist and her mother laid claim to the United States. “Acres of rice farm in a country we rarely visit. . . . What are we, the generation that exists in the . . . wake of estrangement, to make of the pieces?” asks Mackrandilal in the video. Two centuries later, the “rupture” created by the initial crossing of the *kal pani* remains pervasive. And it now haunts a second wave of a transatlantic migration from Guyana to the United States.



Figure 4. Maya Mackrandilal. 2015. *Yoni Mudra*. From the series *Mudra Erasure*. Pigment print on bamboo paper. Courtesy of the artist.

The video is accompanied by a triptych *Mudra Erasure* (2015) of *mudras*—a Hindi word for the symbolic hand gestures often used in Indian dance. It features the hands of the women in her family holding three food objects unique to the region: a gutted hassa fish, a pierced green coconut, and a halved sapadilla fruit, all of which have been violently ruptured. In this work, Mackrandilal connects generations of those who ventured into the *kal pani* two centuries ago with those who embark on symbolic crossings of their own twenty-first century dark waters.

According to the United Nations' (2016) study on migration, over 244 million people are now living in a country other than the one they were born in. Mackrandilal's work speaks to the desire for reconnection with loved ones, houses, landscapes, and sacred objects left behind in places that are beautiful yet materially impoverished. Underscoring her work is a universally deep desire to know the land of her parents' birth. In her return to Guyana in the past decade, she creates new rituals to honor the loved maternal ancestor she never knew. Embedded in Mackrandilal's *Kal/Pani* is a story of how we lose, rediscover, and reunite with place.



Figure 5. Suchitra Mattai. 2019. *The Sweeter Side*. Vintage saris, belt, fiber, tassel, faux plant, 72 x 33.75 inches. Courtesy of the artist.

Suchitra Mattai

Suchitra Mattai (b. 1973 Guyana; lives in the United States) is deeply concerned with the artistic labor of women's work—the skill, craftsmanship, artistry, detail, intricacy, and love invested in a vintage patchwork tapestry or a silk sari or a crocheted lace that transforms it from a sequence of threads into a work of art. Mattai's personal commitment to the slow, meditative, and increasingly elusive handmade process—weaving, knitting, crocheting, sewing, needlepointing, and embroidering, which have been buoyed across generations by the hands of the women in her Guyanese family—reflect the artist's political consciousness of the visible and the invisible work of women. She wants to give voice to the original makers—women. For Mattai, women's work is steeped both in the activism and the poetics of an artistic practice.

This reverence for women's work can be seen simply in the ways the artist honors the threads, both tangible and metaphorical, woven throughout

the vintage saris in *The Sweeter Side* (2019) or the embroidered seaweed rug *El Dorado after All* (2017). With each puncture of embroidery, each woven thread, each knitted yarn, Mattai challenges the ways women's artistic production rooted in handmade traditions have been excluded, dismissed, trivialized, or outright erased from art historical discourse as "domestic" or "feminine." Instead, the artist elevates their value and centers them squarely within the history of art making.

Mattai, like so many of us, is a daughter of migration. In her work, women of the Indian diaspora are always present. The artist's migratory paths through Guyana, Canada, and the United States inform a dynamic artistic practice characterized by what she deems "disconnected landscapes that are unreal but offer a lingering familiarity."¹³ While employing the processes of women's work to make textile sculptures and installations, Mattai is in conversation, in both subtle and overt ways, with the audience about how women navigate through and out of migration, displacement, and borders. Her oeuvre teems with texture, materiality, and laborious detail as the artist weaves together a bounty of objects suggestive of turbulent and disruptive experiences. For example, in *El Dorado after All*, Mattai reimagines the mythical city of gold that ignited sixteenth-century European explorations of South America. Drawing from a photograph hypothesizing the location of this lush world, Mattai renders *el dorado* an idealized, imagined, abandoned, symbolic landscape. She weaves onto a large-scale seaweed rug a bounty of objects and materials—thread, faux fur, leather, zippers, cord, ribbon, pompoms, chains. Mattai is concerned with the liminal space of disorientation when one transitions through multiple cultural spheres. "By hand-embroidering this idealized (and fictitious) version of Guyana," she states, "I am weaving together both personal and historical traces to create a mythical past. Like all myth, this past is part fiction and part truth."¹⁴

Embedded in Mattai's works are the histories, memories, and visual codes of her Indian-Guyanese heritage. In many of her collage works, an Indian woman or girl is usually centered as the protagonist, allowing the artist to pay homage to the multiplicity, the complexity, of the subject's life. She often thinks of her work—for example, the formidable *The Sweeter Side*, a tapestry of vintage saris enclosed in a heavy metal frame—as a "monument" to the women and laborers from the Indian Guyanese diaspora, one that bridges women of the past with the Guyanese women of her own family who ensured the passing on of handmade traditions.

To be immersed in the details of Mattai's work, to witness her breathe life into seemingly unremarkable found objects—a belt, a tassel, a zipper—only

to reinvent them into monuments of beauty, is a reminder of the words of Haitian-born writer Edwidge Danticat who posits that all immigrants are artists for the ways in which we fashion and make a life from nothing. Danticat 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-taking, 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. (quoted in Fassler 2013)

As I have poured over the work of these great Guyanese women with my multiple hats on—curator, citizen, and daughter of Guyana—I see love embedded in the art so generously offered throughout their practices. I am moved by their brilliance and innovation, by the thoughtful and provocative conversations, at times challenging and disruptive, that their works allow us to have. For them, love is showing up for Guyana and dreaming of its future. We can look to these women as the ambassadors of Guyana's multiple stories.

* * *

Khadija Benn was born in Canada, grew up in the bauxite mining town of Linden, Guyana, and settled in the capital Georgetown. Her photography-based artwork features abstracted portraits set in distinctive Guyanese landscapes and her social documentary photography focuses on the diversity of Guyanese experiences. Benn holds a master of science in geoinformatics from the University of the West Indies and works in Guyana as a cartographer, geospatial analyst, and researcher. She teaches in the Department of Geography at the Faculty of Earth and Environmental Sciences, University of Guyana. Her work has been exhibited at Aljira, a Center for Contemporary Art (New Jersey), CARIFESTA XIII (Barbados), and the Caribbean Cultural Center African Diaspora Institute (New York), and featured in *ARC Magazine* and *Transition Magazine*.

Dominique Hunter is a multidisciplinary artist who lives and works in Guyana, where she was born. Her artistic practice critiques the (non)representation of Black female bodies in art history and stereotypical portrayals in contemporary print media. Her recent work has expanded to include strategies for coping with the weight of those impositions by examining the value of self-care practices. Hunter has been an artist-in-residence with Caribbean Linked IV and the Vermont Studio Center where she was awarded the Reed

Foundation Fellowship. Hunter is the Sunday Arts columnist for the *Guyana Chronicle*.

Maya Mackrandilal is an American-born transdisciplinary artist and writer based in Los Angeles. Her Guyanese-born mother migrated to the United States in 1978. Mackrandilal holds an MFA from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, where she was a recipient of a Jacob K. Javits Fellowship, and a BA from the University of Virginia, where she was a recipient of an Auspaugh postbaccalaureate fellowship. Her artwork has been shown nationally, including the Chicago Artist's Coalition, Smack Mellon, THE MISSION, Abrons Art Center, Aljira: A Center for Contemporary Art, and the South Side Arts Incubator. She has presented artwork and research at national conferences, including the College Art Association, Association for Asian American Studies, the Critical Mixed Race Studies Association, and Open Engagement. Her writing, which explores issues of race, gender, and labor, has appeared in a variety of publications, including *The New Inquiry*, *Drunken Boat*, *contemporary*, *Skin Deep*, and *MICE Magazine*.

Suchitra Mattai explores how natural environments shape personal narratives, ancestral histories, and the creation of "home." She received an MFA in drawing and painting and an MA in South Asian Art from the University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia. She has held solo exhibitions at Metropolitan State University of Denver; Center for Visual Art, Denver; K Contemporary, Denver; and grayDUCK Gallery, Austin. Group exhibitions include Lancaster Museum of Art and History, California; Center on Contemporary Art, Seattle; Caribbean Cultural Center African Diaspora Institute, New York; and a travelling exhibition with Art Museum of the Americas, Washington, DC. Recently, Mattai completed a residency at RedLine Contemporary Art Center and was nominated for a United States Artists Grant. She was featured in the 2019 Sharjah Biennial.

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Notes

1. Clifford Krauss, "The \$20 Billion Question for Guyana," *The New York Times*, July 20, 2018.
2. Oneka LaBennett, Twitter post, July 20, 2018, 8:20 AM. Retrieved from <https://twitter.com/OnekaLaBennett/status/1020282351392362504>, accessed March 15, 2021.
3. Guyana's emigration rate is among the highest in the world. More than 55 percent of its citizens reside abroad (CIA 2017).
4. Artist statement submitted by Dominique Hunter for her digital collage work *We Meet Here, I to XII* (2017) featured in the group exhibition *Liminal Space*, curated by Grace Ali, at the Caribbean Cultural Center African Diaspora Institute (CCCADI), New York, on view June 17 to November 30, 2017.
5. Hunter, artist statement, 2017.
6. Hunter, artist statement, 2017.

7. Khadija Benn, artist statement submitted by Khadija Benn for her digital photography series *Wanderer* (2012–16) featured in the group exhibition *UnFixed Homeland*, curated by Grace Ali, at Aljira, a Center for Contemporary Art, Newark, New Jersey, July 17 to September 23, 2016.

8. Benn, artist statement, 2016.

9. Benn, artist statement, 2016.

10. Maya Mackrandilal, artist statement submitted by Maya Mackrandilal for her video *Kal/Pani* (2014) featured in the group exhibition *UnFixed Homeland*, curated by Grace Ali, at Aljira, a Center for Contemporary Art, Newark, New Jersey, July 17 to September 23, 2016.

11. Mackrandilal, artist statement, 2016.

12. Mackrandilal, artist statement, 2016.

13. Suchitra Mattai, artist statement submitted by Suchitra Mattai for her mixed media work *El Dorado after All* (2017) featured in the group exhibition *Liminal Space*, curated by Grace Ali, at the Caribbean Cultural Center African Diaspora Institute (CCCADI), New York, June 17 to November 30, 2017.

14. Mattai, artist statement, 2017.