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▶ **To cite this version:**

Thomas Lacroix, Judith Misrahi-Barak, Lawrence Aje. Introduction - Singular and Multiple: the Three Guyanas. Re-imagining the Guyanas, Presses Universitaires de la Méditerannée, pp.13-25, 2019, 978-2-36781-291-5. hal-03723364

**HAL Id: hal-03723364**
**https://hal.science/hal-03723364**

Submitted on 26 Jul 2022

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*PoCoPages*, 2019, 13–25.

# INTRODUCTION
# SINGULAR AND MULTIPLE: THE THREE GUYANAS

*Lawrence Aje, Thomas Lacroix and Judith Misrahi-Barak*

French Guyane, Guyana and Suriname are not often focused on. Sometimes French Guyane is believed to be an island, like the other islands of the Caribbean basin. It is not included among the Antilles, sometimes it is as if it was not included among the other territories of the Caribbean at all. As for the countries that border Guyana or Suriname, it is often quite fuzzy in many people's minds. Some comments that are made publicly are often derogatory or show a certain degree of ignorance or simply, a lack of interest. To say the least, there is some uncertainty about the geography, history, culture and the arts coming from that South American corner of the world, without mentioning its administrative and political status.[1] This is not to say that no work has been done on the Guyanas, far from it—excellent work has indeed been done and published, and the academic corpus is quite rich. Scholars in literary studies, geography, political and social sciences, anthropology etc. have been underlining the richness and uniqueness of these territories, for a long time or more recently.

1. Administratively, the Guyanas include five distinct entities: the Guyanese regions of Venezuela and Brazil, two independent states (Guyana and Suriname), and a *département*, French Guyane. The former DOM-TOM (*Départements et Territoires d'Outre-mer*) was transformed by the French Parliament in 2007, to give more visibility to territories whose different statuses had become opaque and problematic. Along with Guadeloupe, Martinique and Reunion, Guyane was granted the status of DOM-ROM (*Départements et Régions d'Outre-mer*). The focus in this volume is on Guyana, French Guyane and Suriname.

Yet, one cannot avoid the impression that these erudite and passionate specialists have generally focused on one specific country and worked from a disciplinary angle that is relatively separate from other disciplines. Such approaches have not always enabled them to raise an interest from other specialists or from a more general public in a way that would be cross-disciplinary, more comparative and global. It also seems difficult to dispel the notion that French Guyane, for instance, is only worth noticing or remembering because of such associations as *le bagne*, the film *Papillon* (1973), or the 'Centre Spatial Guyanais' of Kourou. When one is lucky, a few literary references—to Albert Londres or Leon Gontran Damas mainly—do surface.

This is to the extent that Catriona MacLeod and Sarah Wood have entitled the first edited collection that examines French Guyane from a multi-disciplinary perspective *Locating Guyane* as if it was indeed difficult to decide where French Guyane is located, how it has been constituted as a geographical, historical, cultural and artistic space, and what its political and administrative status is. This is how MacLeod and Wood introduce their volume published in 2018:

> Overseas department of France in Amazonia and 'ultraperipheral region' of the EU, Guyane [. . .] is at the juncture of Europe, the Caribbean and South America. This collection of essays explores historical and conceptual locations of Guyane, as a relational space characterised by dynamics of interaction and conflict between the local, the national and the global. Does Guyane have, or has it had, its own place in the world, or is it a borderland which can only make sense in relation to elsewhere: to France and its colonial history, for example, or to African and other diasporas, or as a 'margin' of Europe?[2]

If MacLeod and Wood favour an approach centred on French Guyane even if they do allow a few forays into comparisons with Guyana and Suriname, the present volume of collected essays aims to follow suit and throw light on a much-ignored region, this time endeavouring to draw links between the three countries and invite comparisons. The desire to spotlight French Guyane, Guyana and Suriname was given the occasion to find a concrete expression with the celebrations of the 40th anniversary of Surinames's independence from the Netherlands (1975–2015) and of the 60th anniversary of Guyana's independence from Britain (1966–2016), while 2016 was

2. Catriona MacLeod and Sarah Wood. *Locating Guyane*. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2018. https://liverpooluniversitypress.co.uk/products/107030.

also the 70th anniversary of the *départementalisation* (1946–2016). This volume emerges from several academic conferences that were co-organized in such a context of celebrations, in the Netherlands, the United Kingdom and in France.

The University of Amsterdam hosted the first event entitled 'The Pan-Guyanese Highway: Cayenne—Georgetown—Paramaribo', focusing on the necessary questioning of the challenges in the communication between the three Guyanas, on their commonalities and/or discrepancies.[3] The University of London hosted the second event entitled 'Imagining the Guyanas: Ecologies of Memory and Movement'.[4] Special cultural events were held as well as academic ones, among which a Rose Hall Panel where Gaiutra Bahadur, Cyril Dabydeen, Clem Seecharan and Jan Shinebourne engaged in conversation about the plantation they grew up on, or close to, and their moving away from it. The first section reflects this bond and the questioning of that bond. One of the iconic writers of Guyanese descent, Fred D'Aguiar, graced the audience with reading from his work. Finally, the Université Paul-Valéry Montpellier 3 (EMMA) hosted the last event, 'Imagining the Guyanas: Across the Disciplines', endeavouring to create and reinforce a cross-disciplinary dialogue between scholars who had done important work and were glad to exchange views and perspectives.[5] The presence, aura and work of the writer Pauline Melville facilitated all the exchanges. All three events contributed to understanding how a focus on the Guyanas could promote a clearer understanding of the political, social and environmental issues at stake in the Caribbean as a whole, and possibly elsewhere. How can the three Guyanas provide a laboratory for a cross-disciplinary sharing of ideas and visions for

3. The conference was organized in October 2015, in partnership with the University of Antwerp, Université de Liège, Université Louvain-la-Neuve, Universiteit Leiden. Gert Oostindie gave the keynote address. Kim Andringa, Serge Goriely, Kathleen Gyssels and Michiel van Kempen were the local organizing committee.

4. The conference was organized in October 2016, in partnership with the University of Antwerp, University of Stirling and the Society of Caribbean Studies. Speaking Volumes organized 'A Celebration of Guyana in Poetry and Music', where the poets John Agard, Cyril Dabydeen and Grace Nichols were invited, as well as Malika Booker and Keith Waithe. Alissa Trotz and Janette Bulkan were the keynote speakers. The School of Advanced Study was the local organizing committee.

5. The conference was also organized in October 2016, in partnership with the University of Antwerp, University of Stirling and the Society of Caribbean Studies, as well as the Centre Culturel Université Paul-Valéry. Lawrence Aje and Judith Misrahi-Barak were the local organizing committee. Bill Marshall and Charles Forsdick were the keynote speakers.

the future? These events were part of a wider programme structured around the theme of Ecotones, a series convened and coordinated by Thomas Lacroix (MIGRINTER- université de Poitiers), Judith Misrahi-Barak (EMMA-université Paul-Valéry Montpellier 3) and Maggi Morehouse (Coastal Carolina University, SC). The term is traditionally used in environmental studies and geography to reflect the transitional area between two or more distinct ecological communities, for instance the zone between field and forest, mountain and ocean, or between sea and land. The two ecosystems may be separated by a sharp boundary line or merge gradually. The Ecotones series, however, borrows this term to apply it to postcolonial studies in disciplines such as literature, history, the arts, translation studies, the social and political sciences, ethnic studies, ecocriticism, etc. It seeks to explore the 'contact zones' (Mary Louise Pratt) and the 'complex chemistry' (Robin Cohen) of creolizing processes that lead to new communities germinating, in contexts such a migration, diaspora, refugee movements and other postcolonial displacements and environmental evacuations. The ecotones and other points of contact can also be points of friction or conflict. They generate a multiple and diverse universe in which a single origin and fixed delimitation can only be questioned. The Guyanas provide a laboratory to explore the complexity of the myriad ways spaces and borders fluctuate and impact interactions between communities.[6]

The setting itself is of primary importance. It is first a place of confrontation with the physical space. As if to mark the peculiarity of this ecological milieu, specialists often depict the area as an 'Island' (Lezy 2008). Indeed, the 'Guiana shield' *i.e.* the geo-physical ensemble in this corner of Southern America, is a Precambrian geological formation which is delimited by 3000 km of coastline in the North, the green Oceans of Amazon, Rio Negro and Orinoque basins in the South (Guyana means land of waters in Amerindian). It has been peopled since the Palaeolithic era by Amerindian tribes who share the same Amazonian ethnolinguistic traits and live in a tropical forest constantly bathed by hot rains, as much as four meters a year. The Western part is made of hilly lands but the Sierra Pacaraima, which is located at the border between the Guyana and Venezuela, culminates

6. The details for the Ecotones series (2015–20) can be found on EMMA's website. The series focused on the three Guyanas is refered to as the 3-G Network. https://emma.www.univ-montp3.fr/fr/valorisation-partenariats/programmes-européens-et-internationaux/ecotones.

at an altitude of 2818 meters. The Guyanas are a land of contrast, divided between a small costal band where the bulk of the population resides and a vast tropical hinterland, striated by innumerable rivers and home to one of the highest biodiversity in the world. For centuries, the different populations living in this area have striven to refashion this both generous and hostile territory. The coastal area, also called 'Caribane' is primarily a production of Auriquinoid settlements, whose agricultural practices have transformed the landscape from the 12th century onwards. It was discovered around 1500 by Spanish navigators. Remotely administered from Trinidad and Tobago, the Guyanese area remained for centuries the blind spot of the Spanish Empire. The land was given up to adventurers in search of the El Dorado, and later to French, Dutch, English or Portuguese privateers. The various expeditions and trading activities gradually turned into competing colonization projects of the Guyanese territory. In the mid-seventeenth century, after the loss of Brazil, the Dutch Western India Company shifted its colonial endeavour to Guyana (renamed Nova Zelandia) and established the first durable administration and economy, based on sugar plantations and slavery. The treaty of Breda (1669), which put an end to the second Anglo-Dutch war, confirmed the sovereignty of the United Provinces over Nova Zelandia in exchange for its colony of Nieuw Amsterdam in North America (*i.e.* which would later become New York). Consequently, Suriname developed as early as the 17th century as a plantation economy and became a central element of the United Provinces's South American policy. The import of African slaves transformed the demography of the Guiana, but also its political landscape. Maroons (runaway slaves) created colonies in the forest, along the Coppename and Saramacca rivers in Suriname, as well as along the Maroni in the French Guyane.

By contrast with the Dutch colonisation, the French presence in Guyane was limited for a long period to the Cayenne island (Piantoni 2002). However, this territory which is located at the periphery of the Antilles-France colonial axis was deemed economically unattractive. It was not until the abolition of slavery (1848) and the gold rush (1880) that the hinterland started to attract a sizeable population, and with it, the need to expand a territorial administration. This was done noticeably through the establishment of penitentiary colonies (*le bagne* was established in 1854) that were meant to compensate for the loss of workforce after the abolition of slavery. Between 1852 and

1939, the French Guyane received 70,000 deportees (Krakovitch 1990). Instead of using convict labour, the British authorities, that settled in the West of Suriname since the late 18th century, and the Dutch in Suriname resorted to indentured labourers from India. Between 1838 and 1917, an estimated 240,000 Indians arrived in the Guyanas (Emmer 2010).

The political geography of colonial times was structured upon a horizontal coast/forest ecotone. The forest and the rivers formed natural obstacles to the penetration of colonial power. For centuries, rivers were communication means that enabled trading activities for Amerindian tribes. However, while the rapids and falls impeded navigation they also led to a natural geographic segmentation that is the source of the social and political fragmentation that has characterised the Guyanas up until now. The horogenetic[7] function of rivers was also apparent during colonial times as they sheltered maroon communities against the rule of settlers. Rivers also became the markers of the territorial aspirations of the three empires. After independence, they were used to delineate the borders between newly formed states: the Oyapock between Brazil and Guyane, the Maroni between Guyane and Suriname, the Courentyne between Suriname and Guyana, the Amakura and Cuyuni between Guyana and Venezuela. . . Some of these borders still remain very much contested today.

The geography of colonisation was therefore inscribed in the horizontality of the costal/hinterland divide. This political geography radically changed after World War II, when British Guyana (in 1966) and Suriname (in 1975) gained their independence. Similarly, the status of *département* after 1946, which coincided with the official closing of *le bagne*, incorporated the French Guyane in the state-building project of the metropole. The transformation of the former colonies into full-fledged administrations changed the relationship between the coastal centre and the hinterland periphery. During the post-independence period, the sharing of sovereignty over the forest became a key issue. In the absence of a railway system that usually plays this integrative function, the building of roads and even rivers (with the diffusion of outboard motors) became vectors of power irrigating the Guyanas. After independence, the three states were confronted

7. Horogenesis is a neologism coined by Michel Foucher to name the making of borders, see *L'invention des frontières* (1986).

with the necessity to transform this ecologically and politically fragmented territory into a unified space to be controlled and exploited. The nation-building project within the Guyanese ecotone rests upon the verticality of communication axes.

From the 1950s onwards, the transformation of the French Guyane into a *département* extended the assimilation policy of the French Republic but efforts to boost the productive sector by developing agroforestry and agriculture (rice) have failed. The mining industry and, more recently, the creation of natural reserves are the most important tools for administrative territorialisation. In Suriname, the exploitation of bauxite started during World War I. In the sixties and seventies, it provided a third of the state revenue. The mining sector (including gold and oil) still represents 55% of the Surinamese GDP (Giacottino 1995). Bauxite, gold, manganese, diamonds and uranium are the main sources of income of Guyana. The French Guyane does not enjoy major mining industry other than gold (46% of the value of its exports). It is the spatial centre of Kourou (Centre spatial guyanais, established in 1964) which represents the economic pillar of the *département* by providing 20% of its GDP and 20% of its employment (Giacottino 1995). However, this may change with the government-led gold mining project entitled *Montagne d'Or*, under the aegis of the mining company tellingly named 'Columbus Gold'. As one of the largest in the world, this 35-year-long project located in the western part of the country in the *arrondissement* of Saint-Laurent-du-Maroni, may lastingly modify the whole region.

The diversification of the economy after World War II was constrained by the availability of workforce. Immigration remained of primary importance. In Suriname, the Creole population, which descends from white settlers or black slaves, along with the Hindoustani population that descends from indentured labourers, form the majority. As the mining economy boomed, immigration flows were maintained and became diversified, with the arrival of sizable cohorts of Chinese and Javanese immigrants (Piantoni 2016, Vezzoli 2015). Since the 1970s, Suriname has turned into an emigration country as a result of its dull economic situation, with its mostly Creole population leaving to the Netherlands while poorer Surinamese prefer to go to French Guyane (Piantoni 2016). Quite similarly, Guyana is an ethnic mosaic mostly made up of Indians and Blacks, but also Chinese, Portuguese and other populations of European background. In French Guyane, Haitians, Brazilians, but also Chinese, Indians or

Eastern Europeans or Hmong (an ethnic minority from Vietnam) have induced successive immigration waves. But the wealth differential between the *département* and the neighbouring states ($ 8300 GDP *per capita vs* $939 in Guyana and $1905 in Suriname) attracts a significant undocumented cross-border immigration. Population inflows, combined with a very high fertility rate have made French Guyane one of the places with the highest population growth in the world (nearly 4%) (Piantoni 2009).

These nationalist endeavours collide with the historical and geographical segregative forces of the Guiana ensemble. The different immigration waves have de-multiplied the number of ethnic enclaves in the region. Each village and city is home to specific groups: Indians, Chinese, Vietnamese, Amerindians, turning the Guyanas into a caste-like society where each group is given a specific socio-political role. The Creoles hold the administrative and political centres (Cayenne, Paramaribo and Georgetown), whereas the Chinese occupy the trading sector. Even the Kourou spatial centre which was initially designed to become an economic locomotive of the *département*, has become an enclave as penitientiaries used to be in the past. The pillars of the Guyanese economy are concentrated in the hands of a minority and do not benefit to the population as a whole. The livelihood of a large proportion of the population is dependent on welfare help (in French Guyane) and on the informal economy (drug or gold trafficking). The social stratification of the Guyanese society, coupled with the difficulty to establish a stable and self-sufficient economy, is the crucible for political instability. Most political parties have an ethnically-defined constituency. As a consequence, the recent history of Guyana is marked by several *coup d'états* (1980, 1982 and 1990 in Suriname), strikes and riots (1989 and 2001 in Guyana). In 2017, a general strike blocked the French Guyane for several months. Another major conundrum Guyana is confronted with today is migration. The pathways towards more economic development would entail a better integration of the 'Guiana shied' to the rest of the continent. But immigration, which was once sought after, is now perceived as a threat that blocks the construction of transportation infrastructure projects between the countries of the region (Piantoni 2009).

Considering the complexity of the region, of its geography, ecosystems, history, culture, literatures and arts, the co-editors know only too well that this volume is only a small contribution towards widening the horizon of the research on, and the understanding of, the

Guyanas. It will be more one step in the exploration of the myriad ways this territory has been mapped, constructed and imagined over centuries.

The first section of the volume examines **Rose Hall** as a site of memory which bears the historical traces of the different forms of coerced labour that were practiced in Guyana. Rose Hall sugar plantation, as Gaiutra Bahadur reminds us, was toiled by slaves and indentured servants who emancipated themselves from the oppressive yoke of servitude through rebellion or political mobilization. The site fostered a communal cultural identity for Guyanese of African, Indian, Chinese or Portuguese descent who became bound by a shared experience. Despite the intergenerational transmission of the memory of Rose Hall over time, Janice Lowe Shinebourne and Clem Seecharan show in their narratives that this common memorial legacy has gradually been obliterated and erased in an instance of collective amnesia, due to a lack of consolidation. As Cyril Dabydeen's contribution illuminates, the revisiting, resuscitation and, ultimately, memorialization of Rose Hall in works of fiction constitute forms of resistance against this oblivion. Shinebourne and Dabydeen explain how Rose Hall has played a major inspirational role and has been sublimated in novels and in poetry as it offers a unique opportunity to exhibit instances of how personal historical narratives intersect with the national historical metanarrative, as well as how issues of memorial negotiations and conflicting memories may have led to a voluntary or involuntary mythologizing of the site. All four contributors to this section grew up on Rose Hall plantation, or nearby. They belong to different generations. They have become journalists, academics and / or writers. But Rose Hall still holds them together, wherever they have moved to. Personal and collective memory are closely associated.

In the second section, **Emancipating Memory**, Charles Forsdick, Sonja Boon and Kathleen Gyssels set out to examine how historical factors such as banishment, the gold rush and service during World War II profoundly influenced in-migration and out-migration experiences in the Guianas and in the Caribbean. More specifically, it explores the memorial traces and traumas that stem from the interrelationship and inseparability of time, space, memory, history and identity formation. Forsdick reveals how travelogues, by treading the thin line between fact and fiction, simultaneously chart and record landscape and memoryscape, thus creating and perpetuating

a cultural imaginary specific to the Guianas. Boon and Forsdick both explore how personal and collective identity become coterminous with environment as natural resources, such as gold, or places like the *bagne*, serve as defining and binding elements that unite disparate strands of individual, familial or collective (hi)stories. Understanding how founding myths have been passed down, internalized and reworked by descendants and especially how certain aspects of the Guianese past have been marginalized in discussions of postcolonial memory, is a unifying theme of this section. With Gyssel's contribution, this section also forcefully demonstrates how the resurfacing of the past in literature, poetry and popular culture is an instance of contemporary memorialization that ultimately partakes in blurring temporal lines so as to emphasize timelessness, continuity and permanence.

The third section, **Mapping and Charting the 3 Guyanas**, further delves into the exploration of the composite and multilayered nature of the Guianese identity which has stemmed from several waves of forced or voluntary emigration. By mapping and historicizing the phenomenon of shifting identities in the Guianas and among the Guianese diaspora, section three sheds light on how the political and discursive translation of nationalist claims have fostered and consolidated communal identities whilst simultaneously leading to a fragmented and complex national identity built on various diasporic identities with descendants claiming multifarious national, ethnic, racial and religious attachments. Ateeka Khan's contribution emphasizes that, as a result of these identities having been historically suppressed during colonial times, the contemporary resurgence and celebration of indigenous and diasporic identities are instances of cultural resilience and resistance. Despite the public expression of some cultural practices that were hitherto not tolerated in Guyana, such as obeah or the Hindu ritual of the puja, Sinah Kloß shows that the latter have undergone transformation among younger generations and members of the diaspora as a result of evolving local prohibitions or acceptance, the age of the participants and the social class they belong to. As this section shows, despite Guyana's rich ethnic makeup that should prove to be an asset, its politics have historically been articulated along racial lines sometimes leading to violent confrontation between the Indo-Guyanese and the Afro-Guyanese, particularly in the 1960s. Natalie Hopkinson suggests that while festivities such as the Mashramani carnival, may provide a way forward to

a reinvented and united national identity, it might paradoxically be a missed opportunity to fully address deeply rooted social and racial antagonisms. Ultimately, hope may lie in the increasing efforts to acknowledge the diversity of the Guyanese cultural heritage, notably by the valorization of its indigenous people and their specific culture. Lisa Katharina Grund's contribution partakes in doing so by furthering our understanding of Amerindian culture. Her minute analysis of the social experience of space among the Makushi unveils the socializing practices of this indigenous population and interestingly reveals how their correlation of social distance with spatial distance allows them to formulate a specific etiquette. Ultimately, through her examination of the settlement processes of the indigenous and tribal peoples in the circum-Caribbean territories of Belize, Guyana and Suriname, Janette Bulkan forcefully shows that resistance to territorial encroachment and recognition of land rights not only provide a means to ensure cultural survival—as land is constitutive of identity—but may also pave the way for a form of national reconciliation.

The last section, **Writing and imagining the 3 Guyanas**, is an invitation to reflect on the poetics of the three Guyanas and more specifically on how the territory has been written and imagined over time. Mainly through an examination of the works of Edgar Mittelholzer and Wilson Harris, this fourth section explores how novels have sought to challenge biased representations of the Guianas, by inscribing the territory into a fertile cultural and aesthetic imaginary. Juanita Cox's thought-provoking contribution reinstates Mittelholzer by examining the multilayered nature of his fiction and more specifically how his treatment of landscape fostered an indiosyncratic poetics of the occult. Gabriel Cambraia Neiva exposes how the living Guyanese landscapes are epitomized by the interaction between man and nature that are conducive to specific forms of soul searching and self-discovery. Tim Cribb convincingly demonstrates how Wilson Harris's scientific training as a surveyor shaped his literary creation and the representation of the Guyanese landscape through his characters.[8] Michael Mitchell's contribution forcefully echoes Cribb's and Neiva's as it painstakingly shows how, in Harris's novels, the landscape of the interior of Guyana is translated into a specific

8. This is an aspect that had also been examined by Fred D'Aguiar. See 'The Writer as Surveyor' in *Another Life*, Mélanie Joseph-Vilain and Judith Misrahi-Barak, eds. Series *PoCoPages*, Coll. 'Horizons anglophones', Montpellier: Presses universitaires de la Méditerranée, 2012; 29–44.

form of fiction that partakes in mapping a journey into the interior of the mind through the use of specific postcolonial fictional strategies.[9] Ultimately, the contributions in this section resonate with many others throughout the volume as they reveal how freeing personal or collective memories of the past through fiction and commemoration, are palliative means to assuage sentiments of nostalgia, longing and loss, thus allowing for new modalities of identification, belonging and connectedness.

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9. See Michael Mitchell's obituary for Sir Wilson Harris. www.theguardian.com/books/2018/mar/09/sir-wilson-harris-obituary, accessed June 1, 2018.

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