

GUYANA IN THE EYE OF THE STORM IN 2021: CONVERGENCE, STASIS AND REVERBERATION*

*Guyana en el ojo de la tormenta en 2021:
Convergencia, estancamiento y reverberación*

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ABSTRACT

Guyana, a small oft-forgotten country in South America, has seen its prospects shift markedly in recent years. Previously lauded as a world leader in environmental conservation and avoided deforestation initiatives, Guyana recently made international headlines when significant oil discoveries were made in its territorial waters. Using a model of convergence, stasis and reverberation, this article positions these developments historically and politically. In it, I argue that Guyana's shifting fortunes are reflective of broader regional and international shifts and contestations around post-colonial development and climate policy. The article shows how different forms of vulnerability coalesced over time to position Guyana as both vulnerable and as agential. The state's vulnerability lies in its susceptibility to natural disasters through climate change, imperialism in the wake of colonialism, and ethnic strife through race-based politics. Its agency, on the other hand, lies in its deployment of its natural resources and its geographic location to negotiate changing geo-political arrangements and efforts to address climate change. In developing this argument, the article views, and positions Guyana as a microcosm of several pressing and overlapping global crises – a metaphorical eye of the storm.

Keywords: Guyana, Convergence, Colonialism, Climate Change, Development.

RESUMEN

Guyana, un pequeño país de Sudamérica a menudo olvidado, ha visto cómo sus perspectivas han cambiado notablemente en los últimos años. Anteriormente alabada como líder mundial en iniciativas de conservación del medio ambiente y de prevención de la deforestación, Guyana ha aparecido recientemente en los titulares internacionales al producirse importantes descubrimientos de petróleo en sus aguas territoriales. Utilizando un modelo de convergencia, estasis y reverberación, este manuscrito sitúa estos acontecimientos histórica y políticamente. En él, sostengo que los cambios en la suerte de Guyana son un reflejo de los cambios y las controversias regionales e internacionales más amplias en torno al desarrollo poscolonial y la política climática. El artículo muestra cómo diferentes formas de vulnerabilidad se han unido a lo largo del tiempo para situar a Guyana como un país vulnerable y agencial. La vulnerabilidad del Estado radica en su susceptibilidad a las catástrofes naturales por el cambio climático, al imperialismo tras el colonialismo y a los conflictos étnicos por la política racial. Su capacidad de acción, en cambio, radica en el uso

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de sus recursos naturales y su ubicación geográfica para negociar los cambiantes acuerdos geopolíticos y los esfuerzos para hacer frente al cambio climático. En el desarrollo de este argumento, el artículo considera y posiciona a Guyana como un microcosmos de varias crisis globales apremiantes y superpuestas, un metafórico ojo de la tormenta.

Palabras clave: Guyana, Convergencia, Colonialismo, Cambio Climático, Desarrollo.

I. INTRODUCTION

Guyana is a small, oft-forgotten country in South America. It was formed through histories that span centuries of European colonization (Collins 2019b) and decades of American imperialism (Rabe 2006), alongside failed and stalling Caribbean integration projects (Hall 2003). This article argues that based on its history, natural resource endowments, geopolitical and climate change vulnerability, Guyana's circumstances are indicative of the sustainable development challenges of postcolonial countries (Rattansi 1997) around the world in terms of managing internal societal divisions and natural resources, while crafting foreign policy in the face of changing global power constellations.

This argument is based on the recognition that the internal political struggles of Guyana's inhabitants are not only significant for their own sake, but have notable, reverberating effects across Latin America and the Caribbean, and further even afield. Given that the people of the Caribbean have always been caught up in the affairs of the wider world (Mintz 1985), these struggles are, to some degree, reflective of the tenor of global affairs. The article supports this argument by putting forward a model of convergence, stasis, and reverberation. It uses convergence to refer to events that took place over the centuries that culminated in the formation of the independent Guyanese state; stasis to refer to its current state of racialized, post-independence precarity; and reverberation, to the ways in which colonial histories inform Guyana's response to events unfolding both locally and internationally.

Guyana is home to a multiethnic population of roughly three quarter million people with origins in several continents whose living conditions evidence its historical formation as a state. They communicate in the languages of the colonial and imperialist powers, as well as fragmented, mixed, and overlapping tongues influenced by Hindi and West African traditional languages. Having gained its independence from the British in 1966, however, Guyana is the only officially English-speaking country in South America. The architecture of Georgetown, the capital city, also exemplifies the country's colonial past and its ongoing attempts at modernity, as Dutch colonial-era buildings stand alongside newly constructed and airconditioned boxy buildings that attempt to keep out the ever-increasing heat and humidity. Culturally British West Indian/Caribbean and geographically South American, with Indian, Chinese, European, Amerindian and African racial groupings competing internally for political influence and access to resources, Guyana's internal constitution is demonstra-

tive of globalization's historical roots (Milanovic 2003). Since its independence, Guyana has struggled to find its statal footing, remaining highly subject to the maneuverings of foreign powers both within and outside of the South American continent.

However, Guyana has seen its prospects shift markedly in recent years. Lauded as a world leader on environmental conservation in the late 2000s and early 2010s, Guyana has again been making headlines for what some see as environmental conservation's greatest challenger – extraction (Le Billon 2021). A spate of oil discoveries were made within its territorial waters, which led many on-lookers to speculate that Guyana's vast oil wealth will propel the country into a newfound status as a regional powerhouse¹. This article argues that Guyana's shifting prospects and circumstances are reflective of broader regional and international turns and contestations around development and climate policy. It situates these developments within increasingly urgent debates on development and natural resource use policy in the context of climate change. In it, I demonstrate how some different forms of vulnerability coalesce to position Guyana as both vulnerable and agential in the politics of climate change, environmental conservation, and development - a metaphorical eye of the storm.

Despite its vulnerability to climate change, imperialism, and ethnic strife through race-based politics, Guyana retains some agency on the international stage through its management of the climate-significant Amazon rainforests, its specific geo-political situation in relation to emerging powers like China and Brazil, and the economic might and influence projected to come with its burgeoning oil industry. By positioning Guyana as a microcosm of several pressing issues of overlapping global concerns, this article shows how some societies formed almost entirely through processes of colonization go on to achieve a precarious state of stasis in view of externally driven events, and yet retain agency in responding to pressing global issues, by taking decisions that have the potential to reverberate across time and space.

The argument develops as follows. First, the article briefly elaborates on its definition of convergence as a departure from Milanovic's (2003) historical contextualization of the term in discussions on globalization. Its second section traces the origins of Guyana's multiethnicity through converging, colonially-driven, events that led large groups of people from outside the area that eventually became independent Guyana to meet, both voluntarily and involuntarily, to form Guyana's population and to relate to the environment in racialized ways (Collins 2021a). The third section outlines stasis, a term I use to describe the current state of play in independent Guyana's politics and constitution, including the racialized character of its politics and associated development strategies. The fourth section connects these accounts to the contentious politics of

¹ See, for example, MercoPress (2018) and Smith (2021).

climate change mitigation and to specific geo-political arrangements playing out across South America and further afield.

II. CONVERGENCE IN THEORY

Convergence has been theorized in multiple ways across the social sciences (Ozturk and Cavusgil 2019). While it has been used in economic debates on globalization to examine the potential of economic growth trajectories between industrialized and non-industrialized countries to find equilibrium in terms of per capita income, convergence theorists posit more generally, “that nations are becoming more similar to each other despite different cultural, historical, political, and economic background” (Ozturk and Cavusgil 2019: 296).

Convergence as an outcome of globalization was thoroughly critiqued by Milanovic (2003), who merged the economic ramifications of the concept with a compelling description of globalization’s colonial roots. Milanovic, in his move past an exclusive focus on the economic meaning of globalization, described the mainstream understanding of the term as premised on the view that globalization is a:

... benign force leading us ultimately to the era of converging world incomes (as poor countries such as China open up to the world and see their incomes rise), converging institutions as democracy becomes a universal norm, and cultural richness as people of different background interact more frequently (Milanovic 2003: 667)

On the contrary, he likened globalization to colonialism, writing that “it is through being colonies that most of the non-European countries were brought to the global world” (Milanovic 2003: 669). For Milanovic, globalization is responsible for the historical economic decline of some countries, such as India and China, and the prevention of others from achieving industrialization and development (2003). In this article, although I make no attempt to reopen the globalization debate on the possibility, or lack thereof, of achieving income convergence between countries, I employ convergence in Milanovic’s historically contextualized form and use it to refer to the historical, sociopolitical, economic, and migratory processes through which events external to a place intertwine and coalesce to inform its creation and shaping.

Convergence, as I intend it, can be seen operating in the work of humanities scholar, Kathryn Yusoff (2018), who, citing Lewis and Maslin (2015), described how European arrival to the Caribbean in 1492, along with their decimation of the indigenous population and transplantation of large numbers of people from elsewhere into the area, resulted in the intermingling of biotas that had been previously separate and the emergence of new ecological formations and plantation ecologies in the Americas (Yusoff 2018). The eventual reverberation of the impact of those formations and events across time and space were also highlighted

when Yusoff (2018) wrote the following of the trans-Atlantic slave trade through which people were brought from Africa to labor forcibly in the Americas:

As the largest forced migration of people in the world, the profits accrued from the enslaved during the transatlantic slave trade laid the economic foundation for Western Europe, the Caribbean, and the Americas... (Yusoff 2018: 37–38).

Hence, the fruits of enslaved African labor in Guyana and other enslaved labor-recipient countries reverberated outward to intensify industrialization and modernity in Western Europe with all its now detrimental environmental and climatic effects (Quijano 2000; Wolford 2021). I trace the convergence of these histories into the now independent Guyanese state in the following section.

III. CONVERGENCE IN PRACTICE

Small bands of settlers are known to be the first human presence in the Caribbean. Since then, the region has come to function as a backdrop of various meetings of culture and ethnicity. Over time, there emerged “one of the most diverse yet intricately interconnected geo-political and cultural regions in the modern world” (Hofman et al 2014: 590). The fruits of this interconnectedness were deeply disadvantageous to particular groups of people and the natural environment, with few places being more detrimentally impacted by European expansion than the Caribbean (Emmer 1997). The indigenous Caribbean population, for instance, was devastated at a scale unseen elsewhere. The environment was badly damaged as small-scale farming was displaced in favor of large-scale plantation agriculture and a constant demand for labor emerged (Emmer 1997). It saw different groups of people converge over time to form the multiethnic fabric that Guyana now celebrates (International Times 2013). There were several push factors behind these converging migratory shifts. I begin to trace some of these, starting with the Europeans who initially confronted the original inhabitants of the area that subsequently became the Guyanese state.

From Europe

In the early 1600s, indigenous people living on the land that later became the Guyanese state encountered European explorers. The two groups went on to develop trading relations (Griffiths and La Rose 2014) and the Europeans eventually established plantations in the coastal areas. Between the 16th and 19th centuries, colonization of the New World depended on indentured European labor. The European indentureship system emerged because potential laborers often found themselves unable to finance their journey overseas despite their willingness to relocate. Hence, contracts were drawn up between prospective

migrants and the shipping firms or employers. These contracts stipulated that the migrant laborer would indenture him or herself for a defined period, often between three and seven years, during which the laborer would work for the employer in exchange for travel, housing and subsistence for the period of the contract (Emmer 1997).

Many of the early indentured laborers brought to the Americas from Europe were coerced, with both voluntary and involuntary European labor co-existing during some periods. Involuntary servitude was often forced onto those deemed undesirable in Europe at the time, including vagrants or vagabonds, the poor and exploited underclass, felons, prostitutes and even children and teenagers from Ireland and Britain (Handler and Reilly 2017). This practice continued into later centuries as “roughly 10,000 Scottish, English, Irish, and even German prisoners from the 1651 Battle of Worcester, the final battle of the English Civil War, were also transported to the Americas as servants” (Handler and Reilly 2017: 35). Those who were captured through war, or were deemed political prisoners, could be sold for up to ten years of service, a period significantly more lengthy than the customary five to seven year period (Handler and Reilly 2017).

Before the 1630s, some people of African descent and Native Americans had been employed as indentured servants, a practice no longer lawfully possible after 1636. Over time, indentureship grew to become “the most dependable source of coerced labor across the British American colonies” (Dowlah 2020: 119), remaining a key source of labor for plantations in the Americas throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Although estimates differ, more than half a million Europeans are estimated to have been employed through indentureship in plantations in the Caribbean. By the eighteenth century, small farms were increasingly being overtaken by large plantations, driving up the demand and cost of indentured European labor so dramatically that colonizer preferences shifted toward less expensive, seemingly more suitable and abundant enslaved Africans (Dowlah 2020), leading to millions of enslaved Africans being forcibly transported across the Atlantic (Emmer 1997) with significant numbers arriving at Guyana’s shores, as explained next.

From Africa

Through this shift in European labor preferences, a massive system of enslaved labor developed at a scale never before seen as European colonial powers sourced and shipped enslaved Africans for work in plantations in the New World, including Guyana. The enslaved Africans effectively added a third major group of people to Guyana’s then burgeoning multiethnic state of being. While the enslavement and trafficking of enslaved persons had by no means been a new phenomenon at that point in human history, the trans-Atlantic

slave trade was significant for becoming the “last and greatest of all slave trading systems” (Patterson 2018: 159).

The system depended on the involvement of a wide cross-section of actors and powers across the Americas, Africa and Europe, and a considerable amount of risk and navigational prowess in moving those enslaved, thousands of miles across the Atlantic and Indian Oceans (Dowlah 2020). Approximately 12.5 million Africans were sent to the New World where they were made to labor in appalling conditions. The profits from the slave trade reverberated, as earlier described by Yusoff (2018), throughout the then burgeoning global economy by fueling the “great capitalistic development of European colonial powers while causing massive economic, demographic, and social losses in the African continent...” (Dowlah 2020: 82). Most of those enslaved and brought to the new world disembarked in the British and French colonies in the Caribbean, including what was then called British Guiana (Dowlah 2020) and, much later, the Cooperative Republic of Guyana.

In 1807, the slave trade, involving the buying and selling of enslaved people, was made illegal by the British. Many suppliers of enslaved African labor, however, continued to trade illegally. In 1838, slavery was abolished in the British Caribbean, throwing much into question, not least of which was the fate of those formerly enslaved in their new, unchosen homelands. After emancipation, the availability of labor on the plantations once again became an issue for the European colonizers. In some Caribbean countries with a high supply of readily available labor at the time of emancipation, plantations were able to continue functioning without needing to source additional labor from overseas. However, in most parts of the Caribbean, raising wages to attract labor to the plantations did little to convince newly emancipated slaves to return to the plantations (Emmer 1997). Soon afterwards, the colonizers again started to look overseas for cheap sources of labor. By then, it had again become economically viable to return to indentured European labor by relocating people from some places in Europe, such as Spain, Portugal and even Germany (Emmer 1997). Most importantly for Guyana and the current constitution of its population and racially inflected politics rooted in this migratory convergence, however - the colonizers turned toward China and India, as detailed next.

From China

At the time, Asia was seen by the European colonizers as having massive labor reserves (Dowlah 2020). In China, the population had tripled between the years 1650 and 1850. This massive population increase contributed to the continuous availability of migrant labor from China and the migratory spread of Chinese communities around the Indian Ocean littoral (Emmer 1997). Large numbers of indentured servants were recruited from China throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries by European colonial powers and were then taken to labor

in their colonies around the world. Shipments of indentured Chinese servants began to be sent to British Guiana in the 1850s (Dowlah 2020) under unenviable conditions, described as follows:

Chinese workers were recruited in brutal fashion—most of them were forcibly abducted by ship and press ganged into working as coolies. The kidnapping of Chinese people was so rampant that no man was safe from the threat of being taken aboard a ship by force. The trading of servants was branded as the ‘buying and selling of pigs,’ the camps in which the Chinese were forced to survive before transportation were called ‘pig-pens,’ and the transport vessels were so terrible that they were often called ‘floating hells’ (Dowlah 2020: 135).

However, in spite of the large numbers of Chinese people indentured to work in the Caribbean, China came in just second as a source of plantation labor in this revived system of indentureship in the post-emancipation period (Dowlah 2020). The vast majority of indentured servants came instead from India.

From India

In India, people agreed to indentureship in faraway lands for economic reasons (Emmer 1997). Prior to British colonization, India, one of the world’s oldest civilizations, had been “one of the largest, richest, and mightiest empires in the world... on par with the rest of the world in terms of capitalistic development, industrialization, transport and communication, urbanization, and political development” (Dowlah 2020: 123). Within a century of taking control of the Indian subcontinent, however, the British had succeeded in bankrupting it “to such an extent that India’s budding industrialization nose-dived, dozens of successive famines struck the population, and most people reverted back to the land for making a living” (Dowlah 2020: 124). In addition, land was being enclosed in ways that pushed significant numbers of small farmers off their land, many of whom responded by migrating to the cities (Emmer: 1997).

A range of factors drove villagers from their home towards indentureship. “The practice of imperial capitalism destroyed traditional livelihoods, plunging weavers into unemployment by flooding India with factory-made textiles from England. In times of famine, peasants tramped the roads in search of work” (Bahadur 2016: 25), and there was no shortage of such famines. India suffered twenty-four of them in the last quarter of the nineteenth century (Bahadur 2016). After having impoverished large segments of the Indian population, the British used the resultant labor surplus to their advantage by sending them to plantations in the Americas, other parts of Asia, Africa, and Australia. The British even exported millions of Indians to colonies belonging to other European powers (Dowlah 2020). Of the two million indentured servants taken to labor on the sugar plantations in British colonies, Guyana was the second largest recipient (Dowlah 2020). On the part of the laborer, indentureship meant having

to accept restricted freedom for a finite period of time in the awareness that the economies of their origin countries could not provide him or her with adequate income and opportunity to survive (Emmer 1997).

In essence, plantations in the Caribbean and other places functioned as release valves of sorts (Emmer 1997) for groups of migrants from Asia through indenturedship, with the growth and expansion of the European capitalist economy having caused tens of millions of people to change continents, with significant numbers of people, bringing their cultures, histories and ways of relating to the environment, as they converged in Guyana.

IV. STASIS

Having charted some of the factors and events that drove these groups of people to converge in Guyana, I turn now toward marking out stasis, referring to its precarious state of independence. Here, I no longer focus on the external factors that drove people toward Guyana but describe instead some of the ways through which the independent Guyanese state congealed internally before and during colonialism, and after independence.

Multiethnicity

The history of the area that became Guyana prior to the arrival of European colonizers is poorly documented (Glasgow 2012). It is believed that indigenous groups, known as Amerindians, who were residing in the area at the point of European arrival were numerous and diverse. These groups of people were known to be nomadic, moving freely across the Amazon basin, well before the creation and institutionalization of borders in the region (Heemskerk 2009). Amerindian societies were said to be “well-ordered and technologically complex hierarchical societies based on intensive agriculture and fishing” (Colchester 1997). In the early 16th century, after being confronted by European explorers, the tribes began to adopt some European technologies (Glasgow 2012), while the Europeans, for their part, bartered with the Amerindians. The Dutch colonizers established their first permanent settlement in the area in 1616 (Colchester 1997; Glasgow 2012). They began to develop sugar plantations on the coasts by drawing on ‘red slaves’, as Amerindians who had been captured by other Amerindians, had been called. Amerindians continued to function as a source of labor for European plantations to different degrees until the arrival of enslaved Africans in the 17th century (Colchester 1997).

The area that eventually became independent Guyana had at one point been separately administered as the colonies of Berbice, Demerara and Essequibo. The three colonies frequently changed hands, being controlled by the Dutch, the French and the British (Glasgow 2012) at different periods across over 400

years of colonial rule. The borders between them and their neighboring colonies changed accordingly, being closely tied to events taking place in Europe. In 1803, however, the three Dutch colonies of Essequibo, Demerara and Berbice, came under British control (Josiah 2011) and were united 1831 under the banner of British Guiana.

Guyana's growing population came to be spatially distributed, in no small part, through this colonial history. Its low-lying coast now accommodates approximately 90% percent of its populations, while the forests, representing approximately 85% of Guyana's territory (Government of Guyana 2012) hosts the remaining 10%. This spatial population distribution pattern was maintained during colonialism in part by indigenous groups who had collaborated with European colonizers in thwarting the efforts of enslaved Africans to run away from coastal plantations and set up residence in the forests. The eventual emancipation of enslaved Africans in Guyana in the 1830s, however, negated this policing role (Colchester 1997). The colonizers, for their part, sought to maintain control over the different ethnic groups that had come to form the colony's population by employing a largely successful strategy of divide and rule to limit their ability to organize collectively.

These histories remain evident in the spatial distribution of the different ethnic groups that came to form Guyanese society (Collins 2021a). The descendants of Indian indentured servants remain spatially centered near the plantations on the coast, working mostly in the sugar producing areas. The descendants of formerly enslaved Africans are mostly concentrated in coastal cities after having been discouraged from actively seeking out economic opportunities in the forests by the colonizers, who had seen the forests as a competing site for labor. The formerly enslaved Africans had gone on to set up villages along the coasts, providing seasonal labor to the plantations while maintaining themselves through small-scale agriculture (Rodney 1981). The Portuguese, who had also once again been indentured and brought to Guyana to labor on the plantations in the post-emancipation period, were valued by the colonizers for their ability to augment the 'white' population and stave off slave rebellions that had become a not infrequent occurrence. These white indentured laborers, however, were never seen by the colonizers as being equal in status with the British colonial masters. The Portuguese indentured servants, in turn, came to resent having to work with the by then-emancipated Africans who they had begun to see as inferior (Jagan 1966).

During the 1840s, the extractive industry began to gain traction in Guyana. Mining of gold, bauxite, and other metals were becoming increasingly important to the colonizers. Before this, gold mining had been the almost exclusive preserve of pork-knockers, as the descendants of small numbers of formerly enslaved Africans who deployed artisanal techniques to mine for gold by venturing into the forests had come to be called. Pork-knocking had become the forte of formerly enslaved Africans because indentured laborers were, at that time, forbidden from venturing into the forests. This practice had allowed the

pork-knockers to set up small communities in the forests (Rabe 2006). Their descendants and those of other formerly enslaved Africans in Guyana continue to form a significant presence in the industry.

Overall, racialized land use practices and societal schisms came about from the intentional colonially driven policy of maintaining European dominance in the area (Bulkan 2014). The white planters remained at the head of the social order, imbued with the support of their colonial authorities and the power to control most of the land and capital. Chinese and Portuguese labor that opted not to return to their countries of origin, eventually emerged as a class of small-holders practicing market gardening after being freed from indentureship. These groups were eventually able to consolidate their strengths in Guyana, becoming prominent in commerce and charcoaling (Colchester 1997). The villages formed by emancipated Africans sustained themselves on the coast, providing roving, seasonal labor to the plantations, while Indian indentured servants remained mostly tied to the plantations. By the end of the 19th century, a black middle class had emerged in the urban areas, predominantly through education, public and administrative service. East Indians had increased their economic strengths in agriculture through rice farming on land that they were able to access from the colonial masters by opting not to take up their right to a return passage to India. This resulted in an urban black middle class and an Indian dominated rural sector (Colchester 1997; Rabe 2006). Indigenous communities largely continued to subsist in the forests. These racial population distribution patterns continue to underlie the country's politics (Pelling 1999) and are evident in voting patterns, areas of residence and the economic earners undertaken by the different ethnic groups.

Racialized Politics and Development

In 1966, Guyana took on its current independent form, which I refer to as stasis, when locals formed their own government after the British withdrew (Josiah 2011). The eventual independent government of newly independent Guyana was hamstrung in many ways, not least of which was the inheritance of a racially divided population, low levels of infrastructural development with low levels of industrialization and few local industries. The new state was also coming into its own during increasing global tensions between western, capitalist states and the communist bloc. The United States, having helped 'liberate' Europe from communism, was not interested in having a socialist republic set up shop in what it considered to be its backyard (Rabe 2006).

Yet, this was precisely the direction in which the new Guyana government headed, leading to behind-the-scenes interventions by the British and the Americans into local politics. The People's Progressive Party, which had at its inception represented both the African and Indian ethnic groups in support of national independence from the British, found itself split along racial lines, a

circumstance that continues to plague the country politically today. After independence, Guyana was labeled a 'Cooperative Republic', being governed by a socialist government that nationalized the bauxite and sugar industries (Vaughn 2012). By the mid-90s, when the People's National Congress (PNC) tenure was coming to an end after having allegedly held on to power fraudulently for two decades, the People's Progressive Party came to power and started to liberalize the economy, furthering the PNC's move, in its closing years, towards opening up the economy (Vaughn 2012). The association of race with the different political groups went on to form a considerable challenge in Guyana, given that the country's different ethnic groups had been conditioned across centuries of colonial rule not to trust each other and to see each other, rather than the colonizer, as the source of their marginalization and oppression.

Developmentally, the focus of successive independent Guyanese governments remained centered on the exploitation of the natural resources in the forests to fuel economic growth (Josiah 2011). In the 1970s, a rise in gold prices and a shift towards increasingly available mechanized mining saw a boom in gold mining. In that period, gold miners from Brazil, who had been forced off their lands, relocated to Guyana with improved technologies that fed more destructive forms of gold mining and increased levels of deforestation (Colchester 1997). Eventually, gold mining started to attract large-scale investment. By 2013, it had become the national income earner of choice, representing a significant source of revenue to the state, despite its negative environmental and social effects in the forested interior, and to indigenous lands in particular (Hook 2019).

Guyana's reliance on its natural resource endowments, including gold, sugar, rice, and bauxite to develop intensified in the early and mid-2000s with the publication of the National Competitiveness Strategy. Prior to this, the country's government had issued a series of Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers that demonstrated its increasing compliance with international norms that had, at the time, insisted on bringing developing, post-colonial countries like Guyana into the international, capitalist fold by insisting on trade liberalization.

For example, the 2006 National Competitiveness Strategy stated that:

Important progress has been made in Guyana in recent years in managing the process of adjustment to the new world economic environment through exercise of monetary discipline, improvements in the environment for private investment, reform of the tax system, creation of a property market, investing in basic education and infrastructure, and boosting productivity in traditional sectors of the economy... At the forefront is achieving the economic imperative of improving national competitiveness and diversifying the economy (Government of Guyana 2006: 5).

In 2009, the Low Carbon Development Strategy (LCDS) was published. This document offered a narrative shift in the reliance on markets to facilitate de-

velopment. Instead of Guyana just being open for trade, the carbon sequestration work of its forests itself began to be commoditized. The LCDS, developed under the now East Indian dominated People's Progressive Party (PPP) government, offered the services of Guyana's forests to the world. In turn, the world should have provided Guyana with enough money to compensate for its work in leaving the forests standing. This effort led to the signing of a Memorandum of Understanding with Norway in 2009 for five years of forest conservation that was intended to stand as a showcase to the world on how deforestation could be avoided in the interest of mitigating climate change. The effort also led to the preparation of readiness documents in collaboration with the World Bank and the UN-REDD+ program (Office of the President Guyana 2010).

Borders

Border disputes, also rooted in the colonial era, continue to shape Guyana's current state of being. The country has active, ongoing territorial disputes with two of its three territorial neighbours – Suriname and Venezuela. The more acrimonious of the two is its dispute with Venezuela, which is claiming, and has claimed for centuries, roughly a third of Guyana's territory, a section that is abundant in gold and other natural resources. Particularly important for Guyana's changing oil fortunes is the fact that the oil finds for which Guyana has been making global headlines were found in contested waters. Prior to the announcements of the finds, Guyana's oil production efforts had been hamstrung for quite some time due to this dispute. The Guyana-Venezuela border dispute only hardened as Guyana moved closer to finding oil and Venezuela's own internal, oil-inflected politics deteriorated.

As previously described, Guyana gained its independence from the British in 1966, after being governed as separate colonies for some time before being finally amalgamated under the banner of British Guiana. Venezuela, on the other hand, had gained its independence from Spain in 1811. During the period within which Guyana and Venezuela were colonies of the Dutch and Spanish respectively, the Essequibo River had functioned as the de facto border between the two (Elias-Roberts 2014). Now, the river marks the area being reclaimed by Venezuela and the remainder of Guyana. Elias-Roberts (2014) explains that the Dutch territory had been signed over to the British in 1814 and the colonies were merged in 1831. She explains, however, that "in 1819, Jose Revenga, following Simon Bolivar's instructions, noted the number of British settlers living on the other side of the river and asked that they either cross over into Guyana, or live according to Venezuelan law, but the British continued to promote colonization of the area" (Elias-Roberts 2014: 15).

After that, several incidents took place that brought Venezuela to the brink of war with Britain, Guyana's then colonial master. Within the United Nations,

however, the British has always insisted that Guyana's contested Western boundary was demarcated based on what had been inherited from the Dutch settlers. In 1839, a German geographer, called Robert Schomburgk, visited, and mapped the then British colony. The UK has since referred to the Schomburgk line as a demarcation of Guyana's Western boundary. Venezuela's claim to Guyana's territory is significant, amounting to approximately 50000 square miles, with the wealth of the region not going unnoticed on either side (Ince 1970). After all, it was "the discovery of gold fields in the 1880's that aggravated relations between the United Kingdom and Venezuela" (Ince 1970: 8). According to Elias-Roberts (2014), however, the 'Schomburgk Line' went far past the original Dutch boundary while Venezuela claims all the area that originally belonged to the Spanish.

In view of their acrimonious relationship, Venezuela cut off relations with Britain in 1887. In 1895, after a request made by Venezuela, the United States, a growing imperial power in the region, became involved in the dispute. With US involvement, an international arbitration tribunal was setup, which eventually accepted a slightly altered version of the Schomburgk Line as the border between the two countries. This amounted to a ruling largely in favour of the British since most of the territory and all of the gold mines had been given to Britain, with the Orinoco River going to Venezuela (Elias-Roberts 2014). The feud did not stop there, however. In 1949, Venezuela responded to allegations about fraudulent back room deals during the 1899 rulings by declaring the arbitral award null and void. It renewed its claim to the disputed territory and has since sought to have its case heard at a range of international fora. Since Guyana's independence, mediation over the issue has been ongoing between the two former European colonies.

Overall, Guyana's convergence and current state of stasis is evident in its colonialy rooted multiethnicity, its associated race-based politics, and its disputes with neighbouring states. Having provided this overview, I turn next toward outlining how this state of stasis interacts with externally driven events that reverberate outward, going on to affect other spaces and places in relation to climate change and regional stability in the face of changing global power constellations.

V. REVERBERATION

The modern incarnation of the independent Guyanese state, which I earlier described as being in a state of stasis, emerged through converging histories of the pillage and plunder of indigenous land, European expansion, and intercontinental migration. Across five hundred years of colonialism, the embryonic Guyanese state diverged from the path shared by its South American counterparts who had gained independence from the Spanish and Portuguese within very different time frames. Guyana's path aligned temporally instead with that of the

British West Indies and some other British colonies around the world. However, while it would indeed be tempting to attribute Guyana's histories and fortunes exclusively to the British, it is important to remember that Guyana, as a modern manifestation and marker of a particular spatial geography, (i.e., a spot on a map), was shaped in top-down fashion over centuries by the actions of several colonizing European states and their collaborators around the world.

Guyana's emergence was also shaped by indigenous knowledge and action that had confronted the colonizers upon arrival, shifting over time to include relations premised on trade, resistance and even collaboration. The country was similarly shaped by countless moments of resistance during and after colonialism, some of which are well recorded and studied, such as the actions of those enslaved Africans who organized rebellions²; and those that remain under- or un-recognized, such as those of enslaved Africans and/or indentured servants who undermined, or even upheld, the work of the plantations and colonizers in myriad, untold ways. This convergence of roughly five hundred years of history created Guyana in its current precarious state of stasis.

Reverberation, on the other hand, refers to how this precarity interacts with externally driven events, terminating only if/when the state ceases to exist. Reverberation points to how these histories position and influence Guyana's relationship with the outside world, albeit often indirectly. Guyana's histories of convergence reverberate in ways that are indicative of the porous, ever-shifting nature of global power constellations with which post-colonial countries created almost entirely through the colonial encounter must negotiate. The reverberating impact of Guyana's historical convergence into a state of stasis can be seen, for example, in its earlier described maritime and territorial border disputes, detailed next.

Reverberating impacts on oil production

Guyana's border disputes have significant implications for the oil resources that lie offshore. In the case of Suriname, a previous maritime border dispute with Guyana was peacefully and amicably settled in 2007 by the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea. The clarity around the maritime border that this generated was pivotal, given that both countries are currently reporting significant oil finds offshore. The Guyana-Venezuela border dispute, however, persists.

Elias-Roberts explains that sovereignty over the disputed land territory between Guyana and Venezuela currently lies with Guyana. (Elias-Roberts 2014: 16), a consideration that is significant for establishing its jurisdiction over the adjacent territorial waters and the resources therein. Border related tensions,

² See for example Williams (1990)

however, play out in often unpredictable ways that hold Guyana's prospects of pursuing economic development (Clegg 2014) through resource exploitation hostage to this precarity. This was demonstrated in an incident that took place in 2013 where Venezuela detained a vessel searching for oil off the Essequibo coast. In response, Elias-Roberts asserted that:

Guyana's claim to the territory means that Venezuela's action in the incident described below was a violation of international law. On the other hand, Venezuela might claim that Guyana is threatening Venezuela's inviolability of its border by possession and sovereign control over Essequibo and granting concession to oil companies to explore within its sea areas where Venezuela alone should exercise sovereign control (Elias-Roberts 2014: 16–17).

Guyana had reacted angrily to this incident and subsequently announced its suspension of further exploration in the area until a solution to the maritime border dispute had been found. Guyana claimed that it was a threat to peace in the region, in ways that are teased out next.

Reverberating Impacts on Regional Stability

Venezuela's expansionist activity has caused general concern for the peace and security of the Western Hemisphere. Nations in the Caribbean and Latin America are anxious, not only for a peaceful solution of the dispute, but at the same time to see that the sanctity of treaties is not violated. Anyone with superficial knowledge of the diplomatic history of the Latin American states would be aware that several of the present boundaries were settled by treaties after conflicts. To reject the Arbitral Award of 1899, which settled the dispute between Britain and Venezuela, would be tantamount to opening a Pandora's box in Latin America. The gravity of the situation is even more apparent when it is realized that Venezuela is attempting, by force, what has already been settled by treaty (Ince 1970: 6).

As highlighted by Ince (1970) in the above quotation, Venezuela's response to the Arbitral Award of 1899 has significant implications for the entire Latin American region. Guyana's territorial border with Brazil, its neighbour to the South is its only settled border. In this light, Guyana is working towards strengthening its economic relationship with Brazil, which could be a boon for Guyana's economy (Clegg 2014) but a possible threat to Guyana's forests, given the Brazilian government's current loosening of forest governance policies of late to the benefit of heavily-deforesting agro-business (Inoue and Basso 2021.). These developments have significant implications on the forests and efforts to conserve them, since Brazil is interested in constructing a road from the north of Brazil, through Guyana to the Atlantic. Citing Sanders (2012), Clegg notes that "until the road is constructed, Brazil still cannot use Guyana effectively

for transporting exports from its northern region” (Clegg 2014; 2). Brazil, for its part, has remained staunch in its support of Guyana’s territorial integrity as currently recognized internationally. This is, in part, because Brazil itself shares a border with all but two South American countries. It is therefore not particularly inclined toward having the outcome of treaties, such as the Arbitral award of 1899, disregarded, and border questions reopened throughout the South American continent.

Despite Brazilian and international community support, however, Guyana continues to feature in the turmoil taking place in neighboring Venezuela, reporting the occasional flareup when armed gangs carry out nefarious activities near the border³, claiming that the land is in fact theirs by way of their Venezuelan nationality. Further, significant numbers of Venezuelan migrants can now be found making Guyana their home (Boersner 2020) as they flee turmoil in their country of citizenship stemming, in part, from mismanagement of its own vast oil resources (Rosales and Jiménez 2021). Guyana is also reportedly threatened by Venezuela’s increasing stock of arms, being bought from Russia and China (Raska and Bitzinger 2020).

The United States, which played a significant role in Guyana’s development and political-economic trajectory especially during and after World War II era when it sought to minimize Guyana’s turn towards socialism, continues to be influential. The US is host to a large number of Guyanese migrants, and it is no coincidence that the US-based and supported oil corporation, Exxon, is a major player in Guyana’s burgeoning oil industry, with its support deemed helpful by Guyanese governments for staving off the threats from Venezuela. These shifts in Guyana’s prospects are also reflective of broader regional and global turns and contestations, especially as China becomes increasingly influential in the Caribbean (Bernal 2015) and further afield. These events are all rooted in and better understood through the rubric of convergence and the current state of stasis in the form of the Guyanese state.

Reverberating Impacts on REDD+ and Climate Change

Guyana’s experience with the Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and forest Degradation (REDD+) initiative also demonstrates how the histories that converged to form the state reverberate in response to externally driven events. REDD+ is an international environmental policy aimed at financially compensating forested countries for keeping their forests standing. Formally, REDD+ is still being prepared for in Guyana despite the initiative’s woeful performance in view of the financial returns that had initially been envisioned by the Guyana government of the time (Collins 2021b). In addition to the fact that the global carbon market within which REDD+ was intended to play a key role never de-

³ See, for example, Kaieteur News (2021) and Stabroek News (2021)

veloped, racially inflected politics that saw the then minority PPP government unable to further different aspects of the project were pinpointed as responsible for the failures of this intended showcase by one of the signatories of the bilateral Guyana-Norway REDD+ agreement. Erik Solheim, the Norwegian signatory, problematized racialized politics in Guyana, attributing REDD+'s failures to the rivalry between the two main ethnically based political parties who rely on their respective bases in policy and decision making (Collins 2019a).

Meanwhile, in yet another example of the overlap between race, the environment and climate change; gold continued its rise to become one of the most significant sources of foreign exchange in Guyana. Although relatively low levels of deforestation were maintained throughout the period of REDD+ pursuance, small-scale gold mining continued to threaten these efforts, accounting for over 90% of the country's deforestation during this period. Hence, REDD+'s focus on avoided deforestation, brought gold mining as the main driver of deforestation into question, which, as previously mentioned, had become the forte of the descendants of formerly enslaved Africans. Any idea of limiting the mining of gold in the interest of conserving the forests in Guyana's racially and politically divided climate was therefore contentious from the outset. With racialized gold mining practices remaining relatively untouched, the prospect of avoiding deforestation in the country through REDD+ remained tenuous at best (Collins 2019a). It is also worth noting that Guyana's ongoing territorial border dispute with Suriname also has material impacts on the forests being claimed for inclusion within REDD+ (Collins 2019a).

However, Guyana still derives agency from its management of issues of global concern, including forests and oil, especially in view of climate change. Guyana is highly vulnerable to climate change. This vulnerability is both physical and governance related in that its histories ensure that the spatialized and racialized distribution pattern of the population, described earlier, maps on to its climate change policies, as noted earlier around REDD+. Race, as a set of specific relations through which the diverse groups of people brought to Guyana to labour in relation to the environment is also instrumental in these affairs. This is because, as I explained elsewhere, the colonially rooted, racialized relations of different groups of people with different economic activities and residential areas in the country will ensure that they are disproportionately affected by climate change mitigation and adaptation practices (Collins 2021a). Hence, developments in Guyana refract through race-based politics (Bulkan and Trotz 2021) in ways that influence political outcomes such as whose interests are prioritized in the emerging oil economy and whose voices are heard in charting the country's future.

Deforestation in Guyana also has reverberating impacts. Deforestation in some key hotspots in Guyana's Amazonian rainforests, as part of the Guiana Shield forests, has an outsized impact on the hydrological function of the wider Amazon rainforests, with the potential of significantly influence rainfall patterns across the South American continent. The forests of particular hotspots

are therefore seen as significant for maintaining rainfall patterns across South America (Bovolo et al. 2018). The climate change mitigation work of Guyana's forests also interacts climatically with its increasing reliance on oil as a major economic earner and its continued reliance on gold as a main driver of deforestation in the Amazon. Hence, while Guyana was formed through converging histories of colonialism and capitalism (Rodney 1981; E. Williams 1994), the now independent state retains some agency in influencing global affairs. Guyana's ability to control the resources it sees as necessary for its development, however, remains conditioned by and rooted in its still defining colonial experience.

Overall, while by no means a thorough tracing of Guyana's history, this paper's tracing of convergence, stasis and reverberation recognised that postcolonial development hinges, to some extent, on the histories through which these states were brought into being. This model recognizes how the historical formation of states through convergence, and their current, often-precarious state of stasis, reverberate out-with their spatial configurations to influence regional and global events further afield. This is especially true of the English-speaking Caribbean and Latin America. An understanding of their histories is essential for appreciating the region's varied responses to global challenges and changing global power constellations.

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