

Racing climate change in Guyana and Suriname

Politics

1–15

© The Author(s) 2021



Article reuse guidelines:

sagepub.com/journals-permissions

DOI: 10.1177/02633957211042478

journals.sagepub.com/home/pol**Yolanda Ariadne Collins** 

University of St Andrews, UK

Abstract

Research on the overlap between race and vulnerability to the physical and governance-related aspects of climate change is often globally scaled, based on extended temporalities, and colour-coded with non-white populations recognized as being at greater risk of experiencing the adverse effects of climate change. This article shows how de-centring whiteness from its position as automatic, oppositional counterpart to blackness can make space for greater recognition of the role played by the environment in processes of racialization. De-centring whiteness in this way would form a valuable step towards recognizing how race, constructed in part through shifting relations between people and the environment, overlaps with climate vulnerability within multiracial populations. Without discounting the value of global, colour-coded interpretations of race, I point out the limits of their applicability to understandings of how climate change is unfolding Guyana and Suriname, two multiracial Caribbean countries. I argue that in the postcolonial period, relations with the environment take historical constructions of race forward in ways that undergird the impacts of climate change. Even further, I show how the environment has always played a key, underacknowledged role in processes of racialization, complicating colour-coded interpretations of race, whether global or local.

Keywords

Anthropocene, climate change, Guyana, race, Suriname

Received: 8th October 2019; Revised version received: 17th June 2021; Accepted: 3rd August 2021

Introduction

Guyanese historian, academic, and activist, Walter Rodney (1981), commenced his book *A History of the Guyanese Working People, 1881-1905* with an account of the massive effort through which the narrow coastland of Guyana, on which the vast majority of its population now resides, was reclaimed from the sea. He wrote that ‘An enduring Dutch and European contribution to the technology of Guyanese coastal agriculture was undeniable. Yet one must guard against the mystification implicit in the assertion that it was the Europeans who built the dams and dug the canals’ (Rodney, 1981: 2). Instead, it was enslaved people from Africa and indentured servants from India who ‘had to face up to

Corresponding author:

Yolanda Ariadne Collins, University of St Andrews, St Andrews KY16 9AJ, UK.

Email: yac1@st-andrews.ac.uk

the steady work diet of mud and water in the maintenance of dams and the cleaning of trenches' (Rodney, 1981: 3–4).

A reading of Rodney's account might support *bipartite*, exclusively social interpretations of how the white colonizer played a central role in the historical construction of race by bringing different groups of differentially exploited people to the then colony to labour in support of capitalist development (Quijano, 2000). However, his account can also be read differently – as indicative of a tense and tumultuous *tripartite* relationship between (first) the environment in the form of mud and water, (second) white Europeans, and (third) black and brown workers from Africa and India through whose collective actions¹ the climate-vulnerable coastland emerged and came to prominence. These European-directed, African- and Asian-executed battles against the environment informed not only the racialized subjectivities and identities of different groups of people in relation to each other, but also their racialized relationships with the environment. Hence, Rodney's account highlights how what can be now described as the natural environment, as discursively powerful and neutral whiteness, and as base, impure, and exploitable blackness (Jones, 2003) were all abstracted and co-constituted in small part through the creation of the climate-vulnerable coastland.

Guyana and Suriname have much in common, including multiracial populations established through colonialism, a shared landmass, overlapping Dutch and British colonial histories, and densely populated coasts that lie below the level of the sea. They are also highly vulnerable to climate change – both the physical and governance-related aspects of which tend to overlap with colonially rooted, labour inflected, racial population distribution patterns. These overlapping vulnerabilities have been captured somewhat in the social vulnerability literature on natural disasters and hazards (see, for example, Cutter et al., 2003; Pelling, 1999), which examines how individual social markers such as race, health, employment status, and income 'influence or shape the susceptibility of various groups to harm and that also govern their ability to respond' (Cutter et al., 2003: 243). The social vulnerability literature, however, sees race in ways that are static, atemporal, and given (Bolin and Kurtz, 2018; Kim and Bostwick, 2020).

Within critical debates on the Anthropocene, the overlap between the physical effects and governance of climate change, on one hand, and racial population distribution patterns, on the other, has been dealt with more flexibly as scholars debated about which group of people, logic, or set of events should be given primacy in tracing the emergence of the global, capitalist structures and systems that have produced and wreaked havoc on the environment over time (see Haraway, 2016; Moore, 2015; Wolford, 2021). Within these debates, however, consideration of how vulnerability to both the physical and governance-related aspects of climate change overlaps with multiple social and historical constructions of race is often globally scaled and colour-coded, with non-white populations recognized as being at greater risk of experiencing the adverse effects of climate change than their white counterparts (see Yusoff, 2018). While there is significant value in this observation, the argument I develop in this article points to its limitations.

I argue instead that in Guyana's and Suriname's postcolonial period, during which climate change impacts are being increasingly felt, the immediate relationship to colonizing whiteness no longer plays the central, defining role in local constructions of race. Instead, relations with the environment take these constructions forward in ways that undergird the racialized impacts of climate change and efforts to govern it. Even further, I argue that the environment has always played a key, underacknowledged role

in processes of racialization (Johnson, 2018; Sundberg, 2008) in ways that complicate colour-coded interpretations of race, whether global or local. In this way, my argument de-centres or delinks whiteness from its position as automatic, oppositional counterpart to non-whiteness in what I refer to as *bipartite* constructions of race (Baldwin and Erickson, 2020; Luke, 2018).

In developing this argument, I draw on the work of Anibal Quijano (2000) and Patrick Wolfe (2016). Wolfe reminds us that though race is socially constructed, it is more importantly a site-specific trace of history through which ‘colonised populations continue to be racialized in specific ways that mark out and reproduce the unequal relationships through which Europeans have co-opted these populations’ (Wolfe, 2016). The interests of different oppressed groups often run counter to each other given that they were exploited and integrated into the colonial enterprise in different ways. In Guyana and Suriname, these traces manifest themselves in racial hierarchies that align with those of plantation economies (Beckford, 1999), though these circumstances have shifted somewhat in the postcolonial period after the white colonizer relinquished direct political power and largely withdrew physically from the geographic space or became localized. The significance of this withdrawal for the ability of subsequent independent governments to chart their own paths is surely open to debate (Beckford, 1999; Dos Santos, 2019; Rodney, 1973). However, I explore not only the effect of this withdrawal on ongoing or continued processes of racialization but also argue for a rereading of more firmly entrenched *bipartite* interpretations of race altogether and for greater recognition of the role played by the environment both locally *and* globally. This represents a shift away from exclusively social interpretations of race to *tripartite* social *and* environmental interpretations rooted in colonial histories and the unfolding present. This shift makes space for racialized environments to be further understood as relational, having produced, and been produced by social interactions. Most importantly, it makes space for recognizing how climate change maps directly onto flexible, temporal, socially constructed, and racialized environments.

First, I provide a brief overview of the colour-coded interpretations of race within debates on the Anthropocene. Then, I outline Guyana’s and Suriname’s racial environmental histories, by which I mean histories of racialization retold in greater view of the role played by the natural environment. After that, I point out how race, understood as *tripartite*, undergirds some of the discernible physical and governance-related impacts of climate change. I then conclude by reflecting on how my argument complicates global, colour-coded interpretations of race.

Race and the -cenes

The Anthropocene, the convergence point of much of the critical literature on the overlap between race and climate change, was conceptualized by Paul Crutzen and Eugene F. Stoermer in their identification of the earth’s new geological age in which human beings and their activities became the defining factor in influencing the natural environment and climate (Crutzen and Stoermer, 2000). The Anthropocene recognizes the myriad ways in which human beings have altered the state of the planet, among which climate change is but one. In response, many researchers in the social sciences and the humanities raised critiques, rightly arguing that the Anthropocene is a racial construct that extends to the entire globe a certain Western conception of nature, erasing, as it does so, the racial injustices and colonial histories of extraction and exploitation that have implicated most of the world’s population by force (Wolford, 2021; Yusoff, 2018). These critiques have

legitimately pointed to forces and actors other than a broadly conceptualized ‘anthropos’ of the Anthropocene that are instrumental in ushering the Earth into this new epoch, and attributing alternative ‘-cenes’ to those actors, such as ‘the Capitalocene’ (Moore, 2015), and ‘the Plantationocene’ (Wolford, 2021).

Some significant critiques of the Anthropocene, however, rely primarily on an implicit colour spectrum to demonstrate how black and Brown bodies are being pushed to defend their white counterparts in confronting the devastating effects of climate change (see, for example, Yusoff, 2018). Given that these discussions address events spanning the globe across centuries, this reliance is, perhaps, warranted. Furthermore, this literature has clearly established that climate change is having disproportionately negative effects on people in the Global South and on often disadvantaged, non-white populations in the Global North. Hence, the critical literature on the Anthropocene has made great strides in refocusing the neutralizing view of the concept’s proponents onto the ongoing and historical injustices it obscures (see Haraway, 2016; Moore, 2015; Tuana, 2019; Wolford, 2021). However, this often comes at the cost of viewing the overlap between race and climate change vulnerability according to too simple colour-coded interpretations of race (Baldwin and Erickson, 2020) that obscure significant complexity and heightened vulnerability within its constituent codes. In other words, while whiteness is indeed representative of the figure of ‘Anthropos’ in the Anthropocene (Erickson, 2018), I focus on how race and climate change vulnerability overlap in places that were historically defined through colonial relations steered by colonizing whiteness.² I pay attention to how these places take these processes of racialization forward when white people, directly associated with the colonizer in these places, are no longer in immediate and dominant view.

In Guyana and Suriname, racial assemblages are clearly rooted in the ‘coloniality of power’ that outlines race and culture through conquest and colonialism (Mollett, 2016). The emergence of the New World brought with it world capitalism and ‘a new mental category’ (Quijano, 2000: 215) that codified relations between the populations who conquered and those who were conquered. In codifying these relations, race operated as ‘biologically structural and hierarchical differences between the dominant and the dominated’ (Quijano, 2000: 215). Through these relations, race became a means of classifying roles and places in the division of labour and the control of resources being produced in the New World. The exclusive control of the resources of production by ‘whites’, first in the Americas and subsequently in the rest of the world, ensured that commercial capital and the power to control it was concentrated in Europe. Western Europe ‘emerged as a new historical entity and identity and as the central place of the new pattern of world-Eurocentred colonial/modern capitalist power’ (Quijano, 2000: 217–218). Race then came to represent a basic element of world power, demonstrated in ‘the racial distribution of work, in the imposition of new “racial” geocultural identities, in the concentration of the control of productive resources and capital, as social relations in the everyday life of the world population’ (Quijano, 2000: 218), all representative of the coloniality of power that persisted over the last 500 years and continues to be present today.

When people of European origin encountered the Americas, they found numerous groups of people with their own histories, languages, and identities. They were all lumped by Europeans under one identity, for example, ‘Indians’ or ‘Blacks’, being deprived of their own histories of self-identification (Quijano, 2000). These groupings ensured that the control of particular types of work was the control of a particular dominated people. Hence, race was made to appear natural over time, as indicators of the roles for which certain groups of racialized people were better suited (Quijano, 2000). This nuance is,

however, scarcely reflected in colour-coded interpretations of race common in debates on the Anthropocene (Luke, 2018). Yet, it is known that climate change will affect different groups and parts of the world differently (Arora-Jonsson, 2011; Rhiney, 2015; Sealey-Huggins, 2018; Stern, 2007). This necessitates thorough impact studies ‘that can shed light on the differential vulnerabilities, resilience, and adaptive capacities that exist across multiple geographic and temporal scales’ (Rhiney, 2015: 109). A greater awareness of how the environment is already implicated in processes of racialization would form, in my view, a valued step in this direction.

Sundberg (2008) recognized the role of the environment in these processes some time ago, writing that ‘. . . systems of racialization also have drawn upon and come into being through environmental formations, that is, the historically contingent articulations between environmental imaginaries, natural resource allocations, and political economies’ (Sundberg, 2008: 569). For Sundberg (2008), political and environmental processes are mutually constitutive in processes of racialization. Similarly, Johnson (2018), in her work in Belize, shows how human beings come into being through entanglements with nature. She described ‘socionatural becomings’, through which humans come into being through their interaction with the more than human, including the environment (Johnson, 2018). In like manner, my *tripartite* interpretation of race features a strong awareness of the role of the environment in processes of racialization and depends on a theoretical turn away from *bipartite*, exclusively social, colour-coded interpretations of race in which the position of whiteness is central. This represents a de-centring of sorts that operates in favour of the natural environment and that allows for the multiple, racialized dynamics of climate change to come into clearer view.

I situate my arguments within the framework of political ecology, a theoretical approach that prioritizes the geological situatedness of human–nature relations even in the face of experiences widely shared such as colonialism and environmental degradation (Bryant, 1998). I do so in the acknowledgement that race is more than just a factor that multiplies vulnerability to climate change (Black, 2016; Clark and Gunaratnam, 2013); it is also a multiplier of vulnerabilities to represent and to remedy it. I extrapolate these arguments from research on the colonially rooted impediments to the implementation of the United Nations (UN)-sanctioned, international forest conservation policy called the Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and forest Degradation Initiative (REDD+) in the Guiana Shield of northern South America. The Guiana Shield is a geological area with significant implications for the sustainability of the wider Amazon rainforests (Bovolo et al., 2018), which, in turn, have significant impacts on climate change mitigation. REDD+ aims to limit deforestation by providing performance payments for its avoidance. Guyana and Suriname are the only two REDD+ participants situated completely within the Guiana Shield so they formed the core of the study. Analysed together, the experiences of these two countries demonstrate the varied yet shared outcomes of colonialism’s shaping of race in the Caribbean. However, their racialized circumstances in the postcolonial period reflect both a continuance of their histories and the legitimacy of their own circumstances in ways that no longer default to the global and the colonial.

Environmental histories of race

Despite their meagre contribution to the problem (Stern, 2007), climate change is set to have dramatic impacts on these small island and low-lying coastal states of the Caribbean

for socio-historical (Sealey-Huggins, 2018) and ecological reasons. However, within these climate-vulnerable, multiracial societies, the multifaceted effects of climate change map themselves onto racial distribution patterns emergent from historical and ongoing *tripartite* meetings of differentiated aspects of the environment, colonizers, and the colonized. In this section, I revisit the known histories of these two countries and highlight the ways in which the natural environment featured in local processes of racialization and constructions of race.

Precolonial Indigenous forests. Guyana and Suriname are situated along the coasts of northern South America. Their low-lying, historically forest-denuded coasts host roughly 90% of their populations in its urban areas. Their forests, now accounting for 85%–90% of their territory (Government of Guyana, 2012; Ministry of Labour, Technological Development and Environment, 2013), host the remaining 10%. Through absolutely no coincidence, this population distribution pattern is racialized, largely representing the outcome of centuries of colonialism and resistance to it.

Indigenous enviro-histories preceded European colonization and was independent of coloniality (Quijano, 2000) until the point of European conquest. Upon arrival to this area five centuries ago, Europeans encountered numerous and diverse indigenous tribes with some of whom they set up trading relations (Heemskerk, 2009). The tribes were said to be ‘well-ordered and technologically complex hierarchical societies based on intensive agriculture and fishing’³ (Colchester, 1997). Over time, Europeans began to set up colonies along the coasts by exploiting small numbers of indigenous people as the first enslaved plantation labourers. The Amerindians,⁴ as indigenous communities are now locally known, frequently escaped by fleeing back to the forests, which were then largely unfamiliar to and unvalued by the colonizers.

The current racialized relations of Amerindians to the forested interior are partly a manifestation of this withdrawal. Hence, indigenous groups were not racialized primarily through their relocation from overseas to labour in unfamiliar environments as were the large numbers of people from Europe, Africa, and Asia (Knight, 1990) whose experiences are detailed later. Instead, indigenous groups were racialized through the continuance of their pre-existing, albeit markedly interrupted, relations and life in the forests that took on sharper tones when later compared with the events taking place on the coast. Over time, however, relocated groups adapted to their new environments, adhering to the racialized roles available to them based on the circumstances of their arrival (Quijano, 2000; Wolfe, 2016). I trace these in the respective countries next.

Multiracial coasts and Indigenous forests in Guyana. By the 1760s, some indigenous tribes in Guyana were policing the forested interior and continuing to provide ‘red slaves’, other Amerindians over whom they had dominated, to work on the plantations. However, the arrival of different groups of enslaved Africans to work on the plantations in the late 17th century (Colchester, 1997), stimulated by the slave trade engaged in by the Dutch colonizers, brought a new role for Amerindians. Different groups of enslaved Africans had been taken to Guyana, with the largest numbers coming from the Gold Coast (Glasgow, 2012). On arrival, these different tribes were grouped under European-imposed categories that marked their arrival, their relation to capital (Quijano, 2000) and to the environment. Meanwhile, the Amerindians were becoming ‘owls’ or guards as the Dutch began to reward them for capturing those enslaved Africans who escaped

from the coastal plantations to the forests, limiting the formation of African forest communities there.

The alliance between the Dutch colonizers and the Amerindians was strong, weakening only as the Dutch demand for Amerindian 'red slaves' began to wane due to the increasing labour supply in the form of enslaved Africans. The Amerindian slave trade was eventually abolished in 1793 and the trade relationship of the Amerindians with the Dutch came to an end (Colchester, 1997) with the forests remaining their mainstay. In 1803, due to changing power relations between European states, the three Dutch colonies of Essequibo, Demerara, and Berbice, comprising what is known today as Guyana, passed to British control. The colonies were united in 1831 under the banner of British Guiana. The relationship with the new colonizer did not see much room for engagement with the Amerindians other than relegating them to the role of bush (forest) police.

The emancipation of enslaved Africans in 1833, brought about by shifting public opinion in the England, coordinated uprisings in the colonies, and the possibility of having goods produced at a cheaper cost elsewhere (Williams, 1994) all but obliterated the role of the Amerindians who were no longer needed to police the activities of the slaves on behalf of the colonizers (Colchester, 1997). These historical developments follow the pattern described by Eric Williams who described how forced labour and slavery in the New World started with indigenous groups, moved on to poor white servants brought to the region from Europe and then to the Africans and often overlapped (Williams, 1994). When indigenous Amerindians were deemed too weak for plantation labour by the Europeans, it was Africa that provided an almost inexhaustible supply of slave labour, despite the fact that the law in Europe was punishing people by sending them to labour on the plantations. Tying the demand for enslaved Africans primarily to the demands for labour rather than to ideas of racial dominance, Williams explained that white servitude became the historic base upon which African slavery was constructed. However, servitude was for a time and enslavement was for life (Williams, 1994).

The eventual emancipation of enslaved Africans reduced the ready labour supply dramatically, though the demand for plantation labour continued. Access to land emerged as a challenge in this context as the colonial authorities sought to make alternative forms of livelihood difficult for the freed slaves who worked only intermittently on the sugar plantations and were paid low wages for wage labour. Instead of providing attractive salaries for the formerly enslaved Africans to return to the sugar plantations, the then British colonizers of Guyana imported large numbers of indentured servants who were then legally tied to the plantation. Large groups of people were brought to Guiana as indentured labourers from China in the 1860s, Portugal in the 1880s and most notably due to their large numbers, from India in the 1830s (see Rodney, 1981). As a legacy of these colonial decisions, the sugar industry remains almost the exclusive preserve of Indo-Guyanese. Hence, the East Indian descendants of indentured servants remained spatially constrained and centred in and near the coastal plantations, a legacy that continues today in the dominance of Indo-Guyanese in the rural, sugar-producing areas. The majority of the freed Africans took up residence in the cities, having been dissuaded from seeking out economic prospects in the forested areas by the colonists who saw the interior locations as competition for labour. They established villages along the coasts where they provided seasonal labour to the plantations and sustained themselves by planting (Rodney, 1981).

As noted above, the Portuguese were also brought to British Guiana as immigrant labour after the emancipation of enslaved labour, along with small numbers of other

white immigrants in a colonial attempt to increase the colony's white population and stave off some of the slave rebellions that were taking place. Along with the Portuguese, some Irish, Scottish, German, and Maltese labourers were brought to work on the plantation (Daly, 1974) but were never seen as equal in status to the British colonial masters. The European descended immigrant labour force resented having to work alongside the now free Africans on the plantation who they saw as inferior beings (Jagan, 1980).

Postcolonial forests in Guyana. During the 1840s, the extractive industry began to take hold and the mining industry, of gold, bauxite, and other metals, became more central. Up to this point, most of the mining had been carried out by the pork-knockers, descendants of formerly enslaved Africans who mined for gold in Guyana's interior by adopting simple artisanal techniques, allowing them to establish small communities in the forests (Rabe, 2005). Being deprived of access to land and employment on the coast, African descendants had been willing to risk their fortunes in the forested interior in search of gold (Colchester, 1997). Although Brazilian miners started to flow across the border with improved technologies which fed the forests' destruction in the 1970s and 1980s (Colchester, 1997), gold mining remained the mainstay of the descendants of enslaved Africans, with profound, negative effects on the indigenous communities already residing there, even though these communities often engage in gold mining now too (Hook, 2019).

Racialized environments in Guyana. The racialized separation of people in Guyana lives on as people there speak of the land of six peoples: Amerindians, Europeans, Africans, East Indians, Chinese, and the Portuguese. Note here the distinction between Portuguese and Europeans since the two were seen to be different races. This difference was based not on the colour of their skin, but on their economic status, relation to the environment, and societal position of power on arriving to the colonies.

In the 1950s, the East Indians, who formed the largest group of indentured servants in then British Guiana numbering approximately 250,000, kept working on the sugar estates, with some of their descendants eventually taking up rice farming still on the coasts (Lowenthal, 1960). The smaller numbers of indentured servants made up by the Portuguese and Chinese stopped working on the plantations as soon as they were able to and formed a strata of peddlers, shopkeepers, and urban tradesmen and professionals (Lowenthal, 1960) in the city. Guyana eventually gained independence from the British in 1966. However, race continues to underpin the country's politics (Pelling, 1999), as demonstrated in voting patterns, areas of residence and economic earners of choice. Georgetown and New Amsterdam remain the main urban centres populated by the descendants of enslaved Africans while the rural population is dominated by the descendants of East Indian indentured workers (Menke and Egger, 2006). Indigenous communities continue to subsist in the forests.

This racial, spatial population distribution pattern emerged, like the coastland described at the beginning of this article, through a meeting of white European-directed processes of racializing different groups of with (multi-coloured) people in relation to the environment. While some variation to this pattern naturally exists as the coasts become increasingly metropolitan and mixed, this racialized environmental map roughly holds true, undergirding both the physical and governance effects of climate change, as I describe later. However, first, I describe the emergence of racialized environments in Suriname.

Multiracial coasts and Indigenous forests in Suriname. The first successful establishment of a European settlement in the area now known as Suriname was in 1650 by British planters who began to establish coastal plantations by exploiting enslaved labour. Like in Guyana, European colonizers in Suriname initially drew on enslaved indigenous labour (Galen and Hassankhan, 2018). The shift to Dutch rule in 1667 did not affect the use of the coastal areas for the production of sugar, coffee, cacao, and cotton, eventually through a much heavier reliance on the labour of enslaved Africans (Janssen, 2011). The primary remaining contact between the Europeans and the indigenous groups in the forests took place around trade in items such as weapons and cloth (Struiken and Healy, 2003).

Colonial forests in Suriname. In response to European aggressions on the coast, the indigenous people in Suriname withdrew into the forested areas, strengthening Suriname's separation between the coastal and forested zones, a condition still evident today. The indigenous withdrawal was not without resistance. In 1678, the Caribs went to war with the Dutch presence which at the time was still weak. In 1684, a peace treaty was signed between the warring factions that stipulated that indigenous people were free to live as they wished in Suriname's interior, further cementing the spatial and societal separation between coast and forest and relegating some indigenous communities to the role of forest police, capturing runaway enslaved Africans on behalf of the Dutch (Price, 2010). However, in a significant departure from events that took place in Guyana, enslaved Africans who had runaway were able to form villages in Suriname's forested interior that tended to differ along pre-slavery linguistic and ethnic African lines, forming tribes that include the Saramaka, the Paramaka, and others. This difference is still evident today. Nevertheless, these groups are now referred to collectively as maroons, having benefitted from the physical separation of the forests from the agricultural coastal areas where the plantations were situated and effectively forming another historically informed, enviro-racial category tied to the forests of Suriname.

Over time, agricultural production in the colony stagnated due to a number of factors such as a lack of modernization of the plantations and the frequent defection to the forests of enslaved Africans, who often returned to raid the plantations, bringing about a situation that was so tense and frequent that peace agreements had to be signed between the Dutch and the maroon communities (Janssen, 2011). The abolition of slavery in 1863 also had a significant effect on the racialization of the colony's population as formerly enslaved Africans on the coasts became known as creoles as they moved away from the plantations and established themselves in the cities.

Racialized environments in Suriname. In response to dwindling labour supplies, the colonial government recruited indentured servants from China, who began to arrive after 1853. The Chinese labourers were supplemented by people from India who started to arrive in 1873. Javanese from Indonesia were also brought to Suriname from 1890 to fill this demand for plantation labour, though the fate that befell the indentured labourers was quite similar in several respects to the horrors of slavery (Janssen, 2011). The outcome in the ethnic distribution patterns of the population was that the Hindustanis, as descendants from India are called in Suriname, and creoles formed the largest groups, with the Javanese and maroons representing the second largest and the Amerindians, Europeans, and Chinese offering the smallest numerical contribution to plural Surinamese society (Jansen, 2011). The multiracial society that emerged was based on a small white plantation

class, a relatively large number of enslaved Africans, and a creole section of the population comprised of mixed African and white descendants.

Suriname eventually gained independence from the Netherlands in 1975 despite having suffered over the centuries periods, like Guyana, of shifting territorial integrity subject and rule in accordance with events taking place in Europe. In the postcolonial period, creoles came to dominate Surinamese politics. The maroon communities had been reluctant to acquiesce to independence since they considered themselves already mostly independent and had built up an amicable relationship with the colonizers with whom their forefathers had made peace in the 1760s. Demonstrating tension between two enviro-racial groupings that could both be categorized as black, maroons feared domination by the creoles in the city who, at times, claimed to be able to represent maroon interests (Hoogbergen and Kruijt, 2004).

The structure of Surinamese society continues to be influenced by tensions between the different ethnic groups (Hoogbergen and Kruijt, 2004) but the situation remains relatively peaceful and more integrated than that of Guyana. The influx of Chinese arriving since 2010 also caused a rise in tension (Ellis, 2012). The now large Chinese population in Suriname often conflicts with other ethnic groups, especially around infrastructure and lumber projects often in the forested areas that now have the backing of the Chinese mainland (Ellis, 2012). However, even in Suriname, rough racial distribution patterns persist, with maroon and indigenous communities taking up residence in the forested areas and the other racial groupings remaining on the coast.

Race as tripartite across Guyana and Suriname

The outcome of these histories has seen different groups of people situated in particular places and relating to the environment in ways determined how they were integrated in the colonial project (Wolfe, 2016). In general, the rural coastal areas of Guyana and Suriname remain largely populated by the descendants of indentured servants (Choenni, 2014) and of enslaved Africans. The importance of the city centres in the past decades has led to greater levels of creolization, referring to the cultural and linguistic mixing that arises from the 'entanglement of different cultures in the same indigenous space or location' (Gutiérrez Rodríguez and Tate, 2015: 15). However, a strong separation remains between the coast and the forests with the cities and urban areas remaining primarily the stronghold of creoles and Hindustanis, with indigenous and maroon communities populating the forests. These place-based separations reverberate culturally in references by coastal inhabitants of Guyana to 'bucks⁵' who 'came to town', for example, in reference to indigenous people who left the forests, where they are expected to be, and moved to the city and are expected to be ignorant of city life.

Across the two countries, a comparison of the recent censuses demonstrates the different ways in which populations with the same geographic origins were racialized in different ways through, at least in part, their interactions with the environment traced above. The Guyana census of 2012 identified the population as 29.25% African, 10.51% Amerindian, 0.18% Chinese, 39.83% East Indian, 19.88% Mixed,⁶ 0.26% Portuguese, 0.06% white, and 0.03% Other. The Surinamese census of 2012, on the contrary, identified the population as 16% Creole, 13% Mixed, 27% Hindustani, 14% Javanese, 22% Maroon, 3.8% Indigenous, 1.5% Chinese, 0.3% European, 1% Others, and 0.3% no answers. These official state categorizations point to the geographical situatedness of race in these two countries since people characterized as East Indian in Guyana and as

Hindustani in Suriname share geographic origins, having been brought to these countries in similar periods to labour under similar conditions. In like manner, Guyana's census features an African category for people whose ancestors originated in Africa. Suriname's, on the contrary, features a maroon category and a creole category, both with ancestral origins in Africa, because of the different social contexts, relations to the natural environment, responses to enslavement, and relations to capital of these different groups, among other things, as specific traces of history (Wolfe, 2016).

Overall, the histories of these two countries played out in relation to the natural environment in ways that informed the conceptualization of race and ensured that the representation of different racial groupings became imbued, often through labour and residence, with a particular role in the racialized political economy. Nevertheless, in the postcolonial period, the presence of local people of European descent continued, evident in their ownership of industry and their comparative wealth, but their whiteness was no longer directly connected with the backing and power of the former colonizers.

Mapping climate change onto *Tripartite* interpretations of race

Race conceived of as *tripartite*, with colonizing whiteness less in view in favour of the environment, takes historical processes of racialization forward in the postcolonial period in ways that undergird efforts to govern climate change. REDD+ in both countries, in its effort to mitigate climate change by financially incentivizing avoided deforestation, was challenged by race understood in this way. In its focus on forests, REDD+ turned collective international and national attention towards the behaviour and practices of indigenous communities, who were targeted by an onslaught of consultations, promises of increased wealth and forest use practice-visibility-enhancing activities (Airey and Krause, 2017; Collins, 2019b). At the same time, REDD+ called into question the economic earners of large numbers of Guyanese and Surinamese of African descent, both creole and maroon, who overwhelmingly rely on deforesting gold mining for an income.

Resonances are also likely in discussions on ethanol production (see Guyana Lands and Surveys Commission, 2013). As climate change makes itself increasingly felt, the international market is increasingly interested in ethanol, seen as a more environmentally friendly fuel. Ethanol production, however, is likely to disproportionately affect the large numbers of descendants of indentured servants still working on sugar plantations though it has the potential to regenerate an industry that was seen a few years ago as increasingly economically unfeasible (McLeod, 2020). In other words, according on the climate change mitigation strategy adopted, different racial groupings will be adversely affected.

Hence, these governance-related aspects of climate change have the ability to ameliorate and/or exacerbate the experience of different racial groupings to physical vulnerabilities of the phenomenon. One such physical vulnerability is that the coast of both countries is especially vulnerable to flooding with the potential to affect their most densely populated and fertile areas (Government of Guyana, 2012; Ministry of Labour, Technological Development and Environment, 2013). Furthermore, *tripartite* interpretations of race allow us to see that even those persons who could be globally colour-coded as black are affected by climate change differently. This is demonstrated in how creoles on the coast and maroons in the forests, both of whom are Afro-descendants, are affected by climate change in different physical and governance-related ways. Creoles on the low-lying coasts are more vulnerable to flooding while maroons are more likely directly affected by

climate change mitigating forest conservation programmes that may affect their ways of life.⁷ Furthermore, as the effects of climate change become more strongly felt, the likelihood exists that people on the coasts may be forced to move further inland, exacerbating tensions around Amerindian claims for greater land rights (Dooley and Griffiths, 2014; Heemskerk, 2009; Hook, 2019), which are themselves race-based claims to the natural environment based on specific histories that often conflict with African-descendent demands for land for mining (Collins, 2019a; Hook, 2019). Hence, this analysis shows that race, when understood as *tripartite* in a priori view of the natural environment, exacerbates the vulnerability of different groups of people to both the physical and governance-related aspects of climate change. This reconceptualization of race, therefore, adds to the toolbox of concepts for exploring the varied, intersecting vulnerabilities to climate change, especially in multiracial environments.

Conclusion

In this article, I took the position that in the postcolonial period starting in the 1960s and 1970s, the power to govern Guyana and Suriname was altered significantly as the white colonizer withdrew, relinquishing direct colonial control over these countries whose social fabric and territory they had moulded across centuries. The local population of Guyana and Suriname, with colonizing whiteness less in view, took up governance of these societies in racialized ways (Pelling, 1999). Alternating Indo- and Afro-Guyanese governments have since held on to power through the majority of the postcolonial period in Guyana (Hintzen, 1989), and Suriname's political process has been increasingly 'creolized' through nationalizing forces that aim to integrate previously competing ethnic groups under the banner of an independent Suriname (Gowricharn, 2019). Yet, whiteness remains influential in spaces, such as international development practices and imaginaries, the media, and the circulation of capital (Blackmon, 2020; Smith, 2021).

Rethinking race in closer view of the environment, I argued that in Guyana's and Suriname's postcolonial period, conceiving of race as *tripartite* takes these enviro-historical formations forward in ways that are geographically situated and reflective of the coloniality of labour (Quijano, 2000). *Tripartite* interpretations of race recognize race as emergent from not only the meeting of blackness (the exploited) and whiteness (the exploiter), but of the differentiated environment. Understanding race in this way is possible only through the theoretical de-centring or delinking of whiteness from its position as the automatic, oppositional, and binary counterpart to blackness, in ways advocated for by Baldwin and Erickson (2020). These colour-coded global interpretations, relied on heavily in debates on the Anthropocene, are limited in their support of efforts to understand the increasingly urgent, racialized ways in which climate change is currently unfolding in particular places. As demonstrated in Guyana and Suriname, *bipartite*, exclusively social interpretations of race pinned to whiteness and based on colour miss the different ways through which race is and was constructed with and through the environment. *Bipartite* interpretations of race also overlook the different schisms through which some people are made more vulnerable even within particular colour codes based on racial population distribution patterns, for example, and around efforts to govern climate change through different mitigation strategies.

A *tripartite* interpretation of race improves the potential for understanding the ways in which race undergirds vulnerability to both the physical and governance-related aspects of climate change. It is less susceptible to the critique made of social vulnerability

literature, that is, that it sees race as static, atemporal, and given (Bolin and Kurtz, 2018; Kim and Bostwick, 2020). Finally, it moves forward in the awareness that climate change will affect different groups and parts of the world differently (Arora-Jonsson, 2011; Rhiney, 2015; Sealey-Huggins, 2018; Stern, 2007) and can be useful for providing greater nuance in these discussions (Rhiney, 2015).

Acknowledgements

Gratitude is extended to several anonymous reviewers, to Dr. Judith Krauss and the Alternatives to Development Study Group of the University of Sheffield for their thoughtful and critical engagement with drafts of this work. All errors remain the author's responsibility.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

ORCID iD

Yolanda Ariadne Collins  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4138-9158>

Notes

1. This argument recognizes the natural environment as capable of acting, though not intentionally as do humans (Sundberg, 2011).
2. While I am aware that whiteness is an abstract concept, it is undoubtedly associated with the physical manifestation of white skin. Hence, I focus on how processes of racialization are altered when this physical manifestation recedes and/or is less imbued with political power.
3. Given the nomadic lifestyle of some tribes, it is entirely possible that the same ones resided in and hunted throughout the Guiana Shield since borders had not yet been demarcated.
4. This grouping also obfuscates the linguistic and other differences within it.
5. This is a derogatory term for Amerindian people in Guyana.
6. Some of these Descriptors are capitalized here only because this is the way that they are listed in the censuses.
7. This represents an interesting turn of fortunes since forested communities have been historically more vulnerable to the harmful impacts of resource-extracting, government concessions in their living areas.

References

- Airey S and Krause T (2017) 'Georgetown ain't got a tree. We got the trees'—Amerindian power & participation in Guyana's low carbon development strategy. *Forests* 8(3): 51.
- Arora-Jonsson S (2011) Virtue and vulnerability: Discourses on women, gender and climate change. *Global Environmental Change* 21(2): 744–751.
- Baldwin A and Erickson B (2020) Introduction: Whiteness, coloniality, and the Anthropocene. *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 38(1): 3–11.
- Beckford GL (1999) *Persistent Poverty: Underdevelopment in Plantation Economies of the Third World*. Kingston, Jamaica: University of West Indies Press.
- Black T (2016) Race, gender, and climate injustice: Dimensions of social and environmental inequality. In Godfrey P and Torres D (eds) *Systemic Crises of Global Climate Change: Intersections of Race, Class and Gender*. London: Routledge, pp.172–184.
- Blackmon D (2020) ExxonMobil's South America bonanza grows with new Suriname discovery. Available at: <https://www.forbes.com/sites/davidblackmon/2020/12/15/exxonmobils-south-america-bonanza-grows-with-new-suriname-discovery/> (accessed 12 January 2021).
- Bolin B and Kurtz LC (2018) Race, class, ethnicity, and disaster vulnerability. In: Rodríguez H, Donner W and Trainor JE (eds) *Handbook of Disaster Research. Handbooks of Sociology and Social Research*. Cham: Springer International Publishing, pp.181–203.
- Bovolenta CI, Wagner T, Parkin G and Hein-Griggs D (2018) The Guiana Shield rainforests – overlooked guardians of South American climate. *Environmental Research Letters* 13(7): 074029.
- Bryant RL (1998) Power, knowledge and political ecology in the third world: A review. *Progress in Physical Geography* 22(1): 79–94.

- Choenni CE (2014) Ethnicity and politics: Political adaption of Hindostanis in Suriname. *Sociological Bulletin* 63(3): 407–431.
- Clark N and Gunaratnam Y (2013) Sustaining difference: Climate change, diet and the materiality of race. In: Slocum R and Saldanha A (eds) *Geographies of Race and Food: Fields, Bodies, Markets*. Aldershot: Ashgate, pp.157–173.
- Colchester M (1997) *Guyana Fragile Frontier: Loggers, Miners and Forest Peoples*. London: Latin America Bureau.
- Collins YA (2019a) Colonial residue: REDD+, territorialisation and the racialized subject in Guyana and Suriname. *Geoforum* 106(1): 38–47.
- Collins YA (2019b) How REDD+ governs: Multiple forest environmentalities in Guyana and Suriname. *Environment and Planning E: Nature and Space* 3(2): 323–345.
- Crutzen PJ and Stoermer EF (2000) The Anthropocene. *Global Change Newsletter* 41(1): 17–18.
- Cutter SL, Boruff BJ and Shirley WL (2003) Social vulnerability to environmental hazards*. *Social Science Quarterly* 84(2): 242–261.
- Daly VT (1974) *The Making of Guyana*. London: MacMillan Publishing Company.
- Dooley K and Griffiths T (2014) *Indigenous Peoples' Rights, Forests and Climate Policies in Guyana – A Special Report*. Georgetown, Guyana: Amerindian Peoples Association.
- Dos Santos T (2019) *The Structure of Dependence*. London: Routledge.
- Ellis RE (2012) Suriname and the Chinese: Timber, migration, and less-told stories of globalization. *SAIS Review of International Affairs* 32(2): 85–97.
- Erickson B (2018) Anthropocene futures: Linking colonialism and environmentalism in an age of crisis. *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 38(1): 111–128.
- Galen CW van and Hassankhan MS (2018) A research–note on the slave registers of Suriname, 1830–1865. *The History of the Family* 23(3): 503–520.
- Glasgow RA (2012) *Guyana: Race and Politics among Africans and East Indians*. Dordrecht: Springer Science & Business Media.
- Government of Guyana (2012) Guyana second national communication to the UNFCCC. Policy document. Available at: <http://unfccc.int/resource/docs/natc/guync2.pdf> (accessed 18 October 2016).
- Gowricharn R (2019) The decline of ethnic voting patterns in plural societies: Evidence from Suriname. *Politics* 39(4): 395–410.
- Gutiérrez Rodríguez E and Tate SA (2015) *Creolizing Europe: Legacies and Transformations*. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press.
- Guyana Lands and Surveys Commission (2013) Guyana national land use plan. *Report*. Available at: <http://www.fao.org/faolex/results/details/en/c/LEX-FAOC178057/#:~:text=Guyana%20National%20Land%20Use%20Plan,guide%20land%20development%20in%20Guyana.&text=A%20main%20objective%20of%20the,uses%20at%20the%20regional%20level>.
- Haraway DJ (2016) *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Heemskerk M (2009) Demarcation of indigenous and maroon lands in Suriname. Report commissioned by the Gordon and Betty Moore Foundation and Amazon Conservation Team Suriname Paramaribo, Suriname. Available at: http://www.social-solutions.net/heemskerk/images/Demarcation_final%20May%202009.pdf
- Hintzen PC (1989) *The Costs of Regime Survival: Racial Mobilization, Elite Domination and Control of the State in Guyana and Trinidad*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Hoogbergen W and Kruijt D (2004) Gold, 'Garimpeiros' and Maroons: Brazilian migrants and ethnic relationships in post-war Suriname. *Caribbean Studies* 32(2): 3–44.
- Hook A (2019) Mapping contention: Mining property expansion, Amerindian land titling, and livelihood hybridity in Guyana's small-scale gold mining landscape. *Geoforum* 106(1): 48–67.
- Jagan C (1980) *The West on Trial: The Fight for Guyana's Freedom*. Guyana: Seven Seas.
- Janssen R (2011) *In Search of a Path; an Analysis of the Foreign Policy of Suriname from 1975 to 1991*. Boston, MA: Brill.
- Johnson MA (2018) *Becoming Creole: Nature and Race in Belize*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.
- Jones C (2003) Contesting the boundaries of gender, race and sexuality in Barbadian plantation society. *Women's History Review* 12(2): 195–232.
- Kim SJ and Bostwick W (2020) Social vulnerability and racial inequality in COVID-19 deaths in Chicago. *Health Education & Behavior* 47(4): 509–513.
- Knight FW (1990) *The Caribbean: The Genesis of a Fragmented Nationalism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

- Lowenthal D (1960) The range and variation of Caribbean societies. *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences* 83(1): 786–795.
- Luke TW (2018) Tracing race, ethnicity, and civilization in the Anthropocene. *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 38(1): 129–146.
- McLeod S-K (2020) Guyana's government committed to survival of sugar industry-Ali. *Caribbean News*, 6 September. Available at: <http://www.caribbeannationalweekly.com/caribbean-breaking-news-featured/guyanas-government-committed-to-survival-of-sugar-industry-ali/> (accessed 17 January 2021).
- Menke J and Egger J (2006) *Country Report Suriname*. Leiden: AWAD.
- Ministry of Labour, Technological Development and Environment (2013) Suriname second national communication to the United Nations framework convention on climate change.
- Mollett S (2016) The power to plunder: Rethinking land grabbing in Latin America. *Antipode* 48(2): 412–432.
- Moore JW (2015) *Capitalism in the Web of Life: Ecology and the Accumulation of Capital*. London: Verso Books.
- Pelling M (1999) The political ecology of flood hazard in urban Guyana. *Geoforum* 30(3): 249–261.
- Price R (2010) Uneasy neighbors: Maroons and Indians in Suriname. *Tipiti: Journal of the Society for the Anthropology of Lowland South America* 8(2): 4. Available at: <http://digitalcommons.trinity.edu/tipiti/vol8/iss2/4>
- Quijano A (2000) Coloniality of power and Eurocentrism in Latin America. *International Sociology* 15(2): 215–232.
- Rabe SG (2005) *U.S. Intervention in British Guiana: A Cold War Story*, 1st edn. Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press.
- Rhiney K (2015) Geographies of Caribbean vulnerability in a changing climate: Issues and trends. *Geography Compass* 9(3): 97–114.
- Rodney W (1973) *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*. London: Bogle-L'Ouverture Publications; Dar-Es-Salaam: Tanzanian Publishing House.
- Rodney W (1981) *A History of the Guyanese Working People, 1881-1905* (988.1 R6). Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Sealey-Huggins L (2018) The climate crisis is a racist crisis: Structural racism, inequality and climate change. In: Johnson A, Joseph-Salisbury R and Kamunge B (eds) *The Fire Now: Anti-Racist Scholarship in Times of Explicit Racial Violence*. London. Zed Books, pp.99–113.
- Smith M (2021) Exxon's mega oil finds in Guyana are just the beginning. Available at: <https://oilprice.com/Energy/Crude-Oil/Exxon-Mega-Oil-Finds-In-Guyana-Are-Just-The-Beginning.html> (accessed 12 January 2021).
- Stern N (2007) The economics of climate change: The stern review – Nicholas Herbert Stern, Great Britain. Treasury – Google Books. Available at: https://books.google.hu/books?hl=en&lr=&id=U-VmIrGGZgAC&oi=fnd&pg=PA1&dq=stern+2007&ots=9dtV6oiqm9&sig=6xTVU8cjOIwRoUOPcnIK_eVIs4&redir_esc=y#v=onepage&q=stern%202007&f=false (accessed 19 August 2016).
- Struiken H and Healy C (2003) Suriname: The challenge of formulating land policy. In: Williams AN (ed.) *Land in the Caribbean: Issues of Policy, Administration and Management in the English-speaking Caribbean*. Mt. Horeb, WI: Terra Institute, pp.315–344.
- Sundberg J (2008) Placing race in environmental justice research in Latin America. *Society and Natural Resources* 21(7): 569–582.
- Sundberg J (2011) Diabolic Caminos in the desert and cat fights on the Rio: A posthumanist political ecology of boundary enforcement in the United States–Mexico borderlands. *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 101(2): 318–336.
- Tuana N (2019) Climate apartheid: The forgetting of race in the Anthropocene. *Critical Philosophy of Race* 7(1): 1–31.
- Williams E (1994) *Capitalism and Slavery*. Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press.
- Wolfe P (2016) *Traces of History: Elementary Structures of Race*. London: Verso Books.
- Wolford W (2021) The plantationocene: A lusotropical contribution to the theory. *Annals of the American Association of Geographers* 111(6): 1622–1639.
- Yusoff K (2018) *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.

Author biography

Yolanda Ariadne Collins is a Lecturer in the School of International Relations at the University of St. Andrews, Scotland. She is an environmental social scientist whose work lies at the intersection of climate change governance, environmental policy and international development.