

The biopolitics of colonial carcerality

Colonialism and its afterlife in prison historiography of Guyana

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Introduction

In the 1970s, Wilson Harris, a Guyanese theorist of post-colonial literature, wrote the essay 'History, fable and myth in the Caribbean' (2008). In a work that took ideas beyond the page and into the sociology and psychology of Guyanese and Caribbean sensibilities (Sharrad 1995), Harris spoke of the 'prison of history' to suggest that the Caribbean past had been written to extend and reinforce 'old colonial prejudices' (2008: 12). It enveloped those who had not written these histories but remained at the receiving end of their epistemological constructs. In this chapter, we draw on historical, anthropological and criminological research in the colonial and post-colonial archives of Guyana, and on primary data collection with prisoners and prison officers between 2019 and 2022,¹ to explore the 'prison of history' and to illustrate how colonial logics have been established, extended and reinforced in Guyana's prisons. To do this we develop the concept of the 'biopolitics of colonial carcerality' as one way to think about how historical continuities extend from inside British Guiana's colonial prisons to broader Guyanese society and back again. Drawing also on Caribbean

¹ A multidisciplinary team of researchers from anthropology, criminology, history and sociology wrote this chapter. The research was carried out as part of an ESRC Global Challenges Research Fund collaboration between the University of Leicester and the University of Guyana, in partnership with the Guyana Prison Service (award no. ES/S000569/1). The project examined the relationships, connections and continuities of mental, neurological and substance abuse (MNS) disorders in Guyana's jails, both among prisoners and the people who work with them, from the British colonial period through independence in 1966 to the present day. Between 2019 and 2022 we collected 110 semi-structured interviews with prison staff, prisoners and their families.

philosophy and the Fanonian idea of ‘sustained violence’ (Nayar 2019: 223), we show how colonial carcerality seeps in and out of the walls of post-colonial prisons in many ways, including through the mind and body. We demonstrate that the colonial era continues to shape structures, institutions and futures. This impacts on individual bodies and collective lives through expressions of mental illnesses including substance disorders in Guyana today.²

One example among others where we saw these impacts clearly and starkly during the course of the research period was in the context of the Guyana Prison Service’s (GPS’s) limited capacity to manage the Covid-19 pandemic in 2019–21. Although we saw evidence of colonial carcerality in our many visits to all six prisons in Guyana between 2019 and 2022, during Covid-19 the GPS imposed immediate, drastic and widespread restrictions, the like of which had not been seen for over a century with the arrival of the Spanish Flu in what was then British Guiana. These included the immediate suspension of all in-person visits from family members and attorneys, the suspension of skills training, educational, counselling and religious activities, the use of virtual ‘container courts’ and the almost total confinement of prisoners to their cells, blocks or bays. These severe measures initially appeared effective but ultimately and perhaps inevitably failed to keep the virus out of the prisons. Moreover, they had emotional, psychological and physical effects including increased violence, intimidation, bullying, boredom, isolation and anxiety, which led to further detention and control measures (Anderson et al. 2023).³ The reaction to Covid-19 raises important issues around the human rights of prisoners, and *biopolitics* – and whether such harsh control measures reminiscent of colonial times are warranted? The meeting of carceral logics within a colonially derived context exacerbated the deadly consequences of the virus, most strikingly when two prisoners were shot dead as they tried to escape an outbreak in Lusignan Prison (Anderson et al. 2023).

The discontents associated with such repressive forms of governance are exactly what Harris was referencing – specifically, how Caribbean polities deny the power of imagination and creativity to provide solutions and escape from colonial legacies. ‘What is bitterly ironic’, Harris wrote, ‘is that present

² We include these conceptual elements so as not to ‘naturally’ gravitate towards the US literature on prisons in understanding Caribbean prisons, although of course we take great insight from this work (e.g. Davis 2003; Gilmore 2018; Wang 2018) and appreciate the connections to be made (McKittrick 2011, 2013).

³ Guyana’s Covid-19 response also reflected the approach adopted internationally including creating sanitation stations and protocols, releasing a small number of prisoners and utilizing technology to facilitate contact with family and attorneys and to conduct court hearings remotely.

day historians . . . have fallen victim . . . to the very imperialism they appear to denounce' (2008: 13). Harris, notes Headley, was 'essentially scolding Caribbean historians for obsessing over irreconcilables, the cataloguing of injustices, the tautology of fact, and [the] filing of multiple sources of deprivation' (2019: 43). For Harris, liberation from a positivistic paradigm linking post-colonialism to freedom struggles remained an imaginative impulse rather than translating into praxis. As a result, Harris recognized 'it is possible for ontologies of life to liberate the Caribbean from imprisonment in its deprivations only if Caribbean thinkers acknowledge the void between conventional historiography and the arts of the imagination' (Headley 2019: 43).

As noted by Maes-Jelink (2006), Harris's *The Ghosts of Memory* signals that implementing regimes of violence via the prison – past or present – illustrates human beings' preoccupation with dehumanization – not only on those living and working inside the prison but also on wider post-colonial society in Guyana, where incarceration disproportionately affects the most socio-economically deprived (Sarsfield and Bergman 2017). These inequities arise because the destruction and debris of empire are embedded in the social, cultural and spatial fabric of Guyanese society as well as in the collective imaginaries of Guyanese people.

In this chapter, we take Harris as a starting point to ask: why is it that colonial prisons still play such a role in Guyana today when we know that their roots lie in the desire to manage enslaved, emancipated, Indigenous, migrant and bonded workers; that they were inextricably connected to the plantation and a colonial desire for an unfree labour supply; and that for almost 200 years efforts to reform prison regimes have consistently failed? We follow Harris's guidance around the pitfalls of historiography to show how processes of colonial othering and dehumanization continue today for prisoners, and in attempting to make conceptual shifts in this regard, we reframe the problem so that we move away from *documenting* coloniality towards *rethinking* the role of punishment in modern Guyana.

As this chapter suggests, there are numerous continuities and connections between the past and the present but of greatest significance is the role the Guyanese prison still plays today in extending colonial logics around prison infrastructure, labour and reform. Enduring intersections between empire and governmentality have created prisons as sources of toxicity. In this sense, in what follows we show how Guyanese prisons continue to incarcerate and dehumanize the most marginalized members of society and draw out how the wider society is thrown into a colonial othering process towards prisoners. Overall, we recognize Harris's

work as a plea for a history that supports and nourishes the roots of Caribbean futurity and humanism (e.g. Kamugisha 2019, 2021; Sheller 2021; Thomas 2022).

The biopolitics of colonial carcerality

In the world outside the Caribbean, including Kenya (Pfungst and Kimari 2021), the United States (Gilmore 2007, 2018) and Canada (Barker and Battell Lowman 2019), the concept of colonial carcerality has been used by researchers to make observations about the endurance of legacies of empire in forms and experiences of incarceration and how under neoliberalism the logics that accompanied the development of the carceral state extend into other institutional spaces (Moran 2013). Carceral studies more generally also provide evidence around colonial legacies when they discuss the racialized nature of prison systems (Davis 2011; Fassin 2017: 61); the role of prisons in fracturing communities and the historicity of what Caribbean intellectual Sylvia Wynter calls ‘poverty archipelagos’ from which incarcerated bodies are regularly taken and also deposited (1992: 243); the expansion of surveillance as social control (Browne 2015; Foucault 1977; Young and Petersilia 2016); the impact of carceral capitalism (Wang 2018) on the production and maintenance of social class hierarchies through ‘carceral circuitry’ and the creation of otherness (Gill et al. 2018); the extension of prisons and carceral spaces beyond prison walls (Gilmore 2007); and the connections between prisons and detention centres for undocumented migrants and refugees (McKittrick 2006). In this chapter we extend such conceptual thinking to write of a biopolitics of colonial carcerality.

In so doing, the chapter counters the problems of colonial amnesia in work on prisons (Kerrigan 2020) or what Axester et al. (2021) call ‘colonial unknowing’, which often does not connect the era of neoliberalism to colonial accumulation and its commensurate carcerality. Axester et al. suggest that surfacing previously invisible colonial contexts is a way to rethink neoliberalism as an extension of ‘the colonial matrix of racialised expropriation, exploitation, and extraction’ (2021: 417). Biopolitics provides a transhistorical way to respond to colonial amnesia or perhaps as we would like to suggest colonial aphasia, conceptualized as the occlusion of knowledge, the difficulty of generating appropriate words and concepts and the difficulty of understanding the contemporary relevance of past histories (Stoler 2011). In the Foucauldian sense, biopolitics is about social control and the management of bodies. Foucault wrote: ‘Biopolitics deals with the population, with the population as a political problem, as a problem that is at

once scientific and political, as a biological problem and as power's problem' (1975: 245). It is in this sense of social control that other carceral studies have mobilized his work, to understand prisons and to connect them to outside carceral logics which involve similar techniques and technologies (Browne 2015). For our work in Guyana, which examines the relationships, connections and continuities of mental, neurological and substance abuse disorders among prisoners and the people who work with them, from the British colonial period (1814–1966) to the present day, biopolitics includes the categorization and treatment of mental health (Foucault 2003). Prisons in British Guiana and present-day Guyana have long histories as containers for the mentally ill, while conditions generally have been described as human rights disasters and the prisons themselves as 'unfit for human habitation' (Sarsfield and Bergman 2017; US DoS 2019). As such, the concept of the biopolitics of colonial carcerality is a useful way to understand both the power dynamics between colonizers and colonized and how hierarchies extended and grew through the regulation, control and social circuitry of incarcerated bodies from inside the prison to outside prison walls and back again. This includes what that relationship might look like today through the transhistorical contexts of prison infrastructure, labour and reform.

In this Caribbean instance it is important to connect Foucault to Fanon's work on biopolitics (Nayer 2019). In particular, how do colonial regimes dehumanize colonized subjects by targeting the body, the mind and its dignity, while also denying them the opportunity to be human? What role does colonial carcerality both inside and outside the prison play in this dehumanization process (Foucault 1975: 304; Wynter 2003: 61)? As Nayer has suggested: 'Colonial biopolitics does not only beat the colonized body into the dead or dying, it renders through slow, protracted violence of denial, the descent of the human into the nonhuman' (2019: 223). It is this which constitutes Fanon's notion of 'sustained violence', which can be seen in the relationship between colonial governmentality and post-colonial carcerality. It is the status quo. It is structural (Farmer 2004). Specifically, the biopolitics of colonial carcerality connects the past and present together by illustrating how early colonial forms of carcerality shaped prisons in the era of independence and continue to influence them today.

The prison estate

Prisons were first introduced in Demerara, Essequibo and Berbice during the period of Dutch occupation in the seventeenth century. Following the

Netherlands' loss of the colonies at the start of the nineteenth century, the British took over the existing prisons in New Amsterdam and Georgetown in what became the colony of British Guiana. After the abolition of slavery in 1833, the colonial authorities became increasingly responsible for punishments that had previously fallen under the purview of slaveholders. This marks the emergence of the period of 'sustained violence' in the Fanonian sense that is produced out of the logics of colonial prison systems.

The British oversaw the construction of a complex penal infrastructure to manage formerly enslaved Africans and locally born Creoles, and ultimately their descendants, alongside the colony's Indigenous (known as Amerindian) population (some of whom had been enslaved also); indentured immigrants from British India, China and Madeira; and free workers from the wider Caribbean (Anderson et al. 2020). In preparation for the anticipated rise in custodial sentences, the British expanded the Dutch-built prisons in Georgetown and New Amsterdam, established three coastal district prisons in Wakenaam, Mahaica and Capoey (1837–8) and in 1842 opened Her Majesty's Penal Settlement (HMPS) Mazaruni in a remote river location near Bartica. These constituted part of a larger suite of colonial institutions of biopolitical governance and social control, also enveloping asylums, hospitals and reform schools (Anderson et al. 2020; De Barros 2002).

In the 1830s, to evoke terror among the formerly enslaved, British Guiana's prison administrators advocated the use of the treadmill, employment at stone breaking, solitary confinement and, in cases of 'great violence', fettering and chaining (TNA CO111/144/113 1836). However, following emancipation the imperial government wanted to adjust punishment to meet the different needs of free societies across its Caribbean possessions. In 1837, a major enquiry underlined the need to improve living conditions, reduce harsh punishments and separate different categories of prisoners (UKPP [596-I, 596-II] 1837–8). These recommendations formed the basis of the Act for the Better Government of Prisons in the West Indies, which became law in British Guiana in 1838 (UKPP [107-I]: 320; Green 1974). The Act centralized control in the hands of colonial governors, curtailing the power of colonial legislatures and, despite invoking the language of reform, ensuring that the penal agenda was driven by the specific governance needs of the colonial state. This differed significantly from the approach in Britain itself, where prisons remained under local control until the 1870s (Paton 2004: 119–20).

Though there was colonial investment, by the end of the nineteenth century the colony's prison estate was poorly resourced. In the 1920s the governor himself

described it as ‘a disgrace’ (TNA CO111/710/10; BL C.S.F.351 1934). Alexander Paterson, Commissioner for Prisons in England and Wales, lamented in 1937 ‘the little public interest as yet awakened in the welfare and future of prisoners’ (TNA CO111/740/22). According to the 1945 Moyne Commission, which investigated economic and social issues across the Caribbean, most people saw prison as ‘a place of punishment alone and designed for the protection of the community from the criminal; it is not an opportunity for rehabilitation, nor is its purpose to create a good citizen from the offender’ (West India Royal Commission 1945). Throughout this period the desire to obtain the maximum amount of free and unskilled labour from prisoners outweighed calls to rehabilitate them (BL C.S.F.351 1936). The rejection of the recommendation to rebuild Georgetown prison in 1936 on the outskirts of the town, on the basis that it would take labour from where it was needed, is a case in point (TNA CO111/740/22). When British advisor on prisons O. V. Garratt visited the colony in 1960, he urged the introduction of a proper system of classification, separation and industrial training. Finding that almost three quarters of prisoners were sentenced for periods of less than six months, most for defaulting on child support payments or the non-payment of fines, he suggested several alternatives to custodial sentences. Further, and in a prescient recommendation, he found the number of remand prisoners, around 35 per cent, ‘disturbingly large’, and recommended that bail be granted as a matter of routine. There were, however, no changes in the aftermath of Garratt’s visit (TNA CO1031/3793 1960).

Guyana became independent in 1966, and though three colonial-era jails are still in operation – Georgetown, New Amsterdam and Mazaruni – the prison estate has been augmented by new sites at Timehri (1972) and in a repurposed plantation hospital at Lusignan (1980). It was to Lusignan that prisoners were sent after the fire in Georgetown prison in 2017 and where at the time of writing (autumn 2022) they were still being kept in temporary holding bays. In the autumn of 2017, the UN called for their closure (US DoS 2019).

Guyana inherited a dilapidated and dehumanizing prison system from the British. Its harms have been multiple. The conditions within the walls have exacerbated mental health disorders. Reintegration once prisoners are released is low with high recidivism rates (GPS 2022), low employment rates and a social class lacking opportunities for social mobility. The prison walls in this sense extend well beyond the prison itself, suggesting the relevance of Harris’s prison of history in three ways. The violent history of Guyana’s colonial carcerality has imprisoned the current prison population in material and physical hardship. Meantime, much like during colonial times, there is public and political

reluctance and apathy to provide funding for prison services (UNDP 2012; UNST 2016: 9), while the aftermaths of colonial carcerality entrap society's imagination, preventing the formulation of solutions and lines of flight to escape colonial systems and practices. There remain significant continuities in the prison estate, prison labour and prison reform. Each speaks to the biopolitics of colonial carcerality in terms of prisoners' physical and mental health and dehumanization.

It is important to stress that both the number of prisons and incarceration rates have shrunk from their colonial-era peak (TNA CO 116/229 1860; CO116/230 1861; Moss et al. 2020). Nonetheless, overcrowding is a feature of Guyana's prisons and is exacerbated by a continuing underuse of bail (itself a hangover from colonialism). This means that a large percentage of the prison population (53 per cent in 2021 – 1,595 out of a total prison population of 2,993 men and women) is on remand and has not been convicted of any offence (GPS 2021: 48). Most prisoners in Guyana are arrested for intentional homicide or murder (34.9 per cent) and drug possession or drug dealing (21.3 per cent) (Sarsfield and Bergman 2017: 5). Many come from low-income backgrounds, did not complete secondary school and have lived in homes where there was domestic violence (Sarsfield and Bergman 2017). Most did have jobs before their arrest with the majority either working very long hours or being underemployed (Sarsfield and Bergman 2017).

Since the 1970s, building work has been inadequately resourced and often left incomplete (GPS 1975: 9–10; GPS 1976: 14). As noted earlier, the British left the prisons in poor condition, and a decade after independence the two main blocks at Georgetown were still said to be in 'dire need of major repairs to ensure property security and to prevent considerable leakage through the roof during the rainy season' (GPS 1975: 9). Crumbling infrastructure affects the lives of prisoners and prison personnel alike. The lack of space, deteriorating interiors and prisoners' inability to spend much time outside of cells and dormitories all impact on their mental health and well-being. This was clear in many of the interviews we recorded with prisoners:

Interviewer 1: how big is the cell, how many people were meant to be in the cell?

D: to be honest with you from what I have heard it, cell jail suppose to be at least three to four person inside, but everybody right now one of the cells got like ten, another one has eight, our cell is the smallest so we only got the small amount.

Interviewer 1: all on mattress or people on . . .?

D: no, mattress if you want you could tie you own hammock over your bed space, other than that no. Hammock is yours but everybody is allowed a bed space.

Another man invoked history when he told us: ‘prisons turn soft people hard so quickly . . . the buildings are old, like 200 years old. The bricks were laid by the colonial authorities like years and years ago.’

While two new blocks are under construction at Mazaruni, plans to develop New Amsterdam are underway and Lusignan is being expanded, it is only in the past five years that more sustained steps have been taken to build modern accommodation for prisoners. Although, of course, ‘modern’ is also a euphemism for a US-style prison building with automatic doors, artificial light, a control booth and recreational space in the middle of the building overseen by officers on overhanging walkways. Where the prison infrastructure needed repairs and transformation, carceral capitalism has brought a new atomized and high-security block of concrete and gates instead (Wang 2018).

Is this ‘modern’ any more humane than what currently exists? And, while overcrowding is a concern, to some extent these innovations and expansions rest on the desire to increase security. As such, the root causes of overcrowding, notably the non-use of bail for remand prisoners, remain unfixed. For example, there have been multiple studies recommending alternative sentencing and though judicial officers have been trained for this in many instances their hands are tied by colonial-era legislation that does not facilitate the use of such sentences.

Prison labour

The ongoing use of colonial-era infrastructure and legislation finds parallels in independent Guyana’s attachment to prison labour. Like enslaved, indentured and penal labour in the British period, prisoners in Guyana since 1966 have been an integral component of the global capitalist coloniality of power (Quijano 2000). In the colonial period, this worked at two levels: in the use of incarceration to discipline the workforce and in the employment of prisoners at unpaid labour. By the mid-nineteenth century, the colonial government relied on the prison system to control an increasingly diverse population. As indentured immigrants replaced the enslaved as the predominant form of labour, plantation owners believed that they were engaged in a desperate struggle against habitual idlers, substance abusers, absconders and vagrants (Mohapatra 2004). Regulations

were introduced in 1850 to restrict the rights of immigrants, and this led to a significant rise in the percentage of the population imprisoned, from 1.4 per cent in 1850 to 2.9 per cent in 1861 (TNA CO113/2/20 1850; Moss et al. 2020). Later in the decade, adultery, drunkenness, refusal to work and unlawful absence were all penalized (TNA CO113/3/7 1854). From 1866, indentured immigrants in breach of their contracts were even sentenced to work on sugar estates (TNA CO111/364/149 1867; CO111/377/119 1870).

In terms of prison labour itself, while it was supposed to accustom prisoners to regular work in preparation for their eventual release, the British were also compelled by its immediate productive capacity. Prisoners were employed at an extraordinarily wide range of occupations, both inside and outside prisons, including cleaning, agriculture, manufacturing and public works. Indentured workers were incarcerated in district prisons at Fellowship (est. 1868), Mahaica (reopened 1868) and Suddie (est. 1875), from where they were put to work separately from other prisoners (TNA CO111/390/54).

The Colonial Office deemed Inspector-General of Prisons Alexander Paterson's 1937 report on British Guiana's prisons too controversial for publication because of the way in which he racialized the 'character' of the prison population. However, the report is useful for our purposes because Paterson noted what he termed the 'social and geographical incidence of crime' among people lacking in education and living in 'sordid and crowded' housing in Georgetown (TNA CO111/740/22). Though he noted the 'memory association between the words soil and slavery' in Guyana, Paterson was blind to the broader legacies of abolition. These marginalized Afro-Guyanese and Amerindian labour, as colonial elites preferred the new form of malleable labour represented by indentured immigration. This shift in the colonial labour market has embedded longer-term structural barriers to employment outside the prison for Afro-Guyanese and Amerindians that have proved remarkably enduring.

Mirroring colonial-era practice, soon after independence in the 1970s, over half of all prisoners (65 per cent) were put to work, including as general labourers, cooks, cleaners and in trades such as tailoring, shoemaking, welding, carpentry and printing. Prisoners at Georgetown Prison, for example, made bread for the colony's prisons and hospitals (GPS 1975: 9). Around one-third of all prisoners worked in agricultural activities and development (GPS 1975: 10; GPS 1976: 33). This trend has continued; in the last year for which we have figures (2016), 71 per cent of prisoners were employed in some kind of labour. There has been a relative decline in the importance of the plantation sector in Guyana today,

and this is reflected in prison statistics: many more prisoners work as general labourers, cooks and orderlies than in agriculture (GPS 2016: 37).

The rootedness of the prison regime in colonial political economy is not lost on prisoners in Guyana. Many of our interviewees compared incarceration and slavery, as when a man named ‘T’ told us: ‘I am a slave. I am just the slave. I see the prison system as a slavery. A picture of slavery still exists in this prison.’ Prisoners in Guyana come from poor economic and educational backgrounds and the socially and/or economically challenged neighbourhoods described by Paterson in the 1930s (Cameron and Kerrigan 2021; Sarsfield and Bergman 2017). Their absorption into the institutions of the carceral state over the past two centuries exemplifies sustained violence, revealing the connections between prisons and broader processes of material impoverishment, the creation of ‘poverty archipelagos’ (Wynter 2003: 61), the harsh criminalization of poverty and the large numbers of persons in prison for the possession of cannabis (Sarsfield and Bergman 2017).

Prison reform

Over time, the close linkage between incarceration and the plantation economy has produced an inconsistent if not ambivalent approach to prison reform and, though the economic base of Guyana has shifted, as evidenced in the changing employment of prisoners, failure of reform remains an important legacy of empire in Guyana today. During the colonial era, there were regular reports of officer misconduct, the mixing of different categories of prisoners and overcrowding, and the evangelical Christian commitment to reform that had characterized the 1830s soon gave way to debates regarding the value of incarceration as a form of colonial governance (Anderson et al. 2020; TNA CO111/189/1 1841; TNA CO111/381-382 1871; TNA CO111/384/51 1871). Although the language of reform to some extent persisted, by the end of the nineteenth century there was no longer an expectation that the state would rehabilitate prisoners. One of the key arguments in Guyana, as in other parts of the British Caribbean, was that prison conditions were too comfortable to pose any hardship (Jenkins 1871). Another was that working people did not see incarceration as a stigma or disgrace (TNA CO111/383/25 1870; CO111/386/146 1871).

It is certainly the case that the wider population regarded prisons and prisoners with apathy, and little attention was given to the reformation of prisoners during the first three decades of the twentieth century (TNA CO912/3 1938). By the

late 1930s, anti-colonialism, Guyanese nationalism and the emergence of the welfare state in Britain underpinned a new interventionist model of colonialism, which was necessary to justify continued imperial rule. At this point, universal penal models, which stressed the need to reform rather than punish, emerged (TNA CO912/3 1937). Industrial training and education were viewed as key as the Colonial Office used a rhetoric that stressed the transformation of prisoners into ‘useful members of society’ (TNA CO912/3 1937). Young offenders, women and probationers were especially discussed by the British in the decades prior to independence (TNA CO912/3 1938; TNA CO912/4 1939; TNA CO912/10 1946; TNA CO912/12 1948; TNA CO912/12 1949).

Implementing reform, however, often proved more difficult in practice than the Colonial Office anticipated (TNA CO912/6 1943; TNA CO912/12 1948). There was a discrepancy between official directives from London and operations on the ground, often due to a lack of public interest or financial support. For instance, it was hard to find resources to pay for prisoner training, and ex-prisoners struggled to find employment (TNA CO912/3 1940; TNA CO912/8 1945; TNA CO912/12 1948). Many prisons in the colony fell into disrepair during the 1920s and 1930s or closed altogether, including HMPS Mazaruni in 1930 (though it was reopened for the reception of ‘enemy aliens’ in 1939) (Moss et al. 2020). Other effects of underfunding, including inadequate facilities, poor hygiene and prolonged periods of prisoner inactivity, were regularly documented in the decade that followed (TNA CO912/9 1945; TNA CO912/11 1948). Overall, efforts at reform barely registered, partly due to a lack of trained staff and training opportunities but also a climate of dehumanization that continued to shape prisoner experiences in the years before 1966 (TNA CO 912/6 1943; TNA CO912/12 1949).

By the 1970s, the government of Guyana was promoting religious services, the establishment of libraries and an incentive scheme to encourage ‘industry, good and proper work habits’ (GPS 1976: 18). This included basic literacy and arithmetic classes, and correspondence courses for further education, though the GPS found it hard to recruit suitable teachers (1976). Over the past decade, the Service has stated its commitment to moving from punitive to more rehabilitative regimes. However, an important block remains the enduring influence of colonial ideas of prisons as places of psychological hardship. Prisoners with poor mental health are, as in the colonial era, often kept in prisons, notwithstanding a recent move to improve treatment programmes (Cameron and Kerrigan 2021). A phrase we have heard from many prisons officers is that prisons are not fit places for reform or rehabilitation. There are no full-time doctors; welfare officers are each

responsible for around 150 men and women. Only very recently through the Fresh Start Programme (2022) have education and training for prisoners (including anger management) been introduced. Religion is an important source of comfort for prisoners and staff alike. In some ways, this could be read as an aftermath of the impulses of the early nineteenth-century empire, but in others it reflects the increasing importance of evangelical Christianity rooted in the United States and beamed into Guyanese homes and prisons on television (Ayres and Kerrigan 2021).

Most prisoners today are forced to live in conditions that have been described as ‘inhuman’ and ‘life-threatening’. The buildings are archaic; cells are overcrowded and unsanitary; food is basic and water is in short supply; and, bodies are surveilled and controlled (Ayres et al. 2021; Cameron and Kerrigan 2021; Harris 1993; Ifill 2019). Contemporary reports note physical violence by prison officers, as colonial forms of corporal punishment survive into the present day. Confinement in dark cells and other historic forms of punishment prohibited in international regulations continue in Guyana’s prisons. These include repeated solitary confinement, reduction of diet and ‘close confinement’ (Sarsfield and Bergman 2017). There are routine outbreaks of prisoner violence (Stabroek News, 29 March 2022). Here the systemic violence of the prison replicates the structural violence of colonialism and empire, and of capitalism (Ayres and Kerrigan 2021). The corporeality of violence and its technologies/mechanisms, historically used to invent otherness and difference, is still evident today, as the race and poverty politics of post-colonial states mesh with what has been called ‘the peculiar modernity of colonial governance’ (Pierce and Rao 2006: 5).

Prisons within prisons: Where do we go from here?

Wilson Harris was a poet and writer who never made a direct call for prison abolition⁴ but who focused on the potential of the Caribbean imagination in tackling a ‘kind of historical stasis’ (Harris 2008: 5). In the present context our concern is the criminal justice system, and why it is that colonial prisons still play an important role in Guyana today? One conceptual answer is that Guyana’s prisons are much like trojan horses. Colonial logics, still embedded and located within Guyana’s post-1966 prisons and their carceral regimes, continue to flow between society and its prisons. This happens in several ways, including through

⁴ Although in *Resurrection at Sorrow Hill* (1993) Harris does examine the surveillance mechanisms of the prison system and psychiatric institutions.

the illnesses and abuse that the bodies and minds of prisoners experience and the impacts these have on the social, cultural and economic aspects of their lives, which can often leave them vulnerable to returning to prison. This is the sustained violence of colonial carcerality. It is compounded by a colonial othering process that prisoners experience from wider society.

One take away from these processes of (post-)colonial carcerality and biopolitics is that it is no longer slaveowners and European elites pushing colonial forms of violence and dehumanization. It is now society at large, which mostly has not been incarcerated. Society maintains these colonial institutions and logics and produces a binary of othering between the insides and outsides of prison walls. This, too, is Harris's 'prison of history'. Prisoners are the 'other', and in the rejection of prisoners' humanity there is a normalization of violence and dehumanization rooted in the colonial past. Such a binary is problematic, not least because a majority validating its own humanity in this way may not be fully aware that prisons represent a form of colonial carcerality reconfigured through biopolitics. In this sense, what humanity outside of colonial carcerality might look like is still a question the post-colonial population must answer.

In trying to break from the prison of the past, however, there is much to heed from Harris including potentially new concepts that can shift public consciousness and impact changes on a political and policy level. As Harris themselves noted: 'you have to dislodge people from the way in which they have been anchored in the world. You have to do this creatively. You have to see this with passion and insight and with a whole range of imageries . . . because if you don't do it, this is going to explode' (Harris cited in Kutzinski 1995: 27-8). The answer to the question of the 'prison of history', then, and its connection to Caribbean futurity and humanism is that perhaps we need to become better at understanding the legacies of colonial prisons. These include their sustained violence and impact on the future of people in Guyana and other former colonies. Otherwise, we are still trapped. As Harris stated: 'many people who made the greatest noise about politics and protest are conditioned by a kind of narrative which goes forward all the time, so that their protest really and truly is invalid because the thing they are protesting against has them in its grip. So even though they think themselves emancipated, they're prisoners' (Harris cited in Kutzinski, 1995: 26). For ex-colonies, coloniality as historiography in the positivistic sense Harris warns about may have run its course, and to break out of the prison of history it creates, the question of transformation is perhaps now more about proposing new solutions to punishment than about proving the existence of continuities between prisons past and prisons today.

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