

Conference Report

'Locating Guyane', University of London Institute in Paris, 10-11 July 2014

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The first event of its kind, the international conference *Locating Guyane* brought together around forty scholars to explore the historical, geographical and conceptual locations of France's South American *département*. Held at the University of London Institute in Paris, this two-day event attracted participants from the UK, France, Guyane, the Antilles, the US and the Netherlands.

Richard Price launched the first day with a keynote speech surveying stratifications and exclusions in the contemporary 'neocolony'. Setting the tone for the engaging and often politically-charged discussions which ensued, Professor Price discussed the extent to which Guyane, with its extraordinarily high unemployment and its birth rate six times that of metropolitan France, has been the victim of outsiders' misconceptions.

Later that day, the second keynote speaker offered a different but complementary angle on the critique of imposed interpretations. Sally Price brought a unique and valuable perspective on inventions and reinventions of 'tradition' in Guyane. In a colourful and fascinating presentation she guided the audience through new forms and discourses of art produced by members of Maroon communities as they undergo and participate in social, cultural and economic changes taking place in the region.

Over six sessions, panellists discussed a remarkable wealth of historical and contemporary issues and raised crucial questions about the past, present and future of Guyane. The first and last of these panels were devoted to political geographies and cultural contact in the Guianas from the early modern period to the present. The four other sessions probed imperial historiographies, configurations of Guyane and 'Devil's Island' in the French imaginary, the literature and politics of *négritude* via Léon-Gontran Damas, and questions of citizenship and identity in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Last but not least, at the end of the first day the academic discussion was enhanced by *créole* cooking and cocktails during a delightful conference dinner 'Chez Lucie'.

In the third and final keynote speech of the conference, Bill Marshall traced paths of discursive possibility in relation to Guyane. Both summative and exploratory, Professor Marshall's address was of immediate relevance. He referred to the *mariage pour tous* debate and to Christiane Taubira in order to argue that insights from queer theory can break new ground in the study of Guyane. Drawing upon a fittingly eclectic range of sources from Patrick Chamoiseau to Eve Sedgwick, he demonstrated how the concept of queer – being both identity and its deconstruction – might pave the way for a 'confident and productive vision of identity' and the valorisation of Guyane, moving on from its relegation to the 'periphery'.

The organisers intended this conference to provide a catalyst that would help shape future scholarly perspectives on Guyane, the Guianas and 'overseas France', a goal which is now being realised. The bridges built between disciplines and institutions over the course of the two days have already begun to inspire research collaborations, notably on linkages and divergences amongst the Guianas.

The organisers would like to thank the ASMCF for their generous support for *Locating Guyane*. A grant from the Initiative Fund enabled us to offer six bursaries to support the attendance of postgraduate students. Four of these postgraduates – Jonna Yarrington, Tristan Bellardie, Frédéric Lesimple and Cristina Pelà – were amongst those who presented papers, and all six offered valuable contributions to the discussions.

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