Joshua R. Hyles


The Guianas—Guyana, Suriname, and French Guiana (Guyane)—are multilingual and multicultural but relatively sparsely-populated territories. As a result of their geographical and conceptual situation between Amazonia and the Caribbean, they have often been treated as anomalous addenda to histories of a primarily Hispanic or Lusophone “Latin America.” Joshua Hyles’s worthy aim, in *Guiana and the Shadows of Empire*, is to narrate how the site of Walter Raleigh’s chimeric *El Dorado*, became the three Guianas, with their diverging political trajectories.

The first two chapters are devoted to the single entity of Guiana prior to the colonial demarcations of the nineteenth century. Hyles begins with the assertion that the preconquest era was a homogenous period during which the Guiana shield was home to a single, pan-Guianese indigenous culture. He then attempts to trace the various rivalries, exchanges, and conflicts between European imperialists in the region from the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries. The expressed aim of the book, the published version of a postgraduate thesis, is to synthesize three histories that have rarely been connected to one another since J.J. Hartsinck’s 1770 *Beschrijving van Guiana of de Wilde Kust, in Zuid-Amerika*. Yet for the most part, Hyles tends to treat the British, Dutch, and French Guianas as separate entities, with only one chapter and the conclusion considering them all together. In this respect, a thematic structure might have offered an alternative to the country-by-country discussion which at times obscures the announced purpose of the work.

Hyles’s main claim seems at first to be that if Europeans had colonized the area differently or not at all, there would have been a single state of “Guiana” rather than the present divisions. Such a statement rather invites the reader to question the significance of this imagined alternative path. In anticipation of this, the introduction announces the intention to account for specific, lasting effects of colonial rule. In the event, however, the book offers a descriptive overview without a substantive argument. Hyles pursues a chronological approach, tracing the history of imperial administration in the region through a succession from what he calls the “active administration period” (1814–1914), through an “abandonment period” (1914–50), and finally a “decolonization period” from 1950 to the present.

The book raises a number of interesting conceptual problems, though it does not achieve the intellectual complexity of the best, recent work on the Guianas, such as Miranda Spieler’s 2012 interpretation of Guyane as “underworld” of...
empire. Nor has Hyles undertaken the kind of original archival research that has informed such works. Despite referring to the existing literature (e.g., works by Peter Redfield, Richard Price, and Rosemarijn Hoefte), he does not pursue an in-depth conceptual engagement with them. No mention is made, for instance, of the important theoretical insights that Redfield has made about governmentality in Guyane. In addition, key words (notably “culture” and the “laboratory”) remain vaguely defined. Hyles claims that his book exists to fill a perceived gap in the literature but—partly, perhaps, for this same reason—its originality is limited. Significantly, the reasons why this “gap” might exist remain unexplored. No historiographical challenge is on offer here to the notion of a single and as-yet incomplete narrative.

A number of factual claims and assumptions are erroneous or contentious—a symptom, perhaps, of Hyles’s near-exclusive reliance on English-language sources. This is particularly apparent in the case of Guyane, since he does not unpack the French semantics of indigeneity and so conflates “Amerindians,” as “natives,” with all other non-French-born inhabitants of the colony. He also confuses Devil’s Island with the entirety of the much larger French penal colony in Guyane. The limits of the source material and the occasional but significant factual errors prevent an unreserved recommendation to scholars. Guiana and the Shadows of Empire presents a straightforward narrative of historical events in a profoundly interesting area. Since it does indeed unite the histories of the three Guianas, if more as juxtaposition than as synthesis, it could offer a starting point to those seeking an overview of imperial trajectories in the region.

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