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Infrastructure and Authoritarianism in the Land of Waters: A Genealogy of Flood Control in Guyana

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Although often viewed as serving as a public good, infrastructure can have important political effects resulting from the way in which it is designed, built, and managed that preexist its stated or implied technical goals. It acts as a mediator and enforcer of state interests, defining the ways in which the state can enter everyday life and, in turn, it shapes the possibilities of life around the goals of the state. Although this politics of infrastructure has seen renewed interest from geographers, anthropologists, and other social scientists concerned with the power of artifacts, the role that infrastructure plays in defining and characterizing the particularly nationalist and racialized state remains undertheorized. Through a genealogy of water control infrastructure in Guyana, I show how apparently banal aspects of everyday life, such as infrastructure, can play an important role in the rise of an authoritarian government, first colonial and later postcolonial. Because 90 percent of Guyana's population and most of the nonmineral economic resources are below sea level, water control infrastructure plays an important functional role in the country. Rather than just a means for preventing coastal flooding and irrigating the patchwork of sugar and rice fields that define the economy, however, I argue that this infrastructure played a key role in driving ethnic divisions between laborers in the colonial era that undermined anticolonial sentiment and laid the groundwork for the creation and perpetuation of an ethnic nationalist and authoritarian postcolonial regime. *Key Words:* colonialism, flooding, infrastructure, race, water.

尽管基础设施建设常被视为服务公众之用，但先于其所宣称或意味的技术目的存在的设计、建造和管理方式，则可能造成重大的政治影响。基础设施建设作为国家利益的中介物和执行者，决定国家进入日常生活的方式，并回头塑造围绕着国家目标的生命可能。尽管此般基础设施建设政治已重获关注权力构造的地理学者、人类学者和其他社会科学家的兴趣，基础设施建设在定义并描绘特定国族和种族化的国家中所扮演的角色却尚未充分理论化。我通过圭亚那水资源控制基础设施的系谱研究，展现诸如基础设施的每日生活平庸面向，如何能够先后在殖民与后殖民的威权政体的兴起中扮演要角。由于圭亚那人人口的百分之九十、以及多半的非矿物经济资源皆低于海平面，水资源控制的基础建设因而在该国扮演重要的功能性角色。我主张，此一基础设施建设不仅只是预防海岸淹水以及灌溉定义该国经济的甘蔗田与稻田相间的工具，而是在殖民时期驱动劳工间的族裔分野中扮演关键角色，并减损了反殖民的态度，且为族裔国族主义和威权后殖民政体的创造与延续奠定了基础。关键词：殖民主义，洪水，基础设施建设，种族，水。

Aunque con frecuencia es vista como algo que sirve como bien público, la infraestructura puede tener efectos políticos importantes que surgen de la manera como se la diseña, construye y maneja anticipando sus metas técnicas declaradas o implícitas. La infraestructura actúa como mediador y ejecutante de los intereses del estado, definiendo los modos como éste puede meterse en la vida cotidiana, en tanto que aquella configura las posibilidades de vida alrededor de las metas del estado. Aunque esta política de infraestructura ha recibido un renovado interés de parte de geógrafos, antropólogos y otros científicos sociales preocupados con el poder de los artefactos, el papel que juega la infraestructura para definir y caracterizar al estado particularmente nacionalista y racializado sigue escasamente teorizado. Por medio de una genealogía de la infraestructura para el control del agua en Guyana, muestro el modo como aspectos aparentemente banales de la vida cotidiana, tales como la infraestructura, pueden desempeñar un papel importante en el encumbramiento de un gobierno autoritario, primero colonial y más tarde poscolonial. Debido a que el 90 por ciento de la población de Guyana y la mayoría de los recursos económicos no minerales se hallan debajo del nivel del mar, la infraestructura del control hídrico juega un importante rol funcional en el país. Sin embargo, más que un simple modo de prevenir las inundaciones de la costa y la colcha de retazos de campos irrigados de caña de azúcar y arroz que definen la economía, arguyo que esta infraestructura jugó un rol clave

en el impulso de divisiones étnicas entre los trabajadores de la era colonial que socavaron el sentimiento anticolonialista y aportó el trabajo preliminar para la creación y perpetuación de un régimen étnico poscolonial nacionalista y autoritario. *Palabras clave: agua, colonialismo, infraestructura, inundación, raza.*

The small South American country of Guyana is still dealing with its authoritarian past. A century and a half of British colonial rule in which the needs and desires of the plantocracy were of paramount importance and the needs of the laboring populations remained ignored was followed by nearly three decades of control under a postcolonial regime that would quickly become dictatorial, rigging at least seven local and national elections and referenda and growing the military to maintain and tighten their power (Committee of Concerned Citizens 1978; Working People's Alliance 1983; Collymore 1990; Kanhai 2015).

Although election rigging is one of the more visible ways of establishing an authoritarian regime in an ostensibly democratic country (Thomas 1984), I want to suggest that there are more subtle methods at the disposal of governments seeking to consolidate power that involve the imposition of economic and political barriers that limit individuals' abilities in ways that foster state power (see Foucault 1982; Deleuze 1992). Beeson (2010) argued, for example, that the Leviathanesque threat posed by climate change could result in the growth of a new form of environmental authoritarianism, especially in countries seeking economic development (see also Wainwright and Mann 2013). Beeson (2010) contended that "the emergence of an environmentally-conscious, politically-savvy, effective civil society that can transform environmental practices [is] obviated by uncertain economic development and inequality" (277). Key to Beeson's argument is that environmental management and economic stability go hand in hand, thus making environmental management a crucial tool of governments seeking stability in times of crisis. To what extent, though, are these conditions unique to climate change? What existing technologies of government allow authoritarian politics to develop? Social and economic inequality, uncertain economic futures, and social conflict bred by unequal access to resources are long-standing issues, especially in postcolonial societies where authoritarianism has a long history (Thomas 1984).

In this article, I demonstrate how apparently banal aspects of everyday life such as flood control infrastructure can play a significant role in the

rise and persistence of authoritarian regimes. Guyana serves as a valuable site from which these questions can be approached and through which entanglements between infrastructure—including its development, funding, construction, and maintenance—and authoritarian governmentalities can be articulated. I draw my understanding of authoritarianism from the work of Guyanese political economist Thomas (1984), who argued that, in the postcolonial world, authoritarian regimes take on a unique form arising from the consolidation of political power under a petty bourgeois ruling class. For Thomas, this class gains and maintains its power through clientelism, manipulation of electoral processes, and terror that are explicitly learned from histories of colonial violence they experienced. In addition to rigged elections and the assassination of political opponents (see Kanhai 2015), I argue that Forbes Burnham—Guyana's first postcolonial leader—drew on experiences garnered in the country's colonial past and exploited the geographical segregation of Afro- and Indo-Guyanese groups to economically disenfranchise opposition supporters through negligence of the flood control infrastructure needed to support their local economies.

With 90 percent of the country's population and most of the nonmineral economic resources lying on a coastal plain that sits below sea level, flood control infrastructure in the form of sea walls, canals, levees, and conservancies plays a significant functional role in the country's political economy and serves as a key technology through which governmental projects can be expressed and enforced (Kooy and Bakker 2008; Meehan 2014). Specifically, as Meehan (2014) argued, the growth and development of infrastructural works and the administrative commitments they entail provide new means through which the state can govern a population while alternatives to governmental schemes serve as acts of resistance that limit state power. I draw on archival research conducted between 2015 and 2017 to argue that the construction and maintenance of flood control infrastructure during the colonial and early postcolonial period in the country has been intimately entwined with the state's governance structures. Through a

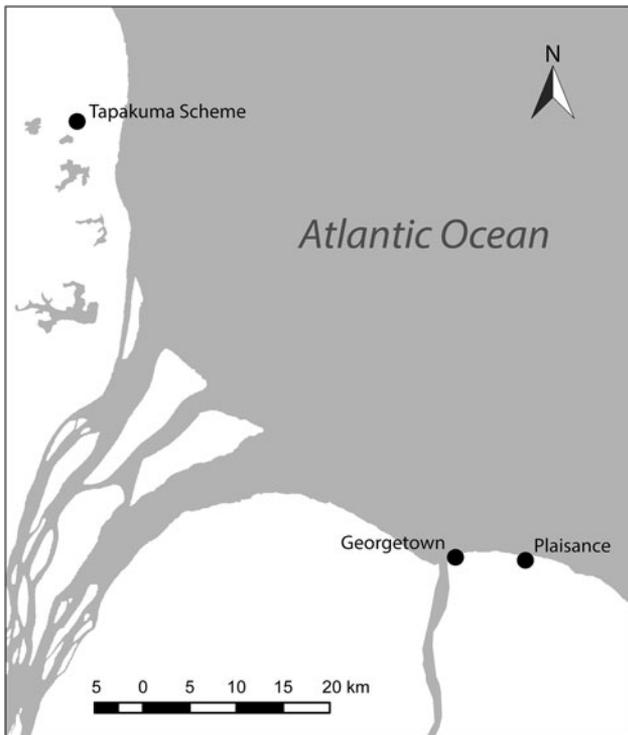


Figure 1. Map showing the relative areas of locations discussed in this article.

genealogy of flood control, I show how the legislation, construction, and maintenance of infrastructural works empowered the colonial plantocracy and played a key role in driving ethnic divisions between laborers in the colonial era that undermined a unified anticolonial sentiment while laying the groundwork for the creation and perpetuation of a nationalist authoritarian postcolonial regime. Rather than acting as background on which political, economic, and racial struggles took place, I argue that flood control was an integral part of colonial governance, used to maintain and govern the marginalized populations of the colony both through its construction and maintenance and through its neglect. I likewise argue that the maintenance (or lack thereof) of these works is upheld as a key governance structure in the racial politics of the postcolonial period, particularly between 1966 and 1985 under the authoritarian rule of Linden Forbes Burnham.

Sugar and the Political Economy of Guyana's Water Control Infrastructure

First established as a series of Dutch colonial trading outposts in the sixteenth century, the area now called Guyana rose to colonial prominence as a

British sugar producer in the nineteenth century. Describing the political conditions in 1871, Jenkins called the young colony “a mild despotism of sugar” due in no small part to the fact that estate owners effectively controlled the legislature and manipulated the colony to meet their demands (Jenkins 1871, 58). From the late eighteenth century until 1834, the colony was home to a large number of plantations that relied exclusively on the labor of enslaved Africans. After emancipation in 1834, a number of plantations found themselves insolvent and abandoned their lands, and others turned to the Colonial Office to provide a new source of cheap labor in the form of indentured workers from South and Southeast Asia, many of whom would themselves become permanent settlers when the British government could no longer afford to pay for their return passage as had previously been promised (Rodney 1981).

During the four-year period of postemancipation apprenticeship common in the British Caribbean, black workers were offered meager wages in exchange for their labor. In the years that followed, a portion of this newly independent laboring population pooled their resources and purchased the abandoned plots to establish new lives outside of the plantation economy (Young 1958; Rodney 1981; Moore 1987). This was the case in the village of Plaisance, located approximately six miles east of Georgetown in the East Coast Demerara Region (see Figure 1). In 1842, four years after the end of post-slavery apprenticeship, sixty-five families of formerly enslaved people purchased the 500-acre former cotton plantation with the intention of forming a village independent of the plantation economy (Haynes 2016). Within a year, 210 acres of ground crops including staple foods such as plantains and cassava were under cultivation in the village.

In 1849, Plaisance experienced a breach in a portion of its front sea dam, causing severe inundation. Then-Governor Harold Barclay levied a large fine against the villagers for failure to maintain their sea defense infrastructure. The money raised from the fine was used to pay for a large drainage pump meant to improve drainage not only for the village but also for the sugar estates that sandwiched it. The villagers did not feel that they were responsible for the flooding and should not have to pay for the pump, eventually petitioning the governor to reconsider but ultimately failing to persuade him (Haynes 2016). With the pump in place, villagers began paying rates

to the Department of Public Works for its maintenance and upkeep. This imposition marked the beginning of a series of legislative changes in which the colonial government gained increasing control over the day-to-day governmental functions of the villages and thus limited their options in terms of livelihood practices. By 1882, under then-Governor Irving, it was argued that the villages should have no right to self-determination or government but that they should fall instead under the colonial bureaucracy, especially with regard to the ability of villages to build and maintain appropriate infrastructure (Rodney 1981). Irving's position was that it was unjust to have villages, which have little income, pay the same rates for maintenance as the profitable sugar plantations. Rather than allowing villages to develop flood control systems more suitable to their needs, however, his recommendation was to end the de facto black self-government of the village system to ensure that the system of drainage, irrigation, and sea defenses continued to work in the interests of the sugar estates. Irving's plans were never realized and villages continued to pay high rates to maintain the works necessary for the continuation of coastal sugar production.

Despite paying the rates for pump maintenance and the increasing administrative presence of the colonial government in the villages, the pump failed in 1886, causing severe flooding to inundate village crops, forcing villagers to labor in nearby sugar plantations for income. One villager, venting his frustrations in the *Daily Chronicle*, asked, "How must the people undertake again to put their labour in the ground when the white man allows negroes [sic] plantains and cassava to be inundated and thus suffer?" (Ratepayer 1886). The following year, flooding struck again, this time from the collapse of the back dam. The villagers of Plaisance this time suggested that this was the direct responsibility of the estate manager and the neighboring sugar plantation of Goedverwagting, who they accused of modifying an aspect of their shared drainage infrastructure to extend the cultivating season for sugar and resulting in the inundation of their fields and village lands (Truth 1887). This sparked a long debate in the daily paper regarding the relationship among sugar, villages, and the economy, culminating with Garnett (1887) of Plantation Nonpariel stating that the colony were "one and all dependent on sugar" and suggesting that villagers should

abandon their efforts for autonomy and get back in line with the industry.

A clear link had been established in the colony to this point between colonial white supremacy and the economic supremacy of sugar. Jenkins's (1871) understanding of the "despotism" of sugar was clearly accepted by the planters, but villagers continuously sought to challenge it through their attempts to develop other ways of living on the coast, such as subsistence cropping and aquaculture, only to be constantly frustrated by floods resulting from infrastructural failure that forced them back into the plantation system (Ratepayer 1886; Truth 1887; Young 1958; for a discussion of the causes of flooding in Guyana, see Richardson [1973]; Strachan [1980]; Lakhan [1994]). This pattern continued well into the twentieth century. In this way, villages acted as spaces for reserve laborers for the estates. As Hintzen (2018) argued, this is in line with a broader project of managing capitalist accumulation in peripheral countries. Here the failures of the pumps and dams in Plaisance could be "deployed to control, discipline, and regulate those located outside of the space of capitalist formation in order to ensure they did not disrupt the process of capital accumulation. The latter also became organized into 'segments' of 'surplus labor' to be made available for capitalist production when needed" (Hintzen 2018, 42). Thus, despite attempts to stay outside of the primary motivator for capitalist accumulation in the colony (i.e., the plantation system), flooding and the failures of flood control infrastructure could be manipulated and legislated in such a way that failures in the villages were all but guaranteed, forcing villagers to come back into the system and accept nearly any wage, particularly during periods where additional labor was needed on the plantations (Greenidge 2001). Rather than experimental, anticolonial democracies in the context of a sugar colony, the villages became further sites in which the despotic rule of the plantocracy persisted and through which colonial authoritarianism could be practiced (Thomas 1984; see also Rodney 1981).

Flooding, Infrastructure, and the Rise of Anticolonialism

At the turn of the twentieth century, the situation for Guyanese workers was bleak. Costs of living in the colony were rising and Colonial Office

surveys of working conditions showed that wages were stagnant or falling. In 1905, facing an unregulated industrial situation in which laborers were expected to take whatever wages they were offered, workers from across the coast went on strike, demanding higher wages and better working conditions and giving rise to the first organized labor movement in British Guiana (Woolford 1998). Over the next two decades, this labor movement grew rapidly, with workers organizing and striking not only against the plantocracy but also against the role of the government in propping it up through the subservience of the police and military to the plantocracy (Woolford 1998). This was accomplished by organizing and action through the British Guiana Labor Union (BGLU) and the Guyana Industrial Workers Union (GIWU), representing Guyana's dock workers and sugar workers, respectively (Greenidge 2001).

In the 1920s and 1930s and in the context of this nascent labor movement, planters sought new ways to exert their control over the laborers, particularly those in the black villages on whom they relied for sugar production. Through several acts of legislation, representatives from the Bookers McConnell and Sandbach Parker sugar firms used their influence in the colonial office to force villages to again pay the same tax rates for flood control infrastructure construction and maintenance as sugar estates by recommending and eventually legislating a flat tax rate per acre of land rather than those based on income or assessed value. This happened despite the much lower economic productivity of the villages due to their subsistence nature. As with Irving's earlier contestation, the issue was raised with no input from the villages themselves.

What differed between this new flat tax plan and those established in the 1880s was that the low market costs of sugar were causing estates some level of financial distress. Planters continuously claimed to be unable to afford to pay laborers for maintenance of defense works, requesting grants-in-aid from the Colonial Office. In at least one instance, the sugar firm Sandbach Parker loaned the government money for its own grant-in-aid, receiving interest on repayment and thus profiting off of free, predominantly black labor provided by the state to repair the sea walls, levees, and canals necessary for continued sugar production (Letter to Lord Passfield, 12 March 1930, CO 111/683/6, National Archives UK).

Meanwhile, the economic burden posed by flat tax rates and continued need for maintenance and construction of these same infrastructural works in the villages caused them to suffer further and pushed many villagers back into the plantation economy to keep their villages afloat. A 1930 report on the economic situation in the colony demonstrated the persistence of previous methods of labor pooling by describing elevated levels of unemployment in the capital city of Georgetown due to the introduction of beet sugar in the European market while the sugar plantations were hiring villagers to work in their estates in greater numbers than previous years, but with lower total wages paid ("Report of the Investigative Committee," 1930). A fundamental part of this control and regulation was through the nondemocratic legislation of flood control systems against the interests of the colonized populations of the coast.

While planters were working with the local colonial government to ensure a steady supply of low-cost labor during the global depression of the 1930s, the Colonial Office was seeking to develop a new market that could provide a source for additional food in the West Indies and for its rapidly increasing population to reduce the reliance on imports (Greenidge 2001). Rice had proven a minor success since its introduction in 1886 and as early as 1917, the year Indian immigration ended, the colony had established a viable export market for rice products with output doubling every two decades since its introduction.

After World War II and under the auspices of the Colonial Development and Welfare Act of 1945, the Colonial Office sought to expand rice production through the development of a number of empolderment schemes. Under these schemes, new systems of drainage, irrigation, and coastal defense were designed, built, and funded by the colonial office with minimal financial input from the villages themselves, allowing rice villages to focus on production without the debt associated with flood control maintenance in African¹ villages. Although some water management schemes were established in majority black areas, this was primarily due to the preexistence of African villages there, meaning that many villagers were still grappling with the legacies of debt associated with earlier legislative acts. At the same time, however, water management schemes in less populated spaces were specifically designed to

create rice-producing regions, including new villages for Indian laboring populations who would be granted housing and land for both cultivation and subsistence in lieu of the return passage promised in their indentureship contracts (Greenidge 2001). This allowed for the establishment of large Indian-majority populations socially, economically, and geographically separate from the African community and without the infrastructural debts associated with the earlier, autonomous settlement patterns (Lakhan 1994; Greenidge 2001).

With the number of agricultural workers increasing, and with wages continuing to remain stagnant in the face of the increased costs of living associated with the postwar period, the labor movement grew not only in numbers but also in its willingness to make demands on the government and began to take on an anticolonial character. Using this sentiment as a means for decolonization, in November 1946 Guyanese dentist Cheddi Jagan, along with others, formed the Political Affairs Committee (PAC; Premdas 1974). In PAC's analysis, the colonial state was used rhetorically as a common enemy of all Guyanese working people, existing primarily as a tool of class oppression at the hands of the colonizers (Premdas 1974; Hintzen 1989). This analysis, combined with relentless propaganda from the PAC, led to Jagan's election to parliament in the 1947 general election.

Having captured leadership positions in Guyana's growing union movement, the PAC reformed themselves as a new labor-backed, multiracial, and anticolonial political party, combining with the BGLU in 1950 to form the People's Progressive Party (PPP). Although working among unions with different racial characteristics, Jagan's popularity rested primarily with Indo-Guyanese, who saw in him one of their own (Premdas 1974). To unite the Afro-Guyanese and Indo-Guyanese working classes under a single party, Jagan sought out a charismatic Afro-Guyanese counterpart in Forbes Burnham, a London-educated lawyer, master orator, and then-leader of the BGLU (Premdas 1974). Because the union movement and its political arms were divided by industrial sector and racial characteristics, the PPP sought to establish a party that would provide a platform for all workers, keeping the working classes from remaining divided in the colonial system. It was under this united banner that the PPP would advocate for self-government and universal adult

suffrage, succeeding in the latter and bringing about a new general election in Guyana in 1953, which they won. Despite the victory of the PPP in the country's first mass election, the party was deposed by British armed forces after only six months, reverting the political system to an autarchic form of colonial governance (Premdas 1974; Hintzen 1989). During this time, British Guiana's new constitution was suspended, Jagan was jailed, and Burnham was placed under house arrest after agreeing to cease any political activity (Hintzen 1989). Now separated, the two leaders of the PPP began to espouse different tactics and goals for the party going forward, leading to their eventual split and the creation of a two-party, racially bifurcated political system that would persist for decades (see Hintzen 1989).

The split in the PPP did not kill the independence movement in Guyana, but it did change the terms on which it occurred. With African and Indian villagers now separated spatially, socially, economically, and politically, the U.S. government via the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) began to promote Burnham's rise to power (Rabe 2005). Although a socialist, Burnham lacked Jagan's ties to Cuba and the Soviet Union and the CIA felt that he could be more easily manipulated to follow U.S. hemispheric interests and an anticommunist agenda (Crosthwait 1966; Rabe 2005). Because Indo-Guyanese populations far outnumbered Afro-Guyanese, the first-past-the-post system of elections similar to that of the United States and advocated for within the colony would not allow Jagan's defeat. The U.S. and UK governments pushed for and were successful in implementing a parliamentary system that allowed the People's National Congress (PNC) to form a coalition government with the liberal capitalist United Force (UF) and gain a parliamentary majority (Hintzen 1989). In 1965, this coalition was able to take control of parliament and establish the first postcolonial government when the country received independence the following year, but UF ministers were quickly removed from power and replaced by individuals loyal to Burnham.

The Politics of Flooding in the Postcolonial Period

Once in power, the PNC-led government removed many of the administrative and financial programs meant to maintain the rice growing (and

largely Indian-focused) schemes, at the same time consolidating power around the party and its leader, Forbes Burnham (Lakhan 1994). The focus of flood control and the infrastructural works associated with it shifted from these rice-producing and Indian-dominated villages to the urban centers and later, through its nationalization in 1976, to the sugar industry, where a small number of black workers still had a home. The governmental abandonment of rice-producing regions also allowed for the reentry of an imperialist and antisocialist politics of flood management to occur along racialized lines—as demonstrated by UK and U.S. aid programs focused on the rehabilitation and development of the Tapakuma Scheme Project in the 1970s.

Tapakuma has long been of interest as a rice-producing region, but even as other areas were being developed for Indo-Guyanese settlement, the project was frequently placed on the back burner by a colonial regime focused on quick returns. Located along Guyana's Essequibo coast and inhabited by a primarily Indo-Guyanese population, the area remains somewhat isolated from the capital city but has a large and successful agricultural industry. As early as 1829, planters worked together to provide a reservoir and canal system for this area that remained in place until the 1960s (Strachan 1980). In the 1930s, the region was hit hard by the recession and falling sugar prices, causing many of the estates to be abandoned and later converted to rice production. The system of water management for sugar was not satisfactory for the rice industry, leading to a number of engineering projects being recommended until the Tapakuma conservancy project, centered around Tapakuma Lake (see Figure 1), was finally approved in the 1950s (Strachan 1980). With the major hydraulic works completed by 1963, land clearing in 1964, and settlement by a large contingent of Indo-Guyanese who would work the land in 1965, the postcolonial government needed to offer little more than maintenance and support to provide for the region's success (Vining 1977). With cuts to spending on infrastructural maintenance in Indian majority schemes, however, this is not what occurred.

By the late 1970s, a decade and a half of neglect from the PNC regime meant that the Tapakuma scheme was in a state of disrepair. Sea defenses were crumbling, roads were impassible at times, and the rice industry was under constant threat of catastrophic inundation (*Guyana Tapakuma Irrigation*

Scheme 1976–1978; Vining 1977). In considering projects to fund in 1978, the UK Ministry of Overseas Development (OD) strongly considered and eventually funded large-scale infrastructure projects meant not only to solve the issues stemming from the lack of maintenance but also to increase the region's economic productivity, which they felt would threaten Burnham's growing authoritarian power (*Guyana Tapakuma Irrigation Scheme* 1976–1978; *Guyana - Sea Defences (Essequibo)* 1976–1978). Their justification for taking on this project over others was simple: "The vast majority of the beneficiaries of the scheme will be of Indian race. The present Government in Guyana has tended to favour the Afro-Guyanese rather than the Indian element, and this could help to constitute an argument for supporting the Tapakuma scheme" ("Guyana: Tapakuma Irrigation Scheme and Sea Defence" 1978). Frustrated by Burnham's focus on growing the military to keep order in an increasingly degenerating regime, the OD sought to undermine his centralization of power by providing services to the base of his main political opposition (Minister of State 1978).

This British interference into flood control infrastructure maintenance appears to have been successful in reducing the economic burdens imposed by flooding on Indian villages. During fieldwork in the Tapakuma region in 2017, an Indo-Guyanese man described coastal flooding as "a black issue," saying that it was a concern for Georgetown and the African villages but not along the Essequibo coast. According to a number of coastal residents, the current government—a multiracial coalition party led by the remnants of the PNC—had seemingly moved past the racial politics of flood control and was focusing equally on all areas, perhaps to the extent of spreading themselves thin. One woman, an Afro-Guyanese teacher in the village of Uivlught, expressed concern that this was effectively colorblind and ignored the long-standing inequalities and hardships faced by both groups in favor a "feel good" policy (see Hardy, Milligan, and Heynen 2017). Regardless of these specific positions and experiences, however, the historical analysis I have presented here demonstrates how flood control has continued to serve as a technology of government in the postcolonial era.

Conclusion

The financial and legislative mechanisms over flood control enacted by colonial and postcolonial

regimes served as a central means by which the government could regulate the lives and livelihoods of Guyana's population. These projects corresponded to the political, economic, and racial dynamics of the country through authoritarianisms rooted in both the hegemony of the plantocracy in the colonial period and in the racially driven dictatorship of Forbes Burnham and the PNC. Beyond strict electoral control (through the refusal of adult suffrage under colonialism and blatant election rigging under Burnham), these regimes were able to use flood control and its related infrastructural commitments to maintain and grow their economic and political power. Equally important to these projects were the tax burdens imposed on Afro-Guyanese populations during colonial rule and the willful neglect of flood control infrastructure in both the colonial and postcolonial era as a means of increasing the vulnerability of populations to ensure they could not actively resist the authoritarian state. Additionally, in the former case, it could be argued that taxation itself served as an act of governance separate from its role in funding the colony by making colonized populations governable (Bush and Maltby 2004). During the colonial period, new means of legislating and funding flood control infrastructure ensured that alternatives would not develop and that the laboring population would remain reliant on the plantation system for its survival (see also Young 1958). In the postcolonial period, infrastructural neglect was used to economically disenfranchise opposition groups who would otherwise have threatened Burnham's authoritarian regime. In this way, environmental management in the form of flood control and the infrastructure necessary to support it served as an important site for authoritarian governance that is often overlooked, echoing recent arguments from Barnes (2017) that "the bureaucracy and technologies of water management can be seen as one of the conduits through which [state] authority may be both forged and contested" (149). Beyond the potential for future authoritarianisms posed by climate change (Beeson 2010), these everyday practices render authoritarian governance practices a banal part of daily life, allowing for new authoritarianisms to creep in largely unnoticed.

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Note

1. I use the term African in the Caribbean sense to refer broadly to the African-descended population of the country. In Guyana, African, black, and Afro-Guyanese are used interchangeably.

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