

The Guyanese Exodus: Exploring Indo Guyanese and Afro Guyanese Race Relations from Guyana to Toronto

Senior Thesis | HIS491

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Due to the colonial structure implemented in Guyana by the British Empire, racial tensions between Africans and East Indians living within the country were fractured from the very beginning. Those tensions transcended to modern-day beliefs and infiltrated political and personal spaces. The issues ultimately culminated in racial tensions that caused many Guyanese people to immigrate to Toronto mainly within in the 1970s to 1980s and a bit afterwards, and those tensions were carried over. The aim is to explore the origins of these tensions and understand how the migration to Toronto impacted or changed them. This thesis examines Guyanese immigrant experiences in Toronto as a case study for reviewing the legacies of race, hierarchy, and colonialism in immigrant communities.

Thesis Argument

Geographical Proximity to the Caribbean Basin



Censorship in Guyana

Under Forbes Burnham, there was an effort to ban discussions of racial tensions between Indians and Africans, causing a lack of scholarship.

Due to historical closeness and geographical proximity, I look at some Trinidadian sources and use that experience to help fill in the gaps in the Guyanese context

Use of Oral Histories and interviews within my thesis!

These interviews “tell us something about the importance of interpretation for the construction of history and about the imposition of time and memory in the process of research and storytelling.”
– Pamela Sukan



Island of Wakenaam, Essequibo, Guyana – Photo by me!

Spread out in various sections

01

Introduction & Methodology

Censorship, the Oral Interview Process, and my
Intersubjectivity

My Oral Histories

This thesis is framed around 7 oral interviews

- 6 Guyanese and 1 Trinidadian
- 4 Indo Guyanese men, 1 Indo Guyanese woman, 1 Afro Guyanese Man, 1 Afro Guyanese woman, and 1 Indo Trinidadian man
- This interviews allow for answers to the questions that this censorship left



"Ole Time," Gouache on cold-pressed watercolour paper. Megan Mungalsingh, 2021, Trinidad & Tobago



Intersubjectivity within the Oral Interview Process

As a woman of Indo-Caribbean descent, I am able to understand these intergenerational legacies through a unique lens.

This allows for a familiarity within the interview process between myself and my elders.

02

The Beginning

Historical Context of Guyana
and Race

Section Outline



Loading the Sugarcane Punts, retrieved from
<http://imagesguyana.blogspot.com/2017/04/loading-sugarcane-punts.html>

- African slavery versus Indian indentureship and lasting legacies.
- Colonial racial hierarchies and the way it bled over into society.
- Differences in treatment from colonial officials that caused tensions
- Encouragement of tensions (before and after colonial impact).

03

Colonial Scars

Race and Gender
Constructs in the 19th and
20th Century

Section Outline

- Race and gender constructs and the way each group understood it.
- How colonial legacies translated themselves into more modern day understandings through gender stereotypes
- Formation of gendered understandings of race, especially within interracial relationships
- Colourism issues within each ethnic group

04

Cracking Glass

Political Understandings
and Demonization of Race

Section Outline



Guyanese Flag, retrieved from https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Flag_of_Guyana

- Cheddi Jagan's People's Progressive Party (PPP) versus Forbes Burnham's People's National Congress (PNC)
- Ethnic polarization and weaponization of race in politics
- The Burnham Era and the favouritism to Afro Guyanese over Indo Guyanese
- Urban (mainly Afro Guyanese) versus Rural (mainly Indo Guyanese) experiences

05

The Exodus

Reasons for Migration and
Settlement in Toronto

Section Outline



Toronto Skyline at Sunset, retrieved from <https://i.redd.it/ep02qqtxec061.jpg>

- One group emphasizes the push factors (Indo Guyanese) and pull factors (Afro Guyanese)
- Emphasizing the difference between the two groups and their experiences, although they were shared
- Reasons for migration
- Differences in the migratory process due to race

06

Banding Together

The Shared Experiences of
Migration and the Changing
Racial Understandings in
Canada

Section Outline



- The changing from a majority group to a minority group.
- Becoming one large group - a racial 'other'
- Putting aside pre-existing feeling to navigate this new country
- Even though Indo and Afro Caribbean migrants were experiencing equally challenging issues, they experienced it differently but ultimately found solace in each other

“One People, One Nation, One Destiny”

Guyana's National Slogan

The Guyanese migration experience demonstrates a progressive understanding of race and racial tensions between Indo and Afro-Guyanese. What began as fear and distrust of the others within Guyana became trust and community within Canada. But in Canada, the Guyanese immigrants are all one people, regardless of race. Within Canada, the Guyanese community truly is one people, one nation, and one destiny.