

## Celebration or scandal? Narrating upheaval in interwar Guyane

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### *Introduction*

In March 1931, just over a month before the launch of the colonial exhibition on May 6, provincial and national French newspapers reported on a trial taking place in Nantes of twelve men and two women from the South American colony of Guyane. As the organizers of the Vincennes exhibition prepared a “picturesque” celebration of empire with displays of modern technology and art alongside displays of “natives”, (Lebovics 52; Célestin & DalMolin 187), the *Cour d'assises* in the former slaving port became a different kind of theater, wherein certain kinds of colonial practices were exposed, critiqued and – in contrast to the self-conscious drive towards “colonial modernity” attempted at Vincennes – ultimately cast as retrograde.

The riots that occurred in Cayenne in 1929 and the subsequent trial in Nantes were examples of what Martin Thomas has described as “sites of contestation” between Europeans and colonized populations, offering insight into how the Guyanais attempted to “challenge...amend... or otherwise to assuage...(the) impact of imperial policies and practices” (“French Empire Elites” 992). Thus they present an opportunity to understand how specific instances of local upheaval in this South American colony, in tandem with European colonial practices, both arose from and impacted upon the relationship between “center” and locality. The consequences of these events for Guyane are a testament to how “French colonizers were no less influenced by these points of contact, deriving from them their normative standards, their modes of behavior, and their administrative procedures” (Thomas, “French Empire Elites” 993). I argue that the use of language by those who interpreted the actions of the Guyanais in 1929-31 – as much as or more so than the events themselves – was instrumental in paving the way for “departmentalization” in 1946 and thus in shaping the present France-Guyane relationship.

Most Guyanais had in theory been citizens of the French Republic since 1848, but in practice were still subject to political as well as economic exploitation in the interwar years.<sup>1</sup> Whilst subject to a regime of decrees rather than the same laws as the metropole, the Guyanais routinely had their limited democratic rights compromised by clientelism and electoral fraud practiced by both local and metropolitan elites

(Bonneton 132; Monnerville 43). At the same time, they lived in the shadow of the notorious set of penal institutions known as the *bagne* until its final closure in 1953 (ANOM, "Penal Colonies"). The Guyanais themselves were – and often remain – secondary in metropolitan imaginings of the "potential" of the territory itself as a site of industrial exploitation or accumulation of political capital. With notable exceptions (Mam Lam Fouck; Spieler; R. Price and S. Price; Wood and MacLeod), few histories which include Guyane have paid considerable attention to anything but the notorious penal colony.

Yet in fact, Third-Republic Guyane was characterized by political and social ferment: a series of minor gold rushes meant that from 1885 it became a destination for miners and fortune-seekers from across the Caribbean and beyond (De Theije 94), whilst many Antillais – including refugees from the 1902 explosion of the Mont Pelée volcano – arrived in Guyane around the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Together with the presence of the *bagne* and the aftereffects of the 1848 abolition of slavery, this economic, social, and demographic change over the course of two or three generations made for a considerable amount of upheaval relative to the small size of the colony's population: around 49,000 in 1911 (Papy 224). In addition, the French bureaucratic and administrative system, coupled with the wealth of apparently untapped natural resources created a regional reputation for Guyane as an "El Dorado" and land of opportunity, despite – or perhaps shielded by – its insalubrious reputation in the Hexagon.

Opportunists and entrepreneurs tried their luck in colonies where the state was less invested than elsewhere in leading *mise en valeur* but where fortunes could be made if one obtained a "vertical" monopoly over extraction, transformation, transport, and marketing (Thomas, "French Empire Elites" 1000) and took advantage of the metropole's readiness to buy colonial goods. Amongst this group of entrepreneurs was Jean Galmot, a journalist, businessman, "adventurer", and amateur novelist from rural Périgord who first came to Guyane in 1906. Returning regularly over the next twenty years, he made millions developing industrial exploitation of gold, rum, essences, and air transport and participating in local politics (Magne 83-89). Galmot built a reputation as an employer under whom working conditions were less harsh than elsewhere, and as someone so personally attached to the locality that he declared himself "Guyanais". This distinguished him from the ensemble of politicians and merchants who had hitherto dominated the colony (often from Paris), and won him popular support (Bonneton 135-139). On August 6, 1928, Galmot's death at the age of 49 became the catalyst for violence in Cayenne: a crowd numbering between several hundred and four thousand people gathered, and a two-day rampage of destruction ensued. Six men died at the hands of a crowd which blamed them for fraudulently obstructing Galmot's rightful election and subsequently poisoning him (ANOM guy//16, B41, 13).

Although quickly overshadowed in the press by the 1931 Colonial Exhibition in Paris, the subsequent trial of fourteen Guyanais in Nantes<sup>2</sup> came to be portrayed in sections of its press – and in its more recent afterlife via an exhibition in the departmental archives of Nantes (ADLA) – as in some sense as the trial of the Republic itself and of its colonial injustices. The “Galmot affair” became known as such because, like the “Dreyfus affair”, it came to represent the focal point around which individual and public opinion were mobilized in the name of denouncing an injustice (Offenstadt 8). In this vein, historians have tended to note how, by describing the riots as a reaction against injustice and oppression, the defending lawyers offered the jury the opportunity to rectify the contradictions and hypocrisies of the Republic by acquitting the accused (Magne; Alexandre; ADLA). This essay nuances this interpretation in several ways. First, it specifies that the putative continuity traced from the French Revolution through slavery and its abolition to interwar patterns of colonial oppression – although not necessarily incorrect and certainly not irrelevant – accounts for few of the locally-specific elements of the conditions in which events arose (Glissant 221-229). Some of these did, in fact, emerge at the trial but have been lost in subsequent retellings of the story which have focused on the figure of Jean Galmot. Secondly, it examines more closely the context in which the “defense” narrative was produced and disseminated, tracing links between literature, law and politics via the use of rhetoric, research, and social networking on the part of key individuals.

Finally, the essay takes steps towards explaining connections between political and literary tropes of the interwar years and those used to articulate the France-Guyane relationship in the contemporary era. It does so by arguing that rhetorical acts, social activity, and intertextual borrowing between lawyers, reporters, and writers of literary fiction were pivotal in shaping the afterlife of this “affair”. Consequently, they were a key part of the construction of Guyane’s French future – and many of the tensions that continue to characterize governmental visions of Guyane’s future were already visible in writings and speeches of the 1920s and 30s. Literary and rhetorical responses to the events of 1928-31 are not only valuable in terms of how they may be compared to one another: they may also be understood as intrinsic parts of these same events. This understanding of literature and narrative as inseparable from political and economic history (Marsh x) offers a new perspective on the competing ideas about French-colonial relationships and modernity that were circulating in cultural and political discourse during the 1930s. This period is often described as being the pinnacle or even the “golden age” of the French empire (Aldrich 114; Célestin & DalMolin 186). However, as Thomas (“Albert Sarraut” 919) reminds us, it was also the point at which anticolonial and nationalist activity grew just as French interest in investing in economic *mise en valeur* reached its limits; hence it was a period whereby conditions were set for the economic and social remodeling of empire. At the same time, interwar artists and writers were beginning to question the extent to which the

“primitive” and “exotic” could in fact be considered as somehow “other”. A study of how these historical and cultural developments applied to and were shaped in the unusual context of Guyane – where state investment beyond the *bagne* was minimal yet effective anticolonial nationalism never emerged – offers an illuminating case study in how both local and state actors might agree, for different reasons, to participate in the shaping of “French” identity. This in turn helps shed historical light on the alternative path to that of national independence followed in the *vieilles colonies*.

***Power struggles and electoral fraud: the emergence of 'Galmotisme'***

In 1906, Jean Galmot was a provincial journalist in the Alpes-Maritimes when he was sent by his new father-in-law, an American diplomat by the name of Heydecker, to Guyane in order to observe Heydecker’s gold-mining business interests on the river Mana. At the same time, Galmot was to conduct comparative research for the Minister of Colonies by also visiting the neighboring Dutch and British colonies in the Guianas (Magne 34-42). Seventeen years before Albert Londres embarrassed France with the nightmare from “another age” to be encountered *Au bagne* (1924, 246), Galmot reported on the economic and social conditions prevalent in Guyane beyond the penal colony. Returning to France temporarily in 1907, he made minor ripples in the press with reports and presentations, for instance at the Parisian *Société de Géographie*, where he compared France’s “neglect” of Guyane unfavorably with British and Dutch treatment of their South American colonies (*Société de Géographie* 74-75, 135; Dangoise 26). In 1908, Galmot wrote about the penal institution for *L’Illustration*, but reserved his strongest criticism for the working conditions of gold miners in the interior of the country, who in addition to facing insalubrious conditions and high mortality rates were often in a state of indentured servitude (Magne 50-51). Soon afterwards, he returned to Guyane, first as an employee of the Maison Chiris, perfumiers who extracted bois-de-rose essence, then as founder of his own, rival company, the Maison Galmot, branching out from essences to the trade of sugar cane, balata, rum, and gold (Bassières 4-5; Magne 73-75).

Alongside his commercial involvement, Galmot developed a popular politics in which he presented himself in propaganda as the liberator of the people, a savior who would bring equality and purity of purpose to politics and society regardless of “sex, class or race” (ADLA 7), yet also a paternalist who addressed his supporters as “mes enfants” and signed public announcements, “votre père” (ALS O116, 7c). He proposed that the colony’s riches be exploited for local benefit and supporters claimed that he paid workers unusually fairly, offered less harsh conditions (Bassières – in fact, as Magne points out, Galmot’s gold mines took advantage of the forced labor offered thanks to the penal colony, 79), and represented Guyane’s best hope for economic dynamism. However, Galmot’s lucrative activities set him in opposition not only to

his powerful former employer but also to two further, influential groups: the white administrative and financier classes that controlled Guyane from Paris, and certain sections of the (largely non-white) local elite in the colony. By participating in a short-lived coalition of rival local groups, Galmot gained election as deputy for Guyane in 1919. However, his political career was foreshortened when in 1921 he was arrested following a press campaign by business rivals and accusations of speculation and war profiteering on rum (Magne, 44). In 1923 he was preventatively detained for ten months under a charge of *abus de confiance* then released on bail to a year's suspended sentence (ALS O112a). Deputy now in name only, he was prevented as of 1925 from exercising his functions by a legal deprivation of civil rights (ANOM B41 [02]), although not before attempting unsuccessfully to gain re-election in 1924.

Galmot's opponents in both Paris and Cayenne routinely referred to him as an "escroc" and rarely missed an opportunity to draw attention to his brush with the law, yet he remained remarkably popular in Guyane, as photographs and reports of "homecoming" receptions by enthusiastic crowds attest (ADLA Procureur Général). This enthusiasm, coupled with the alarm that it occasioned among Galmot's rivals (ANOM B40 [12]), led to unrest at election time. At least one death occurred during the course of the 1924 elections and each side blamed the other for a perceived increase in political violence and for attempted or actual electoral fraud. Despite his popularity, Galmot did not triumph: instead, a "metropolitan" journalist named Eugène Lautier became deputy for Guyane. Lautier, who had no personal connection to Guyane, nevertheless had friends in high places. Specifically, he had the backing of the mayor of Cayenne and president of the *conseil général* Eugène Gober, a local political strongman who was no stranger to dubious electoral practices. (Indeed, according to Bonneton, 132, as far back as 1903-1905 the Conseil d'État had indicted a Conseil municipal headed by Gober for corruption.) However, the kind of anti-democratic clientelism practiced by Gober and Lautier was becoming increasingly unpopular with Guyanais citizens who felt themselves better-represented by Galmot's more inclusionary, egalitarian rhetoric. By the time that Lautier announced he would stand for re-election to the legislature in 1928, the disappointment and frustration of the *galmotistes* meant that the local political climate in Guyane had become distinctly volatile.

Indeed, "galmotisme" had developed into a political force of its own, locally, by 1928. In the legislative elections of that year it was concentrated in support of the candidate Georges Anquetil, whom Galmot had proposed as his candidate (being barred from standing personally). The announcement on April 22 that Lautier, and not Anquetil, was to be named as deputy triggered an unleashing of *galmotiste* frustration and set in motion a chain of events that would lead to the violent events of that summer. That Lautier's election had been fraudulent was public knowledge; official and unofficial reports of corruption abounded in letters, local press and public and institutional pronouncements. The *Ligue pour la Défense des droits de l'Homme et*

*du Citoyen*, for instance, complained to the Minister of Colonies about the absence of political neutrality among members of Guyane's civil administration and accused the mayor Gober of obstructing observers to the ballot (ANOM B40 [12]). Later, the use of the names of people dead, imprisoned or absent would be recalled by the Guyanais lawyer Gaston Monnerville, who recounted that he himself had been listed on Guyane's electoral roll in 1928 despite having been in France at the time (ALS O112a, 1). Nevertheless, the colonial governor Camille Maillet, though well aware of the practices of Lautier and Gober, did not question the results of the ballot and even congratulated the gendarmes and police for maintaining order.

A group of indignant voters marched on the governor's palace in Cayenne, demanding the resignation of Gober and the invalidation of Lautier's election. Maillet appeared to acquiesce but having no influence over the chamber of deputies, he could only meet the first of their demands. Gober was subsequently relieved of his functions and a Galmotiste, Quintrie, was duly made mayor following municipal elections. However, the election of Lautier as deputy was validated in Paris by the Assembly. In effect, the citizens of Guyane were seeing their disenfranchisement gain the approval of the central government.

When news reached Guyane that the Assembly had validated Lautier's election, it was received with fury, frustration, and repeated demonstrations, almost all of which coalesced around the name of Galmot. By May 3, 1928, the governor Maillet described how the actions of a large group of Galmot's supporters, although carried out in his name, were actually out of the hands of the man himself. Galmot, Maillet claimed, had declared himself "ne plus en être le maître" of the "effervescence" growing in the wake of the election (ANOM B41, 1).

The governor attributed this phenomenon to the "caractère presque mystique de Galmot". Such anxiety about the "irrational" qualities of Galmot's popularity betrays a lack of ability or willingness on the part of the authorities to comprehend the appeal of an unanticipated actor in colonial politics. Indeed, the events are somewhat uncharacteristic of violent revolts in French colonies during the interwar period, in that the anger was apparently incited by the death of an outsider, rather than (or as well as being) fomented by insiders. Moreover, the French colonial administration and law enforcement were not directly targeted, and nor was the violence motivated by explicitly anticolonial political ideologies. How, then, to explain Galmot's apparent popularity amongst the Guyanais?

In short, it seems that Galmot was adopted as a representative of dissent. This dissent seems ultimately to have been against the colonial bureaucracy's complacency towards – and complicity in – the habitual stymying of the Guyanais's rights of citizenship. In his electoral campaigns, Galmot promised to shore up and to extend these limited and fragile rights. Indeed, he promised all that was the purported justification for colonization in terms of material "progress" and "civilization" –

increasingly framed as economic “development” (*mise en valeur*) – yet was in practice not delivered. Thus, he and his political rhetoric presented a focal point for local action that could be framed in terms of an injustice reparable within the existing framework of the Republic. The defending lawyers in Nantes were therefore able to present Galmot as a thwarted savior of both empire and republic, offering the jurors the chance to redeem the Guyanais on the basis not of anticolonialism but precisely on the grounds of their “French”-ness.

*(Un)timely deaths: violence and controversy in Cayenne*

“Galmotiste” anger was momentarily appeased by favorable results in the June municipal elections. This truce lasted only until the morning of August 6, however, when news spread of Galmot’s death. Whatever the real cause of his demise, its timing – soon after Lautier’s validation as deputy and following warnings in Galmot’s own pamphlets that he expected to be killed – meant that it was instantly assumed by many to be murder (ALS 0115 4a). Poisoning was initially announced as the cause of death. This was not only a spur to anger in the short term; it also cast an ambiguous shadow over the case in the long term. A first doctor concluded that Galmot had been poisoned, whereas a second, military medic concurred that “the ingestion of toxic substances” of untraceable origin was to blame (Alexandre 46; Magne 187-195). The “facts”, then, were destined to remain unproven, meaning that the affair would come to be characterized by “narrative inconsistencies and... intractable problems of contradictory sources” (Taithe 282). This in turn led to bitter and unresolvable contests over historical “truth” and its meanings.<sup>3</sup> The controversies and mysteries surrounding Galmot’s life and death were grist to the mill of theorists including relatives and friends of the dead on both “sides”, subsequent politicians, historians, and writers, many with personal connections to the circumscribed world of Guyanais politics. A variety of characters with whom Galmot had come into contact – ranging from associates of Gober (Henry) to Galmot’s housemaid to Alexandre Stavisky as well as Galmot himself – were cast as possible culprits by those insisting that he had been poisoned. A recent history, conversely, turns its focus instead to the deaths of the six Antillais, hypothesizing that an alleged “cabal” ordered their deaths and thus recasting the violence as a “mere” set of premeditated murders rather than as the result of an emotive crowd making history (Bendjebbar 374). Indeed, to offer the opinion that Galmot had not been murdered seems still to represent in Guyane an act of peacemaking and a way of defusing the political tension surrounding the affair (Methon).

The possibility that the death may have been accidental did not register in Cayenne amid the latest manifestation of a pattern of sham elections and oligarchical governance. The conviction was expressed, first in the streets of Cayenne and later in the Nantes courtroom by defense lawyer Zévaès that: “si Galmot est mort

c'est qu'on a voulu se débarrasser, comme d'un gêneur, de l'homme qui avait libéré la Guyane" (London 40). Group actions underpinned by politically-charged "moral economics" (Thompson 79) were not unusual in the *vieilles colonies* during the 1920s and 30s. Focusing on the comparable "affaire du Diamant" in Martinique in 1925, Richard Price has described how an event apparently "sans grande conséquence" may, in fact, reveal key underlying power relations and tensions of the era (2000, xii-xiii). Similarly, in Guyane, social and economic tensions simmering since the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century reached a boiling point in 1928. Events in Guyane differed in significant ways from those of the Antilles, however. In Guyane, events saw the working classes opposed to an emerging industrial bourgeois class – comparable to the Antillais *békés* except in that they comprised both African-descended and white Guyanais and Antillais – and to sections of the colonial administration who offered more or less tacit support to local elites. The metropolitan administrative class were not accessible to the crowd after Galmot's death (Eugène Lautier escaped on a boat when the violence began). The local bourgeois, on the other hand, were. The rumor of Galmot's intentional elimination, aggravated by further rumors that his opponents had celebrated his death, precipitated an unleashing of violence upon six of their number. Over the course of two days, six prominent anti-Galmotistes were set upon and killed, variously by gunshots, "coups de bâton", blades, and lapidation (ADLA Procureur Général, 1930). All the dead were Antillais rather than Guyanais, and all had occupied significant social positions: they included members of the local administration, a doctor, and the chef de l'instruction publique (ANOM B41 [09] 4).

### *Bringing 'home' a colonial scandal*

The presence of the *bagne* in Guyane, evidently, had prevented neither the dubious activities of the bourgeois political class nor the murderous civil unrest that arose in consequence. Indeed, the riots were remarkable for the apparent lack of intervention on the part of the police and governor, whilst one witness at the Nantes trial remarked that "la carence des autorités était telle que les bagnards auraient pu facilement se rendre maîtres de la ville" (London 69). The short- and long-term responses on the part of the French authorities are thus revelatory of a key paradox of interwar Guyane: notorious for the penal administration's control over the bodies of the *bagnards* (Toth xv), but otherwise largely unknown and only part-controlled by state power.

True to Martin Thomas's remark that where "French colonialism was barely tolerated... additional police or troops from nearby territories (were) at once a sign of strength and an admission that the colonial state was failing" (*The French Empire*, 2), the central government sent outside troops to Guyane in the wake of the disorder. After doubts were raised about the loyalty of Martiniquais forces, *tirailleurs* were



deployed. Meanwhile, the initial judicial investigation met with obstacles and controversy as crowds protested arrests, witnesses were threatened with reprisals, and the loyalties of the *juge d'instruction* were called into question. On the grounds of public safety and “suspicion légitime” of the local *cour d'assises*, Cayenne's *procureur* obtained authorization to remove the trial from Guyane and send it to the Nantes assizes (Alexandre 47). There, the accused were imprisoned whilst the new *juge d'instruction* relaunched the investigation from the beginning. By the end of the trial, this now-transatlantic process had continued for over two years.

The removal of those to be tried from the immediate locale of the crime was not unknown, particularly in the case of uprisings in the colonies, but it was not common. This was not least because the wholesale shipment of the trial to the metropole, with all the necessary paperwork, paraphernalia and people – including in this case the transcribed testimony of two hundred witnesses gathered by a *commission rogatoire* (ANOM B41 [16]), thirty witnesses in person, and a “veritable arsenal” including rifles, blunderbusses, and mitrailleuses (London 32) – was expensive for the state. That both Martinique and Guadeloupe were ruled out as appropriate locations suggests that the colonial authorities feared revolt could be contagious. It is also likely that they sought to avoid involvement with local “faction-fighting” – involvement that had been known to lead to breakdown of colonial state control elsewhere (Thomas, *Violence and Colonial Order*, 19). The trial's removal to Nantes, in short, appears as a French governmental tactic aimed at averting the greater scandal of a total breakdown of colonial authority.

On the other hand, as Alexandre has explained, the transportation of the trial to the metropole was positively welcomed by the Galmotistes whose newspaper proclaimed that: “Nous étalerons... les injustices soumises, nous montrerons les complications; nous ferons voir comment l'on fait un député, malgré la volonté du peuple” (48). Far from avoiding a scandal for the authorities, many Guyanais anticipated that the Nantes trial would, in fact, produce one: by bringing “home” to the metropolitan French not only the generalized corruption of their colonial regime but also the particular plight of the Guyanais.

#### *A courtroom comedy-drama: narrating and resolving the “affair” in Nantes*

No doubt seeking to distance themselves from controversy, Lautier, his patron Gober, and Guyane's former governor Maillet all excused themselves from the hearing in Nantes in 1931. Nevertheless, the point of view expressed by Lautier, reflected in the case for prosecution and present in some press reports was that the real scandal of the affair was that a rogue and rabble-rousing demagogue such as Galmot should have been allowed to stoke rebellious passions amongst a “credulous”, “superstitious”, and emotional colonized population (London 33). The crowd, according to the

*juge d'instruction*, was mainly composed of “femmes du peuple et des enfants de douze à quatorze ans” (Othily 89), while the prosecution and sections of the press speculated that sorcery, “des incantations et des sortilèges”, had played a part in the events (ADLA 5 U, ‘Procureur Général’). Following Lynn Hunt (12), this interpretation may be viewed as an attempt to cast the violence as a feminized, infantilized, and irrational “delirium” in such a way as might exonerate the colonial government of responsibility and reassure its “dignity and authority”. At the same time, it chimed with the reasoning of those who saw French Caribbeans, post-slavery, as not “ready” for French citizenship (Price 9) and paved the way for the kind of colonial nostalgia that would cast the French as the rightful “parents” of Guyanais “children”.

For the accused, their legal advocates and their defenders in the French and Guyanais press, however, the scandal did not lie in the outbreak of violence itself nor in Galmot’s popularity amongst the population. Indeed, several of the accused offered reasoned explanations for his popularity in court, the defendants Joséphine Lamer and Léopoldine Radical for instance respectively praising Galmot as “le représentant de la classe ouvrière” and claiming that he had become “le père du peuple en faisant cesser l’exploitation des ouvriers” (London 36-44). Rather, the “true” scandal for this group could be located in the long-running practices of electoral fraud and unquestioned clientelism against which, they claimed, Galmot had stood.

Nevertheless, the defense – including Gaston Monnerville, originally from Guyane but at that time a young lawyer based in Paris – played heavily on perceptions of the Guyanais as emotional, simple, humble people who in rioting had been acting out their loyal, “filial attachment” to France.<sup>4</sup> The deployment of familial discourse may be seen as a conscious strategy by the defense to sidestep the criminality of the alleged actions of the accused and instead to portray them collectively as representatives of the “children” of Schoelcher (Burton 19). From there, they might inscribe the killings in a revolutionary, republican tradition of uprising against injustice, a narrative implying that the six murdered men were unfortunate scapegoats whose “collective expulsion”, put in the terms of theorist of violence René Girard (Fleming 47), was a “historical necessity” if “progress” were to be achieved. This strategy was bolstered by witnesses such as the lieutenant Baratier, head of the gendarmerie in Cayenne, who testified that: “tous les manifestants avaient perdu leur mentalité individuelle pour acquérir une mentalité collective, et il m’apparaît difficile d’établir les responsabilités”. Similarly, Auguste Quintric, Gober’s successor as mayor of Cayenne, declared that: “pendant vingt ans la Guyane a vécu sous la Fronde” and as for 1928, “c’était une véritable révolution” (Londres 86). If the killings could be understood not as a set of “crimes de droit commun”, as the court’s President proposed (London 39-40), but as the unfortunate byproduct of an unstoppable crowd realizing an inevitable

form of justice, then the courtroom might be persuaded that this was identifiably political violence. And not mere “colonial violence” – to be classified as “culturally derived, dysfunctional and potentially unlimited” (Thomas, *Violence and Colonial Order* xv-xvi) – but a specifically French form of revolt: “rationalized as ...ideologically driven” or part of a “lingering... aftermath” of an earlier, shared trauma. In effect, the events were portrayed as entirely compatible with the numerous scandals of the Third Republic which had seen members of the metropolitan political classes indicted for corruption. This time – and perhaps for the first time – the Guyanais were cast as defenders of the Republic. The leading lawyer Henri Torrès consolidated this interpretation in his final summary, which tied the defense of the two he was tasked with defending to that of the fourteen, calling for their full acquittal. To convict one or two and acquit others from a crowd of thousands, Torrès suggested, would be to “commit an injustice” as well as to vindicate the “ragots” and “potins” he claimed accompanied their accusation and thus make a mockery of legal and colonial systems.

The trial had, in fact, frequently lapsed into the absurd, as revelations of the hypocrisy of French officials’ actions in Guyane unfolded to a public audience in court that was growing every day as news spread of this atypical trial (London 51). According to one reporter, the audience appreciated the entertainment: “le public s’amuse follement et regrette l’annonce du renvoi au lendemain de la suite des débats [sic]” (London 65). There is, in addition, a sense in reports that the accused were considered almost benevolently, as children only part-responsible for their actions, pitied for their evident ill-health amid the Nantes winter and appreciated for their wit and humor, for ironies that had arisen during their testimonies, and for their imputed “picturesque” qualities (71). Some accusations were compelling, but a number of witnesses called were unable to name anyone seen actually committing violence; some claimed not to have noticed the accused at the scenes of the crimes, not to have seen them strike any blows, or to be able to distinguish the gender but not the identity of a person witnessed. One witness did not recognize in person in Nantes the man that she had accused by name. Others changed their statements or made accusations against specific people only many months after the events (claiming they had not done so before for fear of reprisals). Slowly but surely, it emerged that a number of *bagnards* and *rélégués* had been offered inducements including mitigation of their punishments to testify against the accused, allowing Torrès to remark sarcastically, to public approval, that this had not been mentioned before because it would have been “la preuve du génie colonisateur, humain et bienveillant de la France” (London 41-63).

One witness remarked – to applause – that: “ce qu’il faudrait faire, c’est le procès de toute l’administration coloniale” (London 90). Thus Torrès was able to claim persuasively and to a largely sympathetic audience in summing up that acquittal would be a patriotic political act “pour la France indivisible, métropolitaine et coloniale”: having been

“systématiquement provoqué(e)... cette population s’est dressée, non pas contre notre drapeau, non pas contre nos lois, mais pour nos lois, pour leur application et leur respect” (London 99-100).

Helped by the legal complications entailed by the geographical distance, delays, and transportation of evidence and witnesses which would have rendered verdicts of guilt questionable, the defense rhetoric was seen to triumph when the jury acquitted all fourteen of the accused.

Significant sections of the French and Guyanais press gave the impression that rhetoric alone had determined the course of the trial: something not implausible if we agree with Walter Adamson that the “performative public sphere” was considered a key way to shape “public life” in the interwar years (36). In France, approval for the acquittal in left-wing press contributed less to any anticolonial feeling than to “humanitarian” critiques of colonial practices aimed at mitigating their more deleterious effects (Daughton 503). It also had the effect of introducing to a wider public the figure of Gaston Monnerville, the Guyanais lawyer whose *plaidoirie* was remarkably well-received: the Nantes *L'Ouest-Éclair*, for instance, reported that it produced “une très grande émotion. De tous côtés, des mains s’étendent vers Me Monnerville qui a peine à se dérober à une formidable ovation” (4). However, the aftermath of the trial was most transformative in Guyane. There, Monnerville’s interpretation of the violence went on to shape history, as the lawyer built on his success in Nantes to launch a political career in Guyane (ANOM B40). He did so by successfully claiming to be the rightful heir of *galmotisme* in Guyane, thus recuperating the movement – at least initially – and winning the deputyship in 1932. Hence, it was thanks to his handling of the “Galmot affair” that Monnerville was able to obtain a national political platform, ultimately enabling his crucial role in obtaining Guyane’s departmentalization in 1946 along with that of Martinique, Guadeloupe, and La Réunion. In effect, then, events in Cayenne and Nantes bound the national and local afterlives of the “affair” together, laying out a French future for Guyane.

### *A failure on the French frontier: the story according to Cendrars*

Certain historical accounts (Monnerville 1975; Mam Lam Fouck 2002; Alexandre 1999) have considered the political implications for Guyane of both the “Galmot affair” and the Nantes trial, whilst a collection of essays edited by Michèle Touret has examined the authorial processes and publication context of Cendrars’s *Rhum: l’aventure de Jean Galmot*. Commissioned by Lucien Vogel, editor of *Vu*, the text was originally serialized in this new, left-leaning, illustrated magazine in the run-up to and during the Nantes hearing, then subsequently published as a novel. Not yet fully explained, however, is the intertwinement of Cendrars himself – and of this text – in the trial and its

aftermath, nor how Cendrars provided a framework by which these would be remembered. The literary account of Cendrars emerged both alongside and within the narrations of events which emerged in the Nantes courtroom, in the national and local press and in historical discourse, showing how these were in many ways woven together. The involvement of Cendrars and his writings in political history offers us a new and novel perspective on the importance of rhetoric amongst governing elites: its sources, its social production, and its dissemination.

In his 1925 novel, *L'Or*, Cendrars had established an interest in the American frontier, its “pioneers” and the social relations between colonists and commodities. His travel writing and other essays – notably work produced in and about Brazil, where he was impressed by coffee monoculture and other such “development” projects – evinced a fascination with South American tropical modernity (Noland 405; Cendrars, *Le Brésil* 132). In Galmot, Cendrars seems to have perceived a kindred spirit: a fellow *bourlingueur* prone to travel, various kinds of adventure, and the committal of these experiences to literature. From this background, it was a short step to the premise conveyed in *Rhum* that ambitious, “modern” economic development driven by extraordinary individuals with a sense of adventure and expansive possibilities – embodied in Galmot – had the potential to bring light to a benighted French colony.

Collected in Cendrars’s archives are letters, notes, and drafts which offer insight into the processes of commissioning, research, and writing of *Rhum*. A study of these materials indicates how the narrative which emerged was contingent on authorial connections, editorial choices, and responses to market conditions for reportage and literature. First, the fact that the novel was ever written was due to the connection identified by Vogel between Galmot’s trajectory and the literary interests of Cendrars, and Vogel’s subsequent invitation to Cendrars. Second, it is significant that Cendrars’s literary engagement with Guyane was entirely vicarious: he never visited the place. Hence the “metropolitan” rather than the “Guyanais” dimensions of Galmot’s life were most accessible as he researched. In the final, influential version of *Rhum*, Galmot is unrivalled in narrative prominence, whilst other lives, incidents, and perspectives are largely absent. In fact, Cendrars’s sources included a plethora of Galmot’s acquaintances and family members in France, and so a multiplicity of (albeit French and not Guyanais) voices formed part of the authorial process. In contrast to the more developed protagonist, on the other hand, the Guyanais are by and large present only as a mysterious “mass” characterized by threats and magic and emitting “incantations”: unnamed, other, and ultimately supplementary (*Rhum* 97-100).

In the end, what Cendrars produced – as he admitted himself and as Luisa Montrosset has convincingly argued (86) – was in some sense an additional *plaidoyer* to contribute both to and alongside the case for the defense in Nantes: an apologia not for the rioters, but for Galmot himself. In a letter to Galmot’s

friend and former editor Edouard Cristini, Cendrars offered half his fee from *Vu* in return for Cristini's collaboration to "dresser un plaidoyer en sa faveur", expressing hope that "ainsi orientée, mon histoire pourrait avoir une certaine importance au moment du procès et faire beaucoup pour la mémoire de Galmot" (ALS O115 Cristini). *Rhum* is little different in intention from the defense lawyers' *plaidoiries* in Nantes, except that it is intended to rehabilitate the reputation of Galmot rather than those of the Guyanais standing trial. Heroizing him somewhat theatrically, it impresses on the reader that Galmot's political intentions were "pure" and that his attachment to Guyane – as exemplified in a 1924 "serment" in which he swears to "rendre la Liberté à la Guyane" – was genuine rather than a cynical or self-serving ploy (Cendrars, *Rhum* 15).

For Cendrars, the literary commemoration of such an individual was an "act" (Cendrars, *Rhum* 5) that had meaning within his own, modernist literary ideology. More specifically, Galmot represented the possibility for the "regeneration" (Leroy 9) of Frenchmen in the tropics. *Rhum* concludes with a description of the dead man as a "Cecil Rhodes" manqué (116): someone who along with Ferdinand de Lesseps or Gustave Eiffel might have been one of the great genitors of French modernity. Galmot is admired for the attributes which allow Cendrars to make of him a classic, 19<sup>th</sup>-century explorer-hero: one who "forged character through struggle" (Jones 118) and was as concerned with his own "spiritual values" as with "self-advancement and practical virtues" (MacKenzie 92). Thus, he represents a humanitarian notion of "sacrifice" rather than a colonial ideology motivated solely by profit. That he achieves his own financial ruin only indicates his commitment to living an extraordinary life. Galmot's fall from grace, for Cendrars, was less an indictment of his lack of business acumen than an indicator of how, in bureaucratized colonial contexts where vested interests held sway, possibilities for individual opportunism, adventure, and initiative were stifled. Thus, not only does he implicitly criticize the apparent French inability to make of Guyane an enlightened, modern, productive, rational, and "knowable" place, but he also issues an implicit challenge to French colonizers: if they fail to take advantage of a Guyane that is ripe for economic exploitation and "modernization", it will fall to other imperial or neocolonial powers to reap the harvest (Cendrars, *Rhum* 116).

At stake in *Rhum*, consequently, is not only the colony and its economic resources, but also a certain kind of "pioneer" spirit that can establish *maîtrise* over and even benefit from indigenous "magic" and primitive "purity" (ALS O108) at the same time as making money in classic capitalist fashion. The novel is not merely a celebration of a certain kind of *homme nouveau* (Rivas 50) of the interwar years: it also locates his death and the outbreak of violence in Cayenne at the catharsis of a tragedy. The tragic aspect of *Rhum*, however, is less the cathartic set of violent deaths than it is the sense that, with the downfall of the "hero", Guyane's putative economic dynamism and modernity were lost causes for France. Galmot is depicted simultaneously as an

explorer better suited to the 19<sup>th</sup> century and as a “new man” of the 20<sup>th</sup> century: incompatibility between the two leads to his downfall, and consequently the work is perhaps usefully seen as an expression of colonial nostalgia.

Cendrars researched, wrote, and published his text during the two years between the start of the legal investigation and its conclusion in Nantes. Part of the same social circles – cosmopolitan yet centered on Paris – as Galmotiste sympathizers René Maran, Henri Torrès, and now Monnerville, his work provided a convenient and largely well-researched narrative of events in Guyane which the defense team did not hesitate to draw upon in their *plaidoiries*, borrowing his phrasology and metaphors (for instance in describing Galmot’s “allure de Don Quichotte” [16]) and even referring to Cendrars’s presence in the courtroom. In the interwar period, “rhetoric” was a key way in which governing elites (Thomas and Toyé) sought to distinguish French imperialism from that of its European rivals and thus justify it. Cendrars’s text demonstrates how such elite rhetoric is not, in fact, easily separable from the “performative public sphere” (Adamson) that modernist authors attempted to shape, in which “public life was best conceived not as a rational process of discussion governed by consensus and the better argument... but as one of persuasion by performance – performance still governed by the creative ideals of the artist”. The web of historical research, language, and narrative framing that links Cendrars’s novel with the strategies and rhetorical performances of the lawyers, the relative solidarity of the metropolitan press and public, and the subsequent political success of Monnerville indicates how fiction and literature may not be neatly separated from other categories of discourse such as political and legal rhetoric. Nor indeed, given the circumscribed social networks that linked together principal actors in the “affair”, may they be considered separately from interpersonal, social relations.

The two sets of “acts” – literary and rhetorical – which would come to define the events of 1928-31 were produced in relation to one another. Yet the historical fiction that is *Rhum* had political implications of a related but slightly different order to those of the defense rhetoric at the trial. The latter, focusing on the actions of the Guyanais, would persuade the French in Nantes – and subsequently the Guyanais electors – that the riots proved how, as revolutionaries in the French mold, they were owed their dues by the Republic in the form of fuller and more assured rights of citizenship. Whereas the 1931 trial may be seen as a rehearsal of the nascent, “decolonial” logic of departmentalization (Nesbitt) that Monnerville would go on to espouse in 1946, *Rhum* takes its cue not from Guyanais voices but from the interwar French discourse of colonial *mise en valeur*.

*Reformulating tensions of empire: development and citizenship in Guyane*

The question of who exactly killed whom and why, where unproven and heavily contested, takes second place in this analysis to the question of how and why certain actors sought to represent and interpret events according to a certain agenda. Writings about the Galmot affair – including those of Cendrars but also later accounts (Henry; Bendjebbar) have tended to concentrate on the former question, embarking on the classic quest to enclose a finite, definitive version of historical events and thus resolve them in such a way as to tie them to present circumstances. A closer examination of the social, cultural, and political conditions in which narratives emerge, however, shows how this approach functions to contrive a teleological, “ideal continuity” (Foucault 124-126) to events. The question of “whodunnit” in the cases of the multiple deaths in Cayenne has been controversial and remains distinctly intriguing, yet this “affair” and its afterlives also remain significant for broader historical reasons.

First, they indicate how French anxieties about failure of the attempted “civilization”/“*mise en valeur*” of Guyane came to a head between the wars. Miranda Spieler has established how 18<sup>th</sup> century Guyane was already the “underworld” of the Republic; from the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century it was also considered its social dustbin thanks to the penal colony (Toth 1). The “Galmot affair” as told by Torrès, Monnerville, and Cendrars with its forests, goldmines, and violence exposed how impracticable it seemed to imagine a locale so geographically distant and different from the metropole as unproblematically “assimilated”. One response to this was the suggestion that it might be shaped into the image of France by being forced onto a path of industrial development that the “metropolitan” French could recognize and control. Conversely, increasingly prominent voices from Guyane sought in a sense the opposite solution – that the metropole acknowledge Guyane, in all its “difference”, as part of itself and adapt accordingly. In this way, reparation began to be sought in Nantes for the historical mistreatment of the Guyanais whom, it would increasingly be asserted, were no less French than any Parisian.

Second, the affair and its afterlives reveal how much was and remains at stake for Guyane and the Guyanais in the ways that place, events, and people are narrated and thus enter French governmental, literary, press, and public discourse. Judicial, literary, and press narratives shaped how difference and sameness between metropole and colony were construed, and hence how current and future assimilation were envisaged. In this respect, little has changed in the past century: considering recent upheaval in Guyane alongside the events of 1928-1932, we see that French discourse on Guyane, where it exists, has in some respects evolved little. In March and April 2017, thousands of protestors took to the streets and blocked main roads in Guyane (Marot, “La Guyane”). As in the *post facto* articulations of the 1928 events, protestors and spokespeople phrased their demands in terms of the recognition of the



Guyanais' perceived and actual rights as French citizens to political and practical forms of equality. Groups of demonstrators – including unions, local community groups and a masked, black-clad vigilante group calling themselves the “500 Frères contre la délinquance” – blocked the road to the Centre Spatial Guyanais (CSG), closed shops, and patrolled streets in the name of social justice and the struggle against insecurity. A mass general strike, meanwhile, closed the airport, schools, and many businesses and public services. Strikers demanded that ministers travel to Guyane in person – rather than sending *fonctionnaires* as envoys – and ensure that the Guyanais had access to education, affordable food and fuel, stable employment, social security, personal safety, and economic “development” on equal terms with their “metropolitan” French counterparts.<sup>5</sup>

In the end, it seems, the lasting difficulties in the Metropole-DOM relationship still hinge around two questions: firstly, how to combine the legacies of colonialism with the expectations and realities of French modernity; and secondly, the extent to which geographical distance and cultural difference can or should be reconciled: in essence, the question of “assimilation” is still the key stake. As the interwovenness of literature, politics, law, and history in the case of the “Galmot affair” shows, governmental questions may not be easily separated from the cultural narratives that circulate in fictional and journalistic accounts of Guyane.

There are immense differences between the incidents of 1928 and 2017. The 2017 demonstrations were non-violent; indeed, they arose in response to growing levels of violence and insecurity, including burglary, robbery, and murder. Nor did the 2017 events crystallize around an individual person as a focal point. Rather, as the anthropologist Isabelle Hidair has highlighted, they may signal a “participative revolution” bringing together for the first time a remarkable diversity of Guyane’s social and cultural groups and making clear demands based on a specific set of causes (Flandrin). Nevertheless, the language that emerged on the French side during and in response to these events featured many of the same tropes as did those of the interwar years, with two featuring particularly strongly: the ideal of doing postcolonial justice to the Guyanais on the one hand, and on the other, the prospect of exploiting the South American territory for maximum economic and geopolitical benefit. In recognizing the resulting plan for 3 billion euros of investment in Guyane’s infrastructure, the then-prime minister Bernard Cazeneuve trod the line between these tropes by recognizing that: “Les réponses apportées par l’Etat (n’avaient) jamais été à la hauteur des difficultés singulières et réelles que la Guyane connaît” and that any new measures for “development” would need to be “innovative” if they were to reposition Guyane “sur une trajectoire d’égalité réelle avec le reste du territoire national” (Marot, “Qui est”).

Underpinning this century-long process of continuity and adjustment in French rhetoric on Guyane is the fact that certain, fundamental patterns of economic and social relations experienced by the Guyanais as French citizens in South America

have – excepting the expansion of state services during the 1960s – remained little-changed. The local economy— from the space center to the gold mines to the new shopping centers and apartments – is still run and managed, on the whole, by people from elsewhere, whilst many local people work for minimum wage or less. Thousands have clandestine or insecure immigration status, whilst rates of employment, educational success, and political participation are low and crime rates are high relative to the metropole. Many Guyanais are therefore left exposed to multiple forms of systemic and physical violence. A further, striking point of continuity is the near complete silence maintained by the “metropolitan” media in respect to Guyane, punctuated only very sporadically by news stories about strikes, crime, scandal, and insecurity. The lack of updates on Guyane’s present situation in the rest of France and beyond means that it often continues to be understood in terms of nostalgia, as if it were a place of the past.

Few international news agencies keep a correspondent in Guyane for very long, while to many politicians, French South America is a source of incomprehension and even bewilderment. A notorious example is that of Emmanuel Macron who as presidential contender in 2017 appeared to betray geographic ignorance when he referred to Guyane as an “island” ([la1ere.fr](http://la1ere.fr)).<sup>6</sup> Such slips indicate the gulf separating two experiences of France and French citizenship: that of those who try to understand and govern from a distance, in a metropole where a systematized governmental interest in Guyane has never emerged, and that of those who daily experience a life that is both South American and French. The 1931 trial represented a flash in the pan in France, and was much more transformative, in the long term, for Guyane itself than it was for central colonial policy. In 2017, the national interest in Guyane was only slightly less fleeting than usual, and it remains to be seen whether the resultant plan will provide anything more than a sticking plaster over the gap separating “hexagonal” from local norms. Meanwhile, South American France continues to occupy a complex position in relation to “metropolitan” France, its voices often either misinterpreted or unheard.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> These rights of citizenship applied to the so-called “creole” population, largely of mixed African and European descent, but excluded those classified as “primitive populations” or “*indigènes*”, such as Amerindians and Maroons.

<sup>2</sup> State archives pertaining to this period in Guyane have been “lost” according to Galmot’s biographer Jacques Magne (219). A filmmaker researching Galmot’s life and death reported receiving anonymous threats (Maline interviewed by Plaisir).

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<sup>3</sup> State archives pertaining to this period in Guyane have been “lost” according to Galmot’s biographer Jacques Magne (219). A filmmaker researching Galmot’s life and death reported receiving anonymous threats (Maline interviewed by Plaisir).

<sup>4</sup> According to Alexandre (49), the Goncourt prize-winning author René Maran, himself Guyanais, was instrumental in assembling the defense team and in publicizing the trial; he concurred with the Galmotiste position that it presented an opportunity to expose Guyane’s plight in the metropole and used his connections to boost the defense, for instance by persuading Guyanais of good standing in the metropole to testify as witnesses to the good faith of their countryfolk.

<sup>5</sup> An organizational collective behind many of the 2017 actions called themselves “Pou Lagwiyan Dékolé”: a Creole-language indication of their desire to see Guyane “take off”, economically speaking. This name gave an ironic nod to the rocket launches from the European-run CSG – an institution perceived by many as distant from the day-to-day life of the population whilst also being responsible for economic dependence on the “center” and for the inflated cost of living.

<sup>6</sup> Macron, it seems, had in fact previously visited Guyane so the statement could be attributed to a slip of the tongue!

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