

## **Towards A Comparative Archive of Carceral Narratives and Penal Colony Heritage**

When settler colonists of Kourou, French Guiana faced increased theft committed by penal colony escapees in transit through the village, and the human traffickers who extort them, they filed a written complaint with the local prison administration. Their grievance demanded the halt of a troubling pattern they had observed in which each colonial governor who arrived to Kourou built a new prison. Their collective outrage culminated on 10 September 1856 in the delivery of their petition letter demanding administrators to focus on improving their current carceral enclosures, instead of building new ones. Upon first glance, this mid-nineteenth century case against prison construction may appear to be an early antecedent to contemporary social movements in the Americas aimed at ending expansion of the prison-industrial complex. However, upon closer inspection it becomes evident that the call for heightened security within the settler colony not only condones the existence of the penal system, but calls for its fortification. In contrast, today's prison abolition movement challenges us to question the necessity of institutions premised on state violence as a means to structure social order. This dissertation research examines various literary histories generated by these opposing viewpoints.

In order to contribute to a dense body of US based scholarship which has focused on the penitentiary through a national lens, I examine prison literature as an integral feature of literary studies, with a focus on commemoration practices of prison heritage, Black existential philosophy, and queer masculinities. For all intents and purposes 'the prison' here includes any institution that dominates, disciplines and oppresses. This broad approach offers avenues of inquiry leading to questions such as: How does normative masculinity function as a space of entrapment? What is the relation between prison history and the stubborn politics of frontier

making? Which literary traditions and genres prevail among various prison literatures? To this end, I refer to the rise and fall of French Guiana's penal colony as a touchstone to gauge dual procedures of colonial development and remembrance of punitive tactics in the Americas.

The structure of the dissertation is as follows: First, an introduction to carceral systems and their narration through the case study of French Guiana's *bagne* (penal colony). Secondly, three chapters which examine separate instances of authorial interventions from queer racialized writers who have endured incarceration, or marginalized authors who write about memory and enclosure. Lastly, two final chapters will detail the contestation between practices of punishment commemoration by state and non-state actors. This project aims toward building a comparative archive of prison literature by placing in conversation a group of authors who have endured varying degrees of criminalization and attending to how, and why, they evoke memories of their relations to carceral entities.

This project combines archival research and literary studies by organizing the analysis of carceral narratives around primary sources of penal labor historiography. This approach emphasizes how stories both personal and imperial must undergird the way we think about carceral logics by placing these authors' practices of public memory in conversation with institutional memory of a French penal colony. While the archival anecdote from Kourou may seem 'empowering' from the perspective of a community organization challenging a local administration, the settler colonial ambitions in the French Guianese context took for granted the rationale justifying the prisons as necessary social institutions. This research aims to connect with the political horizons articulated by contemporary social movements aimed at abolishing

prisons by creating a critical literary historiography of targeted criminalization and pervasive imprisonment.