



**The Lost Amerindian Girls,  
the Tooth Fairy, and the  
Whore of Babylon**

**Linda Peake**

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## Introduction

I would like to start by thanking the Geography Department for inviting me to give the Norma Wilkinson talk and, indeed, for inviting me back. I completed my BA and PhD here at Reading, over three decades ago, and it is a delight and privilege to be back where I spent a number of happy and productive years. It was a time and place where my political and academic interests all came together through my PhD in political geography and through my activities in the then Labour Party (many hours were spent copying the local ward newsletter on the Geography Department banda machine!). It is also when I started to adopt feminism into my academic work, and when, 30 years ago, I first went to Guyana.

And it was in Guyana that this talk developed. I was there for three months this summer working with Red Thread, a women's organisation, with whom I have been involved for over two decades. I had been having various conversations with Karen de Souza, the co-ordinator of Red Thread, about what was going on in the country, in the course of which she had uttered various phrases to me, about lost Amerindian girls, about the tooth fairy, and about the whore(s) of Babylon. I wrote them down, thinking one day they would speak to me. I didn't have to wait long. The next week an email came from Ruth Evans inviting me to give the Norma Wilkinson presentation; ah, serendipity I thought....it was meant to be.

Let me start by telling you a real story. One of my earliest memories as a little girl, about 7 years old, was one day at school when we were told that we would be making saucers out of *papier maché*. I distinctly remember being so excited that finally the grownups were going to show us how the real world worked, how things were made. My *papier maché* saucer looked nothing like a real saucer but I wasn't worried; I knew that the real saucer must be inside the *papier maché* one. My parents tried to assure me that it wasn't the case – that what I was looking at was the real saucer. But I didn't believe them. I wasn't fooled; I was angry. How could anyone perpetuate such a huge con on unsuspecting children - that we would accept these poor substitutes for the real thing? I could not accept it. I ripped the *papier maché* saucer apart, and I cried my eyes out.

What I want to do now is tell you another real story, a parallel story, about poor substitutes for the real thing, of bringing together the believable and unbelievable, a story set in Guyana, a story about *The lost Amerindian girls, the tooth fairy, and the Whore of Babylon*. Although it was not my intention, it is a title that smacks of magical realism, of bringing together the credible and the incredible, of having to question what you consider is real and suspend rational understandings to make room for the fantastic, because the things I want to talk about, about what is being done in the name of development in Guyana in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, cannot really be taking place, can they?

But magical realism isn't really a credible analytical framing for talking about what is done in the name of development, is it? Let me claim a more credible intellectual basis. Maybe I should just say that I am giving a feminist critique of both development and post development. But that would mean telling a somewhat different story, and I don't think feminism has yet comprehensively engaged with questions of suspending belief, and moreover, its engagement with development is a tainted one. So why not let me turn to magical realism, what Matthew Strecher (1999: 267) has defined as, "what happens when a highly detailed, realistic setting is invaded by something 'too strange to believe'." It may not function with the strict precision expected of theoretical frames but it serves my purpose, and its anchoring in the senses, in everyday affective states, gives it an analytical power that should not be underestimated. Guyana.

So let me start by telling you about Guyana. It is not, as some of you may be thinking, in Africa. It is not Ghana or Guinea. But it is an African story, and an Indian one, and an Amerindian one. And until 1966 – and arguably beyond - it was a British one. So it is also a story about the colonial and the post colonial. It's a story that started post 1492 in the very crucible of modernity, the Caribbean and its Black Atlantic (Gilroy 1993), and it is one that is underwritten by a non-white and violent human bodily history steeped into the land and the sea (McKittrick and Peake 2005).<sup>1</sup>

You may not think that you know this country - it rarely reaches the pages of *The Guardian* – but you do. You know it through its mythical name of El Dorado. You know of it through the travels of Sir Walter Raleigh who first landed there in 1595 (Goutier 1995) and brought back his own stories of the elusive city of gold, El Dorado. These reports caused Dutch, English and French traders to be attracted to what was then called Guiana and for 200 years they fought over the territory, for it to be finally ceded to the British in 1814 (DeWeever 1932: 3). Innumerable others followed in their tread, mapping, listing and categorising the country's bountiful resources of water, land and gold. You might know it through the reports of the Schomburgk brothers (1840; 1841a, b, c; 1923) sent by the Royal Geographical Society in the 1830s, through the novels and autobiographical tales of Evelyn Waugh (*A Handful of Dust*, *Ninety Two Days*, *When the Going was Good*), or through the table top mountains of the film, *The Lost World*. More recently you know it through David Attenborough's (1948, 1956) *Zooquest to Guyana* and the BBC series *Land of the Jaguar*. You know it through the 1978 disaster of the tragic deaths of 909 people in Jonestown. Through the 1980 assassination of Walter Rodney, political activist and author of *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*. You know it all too well through Demerara sugar, Tate and Lyle, and the Tate museums scattered across the British landscape, built from the profits accrued through slavery. Most recently you probably know it through the negotiations about a Low Carbon Development Strategy taking place between countries of the global south and north. And you could know it through the poetry of Martin Carter and the novels of Wilson Harris and Pauline Melville, to name just a few of the literary geniuses the country has produced.



Figure One. Map of the location of Guyana

Situated on the northern shoulder of South America, and the only English speaking country in the continent, as well as home to a number of Amerindian languages<sup>ii</sup> - Macusi, Patamona, Wapisiana, Arawak, Warrau, Carib, Wai Wai, Arecuna - Guyana shares its boundaries with Surinam (formerly Dutch Guiana), Brazil and Venezuela. It is approximately the same size as Britain but has a population of fewer than one million. The British plantocracy largely departed after Independence in 1966 leaving a population of Africans, descendants of slaves, and Indians, descendants of indentured labourers brought from India after the abolition of slavery in 1836, and Amerindians, the country's original inhabitants.

So...development in Guyana. Although development<sup>iii</sup> as an ideology has fallen out of fashion with many intellectuals, not only of its desirability but of its feasibility, it remains triumphant in global politics as does its effects on people in the South, many of whom indeed are struggling to be incorporated into development.<sup>iv</sup> This is also not to deny that so many people still seem to need to believe in development, despite its incorporation of things I consider are 'too strange to believe'.<sup>v</sup> Development, in this sense, can be thought of as the modern day **tooth fairy** - a

supposedly benign but mythical object, perpetuated across generations, that carries with it the promise of money, or material betterment.<sup>vi</sup>

While the colonial period in the Caribbean did indeed result in material betterment for the colonizers, the late 1970s and early 1980s were also a time of tremendous optimism in the post-colonial Caribbean, a period though that was derailed by the squashing of the Grenadian revolution in 1983. I first went to Guyana in 1980 – a pivotal year in the country when the promise of an independent nation state was also effectively extinguished with the assassination of Walter Rodney, a leading figure in the Working People’s Alliance. Since then Guyana has been embroiled in a downward spiral of development, of structural adjustment, structural adjustment with a human face, good governance projects, the Millennium Development Goals, and now the PRSP (Poverty Reduction Strategy Policy).<sup>vii</sup> These capitalist projects of development<sup>viii</sup>, played out in a nation state that has a racially divided populace entrenched by political parties determined to benefit themselves, have become increasingly and inextricably entwined with neoliberal practices of globalization, not least those of narco-economics.<sup>ix</sup> Their entanglement is manifested in a messy set of development practices lacking coherence and unity, some visible and grandiose, others subtle and discrete, many of which lie in the realm of ‘beyond belief’, and which have resulted for the vast majority of the population not in material betterment but rather in both absolute and relative poverty<sup>x</sup> and an entrenchment of “legacies of exclusion and marginality” (Kamugisha and Trotz 2007: i).<sup>xi</sup> So let me turn now to examine just one of these legacies to focus, arguably, on those most excluded, namely the children and youth of Guyana, and specifically among these, Amerindian children and youth and among these, Amerindian girls. The emerging interface of gender, racialised ethnicity, class, children and youth is indeed the backdrop against which Guyana’s future will be determined.

The lost Amerindian Girls.

I use the phrase **the lost Amerindian Girls** as a term that references a narrative of social exclusion of children and youth. How are they lost? I want to argue in a number of ways.

The story of Guyana has invariably been a story of the coast, an area populated by both African and Indian Guyanese. Living predominantly in the hard to access interior in small communities in the North West and along the Venezuelan and Brazilian border areas and in the Rupununi savannah, the Amerindian peoples of Guyana are politically and geographically marginalised and have fallen below most radars. Although comprising almost 10% of the population (approximately 77,000), the economic and social welfare of Amerindian people has never been a priority, largely as a result of racism and plain neglect (see Mentore 2007) and their contributions to the nation state have been erased, the Rupunini uprisings in the late 1960s largely expunged from social memory. Although electoral games have resulted in technology being delivered to these communities: chainsaws, boat engines, television sets (as village property) and more recently, solar panels, the problems of fuel and maintenance remain<sup>xii</sup>, and many live a life of basic subsistence. The majority are involved in shifting agriculture (farms can be 3-6 miles from habitations), hunting and fishing, although some may travel to other communities or to Georgetown for waged work or to go to secondary school. Other occupations include gold mining for males, small scale crafts for both men and women and sex work and domestic work for women.

Adolescence is a particularly vulnerable period for girls; it is a time when the world expands for boys but contracts for girls.<sup>xiii</sup> Amerindian girls can look forward to a life as a farmer and mother. Just as for Indian and African girls in Guyana their only legitimized path into womanhood is through motherhood. But those who leave their villages, enticed by stories of earning wages as waitresses or other legitimate forms of employment often enter into the murky world of the sex trade. It is a commonplace trade run by coastal 'business' people, both men and women, who deceive and cajole girls to leave their villages and work on the coast (Marcus *et.al.* 2004).<sup>xiv</sup> After only a day or two they are told they have to engage in sex work and are commonly held against their will and prevented from leaving and moved between locations to prevent them from being detected.<sup>xv</sup> This is arguably the most investment that has ever been put into Amerindian girls' lives.

Here is one girl's story that happened this summer. Brought by a 'business' woman from the Brazilian border town of Lethem, where she had been living unhappily with her father and step-mother, she was taken to a restaurant in a village on the coast where one other Amerindian girl was staying. The next day the business woman took her to stay at her house further along the coast. A concerned person in the girl's village, contacted a Red Thread woman with some information about her departure, who after a little detective work found where the girl was and went to visit her. Both the girl and woman reassured her that all was well, that the woman had felt sympathy for the girl's plight and had brought her out to have a better life; no mention was made of the stop at the restaurant. A few days later, checking on the girl, she was found to no longer be at the woman's home and was found at the restaurant instead, ready to start working. The Ministry of Social Services was called in and after discussions with the girl's father she was put on a bus, alone, back to Lethem. It is incredible that in 2009 the only solution by the state is to send her back, most probably for her journey only to start all over again. Where is she now? In lives characterised by movement many remain undocumented. However, even when in situ Amerindian girls can be lost. They are often lost in education. For example, in the interior there are now a number of secondary schools for Amerindian children so that they do not have to travel to Georgetown to access education beyond the primary level, but given the distances they have to travel they most often have to board. If they fail a grade, however, they are not allowed to stay in the boarding residence so unless they live locally they have to leave the school. One study (Das 1996) states it is these very girls who have to leave school who end up in Georgetown. It is incredible that in 2009 education policies for Amerindian children are so inflexible that failing can only result in expulsion, a lack of access to education, and a denial of a basic human right.

Indian and African girls do not fare much better. Although, ostensibly, education in Guyana is free parents have to pay for school uniforms, books, journey to and from school, school lunch, exam fees, and now extra lessons. Extra lessons, if a child wants to pass school exams are *de rigueur*. Even with extra lessons pass rates for the CXC exams are abysmally low. Figures that are repeatedly bandied about in international development reports about the high level of literacy in the country are simply untrue. They speak to an era in the 1970s and 1980s when Guyana had

some of the best schools in the Caribbean. Recent figures from the UNDP indicate that adult levels of literacy (% aged 15 and above, 1999-2006) are 98.5% for females and 99.0% for males. These percentages are identical to those for the United Kingdom.<sup>xvi</sup> Well if you do not believe them for the UK are you going to believe them for Guyana? They are, to put it simply, wrong. In fact they could not be more wrong. It is indeed unbelievable that the UNDP could get these figures so wrong. A 1998 study (Jennings 1998) came to a very different conclusion; conducted on 3,000 young adults aged 14-25 it measured functional literacy (ability to fill out passport and job application forms, for example) and confirmed what many already know - that there is a crisis of literacy among young people; 89% were considered to be functionally illiterate.<sup>xvii</sup>

In this era of global competition, technological change and increasing social inequality, the majority of these young adults did not even consider education all that important indicating that young people in general lack confidence in the future. After all, there are few jobs to apply for and those available will be given to those with the right political party connections. Indeed, it is estimated that only 2/3 of Guyanese children attend school (both primary and secondary) (Educare 2008; 17).<sup>xviii</sup> Apart from the cost factors boys drop out of school because of the lack of economic opportunities afforded them; street life with the promise of integration into a drug culture and money is much more immediately gratifying. Girls often drop out of school because of pregnancies or family duties. And although, assuming they have support to deal with baby care, they can return to school, there is still no programme response in the country to pregnant girls dropping out of school, “intimating that [for girls] society is still dealing with the issue of stigma, rather than a right to education” (Watkins *et.al.* 2007: 51).

Girls and boys are also lost in the current economic juncture in which companies have stopped hiring and whole industries are downsizing or closing down. Most of the legitimate industries in Guyana have not been able to survive the economic downturns of the last decade and the current financial crisis.<sup>xix</sup> It is the drug trade in cocaine that now fuels the Guyanese economy, and although official figures might want you to believe that economic growth is taking place it is a jobless growth; money laundering is not known for its support of a policy of full employment.

Children are also lost in the current crisis in care that has arisen from parents migrating (or other forms of separation) and leaving children behind, either with relatives or friends (what Red Thread refers to as child shifting) or in residential institutions.<sup>xx</sup> With households already overstretched and institutions ill equipped to cope, children are increasingly vulnerable to violence, to sexual and economic exploitation.<sup>xxi</sup> Many of these are from destitute and abusive homes and increasingly are AIDS orphans (the Caribbean, especially Haiti and Guyana have the highest levels of HIV / AIDS infection rates outside Africa).

Red Thread and development in Guyana.

Is this what passes for development in Guyana? Is development actually taking place? Here is what some of the women associated with Red Thread have to say about development in their country. What follows are four transcripts of abstracts from interviews I conducted in August 2009 with Jocelyn Dow, Andaiye, Karen de Souza, and Nicola Marcus. Each was asked only two questions<sup>xxii</sup>: What is development? And, is development taking place in Guyana?

Jocelyn Dow

**Jocelyn:** The current hat I wear is that I have been a board member for something called the Guyana Citizen's Initiative, which was an organization that came about around the flood of 2005 unfortunately after the Tsunami, so nobody gave a lick. And I used to be the former Chair of the WEDO Board (Women, Environment and Development Organization) that did a lot of work around the UN conferences from 1991 to the conference on Food and Monterey and so on. So I have spent a lot of time listening to governments and other actors talking about development and the right to development. Now, what do I think about development? Well, I know what I think of under-development and that is that it's a completely awful experience for countries and persons since it so negates any human potential and country potential. And so, by the same token, I think development has to be seen as the capacity, the wherewithal for a person – woman or man – to live to their full human potential, which means that they have to access to healthcare in the first instance, education, and the opportunity to find the kind of work that is, you know, commensurate with their education and their aspirations. So, this is one area of development that

I think is absolutely vital. I think the other thing about development is that we tend to see it as something to do with per-capita income and gross domestic product and so on. Well we know that unless we have equitable distribution of those monies and opportunities then you can have a very skewed development as many of our countries have at the moment. So for me, the struggle for development will be ongoing because it will be a class struggle, it will be a gender struggle and it will be a struggle no doubt between those that are young and those that are old and established. So that it is multi-dimensional in every aspect and it's something in which we all have to engage. If we really believe that every human being has the right to live to his or her full potential this must also be in harmony with nature. So now what we can assume to be development cannot be, importantly, at the cost of the environment and nature itself.

Andaiye

**Andaiye:** I don't know how to answer the question because when people are talking about development they seem to me to be talking about a version of the world as we know it now, but with things happening better, right? So that there's more whatever, more money, there's more well being, and so on. I really still belong to those politics where what you want to do is overturn the world as you know it. So you're talking about a radical alteration of all power relations. And that to me is the only context in which anything that I would consider development, whether in money terms or in terms of the human spirit or any of those things. Those are the only conditions under which I can see it happening. For the rest you're only talking about umm – what is it when they talk about sustainable development? What do they say? They're talking about making sure that you don't cut down everything. You know that stuff. To me, that's not for me development. And I think it's because we've all turned so hopeless, I mean literally hopeless, about the possibility of radically changing the world that we chat this other stuff. But it doesn't make any sense to me. I mean I certainly would not spend my life fighting for those things.

Karen de Souza

**Karen:** I think of development as the means by which people's status and people's relations are improved. And those means will take different forms depending on the situation we're talking about.

**Linda Peake:** Can you be a bit more concrete about what you mean?

**Karen:** I would say, for example in the context of Guyana, development might mean electricity that is reliable, water that is clean and reliable, that people have the means to live comfortably without having to work excessive hours. That I guess would refer to people living on the coast but it is a very different thing for people living in the hinterlands of Guyana because there are ways in which we romanticize a lot of the non technological culture of Amerindian peoples. But the lack of technology in those communities makes life very difficult. The problem there is that we have not had any conversations that begin to approximate a way of working through what development in those communities might mean. Does it mean that they have the same kinds of consumer goods, have access to the same kinds of consumer goods that are available on the coast? Does it mean that there are more labour saving devices in the community? We don't know what development means in that context when we are talking about a culture that is different from a western culture that dominates on the coast. So there are many ways in which trying to conceive of development or the process of development requires rather different considerations depending on the place and the thing that you're talking about.

**Linda:** And would you say that development is taking place in Guyana?

**Karen:** I would say it is not taking place largely because the vast majority of young people have no hope in the future. And they, certainly the young people that I am in touch with in various communities around the coast, don't have a plan for the future, which is a plan that keeps them in Guyana. Because they really have no prospects that they can see.

Nichola Marcus

**Nichola:** We can use the country for example. Our government would like to say that we've made a lot of developments. For them development, in terms of bridges and schools – they've built a lot of schools and so they would like to say that we have made a lot of developments in that area since there were a lack of schools. But school for me doesn't mean the building it means more than that. And what we have is a lot of buildings and no school because you have

students in the schools but no teachers. And in some cases you have teachers but there's not much teaching taking place. For example, the English language. The teacher's themselves do not know the language well enough to teach it to the children. So that for me is not development. [...] Again, the state of the country. The level that poor people are at. That people have to choose between sending their children to school and feeding them. So, if we are going to talk about development in a country these are the things that we need to look at. If there's development taking place then everybody should be able to benefit. And, at the moment, that is not what is happening. And so development, for me, should start from the bottom up. And that's not what is happening. And until people could look at [...] that we talking about what's happening in the economy and until we could look at the economy from the household and then reaching the national level then to me there's no point because poor people are still suffering.

Even within these short interviews there is obviously a range of views on what passes for development, but what all four women state is that development is not taking place in Guyana. But neither do they discount development. Their understanding of development is that of processes and practices that have to do with co-operation and synergy, with developing human potential, indicating that for them development fundamentally is not about the economic but the social and creating a viable society that leads to improvements in both the means and relations of development. It is about starting with the needs of households. It is about defining priorities on their own terms – about the right to participate, the right to work. It is, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, also about respecting nature, of taking into account the physical environment and the land. It is about inclusivity and recognizing the right to citizenship of all Guyana's peoples. It is about independence and sovereignty. It is about dignity. Ultimately, it is about creating hope through a politics of the possible.

What has Red Thread been doing about development that has resulted in the neglect of children, exponential increases in rates of illiteracy, and the creation of hopelessness?

Red Thread arose from the Working People's Alliance and started its work in Guyana over twenty years ago in 1986 and has as its mandate working and organizing with poor women

across race and geographical location. Its mandate stretches beyond the local and national arenas, also playing a role in the Caribbean region and internationally through the Global Women's Strike. Significantly it does not label itself an NGO, refusing to identify with the huge increase in the number of NGOs operating in the country and which, in Guyana stand in for civil society. With woman as its focus it has invariably ended up reaching out to socially excluded children. Over the years they have worked with children providing free school text books, supporting children with HIV/ AIDS, and have established literacy and computer classes and hot, nutritious meals for children in the local community in which they are based. They are also currently providing twice weekly literacy and computer classes to children from the Georgetown Drop In Centre, a home for children who for various reasons, including being physically and sexually abused, cannot live with their families.

To say that the latter is just a community based educational programme is to miss the point. Going to the Red Thread Centre provides these children with safe spaces; it is the only place these children can go where they know categorically that they will not be beaten. The beating of children is the norm in Guyana; attempts in 2006 by Red Thread and others to eradicate corporal punishment from schools was vociferously defeated...parents, school teachers, church leaders all decried the proposal resorting to the Biblical idiom of 'spare the rod, spoil the child', a discourse that steadfastly circulates in the country.<sup>xxiii</sup>

This safe space not only provides the children with access to technology, but with mentors and role models; it provides them with a community that says that they matter, that they are capable, that they are cared about, that they are listened to, that there is hope. Red Thread is providing them with human capital; while in the Red Thread Centre they have the time and space to be children. It provides a place where they can interact with their friends without suspicion, without feeling threatened. It is also providing these children with material capital; they are learning to read, write and use computers and are valued as future economic participants who are entitled to education and work. It is also developing their social capital; friendships and mentors and the freedom to build social networks nurtures their social, emotional and psychological development. Through friendships with peers and mentors they develop self confidence, gain a

sense of support, build communication skills, and access networks of information of ways of doing things differently. Gendered and sexualised stereotypes and abusive attitudes and behaviours are challenged: bullying is not allowed. They are told they have rights and that injustices against them will not be tolerated. So, for example, when two 14 and 16 year girls are caught fighting in the Drop In Centre and the staff take them to the police lock ups over night as punishment Red Thread challenges such practices that fail to treat children as children.

What is the evidence for these claims? The evidence is that the children keep on coming to the Red Thread Centre. They are confiding in the Red Thread women about their problems and personal issues. Not only that, they have now started doing homework. Can you imagine that? From going from living in situations of homelessness and abuse to not only going to school and staying in school but to actually wanting to do homework? How girls and boys pass through adolescence determines the futures of everyone around them – it shapes the health, education and wealth of each generation; but development in Guyana rarely invests in children. Investing in children is not a luxury; they are not a marginalized group to be pitied, they are the best and shortest route out of poverty (Plan 2009: 139).

But the spaces Red Thread provides – the physical, social and epistemological spaces – for the advancement of knowledge about progressive practices for development are not the norm in Guyana. As I was writing this (16<sup>th</sup> October 2009 in Guyana) Karen de Souza from Red Thread was asked to attend a meeting of the Peace Corps who are implementing projects for women and whose projects fall within the WAD / GAD approach, but are beginning to question it. WAD (Women and Development) and GAD (Gender and Development) are approaches to ‘incorporating women into development’ still widely adopted by international development organizations despite having been heavily critiqued by organisations such as Red Thread and by academic feminists. As Trotz (2007: 72) states, “Gender equity and ‘mainstreaming’ of women’s issues are offered up as good feminist practice – but [they are part of ] a practice that is bureaucratized, neutralized, and depoliticized, thus obscuring its conscription as an alibi for the entrenchment of social and economic policies that consign the majority of the ...population to permanent structural marginalization”. Karen is not paid to go to this meeting, not even her

transportation; it is assumed she is available, that her knowledge and time can come free, that she will question the framework, yes, but that there are indeed no problematic aspects of her being asked to attend a meeting to discuss the projects of 12 US volunteers. And moreover, whether it be the Peace Corps or VSO or CIDA or DIFD or UNIFEM or UNICEF or any of the many other bilateral, multilateral or local organizations working in Guyana, “[t]here is no overall coordination around work on gender within the donor community” (Watkins *et.al.* 2007: 25).<sup>xxiv</sup> Despite decades of development interventions on behalf of women – WID, WAD, GAD, Empowerment – in Guyana they remain piecemeal, small scale, and technical interventions, while the ‘women and development’ industry goes from strength to strength (Pearson 2005). Absolutely unbelievable.

### **Conclusion: What passes for development in Guyana?**

It seems to me that what passes for development in Guyana is less about the tooth fairy and more about the **Whore of Babylon**. The Whore of Babylon is a Christian allegorical figure of evil mentioned in the Book of Revelations in the Bible. At times she has been identified as Rome or Jerusalem, or as I use it here, as a recurrent theme associated with the corrupting power of materialism and the love of money. In Guyana the interests of the technocratic and managerialist elite align with those of international capital. Post-colonial state managers, multilateral and bilateral development agencies (the World Bank, the IMF, the WTO), aid agencies, NGOs, consultants, and private sector organisations such as banks, are the personal and institutional beneficiaries – the Whore of Babylon, shoring up and sustaining the (false) promise of development as a, “sphere of professional, organisational, and entrepreneurial activity” (Nandy 2002: 174).

Notwithstanding the engagement of so many elements of the development industry in Guyana what is being produced is not development but chaos (see Austin 2007). As early as 1995 the Human Development Index Report revealed that Jamaica and Guyana had fallen in the ranking of human development by more than any other developing country in the world.....Guyana was thirtieth in 1970: in 1995 it ranked at 50” (Levitt 2007: 357). The 2009 Human Development

Index ranks Guyana as #114 out of 182 countries (UK is 21, Haiti 149<sup>th</sup> and Palestine 110<sup>th</sup>).<sup>xxv</sup> As the development economist Cari Levitt (2007: 327) states: “The right to development has been subordinated to the rights of investors, fortified by the trade-enforceable regime of the World Trade Organization, and an ever growing list of economic and political conditionalities attached to official development finance”. As a result development has not been conducted with the interests of Guyanese people in mind. Instead of pursuing the development of local economic activities, those activities that would produce the largest profits for investors – the extraction of minerals and forest products, with no value added – have been enacted. The result has been a plunge in the standard of living of the majority of the population, causing many to leave. Indeed, there has been a steady contraction of the Guyanese economy since the 1970s (with the exception of 1991-94) (Watkins *et.al.* 2007) leaving it in a fragile state. It has problems meeting the Millennium Development Goals with debt servicing, rising oil prices, changes in terms of trade, especially for sugar, and limited economic diversification. The money supply has been drying up with the arrest (in the USA) of illegal drug traders, the introduction of VAT (at 16%) in 2007, and the cancellation of the HIPC (Highly Indebted Poor Country) debt relief programme between the government and the Inter-American Development Bank, which has reduced the level of aid available.

The poor have had to make the largest adjustments especially as there has also been a decrease in remittances due to the current financial crisis. And while poverty is feminized, it is males whose employment opportunities are currently being restricted (with the restructuring of the sugar industry (Indian men) and the decline of bauxite production (African men). Bauxite, forestry and gold mining have attracted some foreign direct investment (FDI), but this has fallen off this decade due to the perceived vulnerability of Guyana as a SIDS<sup>xxvi</sup> and the problems of trying to privatise electricity, water and communications, which have also resulted in an increase in the cost of services. The nature of crime has also both changed and increased since the mid 1980s, with the post SAP era of economic depression, the boom in drug consumption in the USA, especially cocaine, the influences of organized crime in the region, the (possible?) impact of criminal deportees on levels of crime, and the increased involvement of young people as both victims and perpetrators of violent crime (Kambon and Henderson 2008).

In the thirty years I have been visiting the country basic social services - water, sanitation, electricity, health care and education – are still malfunctioning; blackouts are still common, water supply is erratic, whole areas of Georgetown still have no sanitation system, all sectors of health care suffer from a chronic shortage of personnel, as does the education system, once the jewel in Guyana’s crown. Those who can afford to do so have migrated, leaving a society characterized by social disintegration, where many turn to religion for salvation: most households have little or no security, including protection from crime, economic and natural disasters and are afforded few opportunities to participate genuinely in development processes (see Melville and Wint 2007) that provide for the realization of self dignity, respect, and self esteem. What many do have instead is the emotional humiliation of dependency and the moral pain of having to make choices – as Nichola noted, of mothers having to decide whether to use what little money they have for food or sending their children to school.

Red Thread has engaged in many civil protests over everyday living conditions that have held the government to public account on its promises to deliver development (see Trotz 2007) most recently around the imposition of VAT, police violence and lawlessness, and its failure to pass the new Sexual Offences Bill (to mention just a few). Red Thread’s engagements arise from its understandings of the sensibilities that inform the basis of women’s labour in processes of social reproduction<sup>xxvii</sup> - the resourcefulness, resilience and creativity of Guyanese women that has carried the country through its many crises - and not from neoliberal notions of fiscal responsibilities or the sanitised technical speak of ‘stake holders’, ‘good governance’, ‘WID’, ‘WAD’ or ‘GAD’, or through the epistemic violence performed through development categories of ‘Third World woman’, or even ‘feminism’. In this sense, epistemological framings, or how we know development, are understood by Red Thread not as, “a fixed architecture of knowledge production but as achieved labour and worldly practice” (Stoler 2008: 350), based upon the ethical imperative of keeping hope alive. Their work points to ‘hopeful geographies’ (Gibson-Graham 2008), of the alternative spaces of development that can emerge from agency that engages with a politics of the possible.

Contemporary discourses about what can and should be done in the name of development in Guyana form a battleground where various flows – institutional and bodily - of what matters

clash up against each other, it is a battle between making choices based on an ethics of concern for all versus the Whore of Babylon. It behoves us as academics that we find a positioning – a political vantage point, a social location – from which we can discern what is credible, believable, plausible, and sincere, versus what is unbelievable and incredible.

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<sup>i</sup> Here is what Walter Rodney, the Guyanese academic and activist had to say about the carving out of the Guyanese coast, the vast proportion of which lies below sea level:

The Venn Sugar Commission of 1948 estimated that each square mile of [sugar] cane cultivation involved the provision of forty-nine miles of drainage canals and ditches and sixteen miles of the higher level of waterways used for transportation and irrigation. The Commission noted that the original construction of these waterways must have entailed the moving of at least 100 million tons of soil. This meant that slaves moved 100 million tons of

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heavy, water-logged clay with shovel in hand, while enduring conditions of perpetual mud and water (Rodney 1981: 2).

<sup>ii</sup> The majority of Amerindian peoples speak one or more Amerindian languages as well as English.

<sup>iii</sup> The current concept of development emerged after the Second World War with President Truman's programme of international 'fair dealing' but the term 'development' first came into the English language in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, meaning 'unfolding'; this association with evolution and linear notions of progress has been hard to shake off (Watts 2000).

<sup>iv</sup> Jonathan Crush (1995) among others has argued that the discourse of development, "the forms in which it makes its arguments and establishes its authority, the manner in which it constructs the world, are usually seen as self-evident and unworthy of attention", although there is now a large literature from post-modern and post-colonial scholars that have drawn attention to modes of establishing expertise and authority, the power relations it underwrites and the forms of knowledge it produces. See also McGregor (2009) and the issues of the Singapore Journal of Tropical Geography (2005) 26 (1) and (2).

<sup>v</sup> Kothari (1993) goes so far as to claim that its now hegemonic status in the twenty first century is such that we can think of development as the new fundamentalism. Leonard (1997: 270) goes further: "Development, as in Third World development, is a debauched word, a whore of a word. Its users can't look you in the face...It is an empty word which can be filled by any user to conceal any intention, a Trojan horse of a word. It implies that what is done to people by those more powerful than themselves is their fate, their potential, their fault....".

<sup>vi</sup> The tooth fairy is a mythical character depicted as a fairy that gives a child money or gifts in exchange for a baby tooth that has fallen out and typically placed under their pillow at night while they sleep.

<sup>vii</sup> The inadequacy of such models of development is probably best illustrated by the inability of the PRSP in Guyana to respond to the 2005 flood, to lives being lived in crisis.

<sup>viii</sup> Development has all been used to justify violence and injustice through the imposition of unequal sacrifices to extract external surplus by agencies such as the market and the state.

<sup>ix</sup> The vast bulk of the drug trade in the Caribbean is fuelled by cocaine. As a transshipment point Guyana serves the USA, Canada and Europe with most cocaine coming from Columbia, Venezuela and Brazil. There is no one organised ring but a number of loosely connected networks (Caribbean Community 2002).

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<sup>x</sup> Poverty is not basically an economic problem; “it is a state of social, political, psychological and existential being that defines the human condition at a given point in history” (Kothari 1993:1) that has grown out of the international contradictions of capitalist development.

<sup>xi</sup> In 1999 a UNDP survey showed that 36% of the population lived in absolute poverty on less than US\$1.40 per day, 78% of whom lived in rural interior areas (UNDP 1999) and that 85% of Amerindian people live in poverty (Ministry of Labour 2006).

<sup>xii</sup> But invariably alcohol is available.

<sup>xiii</sup> Although legally girls can inherit land and property, the gendered division of labour, meaning girls conduct housework but boys rarely do, and early motherhood is cutting off girls from education and economic opportunities. Immersion in unpaid housework sets the standard for what girls can do, and how they perceive themselves.

<sup>xiv</sup> The current ‘panic’ in the Caribbean over trafficking, especially trafficking of girls and women into the sex trade, is related US foreign policy. Annual reports have to be made by Caribbean governments to the US State Department over unregulated migration and forced labour and their strategies to deal with these issues. Countries are ranked annually into three tiers, with those in the lowest tiers threatened with economic sanctions. Guyana is currently in Tier 2 and since 2004 it has enacted anti-trafficking laws (Kempadoo 2007).

<sup>xv</sup> In a study conducted by Red Thread on sex work (Marcus *et al* 2004) trafficking in persons for the purposes of sexual exploitation was found to be widespread involving mostly young Amerindian girls from riverain or interior areas. Trafficking of all girls and women into mining areas in the interior also takes place. And it is a trade increasingly becoming a pan Caribbean one. See also Red Thread (1999), Peake and Trotz (1999), Peake (2000) and Peake and de Souza (2010) for further Red Thread based research.

<sup>xvi</sup> The GDI is a human development index developed by the UNDP which measures levels of inequalities between men and women across countries.

<sup>xvii</sup> This would suggest a figure in the 70s percentage range for standard of literacy in the country (Jennings 1998).

<sup>xviii</sup> Children can leave school at age 14 ½ but are expected to stay on until 16, to complete fifth form.

<sup>xix</sup> Current labour force participation is at about 55% as well as problems of underemployment and unemployment (with unemployment of women being double that of men (DFID 2007)), and especially among young people. It is

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estimated that over 80% of university graduates - the country's technical, managerial and professional personnel - emigrate (Ministry of Labour 2006).

<sup>xx</sup> There are over 32,000 orphans in Guyana yet there is still an 'absence of standards and norms for institutional care' (Ministry of Labour 2006: 7). There are currently a number of laws before parliament for the regulation of care. Their enforcement, however, is uncertain.

<sup>xxi</sup> AIDS /HIV is now considered a general epidemic in Guyana and no longer restricted to high risk groups with the main mode of transmission being heterosexual sex (Ministry of Health, 2004). After sub-Saharan African countries, the Caribbean has the highest levels of HIV – Haiti (11%), Guyana (6%), Trinidad and Tobago (5%), Jamaica (5%). UNAIDS estimate 6% of children in Guyana have lost one or both parents to HIV / AIDS and that HIV/ AIDS prevalence is 2.5%. AIDS is the leading cause of death among adults aged 24-44, with one out of every four deaths being AIDS-related (Ministry of Labour 2006).

<sup>xxii</sup> None of those interviewed knew in advance the questions they would be asked.

<sup>xxiii</sup> The new Education Act has not yet gone through parliament, but it includes beating of children as one of a menu of measures of discipline.

<sup>xxiv</sup> Neither was gender integrated into the first PRSP.

<sup>xxv</sup> The Human Development Index (HDI) is a UNDP comparative measure of life expectancy, literacy, education and standards of living for countries worldwide. It is a standard means of measuring well-being, especially child welfare. It is used to distinguish whether the country is a developed, developing or an under-developed country.

<sup>xxvi</sup> Guyana is considered a SIDS country (Small Island Developing State) because most of the developed coastline is below mean high tide sea level. There has been a failure to act on climate reform, despite the depletion of natural resources by international mining and forestry companies and the floods in 2005 which led to the collapse of many businesses.

<sup>xxvii</sup> Social reproduction is the "stuff of everyday life (Katz 2001) that provides the basis for production to take place, and ultimately human existence (see Silvey 2009).