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Narratives of food insecurity in the penal colony: interpreting memories of 'slow violence' in French Guiana and New Caledonia

Sophie Fuggle

Department of History, Heritage and Global Cultures, Nottingham Trent University, Nottingham, United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland

ABSTRACT

After decades of collective forgetting, heritage initiatives have resulted in the restoration of sites linked to France's former penal colonies in French Guiana and New Caledonia which operated in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In both territories, museums dedicated to the history of the 'bagne' have been created in buildings once used as kitchens and bakeries. However, as with other forms of penal heritage, the opportunity to create more nuanced and sustained narratives around the lived experience of food insecurity for those sent to the penal colonies remains subordinated to more sensationalist accounts of physical constraint and corporal punishment. This article analyses existing narratives and museography at the two sets of sites, identifying potential for further memory and interpretive work around food, nutrition, and sustainability. The article explores convict memoirs and correspondence that emphasise the 'slow violence' of malnutrition resulting from poor-quality produce and unequal distributions of rations amongst convict populations. The wider intention is to consider how historical narratives of food insecurity can be developed at sites of former penal heritage to foster awareness and empathy around contemporary forms of food poverty, emphasising that food insecurity is still used as a form of control within spaces of confinement.

RÉSUMÉ

Après plusieurs décennies d'oubli collectif, des projets de patrimoine ont mené à la restauration des sites liés aux bagnes coloniaux de la Guyane et de la Nouvelle Calédonie (en opération pendant les XIXe et XXe siècles). Aux deux territoires, on a inauguré des musées du bagne au sein des anciens bâtiments qui servaient de cuisine ou de boulangerie. Même s'il existe grand potentiel au sein de ces sites de témoigner de l'expérience vécue de la pénurie alimentaire, cet aspect de l'histoire reste subordonné aux perspectives sensationnalistes de la contrainte et de la torture physique. Cet article analysera la muséographie des deux territoires. On identifiera les possibilités pour un travail de mémoire autour des questions de la nourriture, de la nutrition et de la durabilité. A travers une lecture des mémoires

CONTACT Sophie Fuggle Sophie.fuggle@ntu.ac.uk Nottingham Trent University, MAE 328, Clifton Campus, Nottingham NG11 8NS, United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland.

et de la correspondance des forçats, l'article soulignera la violence 'lente' de la malnutrition, résultat de la mauvaise qualité de la nourriture et de la distribution inégale des biens. On se demande comment les récits historiques de la pénurie alimentaire pourraient être mis en valeur aux lieux de mémoire pénaux pour mieux comprendre les enjeux de la pauvreté alimentaire comme technologie de contrôle contemporaine autant qu'historique.

Introduction: thinking beyond shark fodder

If you take a catamaran tour to the Iles du Salut (Salvation Islands) in French Guiana, you may be treated to a short speech by the skipper. They will point out Alfred Dreyfus's hut on Devil's Island, the smallest of the islands. Directly opposite the hut on Ile Royale, the largest island, are the vestiges of the abattoir which functioned to supply the islands with some of their meat during their use as 'natural prisons' within France's largest and most notorious penal colony.[1] The skipper will recount how the blood of slaughtered animals would run into the water, ensuring the islands were always surrounded by sharks. This acted as additional insurance against convict escapes. The story directly co-opts the supply of food to a wider narrative that emphasises the sensationalism and violence commonly associated with French Guiana's dark history as a penal colony which operated for a hundred-year period between 1852 and 1953 and saw over 70,000 men and 1,000 women exiled from France and its other overseas colonies (Renneville 2007).[2]

This article takes stock of the challenges and possibilities of interpreting food cultures and insecurity in the penal colony at former sites linked to this history. The central claim being made is that one cannot understand the legacy of this form of colonial operation without engaging the question of food as central to both the lived experience of transported convicts and the shaping of the colonial landscape through agricultural production. Food insecurity represented an additional form of punishment intended to further the suffering of those doing time in the penal colony. Yet, the paradox here is that for a labour force, inadequate nutrition not only rendered the possibility of development moot but sabotaged the premise of creating a sustainable agricultural production for both convicts and the territory's wider population (Redfield 2000, 104). Thus, food insecurity was also highly expensive as the penal administration continued to import a significant amount of produce from France.

As suggested in the introductory anecdote, where stories of food are presented as part of public memory activity today, these often fail to convey the complexity of the penal operation. This is for several reasons. First, there is a tendency to focus on the sensational. At the Camp de la Transportation in Saint Laurent du Maroni, French Guiana, tour guides dedicate a significant part of their narrative to the final hours of those condemned to death, including details of their final meal. This is despite the limited use of the guillotine within the penal colony (one or two executions per year) compared with mainland France. Second, text panels found in the museum exhibitions and at sites where vestiges have been preserved are limited in the information they can transmit. Frequently, these draw on archival sources including official lists of rations which often wildly diverged from what

convicts actually received. Elsewhere panels offer a snapshot of convict life via quotations from convict memoirs. What such approaches miss is an appreciation of the symbolic role of food for those undergoing sentences 7,000 km from home alongside the slow violence (Nixon 2011) of long-term malnutrition which is exacerbated by the emergence of complex unofficial systems which saw food redistributed in a way that reinforced social hierarchies and inequalities outside the penal colony.

The article will take up examples of built heritage (historic buildings which have either been maintained as ruin, restored and/or repurposed) belonging to the penal operation in both French Guiana and New Caledonia. New Caledonia was identified as a second site for colonial development via convict transportation, with the first convoy of convicts sent to the territory in 1864. Between 20,000 and 30,000 prisoners, including 1,000 women, were sent there (Renneville 2007). For a period, the penal colony in French Guiana was reserved for colonial subjects, with convicts from mainland France and Europe sent to New Caledonia. Coinciding with the creation of a new category of convict—*relégués* (repeat offenders)—in the late 1880s, transportation from France to French Guiana resumed. The relative success of agricultural development in New Caledonia made it more attractive to settler colonialism and convict labour become increasingly undesirable to the growing bourgeois society of *colons*. Transportation ceased in 1897 and the penal colony wound down its operation by 1924.

Both territories have been subjected to a general forgetting around their penal histories and heritage. As Forsdick (2020) points out, the *bagne* was omitted from Pierre Nora's epic *lieux de mémoire* project despite being embedded in French popular imaginaries of punishment and exile both during its operation and after its closure. Significant work to validate these histories in the territories themselves has been led by key figures keen to remove the stigma around their own convict heritage. In New Caledonia, the historical work of Barbançon (2003), whose maternal grandfather was a transportee, has been supplemented by a wider local interest in built heritage linked to all aspects of the territory's colonial history, embodied in the work and publications of the Société d'études historiques de Nouvelle-Calédonie since 1969 and the advocacy work of the Association Témoignage d'un Passé (ATP) created in 1975. At the end of the 2000s, ATP were charged by the Province Sud administration with developing an 'Itinéraire du bagne' with the first panels inaugurated in May 2014. Partly inspired by the UNESCO World Heritage Convict Sites located across in Australia, the itinerary is aimed at highlighting the many different sites linked to New Caledonia's history as penal colony whilst allowing each site to maintain its own identity and interpretation (Lafon 2009). The work culminated in the inauguration in 2021 of a small museum located in a former bakery belonging to the penal settlement on Ile Nou.

During three decades as mayor of Saint Laurent du Maroni in French Guiana, Léon Bertrand, also a descendant of a transported convict, privileged restoration initiatives which both validated and repurposed buildings and sites formerly belonging to the penal administration (Rennie 2004). Notable here is the work carried out in the Camp de la Transportation, which now includes a museum, municipal library, artist's residence, theatre and multimedia lab as well as the municipality's archives and stabilised ruins of the 'quartier disciplinaire' (where convicts were imprisoned in individual cells and collective 'blockhauses' as further punishment). Elsewhere preservation and restoration work has been undertaken under the direction of different local and

regional committees. Since the 1960s, the Salvation Islands have fallen under the jurisdiction of the Centre Nationale d'Études Spatiales, who, along with the Conservatoire du littoral, have overseen the restoration and management of key buildings including the hospital and the chapel on Ile Royale. Vestiges belonging to Camp Crique-Anguille (a former camp for Vietnamese convicts) in the commune of Montsinéry-Tonnegrande (45 km from Cayenne) have been cleared of vegetation and made further accessible via the creation of walkways under the direction of the Conservatoire du littoral with funding and research support from multiple regional, national and European agencies. A series of interpretive panels offer further exposition of the site.

What the two sets of sites and their valorisation as cultural heritage demonstrate is the widespread, fragmented nature of the penal settlements which offer a built heritage and landscape which is more complex, uneven and expansive than other forms of penal heritage. The different actors, government agencies and independent associations involved in restoring and interpreting the built heritage in both French Guiana and New Caledonia also provide a unique perspective allowing us to identify shared approaches, convergences and challenges to this form of collective memory work.

The focus of the article inevitably brings the fields of prison heritage and carceral geography into conversation with memory studies and food studies. To contextualise the penal heritage in French Guiana and New Caledonia in terms of narratives of food insecurity and the potential to further develop interpretive strategies that draw on these, a preliminary overview of recent work on food interpretation within museums will be presented. This is followed by reflection on the current state of research into carceral cultures, looking at work being done on the symbolic role of food for people sentenced to imprisonment or detention alongside the nutritional impact of food insecurity within such spaces.

Continuing with a study of the sites of food production and distribution at both sets of sites, the article will explore how built heritage belonging to the penal colony is frequently linked to the task of feeding a large population in difficult conditions. It will consider the architectural and political reasons why such vestiges often remain where other forms of structure have long since disappeared. In identifying some of the challenges around interpreting food at sites linked to former penal colonies and settlements, the final part of the article will propose a return to convict correspondence and reports housed at the Archives Nationales d'Outre-Mer. Beyond tales of sensationalism and heroic exceptionalism found in celebrity memoirs such as *Papillon* (Charrière 1969) and *Dry Guillotine* (Belbenoit 1938),[3] these sources offer greater insight into the ways food insecurity enforced social inequalities and hierarchies within the penal population as well as the role of shared food practices and the symbolic function of certain forms of food. The article will conclude by suggesting that despite attempts to present food (in) securities as a key aspect of life in the *bagne*, there is potential to make greater use of the multi-sited built heritage in both French Guiana and New Caledonia to provide a more nuanced understanding of convict life as well as encourage reflection on contemporary experiences of food (in)security, sustainability and the ongoing global practice of incarceration.

Food, memory and museums

The important role of food as a conduit for both individual and collective memory has long been acknowledged within museological practice. As Nucci and Hallman (2012) have argued, museums could play a significant role not only in enhancing scientific literacy around food but in encouraging discussion around existing knowledge, knowledge sources (such as popular culture) and common misperceptions. Following the participatory turn (Simon 2010) whereby museums have proactively sought to rethink community engagement and interaction, increased attention has been given to the potential of food to foster greater inclusion and participation of diverse social groups. Drawing on Barthes's 1961 essay identifying food as a system of communication (Barthes 1961), Levent and Mihalache (2018) argue that '[F]ood's flexibility to be studied from multiple perspectives—as a subject of politics, as a form of cultural capital, as gender performance, as global traveller, or as a source of social anxiety—is what facilitates its diverse uses in museum practice' (4). Such perspectives can draw on vast material resources from a range of disciplines including archaeology (Bescherer Metheny 2017; Stockhammer 2016) and anthropology (Moreno-Black 2017; Shields-Argelès 2018) whilst engaging different forms of interpretation including art and performance (Buller 2012) and inviting community interaction (Silagy 2012) through programming activities that frequently explore food history through tasting and sharing (Steinberg 2012).

Much work done by museums around food interpretation has been based on nostalgia amongst visitors for certain foods rather than dealing with the question of how to 'interpret' unpleasant food associated with difficult, longer histories. In his account of food tours organised by New York's Tenement Museum, Steinberg describes how '[t]he immediacy of food memories would draw visitors into a rich scholarly field in the history of immigrant food culture . . .' (2012, 82). He goes on to note how the discussions facilitated by food tours often led to wider reflection amongst participants around their own family histories, which included admissions of shame around food poverty (87). There are multiple challenges around how to interpret 'colonial' food and, moreover, the impact of colonial food production on a landscape. In her discussion of early forms of food interpretation as part of 'living histories' presented at historic house museums and former plantations, Moon (2016) warns how these types of display can often render entire populations invisible and rely on a form of romanticisation that erases the systemic inequalities and oppression underpinning much historic food production. One notable counterexample to this form of interpretation is Michael Twitty's work around 'foodscapes of slavery' which uses cooking demonstrations to teach about the impact of the transatlantic slave trade on food production, landscapes and cultures across the United States, especially in the South (see https://afroculinaria.com/).

What wider possibilities exist for storytelling and interpretation that challenges dehumanising narratives whilst also emphasising the slow violence of food insecurity past and present? Scholars have argued that tackling the ongoing problem of global food insecurity (especially in zones of conflict and sites of detention) requires a cross-disciplinary approach (Collinson and Macbeth 2014). This includes the use of historical narratives of food insecurity which offer a means of better understanding not only contemporary issues (Yun Lee 2011) but also the effect of media representations on public perception and action (Ruscia 2014). Museums and other heritage sites have an important role here

as widely trusted institutions (Di Liscia 2021) and in the different forms of storytelling and reflective, embodied experiences they offer to visitors. However, in the case of sites linked to penal heritage, a significant shift in interpretative strategies is often required.

Much has been written about how prison museums and other forms of built heritage related to prisons and penal colonies frequently engage in sensationalist forms of interpretation which privilege focus on physical constraint and torture (Brown 2009; Welch et al. 2017). Most prison museums, if not all, display at least one set of shackles, handcuffs or other forms of restraining device historically used on prisoners. Frequently, these devices have much in common with present-day forms of restraint. The overriding narrative such displays produce is that prisoners were perceived by the authorities as physically dangerous and thus required careful, frequent restraint using these technologies. However, in many cases, especially where forced labour was a core part of a convict's sentence, restraint was less heavily enforced on a daily basis than such interpretation implies. Instead, the main form of physical suffering imposed by the regime frequently relates to the type and amount of food available to convicts.

Increasing attention is being paid by scholars and activists around the symbolic, psychological and disciplinary function of food within prisons (Godderis 2006). In the USA, the 2020 report *Eating Behind Bars: Ending the Hidden Punishment of Food in Prison* (Impact Justice 2020), emphasised 'the inequities and troubling trends' in state prisons. In 2022, The Museum of London showcased the project 'We are what we eat: an exploration of food in prison' featuring art created by men incarcerated at HMP Pentonville. Despite the growing visibility around food in prison, scholars of penal tourism have thus far given little attention to the way in which food is interpreted (or overlooked) at sites of imprisonment. Where food is discussed, this often relates to the role of food consumption as part of tourist experiences involving working prisons such as the Clink restaurant in Brixton UK (Turner 2016). Other analyses of heritage sites tend to refer briefly to food rations within more general historical contextualisation of prison conditions. Where food interpretation is subject to greater scrutiny, this pertains to displays which sensationalise the abject experience of hunger, such as the tableau of the 'Ratman' at the Clink Museum in London (Huey and Broll 2017, 532–3).

A tale of two kitchens

One starting point for thinking about built heritage and food insecurity within former penal colonies in the French Empire is via the Musées du bagne located in Saint Laurent du Maroni, French Guiana, and on Ile Nou, New Caledonia. While the geographies surrounding the two sites and their current functions differ, as does the collective memory agenda linked to the two territories as former *bagnes*, it seems more than just a coincidence that both museums are housed in former spaces of food production. On the one hand, the buildings' longevity is probably linked to their structural design as required to withstand extreme heat. On the other hand, kitchens and bakeries do not embody the same 'carcerality' as other penal colony architecture and as such their original associations could be more easily forgotten prior to restoration as heritage sites. In French Guiana, the museum building was once one of the kitchens serving the Camp de la Transportation. In New Caledonia, the museum (only inaugurated in 2021) is housed in the former bakery that once served penal settlements situated on Ile Nou.

Indeed, the single-storey buildings have comparable stone structures and date from similar periods within France's history of convict transportation. Saint Laurent du Maroni was established as a prison town and administrative centre of the penal colony in 1863, a decade after the first convoys were sent to the territory. New Caledonia was established as a second penal colony in 1864 (Figure 1).

The kitchen building in Saint Laurent is flanked by two smaller wings—one used to house the 'salle anthropométrique (where convicts underwent registration on arrival in Saint Laurent) and a small chapel. Entrance via the salle anthropométrique gives the subtle impression of boarding a ship. A large artificial wall features images of the departure from Saint Martin de Ré with its reverse-side taken up with convict registration cards and anthropometric instruments. The kitchen section is dedicated to everyday life in the penal colony, with the chapel somewhat appropriately focused on the closure of the bagne, with significant space given to the work of journalist Albert Londres and the Salvation Army worker Charles Péan in bringing public attention to the conditions of the penal colony.

No structures have been significantly altered as part of the building's restoration. However, the openness of the kitchen as a built space renders it a kind of 'white cube' in comparison to other built heritage of the penal colony. Hanging from the ceiling are screen prints of photographs taken by photographer Dominique Darbois in 1951 of some of the last remaining 'libérés', heavily tattooed, emaciated men who fill the space with a ghostly presence. Despite this haunting, the kitchen *qua* museum space is quiet and empty, less popular among visitors than the guided tours of the disciplinary quarter's cells and blockhauses. As such it is hard to imagine its former life as a busy, chaotic kitchen supplying food for the camp's population. On the wall by the chimney, the following statement appears:

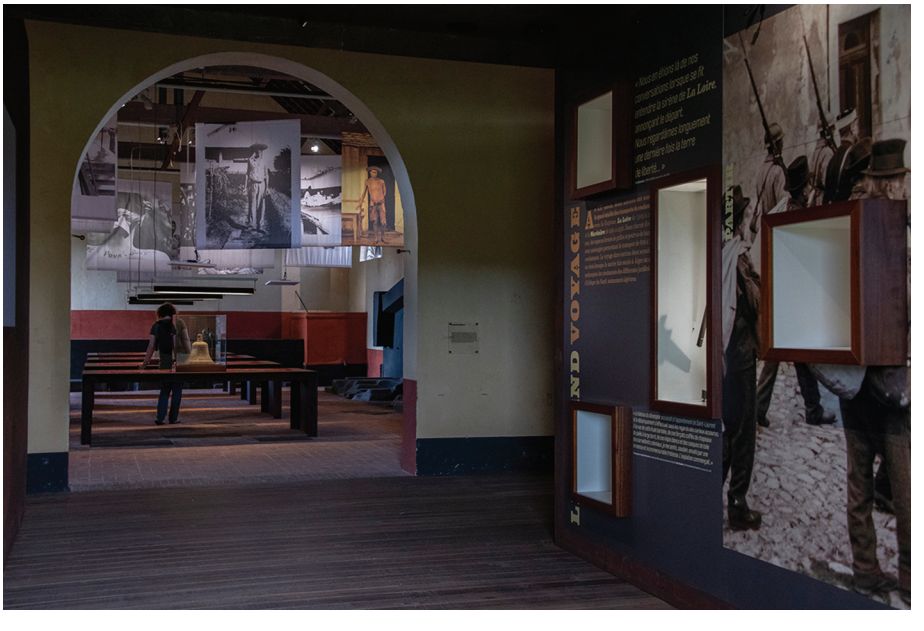

Figure 1. View of the 'cuisine' from the 'salle anthropométrique'. Musée du bagne, Saint Laurent du Maroni. © Claire Reddleman (2018).

> Nourrir près de 1500 condamnés n'est pas une mince affaire et la cuisine est un lieu essentiel de la vie quotidienne. Les rations sont notoirement insuffisantes. Les vols, les détournements et la mauvaise qualité des aliments aggravent la situation de malnutrition, surtout pour les condamnés qui n'ont ni argent ni influence.

While this statement sums up neatly the challenges of feeding the large convict population and the abuses that took place within the system, it clearly does not do justice to the complexity of food culture and food insecurity within the penal colony and its hundred-year operation.

On Ile Nou in New Caledonia, the former Boulangerie Guillain has recently been inaugurated as a Musée du bagne. Where vestiges of the *bagne* exist across Ile Nou, these have mostly been repurposed by the university, the psychiatric hospital and the prison. The foreboding 'quartier disciplinaire' was destroyed after the closure of the penal colony. Prior to the creation of its permanent exhibition, the bakery building was used in tours and for other ATP activities. In 2020, a guided tour was organised on the theme 'Nourrir et soigner au bagne de l'ile Nou' which saw the space furnished with barrels and flour sacks. The new permanent exhibition, similar to the one in Saint Laurent du Maroni, offers a more general account of the penal colony via text and image panels.[4] Artefacts associated with the bakery, such as large bread palettes and troughs, are lined up alongside the remains of the bread ovens, relegated to a more marginal role than previously (Figure 2). As such, the building has also been redefined as a neutral space which references rather than centres its role within the penal colony. Of course, the space of the camp kitchen or bakery is anything but neutral. As the quotation above indicates, it was here that some of the worst forms of systematic inequality and suffering took place.

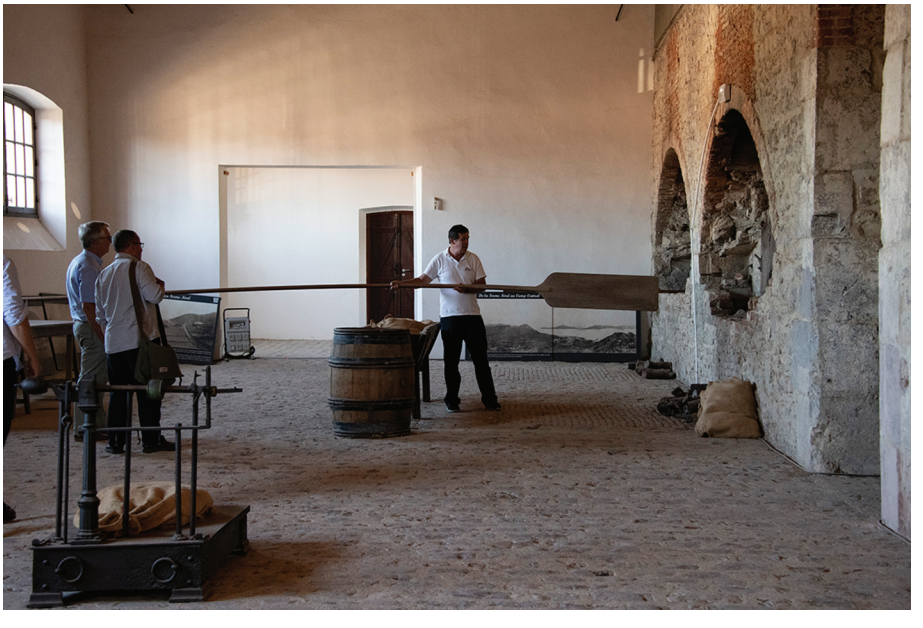

Figure 2. Boulangerie Guillain prior to creation of the Musée du bagne. © Claire Reddleman (2018).

Interpreting wider carceral geographies of the penal colony

Having considered the presentation of two small Musées du bagne found in French Guiana and New Caledonia respectively, I now want to expand the analysis to explore how food culture and insecurity within the penal colony have been interpreted at sites where built heritage takes the forms of ruins and the visitor experience takes place outside. In presenting an example from each former penal colony, the aim is to identify the limitations and potential of these sites and as such leads to more questions than it is possible to answer.

Bagne des Annamites, French Guiana

At the Bagne des Annamites in Montsinéry-Tonnegrade, a series of panels tell the story of the camp (one of three established in 1931 to house Vietnamese convicts, many of whom had been involved in anti-colonial activism). Very little remains of the original site but numerous toilets highlight the emphasis on hygiene in comparison to earlier camps. Other significant ruins include rows of moss-covered cells with bars instead of ceilings, the surrounding building and upper walkways having been dismantled, and the 'four' [oven] belonging to the guards' quarters. The panels (see Figure 3) offer a high level of detail whilst remaining unobtrusive—an acknowledgement that different users of the site, including those taking the trail to the picnic site at Crique Anguille, might not necessarily want to be confronted with the dark heritage of the penal colony in their walk through the forest.

The panels reproduce a mixture of official documents, images, correspondence and maps. On the panel describing the organisation of the convict living quarters [Le quartier des condamnés], an extract from a letter dated 29 January 1939 describes a work and hunger strike involving 150 convicts. Other panels include a list of rations (which differed from those given to European convicts in other camps) and details of farming undertaken on-site. The official sources cited offer a snapshot of the daily experience of convicts living and working in the camp, but require more work to produce a meaningful appreciation of what such rationing looked like in reality. Did the convicts receive what they were supposed to? Who controlled distribution? How was the calorific intake offset against the energy required in their daily tasks? Was food grown used to supplement rations or was it sold for profit? It is difficult to explore all these questions at a site like this where vestiges exist in a state of stabilised ruin amongst secondary forest. Yet, I wonder if the state of ruination and rewilding can actually create a useful setting in which to explore the gaps between official documentation and lived reality in contrast to over-determined reconstructions.

Prony village, New Caledonia

The vestiges at Prony village once known as Camp Sebert (1869–1911) offer an important opportunity for understanding how forest camps operated as well as how these shaped the wider landscape of New Caledonia via practices such as logging (and subsequently mining). Today there are a few holiday residences located in the area and it is possible to organise private guided tours to the village. Prony is one of the stops on the Itinéraire du Bagne as well as part of the PR2 walking route. Consequently, it is well signposted with

Figure 3. Weather-damaged interpretation panel on 'cultures vivrières et élevage'. Bagne des Annamites, Montsinéry-Tonnegrande. © Claire Reddleman (2018).

multiple interpretive panels. The work to excavate and map out the different parts of the camp (from the 1990s onwards) has resulted in the location of guard and convict cemeteries. More significant, for our study, are the simple recreated maps indicating market gardens, which presumably provided fruit and vegetables to the camp population. One of the main and earliest vestiges was the 'Pain au four' (Figure 4). Since the late 2000s, local historians have located vestiges of multiple different bread ovens across the wider area (Cornet and Cornet 2015).

Despite the restoration and excavation work done to mark out the site, interpretation offered by the Itinéraire du Bagne initiative demonstrates the earlier claim about the tendency to privilege narratives of punishment over and above the everyday material conditions relating to convict labour, especially in forest camps. Entitled 'Schlittage et Supplices' [translated into English as 'Timber and torment'—thus maintaining the alliteration] and divided into two sections, the panel offers an extended introduction to the development of logging following the rise in the cost of timber imports. The second section is entitled 'Punition et supplices' and offers an account of punishments meted out

Figure 4. Vestiges of the 'pain au four', Prony Village. © Claire Reddleman (2018).

to wayward convicts. Included in this iconography are sketches of various forms of stocks and a drawing (dating from the 1970s) of a rope attached at the neck and feet. A few metres from the panel, a rope hangs from a tree behind which a stuffed mannequin is encased in a wooden display case, presumably taken out as part of certain official tours and attached to the rope by way of demonstration. The interpretation here is incongruous with other panels belonging to the Itinéraire which tend to provide careful histories and limit imagery to historic maps, photographs and landscape drawings. It nevertheless evokes interpretation elsewhere, particularly in Asia, which makes use of mannequins to stage scenes of convict life. In the context of Prony Village, this focus seems ill-chosen not least given the opportunity to use the multiple vestiges and walking trails to explore questions of food production and distribution and agricultural sustainability alongside the story of 'timber and torture'.

In the brief examples of built heritage cited above, much of the interpretation relies on vestiges supplemented by text panels to tell the story of the penal colony. While suggesting a need for more varied forms of interpretive strategy, I also want to add a note of caution. Where possibilities for olfactory and gustatory interpretation could be proposed here, there is the danger that this type of interpretation could simply produce an embodied experience that privileges a form of role-playing as convict, thus perpetuating forms of sensationalism already at work in much prison tourism. In other words, would smelling and tasting versions of what convicts were fed really result in enhanced understanding and empathy?

In proposing greater attention be paid to the lived experience of food insecurity within the penal colony, I want to argue for a return to the archives. There we can locate testimony that offers insights beyond specific examples of rationing and poor-quality food, also attesting to the slow violence of food insecurity within the penal colony. Putting aside more complex questions of how to present such testimonies in non-text-heavy formats,

collecting and analysing testimony are key to rethinking dominant narratives about the penal colony and, moreover, rehumanising those sentenced to forced labour via collective and personal experiences of food, eating and hunger.

The first example I want to propose here is the correspondence of the anarchist Paul Roussenq, who spent over 25 years in cellular imprisonment in North Africa and French Guiana. His prolific letter-writing provides a substantial archive which includes frequent letters of complaint to the penal administration about food rations, hygiene and related health conditions. A second briefer example draws on inspection reports from the 1920s concerning the receipt of parcels by convicts. Where these reports from multiple sites across the penal colony focus on trafficking and contraband resulting from a perceived relaxation of official regulations around packages, the type of foodstuffs mentioned provide pause for reflection on the symbolic role of food sent by families to those transported to French Guiana.

The slow violence of food insecurity in the penal colony

On Ile Saint Joseph, the proliferation of coconut trees gives the impression that the Salvation Islands were also supplied with an abundance of coconuts during the operation of the penal colony. Coconut trees were planted on Ile Saint Joseph only after primary vegetation had been cleared to construct the penal settlements. There had been plans to create an oil distillery as well. However, as Clair and Mallé (2001) indicate, the coconut trees, now an invasive, dominant species on the island which impacts biodiversity, took a while to take hold. They point to a punishment slip written out to Henri Charrière for picking up a fallen coconut, suggesting that the collection and distribution of coconuts was heavily monitored. This echoes an account by Roussenq in 1910 concerning the distribution of (or rather lack of) fruit and vegetables amongst the convict populations incarcerated on the islands.

Roussenq spent much of his sentence in solitary confinement on Ile Saint Joseph, with shorter periods spent on Ile Royale, including hospital stays. His prolific correspondence with the penal administration provides a significant resource for understanding food insecurity and inequality on the islands. Largely due to the depiction by Albert Londres in his reportages for *Le Petit Parisien* in 1923, Roussenq tends to be written off as an incorrigible (l'inco) for his persistent confrontations with the penal administration. This is the way he is presented in the small exhibition composed primarily of panels dedicated to celebrity bagnards in the former camp commander's residence on Ile Royale now restored as a small museum. However, many of Roussenq's confrontations with the authorities took the form of letters of complaint against the systemic injustices of the penal colony often on behalf of less well-off convicts unable or reluctant to petition for themselves.

Roussenq's correspondence offers insight into the lived experience of transportation and imprisonment on the islands both as it happened and also over a much longer period than that experienced by colonial doctors whose accounts of convict health and nutrition are usually privileged by historians (Toth 2000). Despite his breakdowns and subversive behaviour, Roussenq nevertheless demonstrates a consistency in many of the claims he makes about food rations and hygiene. Colonial doctors usually only spent 2 or 3 years at the most in the penal colony and, while this would have been adequate for assessing the longer-term effects of poor nutrition and limited rations on the convict population at large, a clear

distance remains here as the doctors lived and worked at a remove from the convicts, reassured by the knowledge that their post was only temporary.

One of the clearest expositions of the inequalities arising from food distribution can be found in a text addressed to the Governor of French Guiana by Roussenq in 1910 and entitled 'Mémoire kadéïscopique de vingt mois de séjour aux Iles du Salut'.[5] Point 5 of 10 points focuses on rationing. Roussenq starts by emphasising the gap between official documented rations and what the average convict actually receives: 'À propos de la ration du transporté, elle est assez conséquente sur le papier. De fait elle est des plus dérisoires. Le transporté est volé de la moitié de sa ration'. He goes on to describe how skimming and trafficking of rations takes place under the noses of the guards who have employed their preferred convicts to work in the kitchen and food distribution. He then explains how social inequalities are reproduced within the *bagne* which give the 'artistocrates' access to a greater variety of produce such as fresh fish and eggs than is officially distributed. They are also able to acquire lard and other produce intended to serve the convict population. The outcome, as Roussenq carefully explains, is that not only do most convicts only receive about half their ration but the appropriation of lard and lack of salt makes the soup and meat largely tasteless and inedible—'fade et indigeste'.

The majority of Roussenq's complaints about food focus on the poor quality and diminished quantity of bread, meat and coffee. One letter addressed to the Minister of the Colonies on 25 December 1910 offers further information about the vegetables and fruit produced on the islands but largely denied to the convicts. Roussenq explains how he has not seen any fresh vegetables added to the bouillon and that convicts are punished for gathering wild salad leaves and fallen coconuts to supplement their diet. He also claims that the administration often throw unwanted vegetation from their gardens into the sea rather than allow convicts to make use of it. He makes the interesting argument that surely all the land [*sol*] used and seeds planted belong to the State and are therefore not the private property of members of the administration who make use of (free) convict labour to cultivate the fruit and vegetables in these gardens. These carefully set out comments suggest an active resistance on the part of the administration to improving convict diets via fresh produce. They also indicate a wilful and spiteful squandering of unwanted and fallen produce, with convicts punished for collecting this. A gap emerges between the produce that was grown on the islands during the penal operation and the possibility of this providing a sustainable, nutritional supplement to the bread, salted meat and dried vegetables that made up most of a convict's diet.

Roussenq's dossier contains a series of exchanges from August 1926 in which he accuses the guard Beveraggi of skimming sugar and coffee rations. The response from the administration is to dismiss Roussenq, frequently annotating his letters with words such as 'mensonge' and 'sans suite'. In one memo, the head of the camp writes to the commander that if Roussenq is as hungry as he claims to be, he would not have the energy to write his 'vers'. These memos and notes in the margins and at the end of Roussenq's letters provide a paratext to his writing, a commentary intended to dismiss his claims but which, retrospectively, demonstrate how genuine complaints are discredited and, often, mocked and punished by those in authority: a double injustice which in turn effects a double dehumanisation of those unable to 'profit' from the unofficial system (known as Système D for 'débrouillard') operating across the penal colony.

Another, less considered, aspect of food insecurity within the penal colony is the connections Roussenq makes between eating conditions and more general questions of hygiene, particularly for those confined to cells. In 1911, he complains about the poor hygiene in the 'cachots', explaining in one letter to the Governor (dated 28 January) how the men have to sit on their buckets (intended for faeces) to eat their meals. Another letter to the Governor dated 10 November describes how meals are placed on the cell floor, which is covered in urine. In 1927, towards the end of his sentence, Roussenq complains that his regulation mess tin has not been replaced in five years and that non-regulation tins rust more easily. Such examples emphasise how the material deprivation experienced within the *bagne* is coupled with a dehumanising level of hygiene. These examples continue to resonate with narratives of food insecurity and poor hygiene coming out of prisons today. One of the sketches featured in the Museum of London's 'We are what we eat' exhibition is entitled 'Not fit for human consumption' and depicts a toilet bowl filled with food, representing the experience of having to eat one's meals just feet away from the cell toilet.

Roussenq's letter of 28 January 1911 describes how many of the men in solitary confinement are suffering from scurvy. Despite prescriptions from the doctor for wild salad (which grows everywhere on all three islands) and lemons (which are grown on Ile Royale), these are rarely distributed to the men, who, Roussenq argues, are too afraid of sanctions to complain. His account emphasises the cumulative effects of the penal system which not only prevents the treatment of poor nutrition but also threatens to punish those who complain. While Roussenq frequently advocates on behalf of other convicts, including those unable to read and write, the most sustained example of the long-term health effects of poor nutrition and hygiene described in his correspondence are his own physical conditions. In 1926, he writes to the director of the administration that he has himself contracted scurvy while confined in a cell on Ile Royale awaiting the outcome of disciplinary proceedings for verbal insults.

Previously in 1921, Roussenq writes to the director requesting a suspension of his sentence to the 'cachot'. He has developed a chronic intestinal disease which, he claims, has been exacerbated by the conditions of imprisonment, resulting in his being hospitalised four times. His condition reappears during 1926 and 1927, where he makes several requests for a new flannel belt, prescribed by the doctor to alleviate his symptoms. At this point, he asserts he has been suffering from gastroenteritis for 15 years. Indeed, it was the pain caused by this and other illnesses resulting from his time in the *bagne* that led to his suicide in 1949.

Food parcels

Most of Roussenq's references to food are concerned with poor-quality, low-quantity rations. However, there is at least one example where the symbolic power of certain foodstuffs appears in his letters. Following Albert Londres's reportages in *Le Petit Parisien*, in October 1923 Roussenq is sent 20 francs by a Mme Bourgeois. He requests permission to buy tobacco and chocolate. A series of exchanges ensue about how much of the 20 francs is owed to the administration for earlier debts. Eventually, in April 1924, Roussenq is given permission to purchase a kilo of chocolate, which he claims will help with his anaemia. Despite this rationale, chocolate possesses symbolic as much as nutritional

value. It is not a particularly wise choice of purchase given the tropical heat and lack of refrigeration. Instead, it represents an indulgence, a luxury previously denied Roussenq and something he can share and exchange with fellow convicts. The protracted process of obtaining permission and ultimately his bar of chocolate exists in parallel with the slow violence of poor nutrition, reminding us of how forms of enjoyment that accompany eating (such as shared meals and spontaneous choice) have been stripped away.

In 1914 an investigation into the receipt of unauthorised packages takes place across all main camps belonging to the penal colony in French Guiana (ANOM H1943). The head of each camp seizes the opportunity to lament the problem of such packages generally sent to convicts from their families since these frequently contain money and other contraband and generally result in trafficking. As the commander of the camp at Saint Jean writes to the director of the administration on 29 April 1914: 'Il n'est pas possible de canaliser la fantaisie des expéditeurs que l'on ne peut toujours connaître . . .'. Beyond this dominant narrative which affirms the criminal intentions of convicts (whilst suggesting their families are often unwitting victims), there is perhaps more that can be learned about the content of these packages frequently containing foodstuffs. Beyond the possibilities for smuggling blades and other objects within tins of conserves, food acts as a conduit between the convict population and those they have left behind. Moreover, these food parcels not only have the function of improving a convict's material conditions but create social possibilities whether these be economic trades or shared eating experiences with other convicts and even members of the administration. Reading beyond the dismissive language of the report, one can imagine the choice of conserves and other foodstuffs (notably sausage and chocolate) being the result, in some cases, of painstaking selection, a form of care carried out at a distance aimed at providing memories of home. This speculation grounded in the detail of the reports on the packages offers an important counterpoint to the narrative that many families preferred to declare a loved one dead rather than publicly admit the shame of transportation. The reports also refer to packages containing perishable foodstuffs which have not survived the Atlantic crossing intact. Where for the administration this is perceived as a waste of money and a hassle to deal with, it also demonstrates the lack of understanding as to the location and distance of French Guiana and thus is a particularly poignant example of the impact of exile upon families.

Conclusions

The primary aim of this article has been to explore the question of food insecurity as a key element of lived experience for those living in confinement and exile. In the context of an ever-growing penal heritage industry worldwide, the potential to sensitively offer accounts of the ways in which food insecurity shaped historical experiences of incarceration and forced labour presents an important way of countering an existing over-focus on direct forms of violence such as restraint and torture which frequently work to affirm incarcerated bodies as criminal 'others' whether intentionally or not. There is scope in stories of food insecurity and indeed narratives around food cultures, more generally, to also privilege the macabre or abject and examples of this have been provided in relation to tours around the Salvation Islands and the Camp de la Transportation in Saint Laurent du Maroni.

Various sites associated with the penal colonies in French Guiana and New Caledonia have been explored in terms of their engagement with questions of food production and

rationing. Existing interpretation, often in the form of panels, demonstrates different ways such questions can be introduced within the wider narrative of the *bagne*. It is apparent that these could be further developed particularly at sites like Prony where there are multiple vestiges of bread ovens located across a relatively large area. The selection of sites in both territories is non-exhaustive and intended to provide a snapshot of built heritage and its interpretation rather than a comprehensive study. Other sites that merit consideration here include the Magasin à vivres on Ile Nou and the Porcherie, stone enclosures used for rearing pork, situated between Saint Laurent and Saint Jean. The multi-sited nature of the carceral landscapes in French Guiana and New Caledonia allows for interpretation that is at once self-contained and connected to other sites. Interpretation has occurred at different points and often involving different agencies and researchers. The advantages of the uneven and often fragmented interpretation are that it reflects the uneven and equally fragmented nature of the penal operations whilst emphasising the extensive reach of the penal administrations across landscapes. Yet, it is without doubt that more work is required to connect contemporary landscapes and the vestiges that remain with a deeper understanding of how these landscapes as well as the territories' current agricultural production have been shaped by convict labour and its related food cultures.

Returning to the archives (where available) suggests an abundance of material that not only offers alternative narratives around food but also provides evidence of the slow violence of poor nutrition and the social inequalities playing out within the *bagne*. Thus, one of the main challenges and opportunities is how museum exhibitions might creatively interpret the cumulative accounts offered by convicts such as Roussenq, accounts which are inevitably text-heavy. Further possibilities also exist in how visitors are invited to 'imagine' what life was like without their favourite foods such as chocolate as well as what rations looked and felt like in reality (i.e. after skimming). Museums, tours and interpretive panels can eschew or at the very least limit sensationalism by asking visitors to move beyond existing forms of penal spectatorship. If food can be instrumentalised as a form of resistance (hunger strikes) and exchange (contraband), it also represents a material connection between convicts and their families back home. Finally, a nuanced understanding of the complexity of food insecurity not only offers a means of rehumanising convicts and others subject to confinement or detention but also opens up wider questions around the economic and ecological sustainability of mass imprisonment.

Notes

1. For a useful account of islands as 'natural' prisons or hulks in the context of Australia's penal colony, see Roscoe (2018).
2. Renneville (2007) provides a useful breakdown based on Krakovitch's (1990) calculations. Historians diverge about the exact number of convicts sent to both French Guiana and New Caledonia due to omissions and duplications within the dossiers now housed at the Archives Nationales d'Outre-Mer in Aix-en-Provence.
3. Both Henri Charrière and René Belbenoit achieved fame as a result of their autobiographies, which focused on their dramatic escapes from the penal colony. Both narratives, which are considered by some as fictionalised versions of what actually happened, focus on their individual heroism and the privileges they were able to acquire which enabled them to escape.

4. I am grateful to Briony Neilson for her useful comments about the recent interpretation.
5. All references to Rousseng's dossier are taken from ANOM H5259. The 'Mémoire kadéïscopique' is reproduced in Franek (2019).

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ORCID

Sophie Fuggle http://orcid.org/0000-0001-9688-9593

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