

**BEACONS OF EXCELLENCE:  
THE EDGAR MITTELHOLZER  
MEMORIAL LECTURES**

**VOLUME 3: 1986-2013**

**Edited and with an Introduction  
by Andrew O. Lindsay**

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BEACONS OF EXCELLENCE: THE EDGAR MITTELHOLZER  
MEMORIAL LECTURES - VOLUME 3: 1986-2013

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**The Caribbean Press**



**Tenth Series, 1986**

**The Arawak Language in  
Guyanese Culture**  
*John Peter Bennett*



## FOREWORD

John Peter Bennett was born of Arawak parents at Kabakaburi Arawak Mission on the Pomeroon River on 30 November 1914. He learned English as a foreign language and gained competency *“by reading anything that had writing on it.”* At twelve years old he left school with the dream of captaining a ship, but was denied employment as a juvenile. After a stint in a logging camp (1936) he worked successively with a road gang and as a tailor, but gave up the tailoring to serve with Rev. Hearst (1939) *“who had a lot of books, and that was the attraction.”* Rev. Hearst provided a sound academic training, eventually securing him a place at Codrington College, Barbados, to prepare for the priesthood (1946).

His return to Guyana as the first Amerindian priest was a source of great pride to the Arawaks in particular, who showered him with gifts acknowledging their pride in seeing the work begun by the illustrious Povett in 1840 continue in able hands.

Whilst posted at Waramuri on the Moruka he met the British writer Richard Hart<sup>1</sup> who encouraged him to write a dictionary of the Arawak language. This inspiration has guided him ever since, even through a period of prolonged hospitalisation during 1971 in which he was partially paralysed. He was obliged to learn to write with the left hand whilst writing a diary daily with the right to exercise the muscles. By 1976 he could resume work on the word list that would later blossom into his great Arawak-English/English-Arawak Dictionary. The 1984 Mittelholzer series<sup>2</sup> is Canon Bennett's first published presentation of his remarkable life's work.

**Denis Williams**



## PREFACE

This is a revised version of two talks delivered at the Theatre Guild Playhouse, December 1986, as the Tenth Series of the Edgar Mittelholzer Memorial Lectures of the Department of Culture: The Arawak Language in Guyanese Culture. It forms part of a larger work, *An Arawak-English, English Arawak Dictionary*, to be published in the Quincentennial observances of the Walter Roth Museum.

Pronunciation of Arawak words:

**a** as in pat,  
**e** as in pet,  
**i** as in pit,  
**o** as in nose,  
**u** as in foot.

Stress mark:

**n** as in sing,  
**u** as in bird<sup>3</sup>

**John P. Bennett,  
Kabakaburi**



## THE NAMING OF COASTAL GUYANA

Several words are used in Guyana today which are of Arawak origin. School children and school teachers use them; business people use them; travellers use them; and very likely most of these people are not aware that they use Arawak words almost every day.

Many places have been named by the Arawaks and although they may be distorted and corrupted, one can still trace their origin. Almost all of the rivers and creeks were named by Arawaks.

We may ask, "How were these names given? Why was a place given a particular name?" The answer is quite simple. Places were given the names of the animal, bird, fish, tree, insect or even the stone which was unique to that area or particular location; for example, Seba, Tiger Island, Orealla Creek.

Sometimes only *one* tree was growing in isolation, so the creek or habitation nearby was named after that tree which stood out because it was the only one of its kind.

All the rivers in Guyana that flow into the sea, except one, have Arawak names. The one river which does not bear an Arawak name is Waini. The word *waini* is a Warau word and refers to a bird, a kind of crane which was once plentiful in the lagoon in the mouth of the Waini river. The word really is *wauna*. We have the correct word in 'The Wauna Agricultural Scheme'.

Let us consider some of the rivers with Arawak names and get to know why they are so called. Perhaps we can begin with Orinoco in Venezuela. It is a big river with a wide mouth. Because of this it was given the Arawak name *ori* meaning snake and *noroco* meaning mouth. They named this river *Ori Noroco* – two words meaning 'snake's mouth' – because they reasoned that only in a snake can one extend the width of the mouth more than normal. Incidentally there is a river in Guyana, a tributary of the New River also called Oronoque, and for the same reason.

Next we have Barima. This river flows in Guyana, but empties in Venezuela. In Arawak *bará* means sea and *eima*

means estuary – two words. As *bará* connotes ‘rough sea’, it would appear that the mouth of the Barima river was invariably rough and so the people called it ‘rough river mouth’ in Arawak – *baraeima*. On the right bank of the Barima river is a township called Morawhanna. This name comes from two Arawak words, *mora*, which refers to a tree and *bana*, which means leaf. The two words joined together – *morabana* – make up the name of a poisonous snake that is patterned like a *mora* leaf.

Next we have a village named Barabina. This name is two Arawak words; *bará* means sea and *bina* means cure. Therefore *barabina* means sea-sickness cure. Sometimes you hear people say that *bina* means ‘a charm’. This is rather misleading. *Bina* comes from *ibihi* which word means ‘medicine’. Arawak people refer to ‘charm’ as *yaremehi*.

When you go to Mabaruma by steamer, the steamer stelling is known as Kumaka stelling. *Kumaka* is Arawak for the silk-cotton tree. There is a river, a branch of Barima river, called Aruka. Now Aruka is the Arawak word *aruka* which means ‘to cut’. Then Aruka could mean ‘a cut’, ‘a shortcut’ or a ‘division’. Hosororo is made up of two words. *Ho* means ‘water’ in Warau and *sororo* means ‘trickling’ in Arawak.

Moruka. The name of this river is two Arawak words. *Moró* is a small fish known as ‘dog fish’ and *kan* means ‘to’. In the upper Moruka river there are several islands in the savanna which carry Arawak names; for example, Aiomorakabura, Akhoyoro, Thabula and Waromuri.

Pomeroon. This word is thought to come from *bioroma*, a preparation of baked cassava meal moulded into balls and each ball wrapped in a leaf. It was mostly used while travelling long distances and as the associated meat was already cooked, much time was saved. Up to quite recently people referred to the Pomeroon river as Bauroma. In the 1950s, when I was at Bartica, a man from Pomeroon went to live there. He had a boat built and called it Bauroma, to remind him, he said, of the homeland he had left.

Nearly all the creeks for something like 100 kilometres up, which are tributaries of the Pomeroon river, have Arawak names. This shows that Arawaks were numerous at one time and inhabited most of the rivers in Guyana. We have arrived

at such a conclusion because all the rivers up to a distance of 100 to 200 kilometres from the seacoast have Arawak names.

Of all the rivers in the country, Pomeroon must be the one river with the most twisted name. The names of the tributaries are pretty straightforward. For instance there is Arapiako < Arawak *arapaio*, which is the name of a fish-hawk common in the district at one time. A branch of the Arapiako is known as Tapakuma < Arawak *th'pekoma*, and means 'its calabash'. *Pekoma* is a small calabash made from an elongated type of gourd.<sup>4</sup>

Wakapoa creek is on the left bank of the Pomeroon river, near to the sea. Wakapoa is Arawak *wakokoa*, a type of pigeon common in the savanna. Many islands in the Wakapoa creek have Arawak names.

Akiwini (or Akawini) creek. The word Akiwini is two Arawak words: *eke*, 'to eat' and *oni*, 'rain'. The meaning of *eke oni* is 'eating rain'. The story of how the creek got its name goes like this: after a rainy season the savannahs on both banks were flooded, many people became ill and died. The rains got the blame for causing the death of the inhabitants: so the creek got its name. However, it was not the rains that caused the deaths but the leaves of a poisonous tree known as *hiari*, which grew in great numbers in the area. During the dry season the leaves would litter the ground. In the rainy season these leaves were washed into smaller creeks. People drank the mildly poisoned water and became ill and even died. On the Pomeroon, up to the creek called Wayawaro – the name of a shrub – all the tributaries but one have Arawak names.

The Essequibo is the largest river in Guyana and people of the past believed it would take a very long time to cross. So they proclaimed that if anybody wished to go from one bank to the other, he or she would have to carry a fireside in order to cook a meal in midstream. This account may sound frivolous but when we consider that the fireside of the Arawak was a prized possession, the risk of losing even a part of it was a serious matter. This fireside – *dishiki* – consisted of three rocks, almost identical in height, size and weight. They could be adjusted to accommodate any size of cooking pot. If you lived in a rocky area it was not difficult to make up a fireside, but if you lived in a sandy or swampy area, suitable pieces of

rock were greatly prized. The name Dishikibo was given to the river < *dishiki*, 'fireside', and *abo*, 'with'.

Many of the creeks and dwelling places on both banks of the Essequibo river have Arawak names, for example the creek called Supenaam could mean 'they may call for alcohol' in Arawak. The creek Arawari comes from Arawak *arwa ari*, 'tiger's teeth'. Manaka is Arawak for the manicole palm. Kotana is the name of a little island, a popular fishing place for *basha*, in Arawak a tasty scale fish. Kotana < Arawak *khota nal*, means eating-place; feeding ground. Karia, a dwelling place: in Arawak *kariá* is a bushrope found in cultivated ground. Saxacalli, a village, is from Arawak *sakasakali* – a bird, a type of kingfisher. Aliku is from Arawak *alikiu*, a hardy evergreen shrub found along river banks, often known as 'benda'. Makouria < Arawak *Makorio* = the common name for wasp or marabunta; Bartica < Arawak *baro tika* = axe rust. Burasiri < Arawak *Burishiri* = a type of wasp.

Demerara. A few kilometres up this river is a series of rapids called Malali. *Malali* in Arawak means 'fast running stream'. The entire river was given the name *Malali* and for a long time it was known by that name. When the Dutch ruled the country they always spoke and wrote of *de Malali*. Later on the two words were combined in *Demalali*. Later still the 'i' at the end of the word became 'y' and the two 'l's became two 'r's, so we got Demerary.<sup>5</sup> Some of the old manuscripts still carry Demerary.<sup>6</sup> Latterly the 'y' at the end of the word changed to 'a' so that at present we have *Demerara*.

A creek on the left bank of the Demerara river is known as Kamuni. This is made up of two Arawak words, *kama* = 'tapir', and *onikhan* = 'creek', giving 'tapir creek'. Tapirs frequented the area in large numbers to feed on the fruit supplied by the abundance of *ité* palms in the immediate neighbourhood to the great delight of huntsmen.

The names of the two rivers Mahaica and Mahaicony derived from the same source – *mahóka*. This is the name of a tree that once thrived on the banks of these rivers. The Mahaica was called Mahóka because of these *mahóka* trees that grew in profusion along the banks of the river. The other river (Mahaicony) also had lots of similar trees along its banks, so, this posed rather a problem in finding a suitable name. After

some time they noticed that whenever the wind blew, the leaves of these trees rustled and made a special sound as if they were singing so they felt they ought to name the river 'song of the *mahóka* trees' and so the Mahaicony got its name from *mahóka* – a kind of tree and *yeni*, 'a song'.

Abary. The story goes that a couple of huntsmen in the Abary district found what looked like a human mandible. One of the huntsmen remarked in Arawak: *aba* = 'someone', *ari* = teeth. The river was known as Abary every since.

Berbice comes from the Arawak word *beribishi*, a type of banana. It was said that this particular type grew wild in a certain area of this river. People used to go to collect the fruit and also suckers to plant in their fields. In time the river became known as the river of this particular type of banana plant and so it acquired its name. At the present time we know the river by the shortened form: Berbice.

Along the Berbice river we have several creeks with Arawak names, for example Wironi < *wiro*, a kind of pigeon; Ibini < *ibi*, 'small': this word pertains to the grass growing in the area. Wikki < *waiki*, a domesticated fruit that bears pods, and Tacama < *dakama*, a tree that provides furniture wood.

It is to be noted that the names of the three largest rivers in Guyana are Arawak names – Essequibo, Berbice and Demerara.

On the right bank of the Berbice river is its tributary the Canje. I believe that is the Dutch spelling. The letter 'j' is pronounced as 'y' in English. Canje comes from the Arawak word *kanya* = watery. Nowadays most people call the river Canje giving the 'j' the 'j' sound as in English.

Cuba is also an Arawak word, *koba*. It means the hardest, innermost part of a tree; *koba* means its heartwood. The Guyanese 'tacouba' describes a tree fallen across a stream in which the heartwood remains.

A few Arawak words have found their way into the English dictionary; for example, the word 'barbecue' comes from the Arawak word *barabakwa*. This denotes a raised platform built to store corn, pumpkin, yam and other vegetables, to protect them from damp. A *barabakwa* might have been three metres long by 1.5 metres wide, built on three beams about ten centimetres in diameter. On these beams,

sticks were laid. These sticks made up the floor. The sides were built of sticks to a height of 30 to 60 centimetres. As the floor consisted of round sticks, dust and so on would tend to fall downwards and as there was a space under the flooring, air could circulate freely and keep the temperature fairly regular.

When travelling by a boat a similar device was constructed in the corial or canoe. Two cross pieces were placed across and raised a little from the bottom of the craft and on these a flooring of tree bark was laid, usually *baramili* bark. On this floorboard people put their luggage to prevent it getting wet should the boat leak or collect water from rainfall. This storage shelf in a house or boat was called *barabakwa*.

A similar shelf of round wood on posts was built about one metre from the ground. It had sides of about 10 centimetres high and this shelf was used to dry cassava meal before it was baked. A slow fire was kept going for approximately one week under this shelf until the meal was suitably dry. This shelf was called *yorada*. When huntsmen wanted to preserve meat before returning home, they built a small *yorada* and dried the meat. Sometimes they constructed a tripod, with a shelf half-way down on which the meat was roasted. This contraption was highly portable and meat and *yorada* could be moved at a moment's notice. Creoles called this shelf 'babricut'. As this was a practical method of cooking outdoors it caught the imagination of many people and has become popular in various parts of the world. But 'barbecue' is derived from the name of the first mentioned contraption.

'Cacique' comes from the Arawak word *kashikwali* and means the owner of the house or houses, therefore it approximates to 'landlord'. *Kashikwali* is masculine, the feminine is *kashikwaro*. The word *cacique* is in the name of one of the national honours of Guyana.

'Canoe'. The Arawak word is *kanoa* and means a dugout craft used in calm water. It is usually small and narrow in proportion to its length so that it can be propelled with the minimum of energy. Sir Walter Raleigh used the original spelling of this word.

'Curare'. The Arawak word is *urari*. It is neither a vine nor a tree. It can be identified easily by noting its difference from

other vines and shrubs. The branches in other vines grow upwards. The branches of *urari* grow downwards towards the root. The leaves and the trunk are hairy. It bears yellow fruit and these too are hairy. It has a powerful anaesthetic quality and is used in hunting. When an animal is shot with an arrow the tip of which has been smeared with prepared *urari*, it dies immediately because the organs of the body instantly cease to function.

*Urari* is prepared in this way. The stem is cut into small pieces and mixed with pieces of 'giant bamboo' (a kind of bamboo with thorns at the joints) and the leaves of *konaparo* (another plant with anaesthetic quality) and boiled until it is suitably effective. Then cassareep is added and the mixture is boiled a little more. The cassareep preserves the *urari* so that it can last for years without losing its potency. When this preparation has to be moved from one place to another beeswax is added to the mixture to prevent spilling.

During the 1940s doctors (mostly in Canada) were investigating the properties of the *urari* plant as it was noticed that though it was indeed a fast killer, Indians ate the meat of the animal killed with no ill effects. It was discovered that death was caused by paralysis of the nervous system. It was also discovered that a patient injected with a mild dose of *urari* became unconscious very quickly without any side effects. So *urari* found its way into hospitals in many parts of the world.

'Hammock'. The Arawak word is *hamaka* and means a hanging bed made of string. It is popular because it is light and convenient when travelling. It can be used anywhere. Officers of the British navy used hammocks in their warships. People use them as a means of relaxation on their verandas or in their gardens. Workmen in the interior habitually sleep in hammocks.

'Key' is derived from the Arawak *kairi* and means an island: a bit of land, large or small, surrounded by water. The name is preserved in the Florida Keys.

## ARAWAK SUBSISTENCE AND GUYANESE CULTURE

Each Amerindian tribe has contributed in one way or another to Guyanese culture. We examine some of the skills, cures, customs and methods of procuring food of the Arawaks.

### SKILLS

It is commonly believed that if an Amerindian is placed in unknown territory in the forest, he can go wherever he likes and never get lost. This is not true. An Amerindian, like anybody else, can get lost in a strange locality. The reason for this belief is that a huntsman can go long distances in an unknown district and return unerringly because he is careful to make a *surihi* and follows that *surihi* faithfully.

*Surihi* is an Arawak word for a faint trail that can be easily identified only by the person who made it. Depending on the density of the forest in the region, a twig is broken waist high at intervals of about 5 to 10 metres. The twig is not broken off and the huntsman is careful that each broken twig indicates the direction of the one previously broken as a *surihi* never pursues a straight course but follows the line of least resistance. If a hill is too steep he will proceed at the foot; if a tree falls to the ground and is in his way he will go around it; if the bush is too thick he will make a detour, but all the time he pays close attention to his *surihi*. When he is ready to return he follows the indication of his broken twigs.

People who work in forested areas, like balata bleeders or gold miners, have to develop a keen sense of observation. They note the position of the sun; large trees; different kinds of trees; the vegetation; the direction of flow of creeks and rivers; the tracks of various animals; familiar sounds, etc. These are all skills adapted from the *surihi*.

Corials and canoes are dugouts used in travelling along rivers and creeks in Guyana. A corial is a relatively wide craft with high prows bow and stern and made specially as a sea-going vessel. It is provided with holes and braces so that a

mast and sail can be accommodated. In olden days a sail was normally made of strips from the stalk of the leaves of the *ité* palm. It was fashioned like a Venetian blind and when not in use it could be rolled up into a small bundle that didn't take up much space. A corial is very often used for sea fishing, collecting crabs in season and transporting heavy loads. As it needs to be sea-worthy it is usually made of a strong and light wood. *Gale silverballi* is the first choice because it fulfills both of these requirements and is therefore fast, buoyant and can bounce on the water in a rough sea. Cedar is a substitute.

A canoe may be made of any kind of wood. It is straight, narrow, rather unstable, but has greater speed than a corial of the same size. Because it is somewhat cranky it is used only in creeks, where it can negotiate small spaces and be manoeuvred over waterfalls, sunken logs or any other obstructions.

In all the rivers dugouts are popular because they are lighter and faster than prams (a type of watercraft) or bateaux of similar size, and also because they are seamless and do not require regular caulking. They can also be used without being painted. This reduces the cost considerably but they are a waste of valuable wood. If you were to saw into boards the wood from which a dugout was made you may get enough to build perhaps three boats. Dugouts are found in all the rivers and each river has its own style of design so it is not very difficult to tell where a particular craft was made.

There are different types of paddles. Men's paddles are large, sturdy and are meant to perform heavy work while women's paddles (usually referred to as 'ladies' paddles') are small and are works of art. Then there is the two-bladed paddle known as *yellow*, 2 to 3 metres long. The blades are small but because they are far apart and employ the leverage principle they generate a lot of energy in every stroke. There are usually delicate carvings on a paddle of this kind but many people do not use them since they require a wide expanse of water.

Basketry. The *mucra* plant is invariably used to make some baskets, for example, *hurudi*, which is a light basket with open sides used to store discs of cotton wool which were spun into twine with a spindle. The *mucra* is scraped, dyed and stripped after which the weaving of the desired basket takes place.

The various dyes used are all locally obtained. Red is obtained from the covering of the seeds in the annatto pod. Yellow comes from the roots of the annatto tree. This colour – yellow – is used sparingly as the annatto tree may die if the roots are used too often or are clumsily disturbed. Brown is procured from the outside of the bark of the *ithara* tree. Black is most often used, as the preparing of this colour is not too destructive of prized trees. It is made by using the inside of the bark of the *shirada* tree. The inner part of the *shirada* bark is scraped and this supplies the gummy semi-liquid which is mixed with soot. When applied it gives a jet black stain which dries with a pleasing sheen.

Shopping baskets, hats, vegetable baskets (known as quakes) are made from the *mibi* or *mamuri* vines, which are stronger materials. Table mats, floor mats and other plaited artifacts are made from the spire of the *ité* palm. This straw is known as *tibisiri* < Arawak *th'shiri*, 'the spire'. Fans are made from the dried leaves of the *akhoyoro* or *awara* spire. Fans are used in Amerindian houses to fan the fire.

A *warishi* is a kind of basket made to carry heavy loads. It is usually made of *mibi* and equipped with a head-strap and two shoulder-straps. A loaded *warishi* weighs 50 to 100 kilograms and is carried on the drogher's back. The shoulder-straps are so fixed that they can be undone in a fraction of a second in case of emergency. If the drogher should stumble and fall the loaded *warishi* would not fall on him. The idea of carrying loads this way has become popular.

The designs on the outside of some articles of basketry are meaningful, for example, on a *matapi* – incidentally *matapi* is a Carib word, the Arawak word is *yoro*. On a *matapi*, one finds, say, a representation of fish bones. This design is called *bunabunatahü*. One might find the crosswise markings of a *parepi* tree. This is called *parepidaia*, or an abstract idea of 'lying in wait for game' – *abadahü*.

It is enlightening to note that the word 'quake' is a misnomer. It is made up of two Arawak words: *koa* meaning crab and *eke* meaning container. Arawaks call a crab-container by one word *koake*. In writing, some people spelt *koa* using the letter 'q' instead of 'k' and 'u' instead of 'o' and getting 'qua'. To that they added 'ke' and the resulting word was

'q-u-a-k-e'. Even Arawaks refer to crab-quake, back-quake and yam-quake. The word 'quake' has come to mean a type of basket. In Arawak there is no such word as 'quake'. What is called crab-quake is *koake*. What is referred to as back-quake, is *kauri*. Yam-quake is *himekonake*.

There is a sort of basket made of *mucra* or *mibi*, used to net fish, a sort of hand-net; an angler's hand-net. This is called *shipi*.

Pottery. A few household items were made of pottery. A large goblet that could hold about 16 litres on the average was made to store *casiri* or *paiwari* and was called *kumudi*. A double-bellied *kumudi* was also made. It was shaped like an hourglass and half of it was embedded in the ground. But apart from its capacity it was not very practical as it could not be moved and was difficult to keep clean. Other household articles included cooking pots of various sizes and goblets to hold drinking water. These small goblets became popular with other Guyanese because they kept the water cool.

Troolie. The leaves of the troolie palm made excellent roofing material. Each leaf was roughly 1.5 to 3 metres long, and the troolie palm was plentiful in some areas. These leaves were in great demand. In fact troolie leaves are always in demand. A roof of troolie is comparatively inexpensive and can last for a minimum of 10 years without showing any signs of leakage. When the rice crop is being reaped in some places, very often at a considerable distance from home, shelters roofed with troolie are built. These prevent paddy, people and food from getting wet.

## CURES

Weeds were used to cure many ills. When feeling listless an enema was administered. The extract of certain weeds, boiled and strained, was utilised. The douche-can was an alligator's throat and the hose was the stem of a papaya leaf. For the treatment of a baby a large lime with the inside taken out was the usual thing.

Ague fever – which was perhaps malaria – was treated by subjecting the patient to a bath in fairly hot water, as hot as he could bear. An odd number of leaves which, it was believed,

added to the efficacy of the treatment, was boiled in the bath water. It was said that the bitterness of this mixture got rid of the fever. It was also believed that the heat of the water assisted the patient's body in absorbing the bitterness and so a cure would be effected in a short time. The ingredients used in the bathwater included *yaroro* bark, *muniridan* leaves, greenheart fruit, bamboo leaves and lime juice.

The lime is a valued fruit. It can be used to make a pleasant drink. It can also be used as medicine to cure the stings of insects, to ease headaches, to cure certain skin rashes and even to ease the pain in a snake bite.

Any bitter tasting weed is normally used as a lotion for treating skin rashes. Ringworm is a stubborn rash but it yields to the use of *arisauro* fruit. The yellow juice of the insides of the fruit is used as an ointment. It does not smart but it is bitter.

Any of the following cures may prove effective for snake bites: *arára* bark or *burada* bark. The inside of the bark is scraped and applied to the bite. Burnt bush hog hair or burnt salempeña<sup>8</sup> skin may be applied.

At times a scorpion sting may be fatal. The cure for such a sting is the juice of a young *manicole* palm. The victim is made to drink some juice and in minutes should experience a great ease. A cayman's tooth scraped into water and drunk can also be effective. What is described as a 'cut' against the ill effects of a scorpion-sting is done in the following way: the person's arm is scratched several times until it becomes raw. The tip of a scorpion's sting is broken off and the white milk that is exuded (which is the poison) is rubbed into the person's scratched arm and it goes into the bloodstream. It is a kind of inoculation.

The trunk of what is referred to as 'black banana' gives a valued starchy juice which is used to stop bleeding caused by: a cut, tooth extraction or delivery of a baby. All banana trees appear to produce the same kind of starchy juice but perhaps the black banana produces more of the blood-clotting agent.

The small pepper known as 'bird pepper' is considered to contain medicinal properties. In days gone by, a handful of bird peppers was boiled and strained and the water used as a liniment for rheumatism, cough, itching throat and other

ailments. Sloan's Liniment is also made from peppers with camphor and a few other chemicals added. Because it is effective it has become popular. Apart from being used as a liniment for pains, Sloan's Liniment is also used by mechanics in place of a solution called 'penetrating oil' to loosen seized nuts and screws in machines.

## METHODS OF PROCURING FOOD

Arawaks know various plants which provide food: *manicole*, *akhoyoro*, *kokorit*, *ité*. The *ité* palm provides a lot of food. It bears many large bunches of fruit. A bunch has hundreds of fruit each as big as a cricket ball. When soft, the edible part is consumed raw, or it is scraped off and mixed with sugar and preserved for some time. Added to some water, it makes a pleasant drink. Huntsmen are also aware that animals and birds gather to feed on the fruit of the *ité* palm. The starch extracted from the trunk of the *ité* can be baked into bread. The larvae of the *otokoma* beetle, which lays its eggs in the fallen trunk, is a delicacy to some people.

The following trees bear edible fruit: *aiomorakushi*, *asepoko*, *baratabali*, *kola*, *komaramara*, *makoriro*, *pakuri*. Besides, there are trees which are planted for food.

Traps are used for small animals such as rats, accouris, labbas and yessies. Likewise small birds are trapped. Large animals and birds are usually shot with bow-and-arrows.

The staple food is supplied by the cassava plant. After the tubers are gathered, they are grated, then strained through a *matapi*, pounded in a mortar, then sifted and baked into cassava bread. Sometimes starch is mixed with the cassava flour before baking, this is supposed to impart a pleasing taste to the bread. Starch was also added to the *bioroma* balls to prevent crumbling.

Cassava starch was added to stock to thicken the broth in which crabs were boiled. The resulting dish was known as *koaharo* < *koa*, 'crab' and *haro*, 'starch' – literally 'crab starch'. Cassava starch is also made into glue. It is also used regularly in laundering.

The juice of the cassava is poisonous but it is considered an important and valuable item of food. Cassava juice is called

*keheli*. This *keheli* is heated in a large pot and the cream rises to the top as with cow's milk. This is skimmed off, boiled further and is made into a sauce which imparts a delicious flavour to whatever meat or fish it is added. This sauce, which looks like mayonnaise, is called *kélikotha*. The remainder of the cassava juice, after the cream has been removed, is often used as a second quality sauce. Water is added to prevent it from becoming sweetish when it is boiled further.

The word 'cassareep' is derived from the Arawak word *kashiripo*. It is the juice of the cassava tubers, (said to be poisonous) boiled to the consistency of molasses. When it reaches this stage all the poison is boiled out; it acquires a sweet taste and is dark brown. Arawak people thought it assumed the colour of a potato called *kashiri* so it was referred to as *kashiripo*. Arawaks have virtually forgotten the original name *selei*. Cassareep is popular not only in Guyana, but in other countries of the world.

Two dishes have become popular all over the country. They are crab-back and pepperpot. In crab-back the crab meat is cooked and mixed with toasted bread-crumbs and other ingredients and served in the crab's back. As the crab meat is salty by nature it does not require that condiment; only other seasonings are added. Pepperpot is a dish of meat cooked with lots of cassareep, pepper and salt. Other ingredients are also added and a tasty dish is prepared. Pepperpot is highly thought of and is especially associated with Christmas.

The most prominent and well-known beverages are *paiwari* and *casiri*. There are other drinks of less fame, for example *harirakoshi* = white-eye, and *yamorokoshi* = lizard's-eye. These are *paiwari* in varying degrees of grade. The fruit of the *toro* and *ité* palms give refreshing drinks also.

*Casiri* < Arawak *kashiri*, is a drink made of boiled cassava meal with a dash of boiled cassava juice and coloured with the potato named *kashiri* and left to ferment. This potato gives the drink its name. *Paiwari* < Arawak *paiauro*, is made by a more elaborate method. Cassava meal is toasted and then starch is added and the mixture is baked. A separate cake of fresh cassava meal is baked, the top and bottom of which is allowed to burn. This gives the slightly bitter taste to the drink. The toasted cassava meal mixed with starch gives its brown colour.

## CUSTOMS

In olden times people did not recognise Almighty God as the Giver. They realised that some kind of unseen being gives all sorts of useful things, material things as well as knowledge and skills so they showed their thankfulness and gratitude by giving to the spirit drink prepared from the first fruit of the crop.

When cassava was ready to be reaped, the first few tubers were made into a special drink (jumbie drink, Arawak *yawahü uthan*), and about two litres put into a gourd and placed in the cassava field for the Giver Spirit to drink. This action of the owners of the field was a thank offering to the generous and kind spirit who caused the plants to grow and bear fruit.<sup>9</sup>

They also realised that so many of the useful things of which they partook came from the earth, for example, the animals they hunted for food, the birds, the fish all subsisted on fruits of plants that grew on the earth. They developed a great respect for the earth and thought of it as 'Mother Earth'. They believed they had a right to be thankful and joyful.

One of the ways in which joy was expressed was through dancing. *Khaliron* (known to present-day people as *galirong*) was one dance, from *khal* = 'cassava' and *roñ* = 'only' – 'cassava only'. The meaning of the names of some dances is quite hazy because these dances started a long, long time ago. *Marimari* means toothless-toothless. We really don't know what this signifies. *Kashibakoro* means 'the face-to-face one'.

A dance is sometimes meant to portray some type of animal in action, for example, the baboon dance (Arawak *ituri*) or *colebra* (Arawak *ori*) which signifies a snake trying to bite a man. Like the *khaliron* this is performed by two dancers. *La sapa* (Arawak *shibero*) signifies frogs. In the evening people observed the small frogs jumping in merry fashion so they called one of their dances *shibero biniñ*. In some places this dance is called the 'Crapaud Dance'.

Although, presently, anyone can buy an alarm clock or a calendar some people still rely on the old ways of telling the time. Some listen for the cock crow which could be heard at 03:45 hours and continues at half hour intervals until day dawns. Others listen for the *durukwaro* which crows at 05:45

hours, or the chirps of a little bird known as 'bird wife' at about the same time. Incidentally the little bird referred to as 'bird wife' is a male. You are probably familiar with the saying "before bird-wife wake".

Along all the rivers and creeks in Guyana there is a small tree known as 'corkwood'. This tree bears flowers only in the rainy season. There are other trees whose fruit pop open just before the rains begin.

The roe of certain fishes develop during the dry season and the female fish lays her eggs just before the rainy season. Different methods of fishing are employed depending on the season. In the dry season the hook and line was used. People practised a sort of 'conservation' when they used hook and line because any fish that looked like it had eggs was put back into the water to lay the eggs and thereby increase the fish population. Another method of fishing in the dry season was drugging the fish with the juice of plants with anaesthetic properties such as *haiari*, *konali* and *yaurokonan*. The plant was bruised and the juice wrung out into the creek while the water was being churned and mixed with mud. The fish in the creek, drugged by this mixture, floated to the surface and were easily caught. Fish were also shot with bow-and-arrows. During the rainy season fish were caught with spring hooks. A spring-hook is a hook on a rod and line. The rod is stuck into the mud and set with a trigger so that when a fish pulls at the bait the trigger is released and the rod hooks the fish.

I hope that these two talks have indicated the scope of the contribution which the Arawak language has made to our culture here in Guyana, and even farther afield. Unlike in other parts of the Caribbean, Arawak survives in Guyana with great vigour and regional variation. However, as is the case with many regional or national languages in the world today, its survival is by no means assured. Everywhere it is being replaced by English. And although we consider it very desirable to learn the English language, acquisition of English at the expense of this ancient South American language seems a very high price to pay.

Our review of Arawak words in Guyanese culture is not exhaustive. However, I feel it may be of some interest to students in both the sciences and the humanities. For

example, the distribution of Arawak place names across the map of Guyana shows that there was a specific territory inhabited by prehistoric Arawaks; so there would be no point in an archaeologist looking for Arawak culture elsewhere than in this zone. This zone should also be of interest to the economic geographer: what were the physical features of the land that permitted Arawaks to occupy it so comprehensively? What techniques did they adopt? What can we learn from them? Amongst such questions, there should be answers also for the biologist, because mastery of the environment meant a high level of understanding of its flora and fauna. And finally, the historian. If ever we come to contemplate such a thing as the history of the Arawaks we can start from the important fact that, in Guyana, we have a clear idea of the boundaries of the Arawak heartland.

#### ENDNOTES:

<sup>1</sup> [Editor's note: Bennett dedicates his 1989 Dictionary to "*Dick Hart, the friend I never met.*"

<sup>2</sup> [Editor's note: The date of Father Bennett's lecture was 1986, not 1984, which was the year in which Williams gave his own lecture series. There is actually no foreword in the 1986 booklet containing Father Bennett's lectures. The foreword given here exists only in an original 'dummy' or mock-up, in Denis Williams's own handwriting, and is now being published for the first time. I am indebted to Jennifer Wishart of the Walter Roth Museum of Anthropology for making it available to me. It is most likely that Williams had originally intended Bennett to give the lectures in 1984, and had written the foreword and prepared the mock-up at that time, but for some reason the arrangement had not worked out, and he had substituted himself as speaker. It is clear from the mock-up that Williams and Bennett had intended to feature ten captioned photographs within the body of the text, but they too are absent from the published version. All we can definitely tell from the mock-up is that it was designed to have a photograph of Bennett himself to accompany the foreword, and one of the mission church at Kabakaburi as a frontispiece. So the 1984 mock-up, together with the foreword and illustrations, was either not available or not consulted when Bennett's 1986 lectures were published, or may have been abandoned because of budgetary constraints.]

<sup>3</sup> [Editor's note: This is unintentionally confusing. By 'n' he presumably means 'n' with the tilde, 'ñ'. According to his Dictionary, 'u' is indeed pronounced as in 'foot' while 'ü' (with the umlaut) is pronounced as 'i' in bird. The absence of diacritical characters on a standard typewriter keyboard meant that in material thus produced they had to be carefully added to the typescript by hand (as in the case of his Dictionary) and the unfamiliar characters also caused problems for compositors and typesetters. The stress mark over a letter means that the syllable containing it is to be stressed and lengthened, as in mahóka . It should also be noted that 'y' is pronounced as 'i'.]

<sup>4</sup> [Editor's note: for the sake of clarity I have occasionally replaced the dash ( - ) with < (to indicate derivation) and = (to indicate equivalence of meaning).]

<sup>5</sup> [Editor's note: this is a linguistic phenomenon known as rhotacism. For example, Portuguese obrigado, 'obliged'.]

<sup>6</sup> See *British Guiana* by Raymond T. Smith (London: OUP, 1962), p. 24.

<sup>7</sup> [Editor's note: a drougher ( also 'drogher' or 'droguer') is a labourer employed to carry supplies and equipment on expeditions in the Guyanese interior.]

<sup>8</sup> [Editor's note: in the context of snake bites, this is most probably a reference to the salipenter snake (*Spilotes pullatus*). There is also the large salipenter lizard (*Tupinambis negropunctatus*), jocularly referred to as the 'bush motorbike' because of the speed at which it can move. ]

<sup>9</sup> [Editor's note: for more on the bush spirit or yawahü, see Walter E. Roth, *An Inquiry Into the Animism and Folk-Lore of the Guiana Indians* (1915), [http://www.archive.org/stream/cu31924104074665/cu31924104074665\\_djvu.txt](http://www.archive.org/stream/cu31924104074665/cu31924104074665_djvu.txt).]

**Eleventh Series, 1987**

**The Relevance of Myth**  
*George P. Mentore*



## **PREFACE**

This is a revised version of the lectures delivered at the Theatre Guild Playhouse, November 1987, as the Eleventh Series of the Edgar Mittelholzer Memorial lectures of the Department of Culture: 'The Relevance of Myth: An Amerindian Case'. The opinions derive from fieldwork conducted among the Waiwai of the Upper Essequibo rain forest, Guyana, during 1977–1978 and again in 1985.

**George P. Mentore**



## MYTHIC DISCOURSE

It is perhaps self-evident to us in our literate world that words convey and are themselves depositories of information. That faceless voice on the telephone, that distant personality behind scribbled characters, the merciless precision of computerised words, are all processed aspects of a new age to which we acquiesce. Such is our level of submission, that not only do we no longer require verification that the modern word carries and stores information, but also we have acquired a tendency to no longer protest the status of power given to the word. My reading of our acquiescence is derived from the discourse of hegemony evident from the high volume of literary products which oppress its believers with the mysticism of empirical thought. Science has long co-opted empiricism into its coven of the faithful. This has come about primarily because of the acceptance that words have meaning and, in so doing, express truth or falsehood about the empirical world. It seems ironic, but it appears that philosophers, for example, like Russell who attempted to demystify language, ultimately aided the word in becoming fundamental to the mysticism of the concrete.

Russell contended that to define an instance of a word it is essential (but not sufficient) to have a similarity between the word and a recognised standard noise or shape. For him words came in four types, spoken, heard, written and read. A word spoken is a 'verbal utterance', a word heard is a 'verbal noise', and a word written is a 'verbal shape'. However, he says "*the necessary degree of similarity between a word and its standard noise or shape cannot be precisely defined.*"<sup>1</sup> It is for this reason that "*Print is preferable.*"<sup>2</sup> What he means is that black printed type on white paper is preferable to garbled sounds of verbal utterances or the inconsistent verbal shapes of partially legible handwriting. "*A printed page,*" he goes on to say, "*consists of a set of discrete and easily classified shapes.*" He would have us believe that print quenches our desire for classification. He, of course, does not suggest that the logical structure of

verbal utterances cannot also fulfil our propensity for creating order by categorizing.

Clearly words have meaning within the context of other presupposed words. However, they also have meaning when found in isolation, particularly when found functioning in what Russell refers to as their most "elementary", their most "demonstrative" uses. Words which have meaning in isolation he calls "object-words". The word "fire", for example, can carry meaning on its own, while the word "than" on its own cannot. One learns the meaning of an "object-word" through confrontation with an object or instance of what that word means. The verbal utterance "dog", in the presence of an object dog, gives meaning to the word dog. But humankind seeks to do more with language than provide meaning to the world. We want "intended effects." This is why sentences become operative, for "only sentences have intended effects."<sup>3</sup>

The object-word "look" has the indicative effect of command, but the sentence "Look, there's a tapir" has both the clear effect of command and the motive for the command. The distinction between meaning and intended effect is thus more apparent in narrative speech. As we have seen, meaning is not restricted to the domain of sentences, for object-words also have this capacity. What the latter do not have is the ability to represent intended effects. So, in order to go beyond mere assertions we require sentences – the very substance of narrative and imaginative fiction.

It is said that the explanation of meaning has to begin with object words. It is also said that when sentences make assertions they do so with object-words, and it is only by knowing the meaning of the object-words that one can know what is being asserted. It is now well established that "all empirical statements contain object-words" and that "the meaning of object-words is fundamental in the theory of empirical knowledge."<sup>4</sup> But this is just my point: assertions never take us beyond the boundary of positivism. The modern word bears on the world of object-words. Truth has more and more come to be defined in terms of empirical scientific assertions, facts without concepts about their value; information without the beliefs which mould their reality. We have slowly become the docile recipients of data which do not require us to seek alternative explanations.

This acquiescence to the factual, in the modern world, has been assisted by the impersonal technical objects which convey the message. Science, that genre of learning which has sculptured the depersonalised mediums of the word has, after all, become the Divine King of Modernity. The computer age has heralded a sovereign lord who has sanctioned rather than rejected the hegemony of literate intellectualism. Now to many the word is irrevocably classed with its impassive mediums, and thus, in the logic of Western cultures, the illusion of objectivity. It is this so-called objectivity of the word with its advanced technical mediums that now cajoles and transforms public opinion, for they are recognised and accepted as the handmaidens of truth.

It is my contention, however, that even within the apparently personalised realm of reading, the effect of the modern myth prescribes a docile audience. When an individual approaches a text it becomes an intimate system from which clarification is sought by the relations drawn between its various parts. In the act of understanding the reader succumbs to the strictures of the model; one has to in order to retrieve the message. What is being understood, what is making sense, is the status of sense. The high standing given to the ability to perceive is reiterated everytime we decode the text. In other words, the modern myth of empiricism is in the act of reading. The experience of perception discovered through reading verifies the truth of empirical thought. There is no rebellion, no rejection of *"the"* truth.

But how is this domination; how, more particularly, is this domination by the word? My view is that the individual reader is drawn into a collective reality by the power of agreement inherent in the relations set up by the model in the text. In storing and conveying information, words become at one and the same time the instruments and the inventors of the political. By responding to the stimulation of the text (that is, by successfully decoding its message), the reader is coerced into comprehension. The coherence of the model provides the legitimacy for its authority – the same authority with which it proclaims its right to effect response from the reader. So, held within the structure of the text is the power of logical consistency – the very opium of our compliancy. It is

significant, therefore, that literate cultures have responded to such dominance by placing the crown of reason not just on the head of human language, but also on its offspring, the written word.

The illiterate in our literate world is doomed to the plebeian class. To read and write in our ideology of literacy is to open the doors to rational wisdom. Knowledge and its propagation become the exclusive domain of the literate class – the higher ranking political classes. Written knowledge acquires a potent existence. When it is concretised, it acquires a validity beyond that of its parent “*verbal utterance.*” It is here, then, that control over the word and the medium of its message becomes the primary function of ideology, for in a culture of literacy, written knowledge is power. It is used constantly to reinforce and reproduce the existing order of things. It is no surprise to find, therefore, that in today’s world the modern myth is securely housed in political ideology.

One notices, for example, that at the heart of the mechanism of belief in capitalist societies, the notion of individualism is paramount. It is a characteristic myth that if one applies a certain personal commitment to the work ethic the dream of wealth will materialise. What is perhaps a little more remarkable is the extension of this notion to religion. It is one’s own pledge to accumulate goodness (like the rich man who accumulated goods) that wins salvation. It is that private spiritual encounter with God that finally convinces the heretic to convert. Personal effort, founded on an acute awareness of the self is a forceful and convincing statement for placing the individual. It is also a telling comment on the preoccupation with self-image in the West, a preoccupation that I see resulting from a driving need to find truth through experience. Any discovery about the truth of the self can only be accomplished through personal encounter. Truth resides in verification by perceiving. Experiencing the experience is to know. Such a theory places personal participation at the centre of being, where self amounts to the total accumulation of individual experience. Thus positivism rides in tandem with the primacy of the individual: one is the myth of truth, the other the myth of individualised being. Both help to vitalise and perpetuate the essential character of Capitalism. Both

assist in legitimising the need for State appropriation of the social product, which is necessary for the reproduction of society. *"One day I or my descendants will profit from my efforts"* – for this to occur in such a complex society, the current asymmetry between capital and labour has to be reproduced. The myth, of course, is attempting to reconcile the contradiction of domination; it is trying to make consistent and acceptable capital's denial of labour's access to its source of power – the material means of production. We in the West Indies have long been familiar with this genre of mythic discourse. Our history of contact with capitalist societies has been predicated upon a deep-seated refusal to allow us access to power.

The myth of truth and the myth of being became our cultural patrimony. The slave and the indentured worker took up the master's language – it was their means of convincing him of their potential humanity. With independence from colonialism we similarly took up the master's notion of nationhood, of national identity – this was our means of parading collective competence, our platform for exhibiting ability to come on par with metropolitan civilization. In asserting and reasserting our self-image, however, the means was always one inherited from the dominant ideology. This was merely a reflection of our subordination. This is what the effective use of power actually means. In taking up the challenge, we also took up the fundamental essence of Western cultural belief, one which is predicated upon a notion of individualism, identified by the criterion of experience, but one which ensures the perpetuation of the order of things; in this case, the replication of the order of political domination.

My comment is that the empiricism of science, which resides comfortably in Western thought, has similarly processed the Caribbean mind to ask similar questions about being. It is a case of systematic proof by experience. *"Validate your presence with factual data."* *"In a vocabulary we use,"* says Western thought, *"represent your existence to us."* It is interesting and somewhat revealing that in responding to this challenge the Caribbean mind has articulated, through their intellectual scribes, the very nature of their being.

As many literary critics have mentioned, the crucial issue of identity for the Caribbean person has been worked and perhaps overworked in the metaphor of the dichotomy between Prospero and Caliban. But note, as Drake<sup>5</sup> recently brought to our notice through the ideas of Derrida, the question of identity is itself a result of “*an ancient dichotomy of Western philosophy, the division between body and mind, nature and culture.*”<sup>6</sup> It is the specific result of humanity that mind and culture are the victors over body and nature. Reason must be supreme for society to be. Prospero, being equated with reason, is the natural master of Caliban who is symbolically of nature and of disorder — antiferces against human society. The symbolic transformations clearly carry the meaning and character of the relationship deemed to be central to the Caribbean situation.

In this paper, I will try to offer from Waiwai mythic discourse an interpretation of their philosophy of power. In so doing I hope not only to illustrate the particular character of their relationships of asymmetry, but also to present what can only be described as a viable alternative way of “*being*”, an order of things whose fundamental essence is so far removed from our scientism that the vortex of words separating our cultures may be totally inadequate for a full dialogue of appreciation to be accomplished.

## SOCIETY IN SHODEWIKE

All societies, even those without a culture of literacy, have to deal with information retention and recall. We in modern society force our human presence upon the natural world. We push nature to the outskirts of consciousness and fill the vacant lot with commodities of ourselves. There is, as an outcome, less of ourselves between us and our message. In so-called "*primitive*" societies, human beings are partners not masters in the communicative process. Non-literate cultures have a tendency to accommodate rather than suppress "*nature*". They negotiate for a place within the order of the natural universe. Therefore, in the primitive transmitter nature figures more in the message. There is, moreover, more of humanity as well. Unlike modern literate cultures, whose senses have atrophied with advanced technology, primitive cultures sustain their complete sensory intuitiveness. Action and speech invariably combine to convey the message. Aroma, flavour, and tactility are an intricate part of the whole presentation. You could no more exclude these sensory realities from words than you could sight and sound. As a consequence, information retention is achieved in such a manner as to preclude literacy. In addition, retrieval and transmission, because of the full application of the human experience, achieve a powerful, dynamic quality which some say is lost in the process of literate transcription.

The structural analyses of Lévi-Strauss placed great emphasis upon transcribing the primitive message. While it may be true that much was lost in his algebra of the primitive mind, we at last came to recognise a fundamental reasoning in totemic and mythic thought, one far removed from the narrow confines of "*pre-logical*" thinking. Lévi-Strauss revealed what he believed to be the hidden logic of elementary structures of thought and their universal applicability to humankind. All people whether of literate or non-literate culture organise the conceptual continuum into what they recognise as reality. For the "*savage mind*", however, greater emphasis is placed on the relevance of nature in

creating the categories of social reality. Thus, in one of the most powerful mediums for transmitting the collective representations of reality, mythic discourse, it is hardly surprising to find that most of the characters derive from the material and metaphysical non-human world. Nature is implemented (not subjugated) to make sense of social experience. According to Lévi-Strauss, the mind, that humus of human distinctiveness, is at root, everywhere the same. Developing a general algebra or grammar of the mind permits an understanding of any given phenomenon produced from the fertile bed of reason. From such a perspective, we can now view the primitive modes of thought as just as “intellectual” ,just as “rational”, just as “logical” as modern modes. We can now reject the belief that they are merely “emotional”, “instinctive”, or “mystical”. For Lévi-Strauss, it is the decoding of mythic text in particular that allows us most to view the innate binary processes universal to the human condition of thought.

Scholes,<sup>7</sup> paraphrasing the Dutch art historian and literary critic André Jolles, proclaims myth to be “*the answer to an unspoken question about a matter of great import.*” It “*deals only with the eternal.*” It informs how and why the unchangeable came into being. What is perhaps significant about claims for myth is that they also proclaim its functions as being the “*prototypes of all narrative.*” The early structuralists viewed such narrative as “*primitive fiction*” – a primeval expression that has been used and abused by modern fiction, but it is precisely because of myth’s ability to preserve structural features that it has never been relinquished altogether as a means of expression.

For Lévi-Strauss the presence of such structural features is evidence that myth should be considered as high-level discourse: one that declares the universality of the process of thought among humans. He maintains that all language achieves meaning, not just from the phenomenon of discourse, but from the logic of its process. Sound in language, as Jakobson states, is to allow differentiation of semantic units. It is through perception of the distinctive dyadic features of sound that semantic differentiation is achieved. It is precisely when it occurs in particular patterned forms that it is able to

convey meaning. Thus it is that sound is used to express ideas. Discovering the patterns of binary oppositions in mythic discourse is, for Lévi-Strauss, the means of revealing the real meaning in myth. Of course, myth is here more than just language, for while its purpose is to transmit ideas by the way words of value and relevance are associated, it is also capable of storing ideas. Getting at these ideas is Lévi-Strauss's preoccupation.

It is not, however, merely the immediate message of the moment that the structuralist is concerned to retrieve. It is not only the isolated diachronic theme in the plot, carrying that ephemeral message, that interests Lévi-Strauss. At the level of diachronic discourse, myth changes with every recital. But the myth in performance also retains a fundamental, more resilient message, even when the performance is badly presented, disturbed by interference from outside, or so transformed in its plot as to appear as another myth. It is the consistent synchronic structure that carries the deep meaning in myth, and it is this inner form that structuralism claims to bring out in analysis.

It is no mistake or accident of academic history that it was the societies of Amerindians that helped western intellectuals to at last realise that humanity processed thought similarly. Amerindians appear both culturally and sociologically to be on a plane different from that of modern societies. They invariably live in the "*bush*" while we live in "*town*". They seem close to nature while we are far from it. They seem instinctive and unsophisticated while we are rational and "*civilised*". Structuralism exploded these notions, even if those same notions are the cultural framework upon which we build our self-image, that is, here we are, so there must be the other, defined in terms of opposition. Structuralism states quite emphatically that while humankind may have at the diachronic level of discourse varying concepts that define individual distinctive societies, it is the synchronic level that reveals the innate universal human phenomenon of thought. In addition, we – collective humankind – appear to think pretty much about the same sorts of things – e.g., immortality/mortality; establishing sexual access to particular categories of persons; legitimising authority and the exercise of power; and of course

about “*society*” itself. Mythic discourse among South American Indians is concerned with all these primary themes.

The Waiwai, a Carib-speaking people living in the southern forests of Guyana, display a remarkably expressive artistic life. This is recognised not just by the appreciation of their material artifacts by non-Amerindians but also by other neighbouring forest and savannah communities who are constantly trading for Waiwai graters, bows, arrows, pots, etc. Such economic interaction helps to impart a sense of presence that sets the notion of being “*Waiwai*” at a self-conscious level. Their goods are in demand and with their exchange goes a feeling of contributing to the creation of the collective self – “*Waiwai*”. Whatever is received in the transaction of handicraft goods always, directly or indirectly, assists in the production, appropriation and redistribution of the collective social product. The society and community survives through individual effort which the collectivity then appropriates for the communal good. Thus, at one instance Waiwai means to comply with certain cultural imperatives that necessitate persons being both individual producers and consumers in a social environment – which recognises reciprocal exchange based on similar moral substance. So as to help sustain a coherent belief in this moral substance, ritual and myth engage in a dialogue that highlights the structural themes crucial for the perpetuation of a faith in the order of things.

Shodewika is a major ritual festival held once a year for three to four days in December. Traditionally it was an opportunity for villagers to invite their neighbours to join them in feast and dance so that the unmarried members could state formally their social status and their willingness to alter that status. If we accept a functionalist explanation for ritual behaviour, however, we would have to admit that Shodewika’s social consequence is the expression of sociological sentiments much higher than the proclamation of unmarried status on the part of individuals. We would have to say, for example, that such a major ritual festival is an essentially expressive activity which “*contributes to the maintenance of social solidarity.*” This was certainly the case when villages were small and not so distant from one another. Today with villages having

populations of up to five hundred, with weeks rather than days separating them, possibly a different type of solidarity is enacted in Shodewika.

Much of the instrumental and expressive content of Shodewika remains the same today as it was in the past. The central symbolic element of food is still present. Before the festival begins volunteer members of the village go out and hunt for meat. Traditionally it would have been these men, the hunters and providers of meat, who were the invited guests. Today the volunteer hunters play the part of the guests. While the men are out hunting, huge quantities of cassava drink and bread are prepared in the village. When the hunters return after days of hunting, fishing, and smoking their catches, they enter the village as strangers. In ceremonial dress, with back-pack filled with gifts of meat, blowing their bark trumpets and bamboo flutes, they dance into the village plaza in single file. Above the head of each hunter is a stiffened, smoked totem of the animal they represent. Facing the villagers, they stop dancing and playing their instruments, stand in line. Here they receive the token of their strangeness, the gesture of the sexual character of the festival; every hunter is given a bowl of juice to drink from each of the women who prepared the cassava beverages. The hunters are from and are of the forest, a dangerous realm that must be controlled through the hunters' consumption of cultivated products processed in the domain of the village by women. After their subordination to the forces of culture, the hunters – now tamed animal-spirits of the forest – once again begin dancing and playing their musical instruments while moving into the village leader's house. Here they offer to the village, through its leader, the gift of meat. With this reciprocal exchange, that is, drink for meat, which echoes the division of labour in marriage, the hunters accept their subordinate status to the men of the village. Hunters are now symbolically the husbands of the producers of drink; they are the in-laws of their host. By receiving the drink from the women, the hunters not only gestured their submission, they also made the clear metaphorical statement of sexual intercourse, an act which in Waiwai society is expressive of marriage itself. Sexuality, controlled through confinement within the institution

of marriage, is an ideological construct that needs constantly to be reaffirmed. To hold together in belief of a collective moral substance, Waiwai society re-enacts the primordial myth of Shodewika.

In the myth of Shodewika, the Buzzard-people's invitation to the ritual festival, which was sent out to the other animal-peoples, was motivated by their women's need for husbands. We can thus identify the Buzzard-people (the hosts) as wife-givers and the visiting animal-peoples (the guests) as receivers. This distinction is important because, as Rivière has noted, "*in all Carib societies the relationship between affines – and specifically between parents-in-law and their children-in-law – is always asymmetrical in nature. This being the case, affinal relationships offer the best idiom for expressing political relationships that involve domination and subordination.*"<sup>8</sup>

What articulates these asymmetrical relationships is the principle of direct exchange, that is, the rule in their kinship system which stipulates that I give you my sister to be your wife while you give me your sister to be my wife. The articulating asymmetry is that wife-givers are superior to wife-receivers.

Throughout the myth, which is clearly a charter for not only the ritual of Shodewika but also a formal narrative specifying the fundamental principles of society, political domination is being promoted and justified. Those that accept wives and the conventions of Waiwai marriage come into society; those that refuse or don't comply with marital customs are doomed to animality and rejection from society. The animal-men who marry into the Buzzard-village later on are allowed to keep society and become the various tribes in culture today. But note the price they pay for society. What they lose is the status of being gods: in becoming human they lose their immortality signified by no longer being able to transform themselves into animals and *vice versa* (a very special kind of experience reserved today only for heavenly spirits and shamans). The animal men who do not marry and reside with local Buzzard-women are at various points in the myth transformed into the species of animals that exist today. To conform to uxorilocal residence, that is, for the man at marriage to move from his natal household to that of his

wife's father's household, is both a sign of how humankind should live in society and a statement of acceptance of subordination by the son-in-law. The animal-men who took Buzzard wives and remained living in Buzzard village are subordinate wife-receivers, and with their action comply to the politics of their situation. The myth is an authorised statement of this asymmetric order while the ritual of Shodewika is a regular promotion and justification of this order.

The episodic passages of the myth reiterate structurally the morality of social law. For example, the most striking case of transformation is that of the Kibihee-men who, on leaving the Buzzard village, kill and eat uncooked the liver of a harpy eagle. After consuming the raw meat, they fall asleep and cannot be awakened by the shouting of the harpy eagle's soul/spirit, even though their companions were startled into wakefulness. There is here a definite negative response to sound which proclaims a transformation. It takes a red-hot stick – a positive tactile response – to awaken the Kibihee-men. And it is on the verbal command of their companions that the Kibihee-men are actually transformed into real Kibihees. Fire, in its symbolised form of the hot stick, is seen as a helpful and creative source, for it already represents its cooking potential by actually being the instrument which awakens the Kibihee-men to mortal existence – fire, and hence cooking, are here classed with the notion of culture, which humankind acquires with mortality. The general movement from negative to positive response along the gustatory, tactile, and auditory sensory processes are here the consequences for the denial of actual or possible affinal relationships. The Kibihee-men became animals who were subject to life and death because they did not marry and reside in Buzzard village. They, from the logic of the kinship system, committed incest and kept their sisters instead of exchanging them and becoming subject to in-law domination.

Waiwai political philosophy, as documented in their mythic discourse, clearly sees social morality as the substance which binds and maintains the order of things. It is this moral character, cast in the role of kinship relationships, which sets

the political in Waiwai society apart from the political in modern societies. In the latter the political is motivated by a primary concern for the economic. Among the Waiwai, even though the economic is a crucial part of the mechanisms of the political, it is in a much more balanced articulation with the other elements of the ideological. Kinship is the metaphor in which political and economic relationships are acted out in Waiwai society. Its moral nature prescribes the rather distinctive way in which the society perceives its existence and continuity. For the order of things to be and to continue to be as they presently are, the proper amount and flow of moral relationships must be promoted and believed in. The son-in-law has to believe in his obligation of subordination to his father-in-law, for one day when he has a daughter, he expects with her marriage to receive his share in the exercise of power over his son-in-law. The obligation to give and the obligation to receive must entail at the moment of exchange, a moral imperative recognised by the giver and the receiver. One of the functions of mythic discourse is to make sense of such an imperative, one which sanctions the imbalance of power between these in a transaction of unequal exchange. Clearly a belief in the morality of the transaction is one means of dealing with the inherent asymmetrical nature of power. The exercise of power is needed to effect an ordered society, belief in the morality of power is likewise essential for the Waiwai to accommodate the ultimate result of the correct use of power. The message in the myth of Shodewika is that society is founded on reciprocity and hierarchy, the way in which this is perceived and legitimised marks the essential features of Waiwai existence.

## THE SELF CONSTRUCTED

The Waiwai category of self can best be understood from an appreciation of their concepts of time. The one lends itself to the other in such a way as to be instructive about the proportions and place of individualism in their scheme of things. The Waiwai notion of the person, for example, is one which places primary value not on the individual but on society. This is in contrast to societies in the West that advocate the primacy of the individual. Like Dumont<sup>9</sup> I will refer to the former as 'holism' and the latter as 'individualism'. My view is that these opposing representations of the self reflect a similar opposition in an appreciation of time.

We in the modern world objectify conceptual time in an immense variety of ways: from digital watches to black holes, from test-tube babies to immortalisation in shrines of documented history. Ours is a quantifiable, accumulative, linear time, constructed upon a perception of biological nature. The natural world is made sense of through perceiving the comparative stages of development which continue outside of culture. Chronological time is thus taken to be the reality that formalises this uninterrupted condition. The category of the self in this constructed reality is understood to originate from a coming together of the biogenetic matter of one's genitor and genetrix. The natural act of sexual intercourse between an anatomically and biologically defined man and woman, is the means by which the child as a person first enters the world. The opposing chromosomes are said to create a unique individual, having relatedness only to the hereditary line of its biological parents, who are themselves separate individuals. The notion of the person is founded on precepts of lineality and the successive stages of genealogical blood-line.

In modern society, the individual's consciousness of cultural being is reinforced by the scientism of biology. The child's genetic make-up assists in placing it within society. The child is socialised within the family as son or daughter from the premise of its biological sex. Clearly, however, as

Schneider<sup>10</sup> has shown for American society, with notions of blood there must also be sentiments of relationships. The American cultural ideal is to combine reason and nature so that the former dominates the latter in what appears to be a natural way. Thus it is that the natural substance of blood, which defines the relationship between parent and child, is a relationship which comes about through the instinctive act of sexual intercourse. Both these factors in nature, however, in order to express what is part of the American ideal, must be controlled by a "code of conduct." Love and marriage, therefore, coupled with sexual intercourse, define the ideal configuration in which the American person emerges. There is not enough space here to expound more on Schneider's argument, but my general point is that individualism in American culture begins and develops in the family which is itself built upon the precedent of biological knowledge, formal and/or informal. This body of knowledge inculcates explanations for the specific order of other things, for example, quantifiable linear time, which is then reused by formal science and ethnoscience itself.

The way that the Waiwai view time is manifestly circular. Measurement of temporal space, for example, is achieved with the regular rising and setting of the sun. *Kosopi* (night) and *katpun* (day) are more precisely demarcated by *pasisaro* (the first glow of sunlight), *kamarakatwa* (the sun at its zenith) and *kokone* (the setting sun). Yesterday is *kokonero* and tomorrow is *pasisa*. Longer durations of time can be calculated with the rising and waning of the moon and the seasonal rains which can all be predicted by the stars. In the grammar of their language verbs can be conjugated to incorporate a distant even mythic past. *Owi wasi* (I am), *wesi* (I was in the recent past), *wisakne* (I was in the distant past). What this does is conflate distant mythic time with a kind of continuous present. With this type of perspective built in to their language, numerical measurement is made redundant. In fact, before Western contact, the Waiwai counted to five with all following single units totalling the sum of *mepara* (many). Even chronological age, as a sequence of units, is established by social criteria which emphasise the circular character of time and the essentially curved passage of the intrinsic substance of the self.

When a female child is born in Waiwai society, it is understood that its corporal being is given life at the moment of conception by the woman who gives it birth. The baby girl receives its life-force, its *ekati*, from this woman. A male child receives its *ekati* from the man who is known to have had regular sexual access to the woman who produces the child. The *ekati*, a life-force or soul substance, is a cosmic fluid energy which has to remain intact in its corporal host, from the moment of conception to death, when it is said the *ekati* leaves the body. To at least the age when the child is no longer breast feeding and is walking, its *ekati* is extremely volatile. This means that its parents must remain close to it during this period. Their constant physical presence ensures that the pulling strength of their *ekati* will not cause any prolonged absence of the child's unstable soul substance, which could cause its death. As part of this period of protection the child's parents also abstain from consumption of certain types of food, ones which could contaminate their *ekati* and thus the *ekati* of their child. All living things possess *ekati*, and all it takes is for a malevolent soul-spirit of the dead animal to take revenge upon its hunter and consumer by stealing their soul-stuff.

There is a sense of a collective soul substance, a communal metaphysical life-force, equivalent to the social and political notions of being Waiwai. There is a spiritual realm where all dead souls reside. Taking up residence in this domain is not deemed to be a survival of the individual person<sup>11</sup> but an event in which the *ekati* returns to its original place of existence – possibly to be called on once again to bring life to another human form. This belief stems from the close association in Waiwai thought between personal names and soul-stuff, and the practice of naming a child after a grandparent or a remembered dead ancestor. The thought is that in the spiritual domain there is a metaphysical protoplasm of collective souls which at one time were possessed by the ancestors of the Waiwai and are available for use by the living. This communism of life-force is a structural replica of the material social reality of Waiwai society.

Waiwai society can be seen as a bounded unity where what it means to be Waiwai is recognised in terms of obligatory social roles. Invariably these are relationships of kinship and

marriage maintained by the sanctions of morality. The fundamental articulating principle is to initiate and sustain exchanges which identify members as belonging to the community. Here is where the notion of holism is objectified. The individual is subservient to the collectivity in the sense that for society to exist it has to mitigate against the high probability of the individual surviving outside of society. Waiwai society is considered to be egalitarian. What this means is that every individual has the potential for autonomy, which some scholars say is made possible by the low technology of their instruments of labour and free and equal access to the material resources of production. Holism, captured in the morality of social relationships, helps to work against this potential for individualism. The bounded pool of social relationships, like the realm of collective souls, maintains a notion of being which emphasises an unbounded Waiwai self-image. The recognised procedures in which part of the communal being is transmitted, in order to create the individual, depend upon the hegemony of the corporate self.

The cycles of time and the metaphysical continuum of the self are, in the material world, solidified by social and cultural constructs. Before a girl's first menstruation and before a boy shows signs of adolescence, there is no linguistic distinction made between female and male children – they are all called *rikomo*. At first menses the girl goes through initiation into womanhood. The *emasi* (a young childless female) is ready for marriage after her period of isolation. She wears for first time the insignia of womanhood, a bead apron. Her subsequent conjugal union heralds a new status which is a stepping-stone to domestic authority. A woman's real base of authority comes at the birth of her first child. Her children are the spokes in the wheel of social relationships which bring her and the village community wealth and prestige. People, or more currently the social ties between people, are wealth and power in Waiwai society.<sup>12</sup> Married women with children are called *nacewakomo*; they are the sources upon which the community depends for its perpetuation. When their fertility ceases, they become *chacha*, women who pass on female knowledge to their heirs before their *ekati* return to its spiritual domain.

The cyclical flow of male development is not so determined by the concerns for the production of children, although it is marked by this. Male development has often made me think that perhaps there may be more than one perception of time in Waiwai social thought: one for females and one for males. Female time is manifestly cyclical. Male time, and perhaps even male perception of the self, is linear, not accumulative or quantitative, but unidimensional. The form that objects associated with the different gender take support this view in symbolic transformations. It is no accident that cassava bread loaves, baking pans, clay pots, and even the traditional communal house are round and are viewed in Waiwai minds as female. The circle, like the motion of the moon and the form of the womb that gives life to humankind, is symbolically female. Men's property, in particular bows and arrows – instruments of material death – and flutes, known among the Waiwai as transporters of mystical death, are linear objects held in contrast to the round female forms. This opposition, however, succumbs to the primary life-giving idioms, for male unidimensional time ultimately comes from and develops from a general model of temporal space which is viewed as circular.

The male process of social development, after the neuter gender grade of *rikorno*, goes into *karipamsam* – the category of young men. These are the men who work the most and come under the command of elder males in the community. They are, in their subordination, the representation of senior male power. It is through marriage and the birth of sons and daughters (particularly the latter) that men throw off some of their subordination. With such status they become *poritomokomo* – big men, with their own subordinate sons-in-law. The old men of the village are *pocho* and are the culmination of mortal knowledge.

The human body, when filled with the cosmic *ekati*, has an energy that culture constantly attempts to keep under control. Apart from the periodic social rituals whose main function is to bring disruptive events back to peaceful equilibrium, there are also daily pacifiers of human cosmic energy. These visually portray the emphasis of cyclical temporal themes and the predominance of the social

collective over the individual. The decorated Waiwai body is a graphic image of energy under control. For both men and women the points of physical power, the parts which demand most from the vital force of *ekati*, are *aporu* (the arms) and *iwaharu* (the calf). Controlling energy at the points where it is most exerted are brightly coloured bands of beads or strips of bark. Around each arm between the muscle of the shoulder and the biceps there is a restraining band called *apomi*. There are similar moderators around the ankles called *waspirima* and under the knee called *waspa*. Almost all other artefacts of body decoration go around the human form: a woman's apron, a man's lap, necklaces, even earrings are held in place through pierced ears by being tied together behind the neck or by strings of beads which hang around the front of the neck. The marked difference between the body decorations of men and women is in linear forms which protrude from men. It is only men who wear the long tail feathers of the macaw sticking out of their arm bands. Only men have feathered tassels hanging from their pierced lips and huge feathers thrusting outwards from their nose. And most telling of all, only men have *miso*, a pig-tail wrapped in string and contained in *porokrma*, a beaded bamboo tube with a huge bulb of feathers attached to its end. A woman's hair is twisted into a coiled bun at the nape of the neck. The circular theme is constant in the daily statements the Waiwai make with their bodies. These distinguishing marks also proclaim collective Waiwai identity, for their form of dress states the Waiwai corporate self in opposition to other people who dress differently.

Waiwai discourse in the vocabulary of body decoration speaks about concepts of being. The category of the self is first and foremost a part of an eternal cosmic substance captured temporarily in a mortal corporal form whose distinguishing features state differentiation between gender, age, and corporate identity. The relevance of myth here is in the perpetuation of this order of things. If mythic discourse encapsulates their ideological beliefs when it also carries the validity of their eternal cosmic order, ritual behaviour acts out in substantive form this particular order. The quality of this order in Waiwai society privileges holism in the construction of the self. Thus their philosophy of power is

best interpreted as one in which corporate coercion is the only legitimate means of action, the only valid way to experience life itself. Such a vocabulary of power stipulates the culturally specific character of being Waiwai. Yet my aim in this paper has been to highlight the universal nature of humankind.

My purpose has been to show, like Lévi-Strauss and others before me, that the general concerns of humanity, even though they emphasise different aspects of the phenomenon, are the same from society to society. In addition, I have attempted to illustrate that these concerns are invariably couched in mythic discourse. We are all, as members of human society, concerned with identity and with the experience of being. How we go about constructing this reality and the ways in which it manifests itself varies from culture to culture. I would go so far as to say that in all societies there are concepts of individualism and holism, the proportions and positions of each in a given society establishing its cultural specificity. The fact that the degree of emphasis on and the place given to identity are validated in mythic discourse proclaims that the universal relevance of myth is in humankind's capacity for thought and reason. What is fascinating of course, is that we are all thinking and reasoning about the same fundamental human issues.

#### ENDNOTES:

<sup>1</sup> Bertrand Russell, *An Inquiry into Meaning and Truth* (United Kingdom: Penguin Books, 1967), p. 23.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 26.

<sup>4</sup> *Loc. cit.*

<sup>5</sup> Sandra E. Drake, *Wilson Harris and the Modern Tradition: a new Architecture of the World* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1986).

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 30–31.

<sup>7</sup> Robert Scholes, *Structuralism in Literature: an Introduction* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974).

<sup>8</sup> Rivière, Peter. 'Some problems in the comparative study of Carib societies,' in *Carib-speaking Indians, culture, society and language* (ed) E. B. Basso (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1977), pp. 40-41.

<sup>9</sup> Louis Dumont, '**A modified view of our origins: the Christian beginnings of modern individualism**,' in *The Category of the Person: Anthropology, Philosophy, History*, edited by Michael Carrithers, Steven Collins, Steven Lukes (London: Cambridge University Press, 1986).

<sup>10</sup> David Schneider, *American Kinship: a cultural account* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980).

<sup>11</sup> Niels Fock, *Waiwai: Religion and Society of an Amazonian Tribe* (Ethnographic Series 8, Copenhagen: National Museum of Denmark, 1963), p. 19.

<sup>12</sup> George P. Mentore, '**Waiwai Women: the Basis of Wealth and Power**,' in *Man* (N. S.) 22, 1987, pp. 511–527.

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**Twelfth Series, 1997**

**Language and National Unity**

*Richard Allsopp*



## CHAIRMAN'S FOREWORD

In 1987, ten years preceding today's event, the last Edgar Mittelholzer Memorial Lecture was delivered. With such a lapse of time, it is understandable if memories have become dimmed, and it is appropriate therefore that we should begin by reminding ourselves of what we commemorate.

The invitation to the present revival of a tradition gives the following information.

### Edgar Mittelholzer 1909 – 1965

Guyana's pioneer contemporary writer was the son of William Austin Mittelholzer and Rosamund, *née* Leblanc. In his words, he was the "*offshoot of a Swiss-German plantation manager, a Frenchman from Martinique and an Englishman from Lancashire.*" Somewhere along the line, his father had acquired "*a degree of negro blood*", a fact which led to an intense dislike for a son who had "*turned out a swarthy baby.*" Mittelholzer migrated to Britain in 1947 where he was among the first modern Caribbean writers.

**(Victor L. Chang, 1986. 'Edgar Mittelholzer', in *Fifty Caribbean Writers*, ed. Daryl C. Dance)**

What has not been adequately indicated in this promotional material is a matching synopsis of those aspects of achieved excellence which provide the background and rationale for our present commemoration.

When Edgar Mittelholzer died, at the relatively early age of 56, in 1965, he had published twenty-four books, of which the last one *The Jilkington Drama*, came out just a month after the author's death, and depicted a hero who, like the author himself, died blazing like a torch in a fire of his own setting.

Many of those twenty-four books were reprinted several times, and in many languages. The first really successful one

of them was *A Morning At The Office*, set in Trinidad where Mittelholzer had lived and worked a few years, and published in 1950, after he had migrated to Britain. For the next fifteen years following that publication, Mittelholzer's success as a novelist was phenomenal, with one or sometimes two new books appearing in the world's bookstores every year, and selling millions of copies.

Guyana, the land of his birth is immortalised by Mittelholzer in the *Kaywana* series of novels, in *Shadows Move Among Them*, *The Harrowing of Hubertus*, *Sylvia*, and others; but his mind made its own imaginative additions to reality.

Colin Richards, who knew Mittelholzer well, and to whom this synopsis is indebted, writing a tribute in the Literary magazine *Bim* the year after Mittelholzer died, had this to say about him:

He turned his hand to everything from strongly Caribbean novels to very British ones without any West Indian characters at all. He wrote short stories and also plays. One of his novels – *The Adding Machine* – was published in Jamaica and Italy, but never in England. Words flowed out of him like a river in spate. His books set in the Caribbean introduced readers to brooding jungles, shimmering heat, violence only just below the surface. But most of all they conjured up people torn by emotions often beyond their control, but always masterfully controlled by the skill of their creator's pen. "Original" was the word most used about his work by reviewers. The plots were original, the writing original, the characters original.

Mittelholzer was the first West Indian novelist to achieve success internationally in the post World War years, and this gave him the status of a father figure among younger West Indian writers of whom there were many. But he was revered not only for the example provided by his success, but for his integrity as a person which became legendary in stories such as the one about how he published his first novel in Guyana at his own expense in the nineteen-thirties, and went about selling it from door to door; or the one about his persisting with a manuscript after it had been rejected seventeen times by publishers in his early years as a writer.

So, that is the quality of character and achievement which we are commemorating in this twelfth series of lectures.

The lectures have, as their terms of reference, that they *“should relate to a theme of contemporary Guyanese or Commonwealth Caribbean writers or some aspect of the relationship between thought on history and the emergence of creative writing in the Caribbean area.”*

The eleven series that have been presented since 1967 when they started constitute a valuable record of the thoughts of distinguished Guyanese on contemporary life and its cultural heritage. They are listed as follows on the commemorative invitation:

### THE MITTELHOLZER LECTURES

- 1967 Arthur Seymour:  
Edgar Mittelholzer, *The Man and His Work*
- 1969 Denis Williams:  
Image and Idea in the Arts of Guyana
- 1970 Wilson Harris:  
History, Fable and Myth in the Caribbean and Guianas
- 1971 Martin Carter:  
Man and Making, Victim and Vehicle
- 1974 Michael Gilkes:  
Racial Identity and Individual Consciousness in the Caribbean Novel
- 1977 Gordon Rohlehr:  
Calypso and Caribbean Culture
- 1979 Joycelynne Loncke  
Norman E. Cameron, *The Man and His Works*
- 1983 Roy Heath:  
Art and Experience

- 1984 Denis Williams:  
Habitat and Culture in Ancient Guyana
- 1986 John P. Bennett:  
The Arawak Language in Guyanese Culture
- 1987 George P. Mentore:  
The Relevance of Myth, An Amerindian Case

To this list, we are now about to add the Twelfth Series.

Our Lecturer is a person eminently suited to lend lustre to this event, and to reconfirm the purpose to which these lectures are dedicated.

The following is a very modest synopsis of his life which was appended to our invitation:

### **Richard Allsopp, UWI**

Dr Richard Allsopp left British Guiana in 1963 as Acting Headmaster of Queen's College, to join the University of the West Indies as a founding member of a new campus set up in Barbados. He was its first Vice-Dean, and as University Moderator of the 'Use of English' course, introduced the study of Linguistics in 1970.

Parallel with the teaching of Linguistics he began work in 1971 on what he named the Caribbean Lexicography Project, with the objective of producing a *Dictionary of Caribbean English Usage* covering English usage in all English-speaking Caribbean territories from Guyana through the islands to the Bahamas, the Caymans and Belize. The *Dictionary* was published in 1996 by Oxford University Press and has been well received in the region, and very favourably reviewed in Britain and Europe. In the latter years of the work he was joined by his wife Mrs Jeannette Allsopp who is also a linguist, author of a Supplement (in French and Spanish) to the *Dictionary*, and Senior tutor in Modern Languages at Erdiston College.

Dr Allsopp is the author of some sixty articles in learned journals and books, and he was advisor on language to the

Anglican Liturgical Commission in the production of the recent *Book of Common Prayer* of the Church of the Province of the West Indies.

Dr Allsopp continues work in Lexicography with a view to a second edition of his Dictionary.

But the latter synopsis is largely silent on the excellence of achievement which has additionally motivated the Guyana Department of Culture to select Dr Allsopp for this particular series.

Richard Allsopp was the first scholar to begin scientific analysis of the distinctive characteristics of Guyanese Creole English. This he did in his Master's and Doctoral theses at the University of London in 1958 and 1962 respectively. Since then, many persons have drawn from his work, often without acknowledgement.

Ever since he joined the University of the West Indies in 1963, he has held special responsibilities for the programme in *The Use of English*, and to the extent that he has often been ahead of his time, some of his most progressive ideas for that programme are yet to be implemented.

In the early nineteen-seventies, he became the first scholar to demonstrate how pitch, stress and tone are used uniquely to distinguish particular meanings in Caribbean English, and he suggested that many of the errors in the writing of Caribbean students derive from these stress and tonal characteristics of their speech – a suggestion whose implications are still not generally recognised in the English Language programmes of most Caribbean schools and teachers' colleges, with continuing disastrous consequences for proficiency in written English.

In the field of Creole linguistics, Richard Allsopp has made a special contribution by stressing the formative influence of the underlying grammar and idiom of African languages – a theory which has come to be known as *Afrogenesis*.

But it is in the domain of Caribbean lexicography that Richard Allsopp has achieved most. During the twenty-five years preceding 1996, he applied the resources of his enormous scholarship to the compiling of a *Dictionary of Caribbean English Usage*. At one point in his introduction to

the *Dictionary*, he makes the following very significant statement:

The weight of evidence supplied in this work should provide sufficient ground to build Caribbean pride to replace the earlier colonial shamefacedness and inhibitions bedeviling this region.

And by this he indicates a nation-building purpose in his work, which transcends the scholarly.

This nation-building purpose is strongly reflected in the three lectures that constitute the Twelfth Series of the Edgar Mittelholzer Memorial Lectures which follow.

The general theme: 'Language and National Unity' is one which is supremely relevant in Guyana in 1997 when allegations of racial discrimination and controversies over the results of general elections have newly opened up in the society old wounds which ought to have been healed since the nineteen-sixties when they first appeared

The first lecture is an object-lesson in how language can reflect conflicting world views, and give impetus to social conflict. The second extends the discussion of language impact into the deeper inter-personal domains of feminist issues on the one hand, and the consequences of Afro-American linguistic insecurities, on the other. Finally, the third lecture brings us back to the concrete reality of the *Dictionary of Caribbean English Usage*, and its potential for creating and strengthening a sense of national unity.

The publication of these lectures constitutes a valuable addition to the still relatively inadequate stock of Guyanese intellectual creations. The ferment of ideas which is the indispensable nurture of humane civil society depends uniquely upon that stock; and any endeavour which adds to it automatically strengthens the fabric of our daily lives. The Department of Culture must therefore be complimented on this continuing of the Edgar Mittelholzer Memorial Lectures. I am personally grateful for being afforded the opportunity to participate in the event.

**Dennis Craig, Ph.D, Professor  
Chairman Of The Twelfth Series,  
Edgar Mittelholzer Memorial Lectures.<sup>1</sup>**

## I USING LANGUAGE, A DANGEROUS TOOL

One cold, starry silent night, perhaps very much like another famous night in the history of Christendom, there was a ship abiding in the sea, captain and crew asleep except for two who kept watch, with their wireless shut down. Suddenly a very bright light lit the sky and died away. Soon again the same intensely bright light lit the sky and died away. When this happened a third time the watchmen woke up their captain who, on seeing the fourth occurrence, concluded that there was a party on board a large ship some distance away, and he went back to sleep. A fifth and a sixth light, and then no more.

Had their wireless not been turned off they would have picked up the distress signal CQD – Come Quickly Disaster – which, like the distress flares they had misinterpreted, was coming frantically from the liner *Titanic* which was sinking twenty-one miles away. So, that sleeping ship, the *Californian*, actually stood by while the *Titanic* sank, within easy reach of vital help, in a calm and cold Atlantic with the loss of over 1,500 lives, or more than two thirds of its passengers and crew.

But let us pause for a moment to look at some language associated with that astounding event.

It was 1912 and British national pride was that of a United Kingdom symbolised by a figure of Britannia who “ruled the waves” – rather excessive language, when you think about it, of a rather illusory metaphor, but it was that kind of spirit which had obviously inspired the shipbuilding Britons to name their gigantic vessel after the Titans, the mythological race of giants of glorious ancient Greece who defied Zeus, their Supreme God.

In the same light of thinking at least one commentator is alleged to have said that “not even God could sink this ship,” and it was put about that the *Titanic*, the most advanced product of maritime engineering of the day, was “unsinkable” – a word you will find still noted in accounts of the *Titanic* tragedy given in encyclopedias today. But perhaps the power

of language had been too dangerously abused, for indeed the “*unsinkable*” was going at full speed after four days of euphoric sailing when, like a messenger of Zeus out of the haze, an unexpected iceberg loomed to stop it dead. And neither crew nor passengers at that moment understood that anything serious had happened. But within 2½ hours the for’ard section of the ship had taken in so much water that the mighty vessel broke in half and sank a divided thing, its two parts very far separated on the ocean bed and facing in opposite directions. The indisputable verdict as any insurance company would have to put it – and note the ironic language – is that the *Titanic* was sunk by “*an act of God.*” But, worse still, it cannot escape notice that the circumstances seem to emphasize not only that God’s mercy was markedly absent, but that it was replaced by some sort of Old Testamentary vengeance as a message to the imperial Pharaohs of the day and to mere human ‘facetiness’ (to use an apt Jamaican term).

Would it, I wonder, be pressing allegory too far to see Guiana in 1953 as the Caribbean *Titanic* of its day? Launched in the spring of that year, incomparably the largest Caribbean State with the most advanced machinery for self-government so far, and the greatest potential for economic development, the good Ship of State was put under the command of two respected men, Indo-Guyanese captain and Afro-Guyanese mate, with a euphoric crew and passengers. It seemed as if nothing could go wrong; and the language was again excessive. Some of you may remember –

- ◆ “*the sacred will of the people*” was not to be “*sacrificed on the altar of colonialism*”
- ◆ as for the “*puppets*” and “*lackeys*” of “*the colonial masters*” we would “*tell them where to kiss*” ...
- ◆ and there was the ever illusory metaphor: everybody was a genderless “*comrade*”

The power of language was being abused, but nobody – myself among them – let that bother us too much. Yet the abuse had misled everyone in Guyana; but not, notably, that

arch-colonial master and warlord Winston Churchill who was then at 10 Downing St., nor his warrior friend Dwight Eisenhower who was then in the White House. So although our Ship of State had been grandly launched in England it was sailing on its maiden voyage straight into American waters where after a short flamboyant journey it struck the uncharted anti-communist iceberg and was stopped dead. At first what happened could not seem serious. More like a temporary joke. But distress flares sent to our Caribbean neighbours were ignored; and our Ship of State slowly but surely sank, breaking in two as it did so; and that was effectively the end of our national unity.

I asked a short while ago, whether I might be stretching allegory too far. Let us *hope* that I have, for if national unity *were* really dead it would be futile to continue this series of lectures, at least under the given title. But hope, even if trembling in the face of that dreadful imagery I have felt forced to present, must, in order to be substantial, be based on considerations of situation, position and prospect.

So let me quickly sketch the situation, give you my position and then invite you to join in looking at the prospect before us.

## THE SITUATION

When Guyanese national unity collapsed after 1953, there arose, out of a language the nation scarcely took any notice of, a dialectal cousin of Hindi called Bhojpuri, a phrase challenging national unity with the notion of racial loyalty: *apanjaat naa bhulaiba*, 'don't forget our kind', the first two words of which (meaning 'our kind') rapidly and widely rooted as a slogan of Indic racial loyalty in British Guiana.

Apportioning blame for the source and propaganda of this slogan is not relevant today. What does matter, however, is that it served, like the "*Our Father*", as an ineradicable tenet of a political belief system and became after a while a systemic notion that did not even have to be uttered, while doing such damage to national unity as no other piece of language has.

- ◆ It divided the nation without reference to democratic principle or debatable policy.
- ◆ It was never overtly or in any significant way condemned by the political leadership that naturally benefited from it – politics being after all a game of “*divide and win*”.

As a matter of simple fact, the slogan gave a massively Indic following to the leadership of Dr Jagan who won successive elections in 1957 and 1961. When one looks at the dates of the West Indies Federation, 1958 to 1962, the question must be asked whether the political *koker* effected by *apan jaat* blocked the current of Cheddi Jagan’s thinking from flowing into the Atlantic where it would have joined forces with the West Indies Federation which, he claimed in his book *The West On Trial*<sup>2</sup> his PPP, before the break-up in 1953, “*strongly supported*”. But a *koker* block there certainly was. For Dr Jagan, as leader, blocked Guiana’s joining the new Federation in 1958 and, in spite of the pleading of Dr Eric Williams (of Trinidad) and Mr Errol Barrow (of Barbados), he again blocked Guyana’s saving entry into a collapsing Federation when his political leadership was renewed in 1961. The Federal collapse came irrevocably with the Jamaican referendum of 1962, and what *could* have followed, i.e., the promising possibilities of an *Eastern* Caribbean Federation strengthened by Guiana, disappeared.

In terms of national unity then, what disappeared was a Nation of Federated Caribbean States with Guyana as its major member, and indeed the only State with real Caribs in its census.

The language of the day then centred around two notions, one new, one old.

The new one was “*independence*”. It was argued that Guiana should first have independence, and so should every Caribbean island, and then as a member of a Federation of *independent* states, Guiana would join. This was 1957–58, and when it is recalled that St Kitts/Nevis accepted – for that’s the right word – independence twenty-five years later in 1983, one can see how preposterous, how patently impractical, the Guianese proposition then was. But it was certainly not due to ignorance!

In any case “*independence*”, which means the power of self-assertion, and its close relative “*sovereignty*”, which vitally entails the power of self-defence, are misleading terms for small states in a precariously unlevel world, though our Caribbean social scientists and politicians love to mouth them, until the day when we have to beg Britain or America to come and supervise our elections –which are the very essence of independence.

The other term I referred to above – the old one that was resurrected – was that Guiana really had a “*continental destiny*” indicating that we were not properly a part of the Caribbean. Well our continental neighbours are: on the west, Venezuela, on whose official map more than half of Guyana is shown as Venezuelan territory *en reclamacion* (i.e., being reclaimed); on the east, Suriname, which is also making a territorial claim on Guyana; and to the south Brazil whose migrant population massively ignores our unpatrolled border threatening ultimate Brazilian territorial ownership. So Guyana’s *destiny* is in so much *continental* trouble that only the voices of our unfederated Caribbean neighbours can be counted on for help in preserving our territorial identity. That’s our unhappy geographical situation. You know we’re not even in a position to demand in an international forum like the United Nations that the Venezuelan map be corrected and the phrase *en reclamacion* be declared improper.

Before leaving considerations of our overall situation, however, there is a social question that must be addressed, namely: is the trouble of racial division being mended or is it still bedevilling us today? That that socio-political sore is still raw is evidenced by the row that blew up last year November over the language used by Dr Cheddi Jagan about Blacks in Guyana in statements he made in Toronto.<sup>3</sup> But that’s an incident that can be forgiven and forgotten.

On the other hand I came across the following article in the recent September issue of *Caribbean Week* under the heading *Book On Racial Politics Soon*:<sup>4</sup>

### Book on racial politics soon<sup>5</sup>

I WOULD like to use the forum of your widely-read newspaper to invite submissions for a proposed book to be entitled *African Racism Against Indians in the Caribbean*.

The book would present theoretical analysis and empirical evidence to show how racism against Indians in two post-colonial multi-ethnic societies was manifested through various government ministries and departments.

The book would deal with institutional racism practised by the Afro-dominated People's National Movement in Trinidad and Tobago (1956–1986 and 1992–1995) and the People's National Congress in Guyana (1968–1992).

The book would also examine how (written and unwritten) policies were used to subjugate and alienate the Indian community to an inferior status for selfish political ends by means of unequal distribution of state resources.

In spite of these macro-level obstacles, some Indians were able to devise a variety of resilient and resistant strategies to beat the system and become successful in various fields.

The book, of which I would be the editor, would be published by an American University press and distributed worldwide. Copies would be sold in Trinidad and Guyana at a nominal price because the cost would be underwritten by a million-dollar Guyanese-owned Canadian business enterprise.

Further enquires and additional information should be sent to me as soon as possible at 1350 Turlington Hall, UF, Gainesville, FL 32611, USA.

KUMAR MAHABIR  
UNIVERSITY OF FLORIDA  
GAINESVILLE, FL 32603  
USA

Two things are clear here. First that the prospective editor, Mr Mahabir, is undertaking a journalistic selective *search* for open indictment, not scholarly *research* for open judgement. There is a dangerous difference in the language of an indictment. Second the language used in his advertisement seems intentionally *promotive* of national disunity, not only as an objective but as something to be broadcast worldwide.<sup>6</sup>

Which brings me to another advertisement, this time seen

on the Internet and drawn to my attention on a recent visit to Canada.

### **GUYANA:**

Population: 747,000

Area: 83,000 sq mi

Capital: Georgetown

Principal Language: Creole English. English is official language.

Location: Northern South America on Atlantic Ocean.

Bordered by Venezuela, Brazil, and Suriname.

Government Type: Republic, Commonwealth Member.

Comparative Area: Slightly smaller than Idaho.

Guyana is an East Indian country in the West Indies, as the major part of the inhabitants are descendants of immigrants from India. Of all the world's waterfalls, only nine are higher than the near 500 m (1,640 ft.) high uninterrupted cascades of the King George VI Falls, north of the Roraima Plateau.

There is no suggestion that these two items are from the same source, but the English-speaking world, especially in the vital continent of North America, is being fed here with inflammatory, misleading and tendentious information about Guyana – I mean, even our national symbol Kaieteur is displaced by something less majestic but described in language more attractively touristic.

If Guyanese national unity one day disintegrates – which Heaven forbid!! – the world will likely have been *prepared* for a judgment that may well be based on the evidence of such material as I have shown. But I can only say “*may*” and I also hope that day will never come.

However, it seems to me that the language I hear and see indicates that our social situation is as seriously unhappy as our geographical one.

### **MY OWN POSITION**

I promised to give you my own position. Let me do so briefly.

In 1963 I was a school teacher and Acting Headmaster of

Queen's College. I was also past President of and remained very active in the Association of Masters and Mistresses in Government Secondary Schools (AMM) which had been founded by Mr N. E. Cameron. The standards to which my generation of school-educated persons was accustomed were high, and in my position I strove to maintain such standards. Not only did I find that I was fighting a losing battle in that regard, but racial and political divisions had become patent in my staff-room and were evidenced in my school. Then there was the prospect of teachers being recruited from India. Look at this:

### **TEACHERS FROM INDIA RECRUITED FOR SCHOOLS IN BRITISH GUIANA<sup>7</sup>**

Dr Cheddi Jagan, Majority Party Leader in the Government admitted that teachers were recruited from India to teach in Secondary Schools here.

He made this admission at his weekly Press Conference and pointed out that their qualifications were comparable to those required here.

The Minister added that in England the Ministry of Education recognised only First Class Degrees of Universities of India for graduate status and the same criterion has been adopted in British Guiana [...] He said that six of these schools were approved for aid in January, 1958, and another three in April, 1959. The last one to be approved was September, 1960.

*"It is agreed," the Minister went on, "that there should now be further inspections of these schools and arrangements are being made for these inspections to be carried out early this year."*

*"Regular visits are however paid to the schools by officers of the Education Department," he concluded.*

The language proficiency of such recruits would be in question; and I would probably have had little or no say as to who would be assigned to Queen's College. I had in mind being a University teacher, but I did not like what I saw coming at University of Guyana, so I applied to the University of the West Indies, raised my head to heaven like fowl drinking water when they offered me a post, and packed my bags with relief.

My friend Forbes Burnham became political leader in 1964. Officially titled "*The Comrade Leader*", he was soon popularly dubbed *The Kabaka*, a designation borrowed from the royal paramount chieftaincy of Uganda, and a nickname he did not resent. In November 1965 he invited me to take the post of Vice-Chancellor of the University of Guyana. This is how he did it.

Free passage from Barbados; accommodation at The Residence; and, in the absence of his wife, I was permitted to drive her car, a shiny MG Automatic. I had never driven an automatic before, and, the car being saluted by policemen all over the place, I nearly damaged the vehicle!

One day *The Kabaka* asked me to be present at an interview in his drawing room to which he had summoned Dr Earp, the current Vice-Chancellor of the University of Guyana. I am not sure whether I was told the purpose of the meeting but it turned out to be a severe and embarrassing indictment of Dr Earp's competence and responsibility. I didn't know where to look but on the floor and through the window. When the red-faced gentleman had left, the remark was that his ass would soon be driven out. The metaphor may have been intended to be reassuring to me. But, in so far as it may also have strengthened the invitation for my ass to take the ride in place of his, it was most disquieting.

However, it was a rather unwise thing to resist *The Kabaka* uncompromisingly. Moreover he was a master of language, both smooth and rough, both cynical and sarcastic. So I played for friendly time which, to be brief, ultimately allowed me to escape the vice of that Vice-Chancellorship.

Yet, I must say to his credit that, following his fundamental role in the creation of CARIFTA/CARICOM, it was he who gave, through the Government of Guyana, more substantial financial support than any other Caribbean Government, in the years 1975 to 1980, for research work through which I was able, with the University of the West Indies as support base, to produce the *Dictionary of Caribbean English Usage*; and we must all publicly thank him for that. I personally do not hesitate to pay him the tribute due in that regard, whatever else may be said of him.

However, after the Rodney incident I cut off all contact and that virtually remained my position thereafter. Living in Barbados, working at the all-consuming task of inventorying the ecological environment and chronicling the cultural heritage of this our Caribbean in an ongoing Caribbean Lexicography Project, about which I shall tell you something in my last lecture.

## THE PROSPECT BEFORE US

And so now I come to the risky matter of looking at the prospect for our Guyana. My being unequipped to look at such prospect in political or economic terms, the usual areas, is not a disadvantage. (Indeed at this particular time it may be wiser not to). Politics by definition divides and economics all too often misdirects, even when coming from expert sources. Moreover those are the domains in which the use of language is most dangerously misleading.

Only culture by its nature holds a people together and national culture is much safer, and can be much more productive ground to dwell on. So let me focus on culture.

I want to begin with our Amerindian fellow-citizens, who are usually put last in all our considerations whether political, economic or cultural.

Guyana must be one of the very few places in the world where there is a definitively accountable ethno-territorial presence of what North America called "*First-Nation*" and we have "*Amerindian*" peoples, as part of a Nation with a majority mix of Asian, African and European peoples and sub-cultures.

Instead of despising them as we, like our North and South American neighbours, have always done, we can learn from them two important lessons: one, in living together without being obsessed with active possessiveness and related hatred; and two, in living in near perfect harmony with our God-given environment. In this latter case our Amerindians have a superior experience which must be the envy of a polluted world.

But to learn from them we need to respect them fully. And that's in fact the concept that must inform everything else in the prospect I am attempting here: *respect*.

So I have grappled (for several days in preparing this paper) with the question: How can the Guyanese races *fully* respect each other? For if they do, harmonized constructive living can follow and if they don't creeping, irreversible disasters *will* ultimately engulf us as we see today in the Indic sub-continent and Sri Lanka, in North, West and Central Africa, in the middle East and in Europe (just say Chechnya, Yugoslavia, Northern Ireland). In short the world is full of horrific examples of murderous hatred developed out of contempt (i.e., zero respect), which we *must* avoid.

As my thoughts struggled with the matter I was forced to the conclusion that it is a moral/cultural one in which religion must provide the answer. Immediately there followed the realisation that *religion* as practised does *not* provide the answer, and its practice must therefore take serious blame.

For religion must surely be defined as man's way to God through the use of language, which is God's gift to him essentially for communication with his fellow-man, but more vitally for communication with his Creator.

Since each of our three major religions in Guyana – Christianity, Hinduism and Islam – claim there is only *one* supreme God, then it must follow it is the *same* God that each acknowledges. This is even easier to recognise when we know that both Hinduism and Islam embrace Christianity and can easily identify with it if the practitioners on *all* sides move to make this a reality.

This is clearly treacherous theosophical ground but it can be explored; more successfully so by young minds that have not been entrenched for decades in what seem to be immovable belief systems that continue to cause distress and destruction all over the world.

Consider that Guyana represents a microcosm of the problem, far more promising of productive examination, because we are a small State, than in any of the disaster areas I have mentioned above.

But religious language is a very dangerous tool. Taking an example from Christianity, if one's intrinsic belief in salvation has been shaped by such phrases as

- ◆ “ (Jesus is) “the only begotten Son of God”  
and
- ◆ “I am the way [...] No one goeth to the Father but by me”

(mind you, one finds these statements only in the Gospel of St. John and not in the other three) – one cannot but see the Hindu and Muslim with any other eye than one of pity if not of contempt, and it also seems to follow that Hell must be full of Hindus and Muslims. Which is what the teaching of the Churches of England and Rome have certainly left us to assume or suppose.

But two thoughts follow all that. Firstly that a Muslim – Hindu holocaust in Hell can *never* be the will of an all-loving God who wants the souls of all the creatures he has made in his own image. Secondly that the Hindus have another answer in their *Bhagavat Gita* where the words of Lord Krishna, 3000 years before Christ (and notice the closeness of the names) are given as “*I am the way and I am the Goal*” and also “*However men approach me and in whatever form so do I accept them.*” Compare Jesus’s “*Where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them*” (Matthew 18: 20).

The Muslims too, my inquiry has found, have an exclusive statement in the Koran as follows

### **Surah 3: Ali ‘Imran**

If anyone desires a religion other than Islam  
(submission to Allah), never will it be accepted  
of him; and in the hereafter he will be in the ranks  
of those who have lost (all spiritual good).

Clearly these things cannot stand apparent simple interpretation. It is, it seems to me, as if God has taken the Englishman and his Euro-centred denominationalism away from Guyana and left the rest of us to find him *together* as *one God* of all, with deeply serious mutual *respect* for each other as his fellow-creature. Even after a very cursory look, I find there are many aspects of Hinduism and of Islam that closely parallel the tenets of Christianity. But unfortunately each of them, like Christianity, while giving a social nod to the other,

considers itself a superior religious persuasion. The world is showing us continually that such attitudes lead to monstrously ungodly acts.

Now I have left out African monotheism – which pre-dates Christianity – and Amerindian religious beliefs because I know nothing briefly pertinent about them to introduce into my short discussion of this matter, but let me add that it is only in relatively recent years that I discovered I had all along been misled by the Christian church's use of the words *ecumenicism*, *ecumenical*. The Roman Catholic Church, as prime mover of an Ecumenical Council, really hijacked the words to relate them to all *Christian* churches exclusively, whereas their Greek origin *oikoumenikos* means "*of the whole inhabited earth.*" What a dangerously narrow misuse had trapped me then into believing was that whereas my Anglican self had a respectable ecumenical objective to pursue with Roman Catholic and Methodist, I didn't have such with Hindu and Muslim. So, as I say, it is up to respectful young minds to explore these issues as *ecumenical* in their totality to save Guyana, and to tell the world something.

Let me lastly try to leave you with an integrative thought to start tomorrow with. In my troubled inquiries I sought and found what is called *The Racial Hostility Act*. I am told that Guyana is the only Caribbean territory with such an Act on its Law Books.

Here it is in essence.

CHAPTER 23:01  
RACIAL HOSTILITY ACT  
ARRANGEMENT OF SECTIONS

SECTION

1. Short title.
2. Excitement of hostility or ill-will on grounds of race.
3. Disabilities consequent upon conviction under section 2.

An Act to make provision for preventing conduct tending to excite hostility or ill-will against persons by reason of their race.

[28<sup>th</sup> November, 1964]

1. This Act may be cited as the Racial Hostility Act.

2. (1) A person shall be guilty of an offence if he wilfully excites or attempts to excite hostility or ill-will against any section of the public or against any person on the grounds of their or his race –

(a) by means of words spoken by him in a public place or spoken by him and transmitted for general reception by wireless telegraphy or telegraph; or

(b) by causing words spoken by him or by some other person to be reproduced in a public place from a record; or

(c) by means of written (including printed) matter or pictorial matter published by him.

(2) This section shall not apply in relation to –

(a) anything said or done in the course of any proceedings of the National Assembly or any judicial proceedings; or

(b) the publication of any matter by order, or under the authority, of the National Assembly.

(3) Any person guilty of an offence under this section shall be liable on summary conviction to a fine of one thousand dollars and to imprisonment for two years.

Clearly, all this means is that, except in the National Assembly, if anyone uses in public or writes language *intended* to excite hostility on grounds of race – which an accuser will have to prove – that person is guilty of an offence. It's a virtually toothless Act under which, not surprisingly, no one has so far been arraigned.

Obviously there are many other overt ways of effectively operating racial hostility besides what that Act provides for. If, for simple example, I interfere with my son's or my daughter's choice of a partner in marriage on grounds of that partner's race, that surely is an act of racial hostility.

Moreover when one examines this practice, well known especially in the Indic community, one finds there is no sacred religious ground for it. But it is one hostility among many not nearly touched by our legislated Act, whose language is only the handle of an ineffectual tool. Clearly the Act needs to be revisited and rendered meaningful, and I have actually made a written submission to the Barbados Constitutional Review Commission, which recently concluded its sessions, proposing constitutional protection for a person's free choice of partner in legal marriage without the intrusion or interference of a third party. I think that such a clause would also be relevant to the matter of Guyanese integration.

For the truth of our condition in Guyana today is that genuine fraternal dialogue is needed to take us out of the morass of ethno-political disunity, and forward, integrating in peace and progress. Language, the supreme tool that makes us human, is uniquely – divinely – the tool of such dialogue. But like all super tools it is both dangerous when misused, as it is superbly effective when intelligently and faithfully used.

In the *Analects* of Confucius, which we are told every Chinese school boy was once made to memorise by the age of twelve, there is this memorable fragment with which I leave you: If language be not in accordance with the truth of things, affairs cannot be carried to success.

**S. R. R. Allsopp**  
**November 3, 1997**



## II LANGUAGE AND CLASS

### THE FEMINIST & EBONICS ISSUES

Some years ago when I had responded to an invitation to give a keynote address at the Commonwealth Secretariat in London I was delightfully surprised to find myself the recipient of a first class ticket on British Airways. It was only when, about to return home, I was reporting at the terminal, that my enjoyment of elevation received a jolt on realizing that my patched and weak-handled luggage which had not raised any eyebrows when I was leaving Barbados, certainly in the environment of Heathrow seemed very much out of keeping with First Class, its red carpet and all. The uniformed and waistcoated baggage-handler only made matters pointedly worse when he looked at the suitcase and then at me, and simply muttered, "*Would that be yours, Sir?*" And I, luckily blessed with a skin that cannot blush, simply lifted my head and replied, "*Well it is actually.*" Neither of us looked at each other again. Out tones had said enough. His was intended to question my class, and mine was intended to establish it firmly. And to remind him of his.

Class is a perceptible mark of distinction, ranging from the subtle to the obvious. It prompts discrimination with which it becomes so closely linked that there follows a social equation with betterness of quality and therefrom, by an easy step, with higher intelligence. This is certainly a faulty, probably quite false equation, as I would like to think my little example above might illustrate. In fact class is a perception very largely based on observed appearance and social behaviour, and particularly on language. It has virtually nothing to do with the quality of a person's brain, i.e., with his intelligence (as distinct from stored information).

Let me nail my proposition down with a further and a more familiar example: the intelligence of a batsman or bowler who outfoxes the opposition on the cricket field is nothing whatsoever to do with his social class and, as has been

demonstrated these many decades, those who picked their cricket teams either in the West Indies or in England on grounds of social class have paid the price in the running battle for cricket supremacy. Luckily in the West Indies, we discovered that long before the English did – the British terms “gentlemen” and “players” tell us the story.

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In the post World War II decades, women have been identified as a class of humans – a gender class – which is discriminated against in a male-dominated world. They have counter-attacked in many domains, and I shall deal today briefly with arguments in the domain of language. (That is what the term ‘feminist’ – not the happiest choice – in my title refers to).

During about the same period there has been increased recognition of discrimination against Blacks as a class, in a white-dominated world, and, of the many ensuing rows quite a confused one has developed, more sharpened in recent years, over the recognition of the status of the Africanized languages of Europe in the New World. In my title the term ‘Ebonics’, again an inappropriate choice but now confirmed in the USA, is intended to invite examination of that matter from the perspective of class.

### **The “Feminist” Issue**

Why must Miss Mary Smith’s name socially disappear when she marries Mr John Brown and so becomes Mrs John Brown? – at least that was and, in some echelons of British society, remains the socially recognized convention; and why must she be newly labelled as *Mrs* while the man has always been simply *Mr*, undergoing no titular change?

Again, why, in English at least, does the label given to the female of the species so often carry a connotation of disapproval (sometimes strong): a *mistress* vs a *master*, a *witch* vs a *wizard*, a *vixen* vs a *fox*, a *bitch* vs a *dog*, etc.?

Thirdly why does the English Language seem to exclude “*woman*” from such standard idiomatic phrasing and related

concepts as *the man in the street*, *the Black Man has to fight for his place in the world*, *all men of goodwill*, *man is a tool-using animal*, *I now pronounce you man and wife* (not “*husband and wife*”), etc.?

These three little sets of examples point to three ways in which the English language, and hence its users, discriminate against the feminine and thence the female, the gender and thence the sex. English, as the American writer Andrea Dworkin put it, has made of the female “*an inferior gender class.*”

First there is a case of *non-definition*: Mrs John Brown remains totally undefined, to the extent that if Mr John Brown, like CNN’s Larry King, marries seven times, there can be six women with unsettled identities floating in the socialite soup: are they “*exes*”, or “*formers*” or recycled Misses or what?

Second, there is a case of *gender-deprecation*, where the feminine gender carries such a powerful stain that in some cases, as in *witch-hunting* and *bitch*, it can spread to males as well as to situations, as one saying goes: *Old age is a bitch, hear!*

In the third case the woman’s presence of *existence is ignored* altogether; “*man*” embraces “*woman*” as Mr Churchill is reputed to have said when his usage was queried, such a phrase as *the man in the street* being taken as adequately representative of all normal humans in civilised life, (though how normal and how civilised one may well ask, when idiomatic man is expected to *embrace* wholly unidentified woman, even in the street!)

Question number one then is this: is English, as we know and use it, a demonstrably anti-woman language? Well there is a wide surface of evidence which I have merely pin-pricked in three places, to show that the English language is strongly inclined to be so. But not only English. The governance of societies through the ages having been male-operated and dominated, and language being the machinery of governance, it is a noticeable fact that languages throughout the world treat the concepts feminine and female as subordinate to masculine and male.

It seems to us today absurd that women should ever have been prevented from voting or active participation in politics, yet it is only at the beginning of this century that the Englishwoman Mrs Pankhurst and the suffragette movement which she founded established what is obviously right. And

it is only after World War II that the movement that earned the name 'Feminism' came into prominence, largely through the writings of the French novelist and playwright Simone de Beauvoir.

Oddly enough the French language is bedevilled with the illogicality of grammatical gender, but it is in the use of language beginning with Simone de Beauvoir that Feminism made its most telling attacks for the rights and respect of women in Western society. But I must stress Western society, for there are significant parts of the world today where societies firmly suppress female personhood, let alone expression, as policy of governance. Perhaps the case of Muslim fundamentalist policies in Afghanistan is the most outstanding example of this today. (*Newsweek* of October 13, 1997 carries pictures of Afghan women covered from head to toes in public, face included, with only a gauze to see through).

On the other hand, particularly in the USA, women writers and women's organizations have taken such a strident stand, increasingly so over the last decade, that their attacks upon the use of English have produced sharp adjustments in the wording and style of public pronouncements, documents, administrative statements and, very specially, academic writings. Guidelines have been laid down, e.g., by the Linguistic Society of America; and glossaries of appropriate usage now exist. English Language must be *non-sexist*. For example, at the low end of the social scale, *whore* is offensive and must be replaced by *sex-worker*; at the middle level *spokesperson* replaces *spokesman/woman*, *cabin steward/flight attendant* replaces *air-hostess* etc.; and at the top end a great woman is a *hero* because *heroine* now has a narcotic sound. And so on.

But being *non-sexist* is not enough. This superficially negative label was replaced by what seemed academically the more balanced one of *inclusive language* - language that is more balanced in its word choice and style without drawing attention to sex.

This sounds eminently reasonable until attention is turned to the matter of the language of worship. Language is, after all, God's gift peculiarly to man and vitally for man's communion with Him. The centrepiece of worship in

Western society, which is massively of Christian framework, is of course the Bible, and the protagonists of sex- and gender-equality turned their attention there with earthquake results. I can only touch this shattering matter and move on.

In one extreme view, then, as reportedly expressed by the president of the Catholic Theological Society of America, the idea of God *the Father* is all too “androcentric” (i.e., man-oriented) for contemporary sensibilities<sup>8</sup>. Perhaps it is from such thinking that the New Testament came to be re-written by a theological team in the United States of America in inclusive language presenting the Lord’s Prayer as follows:

Jesus was praying in a certain place, and after he had finished, one of the disciples said to him, Lord teach us how to pray, as John taught his disciples. Jesus said to them, “When you pray say:

Father-Mother, hallowed be your name.  
May your dominion come.  
Give us this day our daily bread.  
And forgive us our sins,  
for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us  
And do not bring us to the time of trial.<sup>9</sup>

The explanation given in the Introduction (p. x) is that the new metaphors such as *Father-Mother* are “crafted [...] to make the reader think about what is being read.” The word “crafted” suggests to me a purposive skill in presenting truth that I would question. And what does “*Father-Mother*” make the reader think of, anyway? Some kind of holy hermaphrodite? Wouldn’t “*Our Creator God*” have fitted the case much better?

I must leave judgement on the point to you, but what must immediately strike one is that the problem of the fair use of language affects us all and is not just a “feminist” issue. All Christians are here being called upon to say a new Lord’s Prayer. American women, at least, are daring to call for more than national attention, actually international unity on such matters.

I have a disturbing comment, however, on the whole issue of the sex/gender equality problem in language use. The English Language is far more widely and deeply biased, in

its usage, against blackness than against women. If women, as a gender-class have a case, how much stronger must be that of Blacks, as a race-class? Consider such expressions as *blackleg, black sheep, blackmail, black spot, black day, black market, a black past/future, black as hell, blacken a character, etc.*, And can anyone effectively tackle that!

However I do not wish to leave this so called “*feminist*” issue without pointedly turning to some Caribbean aspects of it.

Time allows me only summarily to open three doors and invite your insights therethrough. They are the legacy of slavery, the legacy of Europe and the legacy of the USA on our talk about women in the Caribbean.

The key characteristic of the legacy of slavery was the despising of or apology for blackness, as identified by skin and hair, and as these are ready parameters of beauty in women, the English Language that developed in the Caribbean targeted and drew on their appearance and texture for its lexicon of labels and related concepts of beauty and ugliness. All over the Caribbean people grow up ingrained in the use of such adjectival and noun-phrase conjuncts as:

- ◆ nice brown-skin girl, good-looking light-skin woman,
- ◆ clear-skin, fair-skin, nice coloured girl/woman/people
- ◆ big strapping black woman, red mulatto woman
- ◆ good hair, bad hair, hard hair, picky-picky hair, straight hair, soft hair, short/long hair, nice curly hair like a douglah, coarse hair, lotun hair, knotty hair
- ◆ black and ugly, black and stupid, etc. etc.

And there is much more idiom applying to the black woman’s face, breasts, mouth, belly and behind. You may start by checking the calypsos, of which the Mighty Sparrow’s *Obeah Wedding* is one among many examples.

This aspect of Caribbean English usage cannot be too strongly condemned. It creates or contributes to a mind-set

derogatory especially of Black women *in addition* to that of which international English may be accused in regard to *all* women, as illustrated above.

Yet I have the unfortunate impression that I have never heard any of the persons known to have strong feelings about the injustices suffered by Caribbean women, speak out against such usage as I have just illustrated. If, as American women's movements are forcing certain international English usage into disuse – and calling for (inter)national unity on the matter! – progressive Caribbean minds could encourage the rejection and elimination of derogatory Caribbean English usage about women, and therewith prejudiced attitudes to them, it would be a great service to Caribbean national unity.

In the matter of the legacy of Europe the key characteristic is our Caribbean adoption, acceptance, imitation and profound admiration of all things European, the most distinctive item, if perhaps also the most elusive, being, of course, the European's language. In achieving the nearest approach to it, Caribbean woman played a crucial role.

For whereas the male slave was to the European a labour machine, the female was to her European master a realistic source of physical satisfaction, whence there developed an emotional attachment through the children she produced by him, children who very likely became house-negroes and who, together with and carefully guided by their mother, managed a closer approach to the language of the master. Hence house-Negro creolized English became at once a mark of personal quality and therewith of social status. You will note, and I must stress, that this had absolutely nothing to do with *intelligence*, but absolutely everything to do with *opportunity*; opportunity both in the way that kind of language was acquired and in what it procured for its users, who were patently, neither by skin-colour nor by language field-creoles or field-niggers. They were *marked* – seen and *heard* as different.

Increasingly so in the post-slavery era and right through to my generation at least, it remained true that Caribbean middle-class women took greater care of their daughters' speech as the acknowledged step-ladder of respect which, education apart, opened ways to social advancement.

These two legacies – that of slavery and of Europe, you will observe, as they bear heavily on the development of our use of language, lead directly to the passionate issue of Ebonics, which is part of tonight’s matter. But I promised to look at a third legacy, that of the USA, so let me briefly do that.

In regard to the legacy of the United States of America, I see its key characteristic as the stimulus for Black racial assertiveness, and therewith the main influence for Caribbean feminine militancy. The slogan “*Black is Beautiful*” emerged there, and although its originator, Stokeley Carmichael, was a West Indian, I very much doubt whether he could have successfully launched such a slogan from the West Indies. My feeling is that Caribbean feminism owes much more than it does through the massive cosmetics industry to the assertive feminism of the United States Black woman. I remain open to question on this opinion but, to give one example, who can fail to have noticed, over the last twenty-five years or so, as an outward and visible sign of this assertiveness, the plentiful inventiveness of hairstyle designs applicable *only* to black women’s hair.

### The Ebonics Issue

Now to reconnect with the Ebonics question.

Look at this proposed lexicographical treatment of the term ebonics taken from the latest issue: of *The Barnhart Dictionary Companion*<sup>10</sup>.

Ebonics, ee BON icks /i: iban iks/, n. {W} 1. a. Another name for Black English, the dialect of English spoken by many African-Americans. Sometimes written ebonics. Standard (used especially in contexts dealing with education in US grade schools).

1973. Blend: formed from eb(ony) (OEDs: 1851) “*a black person*” [ultimately from ebony skin (OEDs: 1823)] + (ph)onics (OEDs: 1908). Reportedly coined by Robert L. William (born 1903) a professor and author of *Ebonics: the true language of Black Folks* (c. 1975). Perhaps influenced by *Ebony*, the name of a popular magazine focused upon African American culture.

I draw attention particularly to its origin, a name made up as the title of a little book. Firstly I don't think it was a serious linguistic label, and secondly it was evidently intended to cover all language of the Black diaspora, though first focused on that of the USA: It's a blend of *ebony*, a casual name for a Black person<sup>11</sup> and *phonics* which basically must mean "recognition of voice sound" patterned on such other words as *acoustics*, *linguistics*. It was somehow popularized in preference to *Black English* but I don't think it's a better term.

What's more important to note, and I stress, is that it is the American equivalent of our "Creolese" in Guyana and the Creoles of the various Caribbean States, and further, that the problems relating to its place in education and function in society are exactly the same as ours; that is, in the particular case of Guyana, in regard to Creolese. Let me pause to point out that it was our J. A. Van Sertima who appears, at the beginning of this century, to have first used the term *Creolese*, patterned perhaps on *journalese* as a type of language use, to refer to our "Creole tongue" in British Guiana. Others preferred to call it a "patois" or some other derogatory name. In modern times serious students of language have used the term *Creoles* to refer to all the "Creole tongues" of the Caribbean area replacing the more common "patois" which seems now to be reserved for the French Caribbean Creoles. But back to our equivalent American term 'ebonics'.

Now America amplifies everything and a row over proposed attention to ebonics by the Oakland School Board became internationalized by their world television media in December 1996. The row was particularly related to the following part of the Oakland School Board's proclamation:

- ◆ Many African-Americans speak Ebonics.
- ◆ Ebonics is not a debased dialect or jargon but a valid linguistic system influenced by the West African and Niger-Congo languages spoken by their ancestors.
- ◆ African Language Systems are genetically based.

- ◆ Ebonics could and should be used as a medium for the children who were being failed by the current education system.

And so, as in many aspects of our westernized civilisation, the association of its origin with Africa was and remains a substantial source of offence. Once again let me stress, the matter has nothing to do with the intelligence of those who use this manner of speech. History, environment and opportunity provide the whole explanation of its use, and this statement in the lexicographical citation I have given provides the realistic answer to the angry protesters in the matter:

Teachers can benefit from learning more about their structures. *“If you know in what ways the varieties differ, you can develop better strategies for helping students make transitions between them.”*

That is to say, that if the teacher *understands* what is *happening* when he/she hears ‘ebonics’ then that teacher is better able to help the child make the transition to international or World English, i.e., for example, from *he be here* to *he usually comes around here*, which is quite a conceptual leap in Standard English – and let me stress that there is no question but that the transition to the more marketable World English is necessary for the child’s development and status.

Let us then look at a small sample of our own Guyanese Africanized English, our own ebonics, our own everyday creolese (an urban sample, while admittedly a rural sample could be “*deeper*”).

### Creolese

As de man come in de yard, de dog rush an bite e, an now I in trouble! I ain know WHY de stupid boy must go an loose de dog! ! Loose de dog! ! – ! He sorry fo de dog an e loose de dog! ! Mm! ? Sorry fo dog? Ain da is stupidness? Stupidness! Dam Stupidness. Dog must tie!

Observe how strikingly this is a naturally dramatic *oral* medium for whose intrinsic devices the culture of westernized *writing* is inadequate! The use of the voice alone (stress + higher pitch + lengthened vowel) to make 'As' /aaz/ mean "as soon as"; and again by intonation and raised pitch to denote contempt without changing the vocabulary (! Loose de dog !); or by sharply dropping the pitch (!He sorry for de dog !) to signal "He said that". Note also the great economy achieved in letting the context tell you the tense instead of having to call on your brain to change the verbs to *came, rushed, bit, went, loosed*, the elimination of the verb *to be*: *I in trouble; he sorry*; the remarkable syntactic economy in *Dog must tie* replacing (A) *dog must (be) tie(d)* so eliminating the 'passive voice' transformation; etc. And all this while the utterance is stamped with total clarity and honesty.

Is it surprising that when advertisers and politicians wish to sound genuine they use Creolese, but when they wish to fool you they stick to Standard English?

Is it surprising that this manner of speaking and its equivalents in other societies, including US ebonics, remains firmly rooted as folk speech unless status and money rewards *force* people to change? If those incentives are absent, people will not, because they need not, change.

But more than all that, the Creoles and Ebonics, if viewed intelligently, have a very positive contribution to make to Caribbean culture and to World English. The literary prowess of Edgar Mittelholzer in whose honour these lectures are sponsored would not have been possible without a native command of Guyana's Creolese for his dialogue and his wit. Jamaican Vic Reid's *New Day* is a landmark in the literary adaptation of Jamaican creole structures. And Samuel Selvon of Trinidad, Kamau Brathwaite of Barbados and Derek and Roderic Walcott of St Lucia have all won international acclaim, and two of them international prizes including Derek Walcott's Nobel Prize, turning their own native Creoles to literary account. There is much more to be added on a wider scale as I hope to show in the findings of research into Caribbean Lexicography which will be the subject of my next lecture.

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Let me close with a titbit that brings together both the gender and ebonics issues. And perhaps also offer you a little surprise in seeing our Creoles and its sister Afro-Caribbean dialects of English make a sensible suggestion to the pronoun system of modern English.

One of the gender problems that besets formal or Standard English is having to say/write *he or she, him/her, himself/herself* in order properly to keep recognizing the female reality. One simple solution is simply to recognise a grammatical singular 'they', as in such a statement as

If any student goes into the library they must leave their bag at the entrance. (i.e., he/she, his/her).

The acceptability of this solution is still disputed by purists, surprisingly more in the US, it seems, than in Britain. However, Creoles have long ago settled the matter and gone further, with such cases emerging in our Creolised English as this

If anybody t(h)ink dis is a easy t(h)ing, let dem try dey hand and dey will find out for deyself.

which, with a little formalising, becomes:

If anybody thinks this is an easy thing, let them try their hand (at it) and they will find out for themself

(instead of *If anybody thinks this is an easy thing, let him/her try his/her hand (at it) and he/she will find out for himself/herself*) – as would be required in Formal English.

It is, in short, good informal English except for the pronoun *themself*. But then why not? English has already accepted for centuries a singular *you/yourself* in contrast with a plural *you/ yourselves*. And *themself* would, it turns out, be a most convenient and sensible addition to the system. Addition, did I say? Well look at the ninth edition (1995) of the *Concise Oxford Dictionary* (p. 1445) and you will find listed there

*themselves*, albeit as a 'disputed pronoun'. But Creolese, never disputing its soundness, has obviously stolen a march on Standard English here, as anyone can see for themselves!

**S. R. R. Allsopp**  
**November 5, 1997**



### III LANGUAGE FOR TOGETHERNESS

#### WHAT CAN A CARIBBEAN DICTIONARY DO?

*I'm deeply honoured to be the first American President to hold a summit with Caribbean heads of Government here in the Caribbean. But it is high time – America, after all, is a Caribbean nation. Puerto Rico and the American Virgin Islands lie at the heart of this region. The bonds of commerce among us and the bonds binding our people are strong [...] the point I wish to make is that this is not a meeting between Caribbean nations and the United States, but rather a meeting among Caribbean nations including the United States.*

These are the words of President Clinton in his brief opening remarks at the Caribbean/United States Summit held in Bridgetown on 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> May this year. This is language of togetherness. And from among the many declarations of partnership in the resulting documents, called the *Bridgetown Declaration of Principles* and related *Plan of Action* I have picked this one:

[...] the United States [...] (will) assist the Caribbean in formulating a uniform legal approach to meeting new trade commitments [...] (p. 13).

Now law is words, so “uniform” laws promise language for togetherness even if it is a togetherness that we are going to be pushed into by an outside force as has hitherto been our political experience – as the West Indian islands were pushed into a Federation by Britain.

You see we do leave ourselves open to be pushed, although we do already *have* a basic togetherness through our *language*. Even if our Englishes are phonically different we have a tremendous head-start in ethno-regional unity compared, outstandingly, with:

- ◆ the Organization of African Unity (OAU), which has to contend with a multiplicity of African languages and has to conduct its affairs simultaneously in French, English and Portuguese;
- ◆ the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN), which has to contend with a similar multiplicity of Indo-Asian and Polynesian languages and has to conduct the affairs in English (as a second language);
- ◆ the Organization of American States (OAS), contending simultaneously with English, Spanish and Portuguese;
- ◆ the United States of Europe contending simultaneously with every language of the European member States;
- ◆ and even Canada (with parallel English and French) and India and Pakistan with scores of indigenous languages being replaced, in each case, by English, a foreign language.

And the surprising thing to me is that no CARICOM document, or Communique from any Heads of Government Summit, as far as I am aware, has ever taken due notice of or even stated this great human advantage as the very initiative of dialogue: creative, productive, effective, discursive – even usefully quarrelsome *dialogue* – easing unemotional family chat among leaders: for small talk, table talk, banter, and for every level of discussion.

The common language of our Caribbean sisterhood of nations including the United States, as President Clinton has pointed out – is English, English in multi-faceted varieties it is true, so that even when Suriname and Haiti are included we can still say multi-faceted varieties of English. And we can talk with Curacao, Aruba, St Maarten and the whole Netherlands Antilles in their own Caribbean variety of English.

Incidentally when the President spoke of America being a Caribbean nation, I think he may more appropriately have said that the United States and the Caribbean are *American*

Nations because North America, South America and the Amerindian Caribbean are all in fact geographical components of the New World that was centuries ago recognized totally as “America”, until the United States hijacked the name, calling itself America as if all others were irrelevant. You know in the US Virgin Islands, mainland Americans are separately identified as *Statesiders* and perhaps it’s a relegation the rest of us should adopt.

“*The United States and the Caribbean are American Nations ?*” Ha! But what am I saying? Perhaps in that hijacked sense of the name, we may well already be. And perhaps the President may have unwittingly brought that out, for I note, as in the first piece I cited at the beginning of this address, President Clinton spoke of us together as “*our people.*” Not (plural) multiple “*peoples.*” He said “*our people*” four times. And “*our*” is, you will note, a very possessive pronoun.

Still this is more recognition than was accorded us by Sir Winston Churchill who, in his five-volume *History of the English-Speaking peoples*, excluded the Caribbean altogether – we being either not English-speaking or not people at all!

So either for Churchill’s type of mind we don’t exist, or for the American business giant’s type of mind we are a single entity – conceived of as a usable utensil called a Caribbean Basin, into which, in their language of togetherness, they put *their* initiative. So we are in America’s Caribbean Basin Initiative *as one, together, though* we see ourselves in it separately, and therewith floating helplessly. Only say bananas ... to be reminded that, as helpless separates, coming together too little too late, we can’t do a damn thing but beg!

Our own Caribbean political scientists, economists, analysts and empathetic observers tell us we *must speak* with one voice. They cannot tell us how. I have already pointed out, in an earlier address, that politics and economics are domains of division and competition, not cohesion. Only culture holds people together. And as I have also pointed out, only mutual *respect* for each other’s culture or sub-culture whether seen as ethnic or territorial, can cement national unity.

I see it therefore as basic, as crucial, for us first to respect ourselves as people, then to respect each other as one people, therefrom to understand ourselves as being *at one* with our fellow Caribbean people.

Social history holds the important key. But whereas a nation of adults – busy scrambling for money to live by – cannot find the time or the means of the necessary enlightenment in that domain – even if we were to be subjected every now and then to six-hour long public lectures like Fidel Castro’s to the Cuban people – it is, fortunately, a fact and an advantage that every adult can be enlightened by looking around them, and, by the addition of goodwill, further enlightened in their thinking and inquiry about what they see.

Looking around is making an *inventory*, memorizing a checklist of our surroundings. Storing that list with thought and goodwill, and adding systematic inquiry is making a *chronicle*. Inventory and chronicle, seriously undertaken, that is to say professionally, make a *dictionary*. And one that is particularly located in the environment and history of a nation.

So dictionary-making, or lexicography, has a natural emotional link with nationhood. And it is no coincidence that what was notably titled *The American Dictionary of the English Language* emerged (1807–1825) out of the nationalist mind of a native American teacher named Noah Webster within a few decades of America’s becoming an independent nation in 1776.

And again, far from coincidence, Walter S. Avis and his team, creating *A Dictionary of Canadianisms* and sister *Dictionaries of Canadian English*, planned their work to be published in 1967 to mark 100 years of Canada’s dominion status (1867).

And again, W. S. Ramson and his staff planned their *Australian National Dictionary* to appear in 1988 to mark the 200th anniversary of the English settlement of Australia (1788).

These three, the largest English-speaking countries in the world, have tied the celebration of nationhood, in each case, not to the design of a flag, or the words of an anthem, but intellectually to the provision of a national dictionary as the true mark of national identity and, in each case by content and context, as a symbol of national unity.

I said the largest English-speaking countries but not the oldest. The oldest is of course England. And the second oldest is the Caribbean. Yes, I know the *Mayflower* sailed to Massachusetts in 1620 but English language had made footfall in the Caribbees with Drake in 1585, with Raleigh in

Guiana in 1596, an experimental settlement by Charles Leigh in Guyana in 1604, and a permanent settlement through Thomas Warner in St Kitts in 1624. We are here talking about some four hundred (from 1585 to 1996) years of the landing of English language in our Caribbean, not two hundred like Australia and Canada. And they are each one land mass, not nearly so much in need of unity as our scattered English-speaking entities. And of course not nearly so much in need of unity as our scattered English-speaking entities. And of course not nearly so much in need of collective self-confidence and pride as a basis for that unity as we Caribbeans are.

I invite you to begin to see our *own Dictionary of Caribbean English Usage (DCEU)* in this light, as similar to those other national dictionaries, signalling a respectable cultural identity, and one with deeper roots grown out of a longer history.

However some entertaining parallels may interest you:

- ◆ American independence 1776 – *Webster's American Dictionary* begun 31 years later (1807)
- ◆ Guyana's and Barbados's independence 1966 – *Dictionary of Caribbean English Usage* published 30 years later (1996)
- ◆ Webster's American Dictionary took 18 years (1807–1825)
- ◆ Allsopp's Dictionary of Caribbean English Usage took 25 years (1971–1996)

But there is much more than those titbits that must be seriously noticed.

When the time comes, as it will, that imperial England, like imperial Rome, recedes into historical oblivion, England will leave a legacy not in palaces and pounds but, as Rome left Latin, England will leave a legacy in the value and power of the English Language. Commercial *value*, led by American usage; and international *power* for probably centuries to come, as the obligatory first language of communication in every important domain of human activity: international diplomacy talk (once it was French), international conference talk, air-

traffic control talk, sea-link talk, computer-talk – so that even the 1.2 billion self-assertive nation of China find they need *English*.

And all that immense instrumental value and power is anchored, as power must always be anchored, in the basic testament of the multi-volume *Oxford English Dictionary* which now has many respected apostolic adjuncts as I have shown you, of which, with God's help, I have been privileged to provide one for the Caribbean, the *Dictionary of Caribbean English Usage (DCEU)*. (Unfortunately whenever I, as author, feel forced to bring notice to it, I am reminded of poor N. E. Cameron, my fellow-Guyanese and teacher, having to push his own work).

Well, I mean this Caribbean dictionary to demonstrate, not just to the outside world (and it has indeed received good reviews and recognition in Europe and America and sold in Germany and Japan) but very importantly to ourselves, that in that immense instrumental power of English we Caribbeans have a *historical* share, that *to* that power we have made a literary contribution, and that *with* that power – and here I speak particularly to the Caribbeans – we can enable our minds to lead us creatively ahead. *Some* Caribbean individuals have pointedly demonstrated this possibility by their galvanizing use of language. Not only Caribbeans like Marcus Garvey, inspiring all Black America, Arthur Lewis, inspiring world economic thinking and Derek Walcott, topping world literature, but also like Harry Belafonte, Americanizing Caribbean English and Bob Marley, magnifying meaning through Rastafarian language – starting with a new semi-psycho personal pronoun *I-and-I*. All their *irations* (< I + vibration + creation) have grown out of an ultimate Caribbean plantation Creole which is the eldest of the outside children of British English (as the history I summarily dated above attests).

I have used the writings of such persons, and of hundreds of other Caribbean writers, and the samples of the speech of our Caribbean folk, as citations in the *DCEU* to prove that the spectrum of Caribbean English has an established place in our collective thinking, in our togetherness thinking and in any intelligent view of World English.

Yet what is our own Caribbean position in regard to what this Dictionary is, what it can and should begin to do?

You know, the Englishman is ardent about his "*Oxford*" dictionary, as the American also is about his "*Webster's*" – which is now well on the way, let us note, to setting the spelling of international English; and both the Canadians and Australians have academic and administrative educational machinery in place to ensure respect and effective use of their own national dictionaries. Not so with us. We are some way from making anything of the development which the *DCEU* represents.

The regional governments, both Heads and Ministries, have all been apprised of its publication and all fourteen Heads of Government who attended the July 1996 CARICOM Summit in Barbados were presented with personal copies, autographed, with their name-plates. But there has been no comment whatever from any of them. I also wrote six of them asking that CARICOM seek support for ongoing work such as a second edition, a school edition, etc., but there has been no response. But in May this year, my wife and I sent a personally autographed copy with a presentation plate to President Clinton to mark his coming to Barbados for the Caribbean/US Summit. The presentation plate was inscribed "*One language is the best meeting place.*" Within a few weeks we received this personal note of thanks from the President.

June 19, 1997

PERSONAL

THE WHITE HOUSE  
WASHINGTON

Dr and Mrs. Richard Allsopp  
#1 Poinsettia Way  
Cave Hill  
BARBADOS

Dear Dr and Mrs. Allsopp:

Thank you very much for the copy of your book, *Dictionary of Caribbean English Usage*. It will come in handy during my next trip to the Caribbean.

I had a great time during my trip to Barbados, and your kindness helped to make the occasion especially memorable. I appreciate your generosity and send my best wishes.

Sincerely,

Bill Clinton

You may perhaps ask: Which of these is my neighbour?

But let us leave that overcast side of the matter to look at sunnier prospects. I asked above, and must now suggest answers to the question: What can and should our Caribbean Dictionary do?

First it must enlighten us about ourselves, revealing truths that would replace our colonial self-effacement with self-confidence. You must *understand* that Creolese and its sister Caribbean Creoles were new languages *created* by the brains of our ancestors, under severe repression, out of the forced mating of their native African language concepts with those of the languages of Europe; you must remember too that our East Indian fellow-labourers adopted and jointly maintained this new language, and it developed as the universal folk language of our country, as it did similarly in Trinidad; and that out of that universal folk language grew the more educated language we speak today, even if, in some of us,

only marked by a distinctive Caribbean accent and some usage. When you *understand* all this, the logical emotion that will result can only be amazement and full admiration instead of foolish abashment.

For it follows that every single item of our Caribbean Creoles (which in Guyana we call Creolese) in an utterance like *me na a nyam* is of interest to our cultural and social history.

Let me illustrate for a moment. Consider these sets of utterances:

- |                            |  |
|----------------------------|--|
| 1) me na a nyam (Guyn)     | 1a) I am not eating (SE)                     |
| 2) me na da nyam (Jmca)    | 2a) I am not eating (SE)                     |
| 3) mine e nyeng (Srn)      | 3a) ik eet niet (Dutch)                      |
| 4) mwe pa ka mange (Fr Cr) | 4a) je ne mange pas (French)                 |
| 5) mi no ta come (Pap)     | 5a) (yo) no estoy comiendo (Sp) (Yo) no como |

These are all ways of saying “*I am not eating*”. In the left column are five examples of the basic (or oldest forms of) creole structures of Guyana, Jamaica, Suriname, French Creole and Curaçao’s Papiamentu. In the right column are the European language equivalents. Immediately two things strike us: (a) the structural similarities of the left side statements and (b) the marked structural difference of each and all of them from any of the European statements. The questions arising are, firstly, how and why did the slave communities create the same kind of structures when wholly separated from each other, and, secondly, can the left side structures realistically have been formed by corrupting the right side structures, as is popularly believed?

The answer to these questions leads logically to the likelihood that the slaves everywhere were not only “*doing their own thing*” but also that that “*own thing*” was a set of new creations, new languages in fact which had a common linguistic influence, an influence which clearly would not have been European, and must clearly have been something of their own African ancestry.

Next, look at this set.

- 1) me na a nyam
- 2) me na a eat
- 3) me ain eatin
- 4) A ain eatin
- 5) A not eatin
- 6) I'm not eating

In these (1) to (6) demonstrate the continuous development that must have taken place in Guyanese, as it must similarly have in all Caribbean slave societies from the basic slave talk (1) to schooled English (6). Is it not stunning to note that the whole development from (1) to (5) was accomplished *entirely* by the social will and drive of our ancestral Black folk and that *only* stage (6) must be credited to formal schooling as ordained by the (British) Government?

In a nutshell the case of *me na a nyam* illustrates by example the “roots” significance of every item of our basic Creolese and all these columns should serve to tell you succinctly why the study of Caribbean Creoles and, particularly for us, Caribbean English usage, is important to our understanding of our cultural heritage, to our social enlightenment, and to national education. And even when education and status move us away from the levels of folk speech, we frequently find ourselves bound by terms that resist abandonment. By way of example, consider briefly the terms *eye-pass*, *hard-ears*, *own-way*, *force-ripe*:

*eye-pass* connotes deliberateness + brazen insult +  
an age or social superiority factor

*hard-ears* connotes disobedience + stubbornness +  
*youth*

*own-way* connotes disobedience +  
quiet resistance + *youth*

*force-ripe* connotes maturity + unnatural ripeness +  
*dissatisfaction* (or precocity in a metaphorical sense)

Note in each case that there is an *obligatory third dimension*, a sociolinguistic factor that *particularises* the context in which each compound word is bound. Such terms stay with us because they each do a semantic job that cannot be satisfactorily done by any British or American English word.

A Caribbean dictionary, like the *DCEU*, should therefore make you realise, for example, that terms like *eye-pass*, *hard-ears*, *own-way*, *force-ripe* defy replacement by any Standard English equivalencies which could be as succinct as they; and also, to take briefer examples, that *stupidness* is something you say or do, while *stupidity* is your condition, but Standard English has lost this distinction, which we have maintained; that *tinnen* is of the same English pedigree as *golden*, *leaden*; that *you-all* is a clear plural (which Standard English lacks) formed from our African background; that *jook* is a pan-Caribbean descendant of West African pedigree and related to American *jukebox*; and so on and so on.

But we'd be here all night if I let myself get carried away with examples, so I must summarise the rest, only stressing that the key word is *respect*. A Caribbean Dictionary can and should first promote *self-respect* (which I have just illustrated).

Secondly it must promote inter-territorial respect, i.e., Guyanese and Barbadian *golden apple* cannot be considered a better name for that fruit than Jamaican *Jew-plum* or Trinidadian *pomme-cythere*, each having its linguistic rationale.

Thirdly it must promote inter-racial respect when, for example, the Dictionary becomes a ready reference for explaining ceremonies and festivals of our component sub-cultures not only when they occur but at any time. Such are, in Guyana and Trinidad, *arti* and *Phagwa*, *tadjah* and *Eid*, *Kali-mai-puja*, as well as the propitiatory significance of Guyanese *comfa*, Grenadian *saraka*, Belizean *dugu* and so on.

Fourthly, and perhaps as its most important role, a Caribbean dictionary can be an integrative instrument, demonstrating the conceptual and cultural sameness underlying superficial territorial and apparent religio-racial differences. For example it can reveal that the Afro-Guyanese *nine-day* ceremony marking the birth of a child parallels the Hindu *chaati* (both still rurally recognised), that the Muslim

*Eid-ul-Azah* celebrates the Christian story of Abraham and Isaac, that African *stick-fighting* parallels Indic *gatka*, that our Amerindian *masaramani* ('Mashramani') has multiple parallels throughout African and Afro-Caribbean cultures – as *lend-hand* (Tobago), *coup-de-main* (St Lucia), *gayap* (Trinidad), *maroon*, *pardner* (Jamaica) etc. etc – just look up *lend-hand* in the *DCEU* and you will see them all.

Fifthly, there are many down-to-earth practical needs that a Caribbean Dictionary can fill. To offer but one demonstration, I turn to the simple matter of organised spelling. We have two quite different fruits called 'aki' in the Caribbean. My dictionary suggests that we spell the Jamaican National Fruit *ackee* (*Blighia sapida*) and the Barbadian one (which is our *guinep*) *akee* (*Melicoccus bijugatus*). And why should there not be one agreed spelling throughout the Caribbean for *jook*, *calalu*, etc. and in Guyana or Barbados, for *cankie/conkie* and, spreading in the Eastern Caribbean, *Divali/Deevalii*, *daal puri*, *phulouri* etc. etc.?

My dictionary has taken what is called the descriptivist position of giving all the alternatives I have found, making a suggestion sometimes, but really leaving the reader to choose. But people also need to be directed, and so there is need for organised feedback from regional Ministries of Education or professional teacher bodies to myself as co-ordinator of the Caribbean Lexicography Project, as to how a second edition of the Dictionary can be more specifically helpful. And, remember, spelling is only *one* of many areas of real need of enlightenment in our own affairs, respect for our own culture by properly labelling its components! Just remember for example the problems of acceptability that have to be settled in cases like *hard-ears*, *force-ripe*, *jook* that I have referred to above.

Lastly a Caribbean Dictionary, while offering a channel of integrative education and understanding to help unify all Caribbean peoples, crossing into our Francophone and Hispanophone neighbour cultures as well – a huge function that I can regrettably only mention – while flowing creatively in these many channels, must tell the world *who we are* as the book stands recognised side by side with any other professional dictionary of World English.

And it must also tell the whole of Black Africa, by its etymological revelations, that the human phenomenon of our language and the language of our fathers shows a line of common heritage from the Mandingo to Mandela that we can use creatively in facing a world that is unwilling to yield anything to us without vigorous *united* argument. We can, from the Caribbean demonstrate and prove, by linguistic evidence, the *oneness* of sub-Saharan Africa.

That is good reason why the work I have begun needs Anglophone pan-Caribbean support for its continuance. A dictionary is out of date on the day of its publication, because new words, labels and expressions for new ideas and concepts have been coming on stream since it went to press. And what about those it was forced to omit when it went to press? That support can only be effected by Ministerial arrangement of national panels in each territory.

Regional governments, the UWI and the Caribbean Examinations Council must show a sensitivity to this need that I have not so far seen. What about that need for organised feedback which I mentioned a few moments ago?

Lexicography, or dictionary-making, brings together absolutely every facet of human activity. Revealing truth is a total task. The bush-medicine or weed seller becomes as important a source of knowledge in telling you what *man-piaba* is and what it is used for, as the botanist who must authenticate its identification as *Leonotis nepetifolia* (*Labiatae/Lamiaceae*). The hairdresser must tell you how to spell *jheri curls*, name the styles as *weaving*, *weaves* (*n*), *weaved* (*vb*), *guinea*, *corn-row*, etc. The word-bending of *calypso*, *reggae*, *dub* and the folk-science vocabulary of *steelpan making* need authentic linguistic handling. And in this particular regard what can be more startling than the magically easy spread of Rastafarian language use, called *dread talk*, throughout the Caribbean, its remarkable inventiveness, twisting and reshaping words with its own semantic logic, and so on.

In sum, in lexicography, the intellectual idea spans the whole spectrum of life from folk to professional level. It is a very egalitarianising exercise: everybody is important. That is why, it can beneficially provide the core of an Institute of Caribbean Studies in which we can respectfully study

ourselves at all social and intellectual levels with specific focus on integrative education and national unity – *national* spreading through the territorial into the Caribbean sense.

In 1988 when I was invited to participate in Guyana's celebration of its "*Genesis of a Nation*", I called for, and left an outline plan for, such an Institute. I have done so on other relevant occasions elsewhere and I appeal again. You know, there are actually in other parts of the world Institutes of Caribbean Studies that are studying us, while we have, in the UWI and UG, no such. (It's true that at Mona and St Augustine there are persons that have given "*a desk*" so named for a start of such work but there is no institution). Look, there is in:

Berlin and Vienna - *Gesellschaft für Karibik Forschung*  
(Society for Caribbean Research)

Utrecht (Holland) - Centre for Caribbean and Latin  
American Studies

Warwick (England) - Centre for Caribbean Studies

York University (Canada) - Centre for Caribbean Studies

Gainesville (Florida) - Institute of Caribbean and Latin  
Studies

Puerto Rico - Institute of Caribbean Studies

but at UWI and UG – Zilch!

It is time that both the UG and the UWI, through our Governments and through CARICOM, seek and find funding for setting up Institutes of Caribbean Studies, even in a small way, but preferably with inter-campus and inter-university links through a consortium arrangement. In such Institutes Caribbean lexicography would have a natural home playing an enlightening and mutually beneficial role. It would be our very own Caribbean Basin initiative not conceived or designed by someone else's Polyphemus-like one eye to his

own business. So please, as you go from here, think about these things – the need for realistic *regional* support – about which nothing has been done by University, CXC or any Caribbean Government – for Caribbean dictionary work, and the need for proper Caribbean Institute(s) to include as well as benefit from such work.

And, in our varied voices, let our language, mature in regional thinking, mount an effective call for such an Institute that can give *meaning to togetherness*, and then *wisdom* may take us forward, *intellectually together* as a real start. For, as I said quoting a Swahili proverb in the dedication of my dictionary, “*The beginning of wisdom is knowing who you are.*”

**S. R. R. Allsopp**  
**November 7, 1977**

#### ENDNOTES:

<sup>1</sup> [Editor’s note: Dr Craig was Professor in the School of Education, UWI, Mona campus, and served on the advisory committee while Allsopp’s *Dictionary* was in preparation.]

<sup>2</sup> *The West on Trial – My Fight for Guyana’s Freedom* (London: Michael Joseph, 1966), p. 114.

<sup>3</sup> [Editor’s note: Jagan was quoted as saying that “*black people are at the lowest scale of the social ladder,*” a remark which he claimed had been taken out of context, and referred to black people in America, not Guyana.]

<sup>4</sup> [Editor’s Note: in the printed booklet there were four attachments at the end of this lecture, of which this is the first. For the convenience of the reader they have all been brought forward to the appropriate places in the text.]

<sup>5</sup> Published in *Caribbean Week* (Vol. 8, No. 24, August–September 1997).

<sup>6</sup> [Editor’s note: Mr Mahabir gives his address as the University of Florida at Gainesville, which is listed by Dr Allsopp in his final lecture as being home to an Institute of Caribbean and Latin Studies.]

<sup>7</sup> *Daily Chronicle*, 9 January 1961, p. 1.

<sup>8</sup> *Newsweek*, 24 June, 1996.

<sup>9</sup> *New Testament and Psalms – An Inclusive Version* (OUP, NY, 1995).

<sup>10</sup> Volume 10, Number 1, Summer 1997, pages 21, 22.

<sup>11</sup> Taken from L. Todd, ‘**Ebonics: An Evaluation**’, in *English Today* (XIII, 3 July 1997).



**Thirteenth Series, 2009**

**Denis Williams: Art, Blood and  
Heritage**

*Evelyn A. Williams*





*Memorabilia II* by Denis Williams

*"The themes of Memorabilia II are taken from various events in the recent history of Guyana. At bottom left the martyrdom of the five sugar workers from Enmore Estate, on June 16, 1948. The martyrs are portrayed lying in state on a donkey cart, with their cutlasses held in their left hands across their chests. A procession of distraught relatives and village mourners with down-turned spades forms the cortege. Above this section of the mural there is a group of swirling masquerade band images bearing the flag of Guyana. This represents the attainment of independence on May 26, 1966. Occupying the central position of the mural is the statue of Sir James Carmichael Smyth, the Governor who presided over 'the grand design' of Apprenticeship following upon Emancipation in 1834. The statue is portrayed bound in ropes and being removed from its position of honour, by the 'New Guyana Man'. The dancing female figure immediately above this group represents the Spirit of Agriculture bearing gifts of sugar-cane and rice. To the right of this, scenes depicting the winning of timber in the Guyana hinterland are portrayed, while below this two figures under a load of baskets mark the importance of our craft industries. At far right of the mural young pioneers of the Guyana National Service are associated with a group of school children led by a girl carrying cochineal leaf – a symbol of healing. Thus, a sequence which commences at one end of the picture on a theme of martyrdom and sorrow, ends on the other on a note of life and hope."*

The purpose of the Edgar Mittelholzer Memorial Lectures, as envisioned by A. J. Seymour, was to keep safe the “*treasures*” of Guyanese creative and intellectual life and thereby to ensure that the life, work and thoughts of many remarkable individuals did not become subsumed in the narratives of social and political discord, but rather that “*the relationship between thought and history*” was captured “*in order to promote a sense of national pride.*”

Denis Williams is recognised as a founding father of modern Guyana; one of those at the vanguard of the postcolonial reconstruction project; in terms of his central involvement in founding key cultural institutions in the country, and in conducting pioneering work on Guyana’s founding peoples, the Amerindians. We are now seeing the resurfacing of his theories in a fresh, contemporary academic context. It is astonishing, but perhaps not surprising, to see reprints of some of his works some sixty years after they were first published.

There are several strands of Williams’ historical presence. He is remembered as an artist, a teacher, a novelist, an archaeologist, and as a dynamic cultural agent. His written theories are a testament to his philosophical engagement at critical moments in his nation’s development, and his role as a cultural analyst in the process of dismantling colonialism. A personal imperative and elemental drive provided the edge to all his work. In correspondence with A. J. Seymour he declared: “*[...] more and more the idea of personal success, as opposed to communal growth has less and less appeal for me.*” When we begin to scratch the surface of his life-works we immediately become engaged with his theories of art and culture. Our attention is drawn to the synthesising approach that informed all his creative work.

How do we draw together a sense of this life?

I have taken as my cue for this paper the large mural – *Memorabilia II*.<sup>1</sup> This provides a locus of ideas and theories

which I have linked to the three themes of Art, Blood and Heritage in order to consider what relevance they may have for Guyanese today. For there are many who believe we have hardly scratched the surface of his insights and vision. And it is clear that there are continuing issues facing the modern Caribbean nation state in managing its fractured social map. Like other fractured societies it is still facing choices in the direction of its growth.

I have used *Memorabilia II* because, unlike much of Denis Williams' art, it is readily accessible in the foyer of the National Cultural Centre and because we also have his intentions behind the work recorded in the souvenir programme for the inauguration of the National Cultural Centre in 1976. We can read his own words on *Memorabilia II*, reproduced at the head of this essay, for the clues to the images and ideas he considered 'worthy of remembering' in Guyana's recent history. The graphic presentation of the images allows an access to the range of his social commitment to, and engagement with his country.

*Memorabilia II* is a piece of public art. As such it is a means rather than an end – a means of mediating a shared past. Public art can open people's minds and enable them to see the world differently. It can provide a vehicle for discussion to ensure that we engage with one another and move forward in our thinking in order to develop aspects of community. The public art of a nation develops aspects of unique and specific heritage. Public art is a major communal symbol which can be transformative. But it also runs the risk of being political despite itself. The public realm is excruciatingly dangerous and there is a long tradition of attacking public art. Like Cuffy, the work is 'out there', not hidden in a gallery.

The politicisation of culture occurred throughout the Caribbean as new nationalist politics came to recognise the significance of the role of the arts and the benefits of exploiting the arts at the cultural interface of nationalist movements. Art and culture must therefore be considered as being of central significance in Williams' view of national reconstruction. The artist invites us to 'read' *Memorabilia II* as a mural with a didactic narrative. It graphically depicts Williams' view of the possibility of an optimistic journey from oppression to

transcendence. It is a compelling, coherent and consistent belief that can be traced throughout his philosophical speculation. It is a cultural marker that seeks an elevated position for all its peoples, free of the redundant definitions of the past.

The artist as the dismantler of colonialism is symbolised in the removal of the statue of Governor Smyth and, significantly, there is a silhouette self-portrait of the artist himself, centrally embedded in the imagery as “*a highly informed, highly sensitised manual worker.*”

For Williams, art did not concern itself with commercial, economic or political endeavour but with the human spirit. Art was sensibility: a central part of society. It was an endeavour that promoted emotional and intellectual development and it signalled dignity and humanity. It allowed contact with the products of the human imagination – providing insights; raising cultural awareness; understanding the fundamentals and interests of others and countering dangerously simplistic positions. For Williams it was of particular relevance in mapping the progress of a developing society.

It was Mittelholzer who challenged the would-be artist to find subject matter *in* the Caribbean and in the late 1940s Williams had painted what he called “*the material at my own back door*” in *The Plantations*, a suite of paintings exploring the human impact of plantation culture. These artworks were statements of recognisable social content; as disclosures of his own life and the experience of his contemporaries. It was the type of subject matter that gave meaning to Edward Kamau Brathwaite’s notion of the “*inner plantation*” – that dramatic psychological journey from one’s ancestral base to one’s present position – the inner journey that provides continuity. Thus Williams’ paintings come to give us an account of the process that provides those continuities. Art becomes an additional primary source to Caribbean Studies through the access it allows to that inner dimension.

Fragmentation and trauma resulted from the juxtaposition of seemingly irreconcilable elements of Europe, Africa and Asia. How easy to lose an identity; how hard to forge a new one! It is here that the art of a people builds bridges and

allows access to the progression of such continuities. Why is this important?

Within a plural framework it must be a priority to establish links, to test for continuities – to connect. We must connect as individuals, teaching ourselves to recognise within diversity our core human values. We should also connect politically, developing a mindset that recognises a core purpose and the single aim of a country. In this context, the artist in the Caribbean has held a responsibility unlike that usually conceived of in the developed world. The role and responsibility of the artist has been to explore themes often in situations of social conflict: issues of social existence; of individual and national identity where any sense of identity had been called into question through a continuing process of upheaval and displacement through migration and exile.

Historically the cultural revolution of the Caribbean has been interpreted as an original form of rebellion – one achieved not through violent confrontation but through a continuing, subversive transformation of the European imprimatur. This is readily evidenced in its languages, manners and dress; in its literatures, religions and folklore, and in those art forms arising from inherently local values evident in the work of the artists for whom Williams coined the phrase the ‘Guyana School’.

Williams’ artistic and philosophical position in relation to New World realities is elucidated in his 1973 paper ‘Art and Society’. He believed his theories had currency throughout the Caribbean. So what relevance do they hold today? In that paper he described the intrusive art forms of the imperial relationship as “[...] *art forms representing a culture of culture, and not a culture of people, with diminishing social significance, as deculturation proceeds.*” He described the exaggerated regard for ancestral forms – for folk and tribal forms – as “[...] *the forms of refuge; they are not the forms of challenge, they are the forms of complacency*” given that the essential contemporary engagement is missing.

In the continuing process of transition in art from a Eurocentric focus to an international one, artists provide a significant public reference of that contemporary engagement in trends, aspirations and ideas. Williams believed that the

artist had a duty to engage in the cultural debate and that it was the role of the artist to inhabit this domain, for culture is the platform where the battle for identity takes place.

In this same paper, Williams challenges the view that art is a function of wealth; that people near the bread line do not appreciate art. He suggests instead that art is a function of work and work does not always produce wealth. Given differences in the methods of organising work we may expect the relative differences in the functions and forms of art to be profound. The ordering of the environment through work relates to the functions of art and therefore to the role of the artist. Art seeks to interpret the environment for the benefit and security of man. The art systems and art forms of societies in surplus production, with great reserves of private wealth, were unlikely ever to obtain in societies of the Third World.

In the absence of a bourgeoisie, colonial capitalism had created small local elites – among them western-educated classes and moneyed business classes. Then, as now, their patronage and entrepreneurship had been anticipated and essential. In Williams' view, elites and governments bear a responsibility to their artists. They stand accused of not recognising a success that does not produce money. Artists challenged the urban elites of developing countries of the Caribbean to address the complaint that they were not fulfilling their role. This was true of Mittelholzer, Williams, Lamming, Walcott *et al.*

Williams regretted that many gifted Guyanese artists felt little responsibility for forging the destiny of their nation through their creative work. But is this fair and reasonable? Now, as then, there continue to be significant dilemmas for the artist operating in the periphery. People need to express their creativity in their own terms and artists cannot be blamed for leaving their country to seek a platform for their art. Where a public audience and patronage are sought, artists have had to face the reality of their circumstances. Would their platform and sense of artistic community be local? Regional? Metropolitan? International?

Today there are new elites – the mobile moneyed migrants, the “*to-and-fro*” elites with access to foreign dollars. Now it is

the new Caribbean elites who stand accused of being complicit in holding idealised notions of local culture and values – of the ‘Brand Caribbean’ type. They have appeared reluctant to take a lead in the reflective processes that advance entrepreneurial activity in art. ‘Brand Caribbean’ makes reference to the global imaging of ‘Caribbean culture’ which is influenced by external pressures like tourism and paternalism. It continues to project the Caribbean as a homogeneous culture set in an idealised picture postcard landscape. ‘Brand Caribbean’ legitimises this cultural profile but disguises its hybrid variants.

There is widespread acceptance of globalization amongst the new elites of all nations and its values and aspirations cascade. Today there is no doubt that the multi-ethnic, middle-class elite have become a central force. Through their exposure to metropolitan experiences they can be seen to reduce the focus on ethnicity in civil society. However, intellectual and artistic merit transcend national identity and the future may yet be promising for artists of the periphery.

On his return to Guyana, Williams had his period “*in the wilderness*”. He spent seven years in the interior of Guyana writing and painting. There he began to exercise his theoretical ideas concerning the particular difficulties that cultural nationalism was facing in Guyana. These ideas were formally presented in his 1969 Mittelholzer Lectures where he emerges as an artist refigured as an active cultural agent facilitating the transition to self-development and self-determination. For Williams, art was a liberating life force characterised by its ability to challenge established ideas; to reject the mediocre and to present alternatives; and by its capacity to subvert that which is inappropriate to its experience. He showed how art informs the conversations of cultural nationalism with its message of human emancipation and its radical belief that man is in control of his own destiny. He demonstrated its role in the preservation of the individual and collective memory.

He was an idealistic visionary and he took the long view of national development. He held a holistic theory of culture and, as an active cultural agent, he recognised the urgency of laying the foundations of institutions that would enable the

development of a culture that would offer validation to all its peoples within an acceptable context. He was concerned with the attitudes and values that inform a society and develop it into something cultivated and refined. Change always begins with culture. In Williams' vision of the national reconstruction project following independence, art was a central cultural and educational tool. The state could not simply leave this to market forces but should instead fund the conditions favourable to artists' development so that the pool of talent of the nation could be realised. In his view it was national government that bore the responsibility of creating the spaces for artistic legitimisation.

As Director of Art for the new Republic he was instrumental in the establishment of many of the institutions that were to create a context for the reception of art in his own country and which underpinned cultural development – including the Burrowes School of Art, Castellani House, The Africa Museum and the Walter Roth Museum. He had a clear vision for his nation, and his influence was widespread in the related complementary areas of art activity such as art theory, art criticism, cultural programming and curating and in the protection of the cultural treasures of the nation.

Williams posed broadly provocative questions on the nature of a Caribbean identity and whether art could act as a vehicle for an implicit national and regional identity. He pioneered critical theories and identified distinctive continuities that still inform critical debate on the evolution, characteristics and definition of New World identities. He examined the role of the artist in the development of a public understanding of nationhood. He drew upon his unique position and experience in narrating and reviewing local developments and placing his critical evaluation within a wider context of historical reflection.

Turning back to *Memorabilia II* we can identify several images that Williams has used which signal my second theme, Blood, in the social existence of the peoples of Guyana and in the context of national identity - the blood of the different peoples; the blood of the plantation; the blood of the martyrs and the blood of the children. These were themes for the attention of artists and intellectuals as well as for politicians

and he confronted them in his Mittelholzer lectures. In his early transatlantic encounters Williams had experienced being framed and circumscribed by forms of differencing. He spurned the easy exploitation of difference and renounced the cynical exploitation of it as a marketable commodity.

He was scornful of the historical legacy of ideas surrounding the issues of blood and miscegenation in concepts like *"thoroughbred"*, *"pure blood"*, *"pedigree blood"*, *"mingling of blood"*, *"contaminated blood"* and so on. The Caribbean reality of composite blood *"brings us face to face with the concept of the racial ancestor,"* Williams argued. He saw that there was a limitation to growth in the image of the parent culture, the parent hosts of the Old World, *"and, so long as we ideally relate to the racial ancestor we inhibit awareness of our uniqueness [...] and the possibilities of conceiving an autonomous self-image and exploring 'our peculiar psychic heritage'."* He challenged racial and cultural integrity as a *"self-annihilating fallacy"*. He wrote: *"We simply do not know in what racial skin the sperm will present in our children's children."* In other words, destiny unknown. Williams was enlarging on the complex issues surrounding personal identity in relation to an ancestral past.

He suggests the New World relationship to the concept of the ancestor is in need of re-interpretation. He suggests an alternative philosophical view of the reality of life in the Caribbean. He proposes a means of interpreting difference as a creative function and as a positive for the future.

He rejected the image of the Caribbean as a melting-pot with all the contentions and confusions surrounding the term 'Creole'. He challenged the premise of homogeneous unity. Rather, he viewed New World societies as crucibles in which the process of human catalysis of greater or lesser potency operates. His radicalism suggests ways *"to interpret culture free from claims of immanence"* in the face of cultural, religious or racial essentialism. It is the unpredictable human presence and the process of catalysis that determine the culture generated. This view also suggests that, loosened from the historical tethers of class, race and religion, there is a huge expansion of possibility in locating the creative mind and cultural emphasis free of sociological categories. He referred to this as *"[...] the creative mind of the Guyanese people – that total which is greater than the sum of its parts."*

Williams witnessed the transition of the Caribbean nexus from its tethering to Old World cultures to one that increasingly identified with its New World credentials. In that context, the static, militantly filialistic elements within society can paradoxically be interpreted as having a creative function in that they “*promote catalysis and invigorate*” and “*create a fortuitous dynamism in the cultural sense.*” This is also the positive message of *Memorabilia II*. Williams’ theory is open-ended, emphasising the positive agents of change which can transform art and society.

The modern nation state seeking its own version of national identity and unity increasingly has to mediate the ground of its competing multi-faith, multi-ethnic groups and it is tested by its ability to secure the secularised politics necessary to the smooth functioning of society. Economic and political strategies alone are not adequate for the challenge of normalising these cultural encounters.

It is evident that inter-cultural exchanges and pluralities would operate most effectively within an open-ended kinetic structure rather than a solid architecture in which groups compete with one another for their position. As Williams wrote: “*Guyanese society might be seen, then, as a complex plurality in continual process of achieving a complex singularity – a singularity which is always itself open to change.*”

There is a contemporary vocabulary of identity – words like “*migration*”, “*exile*”, “*globalization*” and so forth. We are familiar with labels like “*inside-outside*”, “*to-and-fro families*” and so on. We are informed in our daily lives. We have become comfortable with concepts like multiculturalism, hybridity and transnationalism – all concepts long familiar in the Caribbean if under different labelling. The language of those critiques from over half a century ago has changed, but the themes remain familiar. In Mittelholzer’s time opinion in the West Indies was certainly divided between those who believed the role of the artist in the third world was to engage with universal concerns whilst others argued that the focus should be inward and regional, aimed at West Indian-ness. In a world where migration has since exploded, the positive potential contained in Williams’ approaches to the theme of difference have a continuing contemporary relevance in

a global context, both in the world of art and in society at large, faced as we are with the challenging issues of multiculturalism. They offer an important alternative view of the political challenges of social diversity.

The artist may well have multiple identity roots. Current critical vocabulary has shifted the focus and now allows the artist to inhabit the ground with less contention. The artist has the ability to be Caribbean and international. To answer my previous question, the artist may indeed be local, regional, metropolitan or international.

Writing in 'Art and Society' Williams had anticipated that "*difference*" was likely to be qualified by technology; that technology would be today's most urgent acculturant; that ownership of technology would determine new relationships for the artist and society. He foresaw that the Third World artist would "*find new relationships to society, by means of technology undreamt of [...]*" This statement is prescient, almost prophetic, given that in 1973 he had no knowledge of the internet and the explosion of new technologies that was to occur.

It is certainly the case that modern identities and aspirations are shaped by influences which extend beyond national, ethnic or religious boundaries. We might reference the phenomenon of the "*Colour Revolution*" or the global influence of the Facebook, Blog and Twitter cultures on the Web. Global technologies are having positive transformative effects that completely overarch the confines of the nation state.

Globalization itself is seen to promote knowledge and understanding, and to promote universal aims and common values through economic cooperation in the consumer culture. It has expanded into the periphery. Globalization affects our world here at the periphery as effectively as it does at the centre. Its trends and currents affect both small and large nation states. Driven by the momentum of globalization the old boundaries of identity, culture and nationhood are fragmenting. Globalization challenges national identity; challenges static notions of culture; challenges static concepts of self; and it transcends ethnicity. Globalization has become a compelling, promising concept. Its promise is that greater culture contact makes conflict less likely.

Diversity is 'cool' in the modern arena of art: not only cool but expected. International audiences expect more nuance, a less linear sense of history and culture, and welcome serendipitous discoveries and juxtapositions. This is nowhere more readily demonstrated than through the languages of art. Art has credibility and influence and it is a transformative influence.

The last half century has seen that the shape of migration – so much a part of the history and characteristic of the region – is open to change. Diversity has spread, particularly at street level in the metropolitan centres. Despite multicultural tensions, the transformative process makes a great contribution to cultural life – not just economically, but in its challenge to humanity. It has the capacity of being a transformative process for both 'natives' and migrants. It can be transformative both in creating new allegiances within the "to-and-fro" cultures of the Caribbean and in creating an arena for new types of exchanges in which the local becomes global and *vice versa*. It is a diversity that is evolving independently of social, religious, political and cultural policies and interventions. From this viewpoint, globalization is presented as a positive and we are drawn towards these compelling narratives and compelling principles which seem to be in accord with the human moral agenda implicit in our daily lives – the core values we share as human beings. Some believe globalization and the internationalising process to be the most positive arena in which to present art.

The artist is no longer adrift, isolated in a far-flung periphery. The argument suggests that the arts have the opportunity to evolve in a kinetic framework wholly different from that which supports the art system of the bourgeois world, allowing an art of wider reference. This view can be supported where we see great public commissions in art thrown open to international participation. International Fairs, regional Biennials and on-line spaces are broadening participation – these are examples of the new dynamics. And we can look to the global peer-group for the timeless arguments, the winning arguments of our time. There is more interconnectedness, there are more efficient networks, more fluent technologies providing new spaces and stimulating

opportunities to pursue on-going challenges and relationships between small and large nations.

The counter-argument might be that globalization has the power to fragment identities. In a world of multiple cultures we are increasingly identified by metropolitan “*credentials*” which focus on commonalities; on those features that are essentially the same everywhere. Does globalization imply a diminished national identity in its presumptuous, paternalistic emphasis on universality and commonality? This counter-argument suggests that it challenges artistic autonomy, kills all critical sense and the capacity to think for oneself. It is seen to promote superficial commercial art commodities which subsume national identity in the name of universal modernity. Some point to the asymmetrical power relationships of rich–poor, small–large, in which the manipulation of people’s minds is crushing yet insidious.

Some believe the nation state is threatened. Some believe the nation state to be a fabrication – of myth-making, artificial tradition, institutions and arts patronage coupled to nationalist doctrines: a resilient tangle in need of unpicking. Paradoxically, within the global realms of art we have been witnessing simultaneously a dramatic and fresh emphasis on the specificity of cultural and historical contexts in theories of art which seek to accommodate both holism *and* individualism. The trend is social and political as well as cultural. The self-conscious modern society emphasises the value of difference alongside the competing emphasis of commonality and we see that both have now become presented as compatible rather than opposed.

Reports of the death of national differences in the face of globalization are perhaps exaggerated. The attention afforded to modern identities, to authentic self-expression, has become a positive feature of the modern context of art production and reception: an art that maps personal reality in a globalized world. This is evident in all areas of the arts.

The world has grown smaller. The world has opened up. Many more people are able to create their own degree of mobility. There are more actors on the world stage, more choices. More people have more in common. We increasingly find we share a common background of mixed ancestral

affiliations as social categories merge. The time and place of societies become closer, and relative differences take on fewer hierarchical dimensions. We require open, flexible responses to the reality of today's world.

*Memorabilia II* can be identified historically as a product of a revolution that seeks to break the cycle of the type of intolerance that focuses on racial and religious factions and which cynically relies on a negative focus to obscure contradictions in ideology. The function of *Memorabilia II* is to create in the onlooker reflections of solidarity with the "national brother". It is a message that remains current and urgent to the challenges to authoritarian systems of the kinds based in long-held perceptions of natural hierarchies amongst human beings; in systems predicated on superiority and difference.

Returning once more to *Memorabilia II*, the artist has explored symbols and ideas that make up a nation's identity through images surrounding my third theme, that of Heritage. We see the waving flag of Guyana's independence. There is a reminder of the architectural heritage, and we can recall Williams' role in the protection of the built environment of Guyana: the mosques, the temples, the churches and the vernacular architecture. The recent historical narrative of the modern nation-state is symbolically laid out against a backdrop of the forest. The forest can then be seen to symbolise the prehistoric cultures of the Guyanese hinterland and the artist's role in foregrounding the human and community capital of its founding peoples. We should never lose sight of the fact that Williams' ability to empathise as an artist lay at the heart of his vision. He could move from one disciplinary regime to another with little apparent difficulty. He broke open codes from the Rupununi rock engravings precisely because he could "see" the answers to the puzzles they held. It was an approach characterised by an instinctive ability to see, to shape and to formulate abstract ideas.

In presenting his theories on national cultural development Williams took the long view. He regarded it as self-evident that any future for Guyana was dependent on a thorough understanding of its own past. This could only be achieved through establishing an open-eyed relationship with that past.

He believed this was necessary to equip the nation with knowledge of *all* its inhabitants in order that they might co-exist. His vision is remarkable for the breadth of its survey and its range; remarkable in its prophecy and validity and in its comprehensive philosophy. It is the vision that underpins his work as an active cultural agent and it is also the vision that underpins his pioneering work *Prehistoric Guiana*.

The theories contained in *Prehistoric Guiana* are based on first-hand experience of living with the Akawaio, Karinya, Arawak and other peoples over some thirty years. They point to the potential of a great flexibility and diversity in approaches to living, celebrated in the positive human qualities he identified as contributing to the success of Guyana's founding peoples – cooperative endeavour, egalitarian attitudes, communal pride and self-sufficiency. The subtext of *Prehistoric Guiana* suggests the theoretical possibility of a positive future for all the peoples of Guyana, predicated on the imprint of the country's past. His hope for the future of the nation lay in acceptance by all Guyanese of a filialistic relationship to this common South American heritage. It is a theory that addresses the demise at the heart of the cultural schism which Williams had elucidated earlier in his Mittelholzer Lectures when he wrote: "*Collectively we are a people without a myth, without the unified consciousness of the indwelling of a common ancestor, without any charter whatsoever for a destiny.*" In fore-grounding Amerindian heritage as national cultural heritage Williams signals a means of strengthening the human capital and the social capability of the nation through acknowledgement of what he refers to as the nation's "*spiritual ancestors*". It was typical of Williams' approach that he should place his argument at the vanguard of contemporary controversy, namely the debate that lies at the heart of the complexity of New World identities.

The theories contained in *Prehistoric Guiana* suggest a possible alternative blueprint for a present-day multiculturalism. The distinctive principles of Amerindian social existence present a successful model offering an alternative to the divisive elements of racial essentialism. He offers a coherent and attractive possibility which informs a continuing contemporary conversation in academic scholarship and offers a radical political alternative.

Furthermore, the theories contained in *Prehistoric Guiana* inform the controversies at the heart of global perspectives on the management of tropical forest environments. The prophets are calling for action on sustainability. The dilemma of continuous growth has been challenged as a model which cannot be sustained. *Prehistoric Guiana* examines models of living in equilibrium with the finite resources of the forest. In today's world the issues commanding international policy agendas are those that challenge our capability for living within the finite resources of the whole planet. All governments are called upon to respect ecological limits and to protect resources and ecosystems.

There is no doubt we live in a complex and unstable environment. In an age when we may be witnessing a post-capitalist transition, a world of increasing diversity, of multiple perspectives, where multiple forces are interacting, we will all require a greater flexibility of mind, of skills, of understanding, of acceptance. Alternatives and new models have been presented which require the unravelling of tightly-held traditional models.

Finally, Williams recognised that it was at street level that the most optimistic view is possible. *Memorabilia II* acknowledges the cooperative endeavour and contribution of all Guyana's peoples. People on the ground make change. The spirit of the times always seeks new ways of communicating with others. Governments don't work by government alone. It is on the ground where a nation's relations can be felt; where the social players collide in the market place; where the bonds of common material interest are evident; where operational tolerance assures solidarity. Williams' native Guyana was and remains a microcosm: an intimate stage on which are played out many of the familiar paradoxes significant to national cultural debates within the global context. On this stage walks Guyana man. And of him, Williams wrote: "*Beneath this sun which is all the colour of the world walks the man who is all the races of the earth. His home the world.*"

#### FOOTNOTES:

<sup>1</sup> Photograph by courtesy of Castellani House.

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**Fourteenth Series, 2012**

**Guyanese Literature, Magic  
Realism and the South American  
Connection**

*Pauline Melville*



The National Museum of Guyana in Georgetown has one feature that is possibly unique in the worldwide panoply of national museums. Amidst the historical, technological, archaeological and geological specimens on – samples of native jasper, implements used in the slave trade, bottles from ships bringing indentured labour, Amerindian feathered headdresses and all the numerous artefacts that trace the changes, arrivals and developments in Guyanese history – amidst all this, there exists in the museum, a carefully cordoned-off, mysteriously empty space. This space is specifically set aside for the nation's spirits and ghosts. What other national museum in the world has been considerate enough to leave a space for its ghosts – a place for the enigmatic "*other*"?

Unsurprisingly, the space is and always has remained empty. The spirits decline to show up. Thirty-odd years ago that space consisted of a small plinth covered in plush red fabric, partitioned off with gold tasselled ropes as if the spirits were secret royalty. On the back wall hung separate plaques with detailed sociological descriptions of each spirit itemising its habitat, appearance, customary behaviour and even dietary preferences. Bakoo apparently likes bananas and milk. Moongazer straddles crossroads. And in that descriptive labelling we see the attempt of the rational, with its orderly classifications and categorisations to contain or even overpower the magical – the uneasy coexistence of post-enlightenment social sciences and ancient supernatural beliefs; the tension between rationalism and imagination.

Recently, in the museum, that space has become less prominent, more functional. It has shrunk. The gold tasselled ropes have gone, as if rationalism itself were trying to push such a space out of the way and diminish it. This would be a shame, because it is one of the areas where the imagination of Guyanese writers resides.

This lecture will concentrate on some of the specifically South American elements in Guyanese fiction and then look at the literary movement of magic realism that spread through Latin America in the second half of the twentieth century and see whether or not it affected Guyanese writing.

## PHYSICAL LANDSCAPE

For Guyanese literature to be studied in the context of South America is unusual. The imposition of the English language on all the various peoples of Guyana means that we are more accustomed to studying and analysing our literature in terms of Anglophone traditions and influences, whether they be European, North American or Caribbean, or we look back to Africa or the Indian subcontinent or China for inspiration. The tendency is for the majority of the population, living on the coast, to look outwards across the sea rather than to look over their shoulder and compare their literature with writings and mythologies from the vast continent behind them.

However, one of the first and abiding features that marks Guyana out as a continental rather than an island environment is the landscape. In common with the rest of South America, Guyana has one of the great primary landscapes of the world: rainforest, savannahs, mountains, ancient swamplands, great rivers. Guyanese literature contains influences related to this landscape and to its original inhabitants. To understand why, it is necessary to consider South America at a time before it was divided into colonies by the European powers and think of the land without those historical impositions, before colonialism and nationalism and all the other 'isms'.

There is a relevant passage in the work of Chilean poet Pablo Neruda, writing from the other side of the continent where the snow-covered spine of the Andes and the Altiplano lunar deserts inspire the literature. In his poem '**Demasiados nombres**' ('**Too Many Names**'), Neruda complains about the division of this continent into separate countries and takes us back to pre-history. He says:

They have spoken to me of Venezuelas,  
Of Chiles and Paraguays;  
I have no idea what they are saying  
I know only the skin of the earth  
And I know it has no name.

The "*skin of the earth*", this vast primordial landscape pervades the consciousness of most Guyanese writers. Even coastlanders, whose experience is more confined to urban settings, are aware of the elemental forces of the hinterland encroaching upon them. Poets are traditionally close to nature. Guyanese poets are no exception and they share this closeness to nature with poets from the rest of South America such as Pablo Neruda or the Peruvian poet Caesar Vallejo.

To pick one or two Guyanese examples at random we have A. J. Seymour's *Kaie*, his poetic legend of Kaieteur Falls. Ian McDonald's work is steeped in the Guyanese landscape, as is the work of Mark McWatt. Martin Carter, possibly the greatest of Guyanese poets, produced work that was elliptical, metaphysical and political but he never forgot the difference in scale between a breathtaking primeval landscape and its relatively insignificant human inhabitants. In one of his later poems Carter expresses this positioning of human beings somewhere between the insects and the forest:

Here is where  
I am, in a great geometry, between  
a raft of ants and the green sight  
of the freedom of a tree....

In a continent where geography continually threatens to triumph over history there is a story, possibly apocryphal, about Martin Carter's last words. On his deathbed, combining humour, gravitas and prophecy, he is supposed to have said: "*Swamp want 'e land back*" as if the whole of the human endeavour would eventually be swallowed up by the elemental forces of nature surrounding us. Indeed, awareness of this hinterland seems to have produced a particularly metaphysical cast of mind in Guyanese writers such as Carter and Wilson Harris.

It is not only the poets. Guyanese novelists also make effective use of the physical landscape of the interior. Wilson Harris's novel *Heartland*, for instance, opens with a magnificent description of daybreak on one of Guyana's great rivers. Edgar Mittelholzer, in whose honour this lecture is given, frequently depicted the bush as a sinister and threatening environment, particularly in his novel *My Bones and My Flute*. In relation to the forces of nature, Mittelholzer himself indicated that climate and weather were always among the main protagonists in his work. Climate, heat and violent tropical storms provided atmosphere and often a metaphor for extremism in his novels. One of his books is even called *The Weather Family*.

Yet, however poetic these descriptions of nature may be, they still belong to the strand of realism in Guyanese literature. To understand some of the metaphysical or supernatural element in Guyanese narrative it is necessary to consider the pre-Columbian history of the continent often ignored by literary critics and scholars.

### THE ECHO OF THE FLUTE

According to Dr Odeen Ishmael, the first traces of Amerindian existence in South America are eleven thousand years old. Throughout that period there have been innumerable indigenous peoples and languages whose customs and myths have been passed down (apart from petroglyphs) through the oral tradition. It is fascinating to see how those influences reappear in Guyanese literature.

Of course there are the place names, still existing in the Caribbean and South America. Demerara derives from the Arawak word *Malali* meaning "fast-running stream", which the Dutch called *De Malali*. Berbice is from an Arawak word *Beribishi*, a type of banana. The name Cuba comes from the Arawak word *tacouba* – the hard-wood tree trunk laid across a stream for passage. We still retain for everyday use words such as "hammock" or "canoe". But of particular interest is the way that echoes of ancient, generic indigenous myths and customs suddenly reappear in Guyanese literature.

Let us take Mittelholzer's novel *My Bones and My Flute*.

Throughout South America there are indigenous folk-tales and customs concerning the flute. For instance, there is a Warao narrative (Wilbert, 1970) in which a woman plays a bamboo flute as magical protection against a jaguar, who later turns into a man. Of particular interest is the bone-flute.

Bone flutes are among the oldest known deliberately made musical instruments. Some are made from animal bones. Arawak legends point to the Spirits of the Forest as the introducers among them of the flute made from the femoral bone of animals. The flute provides a link with both animals and spirits of the forest. In one Arawak story, a husband has been killed in a massacre. His wife hears the sound of a flute coming closer and closer to the house. She thinks he has survived the massacre but he has indeed died and the sound of the flute is just his spirit trying to get back home.

Stories of both Macusi and Warao origin include the flute as a particularly magical force that in rituals would be played to dispel evil spirits and make sure a certain area remained sacred. The Caribs made human bone-flutes from their enemies' bones, believing it possible to communicate with the spirits of their enemies and learn what they were thinking, through these relics invested with their essence. George Mentore, in a previous Mittelholzer lecture, talked of the Waiwai flute, known among the Waiwai as the transporter of mystical death.

Mittelholzer's novel *My Bones and My Flute* is based on the real history of the eighteenth-century Berbice slave uprising and concerns the Guyanese jumbie figure – Dutchman – who haunts those who disturb his grave or do not give his bones proper burial. The original folk-tale about the Dutchman does not traditionally involve a flute. But from nowhere the flute motif appears in this novel to terrifying effect. It is the most hair-raising and powerful element of the book. Mittelholzer has combined a folk-figure from the colonial period, the Dutchman, with one of the most ancient, truly South American indigenous elements of myth and ritual. Characters in the book hear a flute playing. It comes closer and closer, and finally drags them to their death in the river, leaving a brand of flute marks on the body. Some people have said that Mittelholzer, a Europhile, took this element of his

story from Mozart's opera *The Magic Flute*. But that opera relays a satirical, light-hearted story with none of the horror that infuses the novel. Mittelholzer's flute retains a ghastly power. It is too late now to discover how he heard about the flute. Maybe it was just that vague intuition that sometimes works on an author's imagination. Who knows the mysterious pathways by which these ancient stories are spread and through what means they infiltrate our literature?

This reappearance of the flute in Guyanese literature is interesting. Wilson Harris, one of the great Guyanese novelists and one of the few novelists to have spent time in the interior, refers repeatedly to the Macusi bone flute or a mythical bone-flute bridge stretching from the Mayan civilisation of Central America to the Guiana Highlands. In essays, he states his belief that Guyana is contained in a "fragile host consciousness" barely discernible, which is Amerindian and thus profoundly South American. His essay 'The Schizophrenic Sea' talks of the bone-flute as a confessional organ involved in, yet subtly repudiating, the evil bias of conquest that afflicted humanity. In his work he frequently explores cross-culturalism through the bone-flute metaphor. Traces of the bone flute occur in 'The Sleepers of Roraima' and in the prologue to *The Guyana Quartet*.

The faint echo of the flute also appears unexpectedly in the work of Guyanese poet Mahadai Das. She had left Guyana and was living in Chicago when she produced a volume of poetry entitled *Bones*. In one poem called '**Flute**' she says:

My body's a hallowed  
stick of bone, a flute  
through which you pipe  
your melody.

In a different cross-cultural parallel, Wilson Harris introduces the Amerindian figure of Kanaima, an enigmatic, tricksterish figure of revenge into his novel *The Four Banks of the River of Space*. And there is another important aspect of Harris's work that shows influences from Central and South America and that can make his work challenging to the reader. It is his way of dealing with time and space. Writings from the

ancient Mayan civilisation of Central America reveal a notion of time and space entirely different from traditional Western thought. The past and future merge together and are not necessarily differentiated. Harris acknowledges these influences. He plays with chronology in a way that can prove difficult for readers more used to a linear sense of time. The linguist Benjamin Lee Whorf in his book *Language, Thought and Reality* analyses the relationship of the Hopi Indian language of North America to the language of the Mayan Indians. He found that the structure of these languages was better suited than the English language to certain scientific concepts – including differing concepts of time and space, making the Hopi language structurally more in tune with Einstein's theories of relativity. Hints of these differences are found in the work of Wilson Harris and it is a reminder to us to study and preserve the Amerindian languages of Guyana.

It is through such influences, often faint echoes or shadows, that we can place Guyanese literature in its South American context, distinguishing it from the rest of the Anglophone Caribbean's "island" literature.

One point is important to make. There are many children's versions of these folk stories. *Amilavaca* by Jan Carew is one. These are often delightful and frightening, as children's stories should be. However, it is a great mistake to infantilise this literature, as if it were only suitable for children and should be confined to them. When used in adult literature, as with Harris, Mittelholzer, or Mario de Andrade and Darcy Ribeiro from Brazil, such influences hold an undeniable power, just as there is power to be gained from ancient Homeric myths in works such as James Joyce's *Ulysses*. These myths are an adult business.

Eduardo Galeano from Uruguay criticises this reductionist attitude, this tendency to infantilise local literature and creativity throughout South America. In a passage from *The Nobodies* he says: "*The nobodies: the no-ones who don't speak languages, but dialects. Who don't have religions, but superstitions. Who don't create art, but handicrafts. Who don't have culture, but folklore. Who are not human beings, but human resources.*" It is time to stop demeaning them.

Magic realism was the major literary movement that had its genesis in Latin America in the second half of the twentieth century. It is very important to define the genre clearly and then to see whether or not this movement has had any effect on Guyanese literature and which writers might be included in its category.

The term magic realism comes from the original Spanish phrase *lo real maravilloso*, the correct translation of which is "the marvels of reality". Significantly, the first person to have developed a theory of *lo real maravilloso* in this hemisphere seems to have been the Cuban writer Alejo Carpentier. Well, he is known as Cuban, although he was born in Switzerland, of Russian and French parentage. He was raised in Cuba and this is a fluid region that will absorb what it likes and reject what it does not without too particular a regard for bureaucratic classifications. Similarly, Guyanese poet Ian McDonald was born outside Guyana with parentage from elsewhere. But he has spent much of his life here and we like him, so he claims us and we claim him. Already boundaries have become fluid.

Guyana, of course, has its own extraordinary reality. It hangs in a sort of limbo. It is South American while not being part of Latin America. Nor is it one of the Caribbean islands. It is a country with a shifting, floating, ever-changing cultural base, difficult to pin down. Jan Carew, another major Guyanese novelist, has said that the Guyanese mind is shaped by a "mosaic of cultural fragments – Amerindian, African, European and Asian". There is a wealth of this material – a treasure trove for any Guyanese writer; but however much Guyanese writers incorporate into their work elements of folklore, traditional magic and myth, this is not strictly what magic realism means.

Carpentier's notion was that the history and the geography of South America are both so extreme as to appear fictional or even magical to outsiders. Thus, South America is a region where the line between magic and reality is blurred. It was in the prologue to his novel *The Kingdom of this World*, a novel of the Haitian Revolution (1949) that Carpentier laid out his philosophy of magic realism and said: "But what is the history of Latin America but a chronicle of magical realism?"

Colombian novelist Gabriel García Márquez is probably the best-known exponent of the magical realist novel in South America. He points to some of the extraordinary but real historical events that, for him, typify a history that appears so extreme as to be fictional. He gives the following examples:

Papa Doc from Haiti had all the black dogs in the country put down, believing that one of his enemies, afraid of being taken prisoner and murdered, had turned himself into a black dog. In the 1930s, Maximiliano Martínez of El Salvador once had the country's street lighting covered in red paper to combat an epidemic of measles and invented a pendulum to hang over his food in case the food was poisoned.

In 1814, Dr Francia, president of Paraguay forbade Spaniards to marry each other and decreed that they should only marry 'Indians, blacks or mulattos'.

Juan Vicente Gómez, president of Venezuela, used to have his death announced and then come back to life (as it were) in order to keep the population on their toes.

Márquez himself says that, even when his imagery is far-fetched, it is based on reality, something that he has seen or heard. He maintains that *"there is not a single line in my novels that is not based on reality"*. He gives as an example an event in the south of Argentina. Winds from the South Pole swept a whole circus away and the next day fishermen caught the bodies of lions and giraffes in their nets. There might be amazing events in his novels but they are triggered by an event in reality.

Do we have any parallels in Guyana? Of course we do. Take the hassar fish or the flat-headed catfish in some of our rivers and creeks. Some species of hassar in the dry season bury themselves in the mud. The flat-head hassar marches overland in search of water, travelling for a whole night in its search. They can live for many hours out of the water, even when exposed to the sun's rays. They project themselves forward on their bony arms by the elastic spring of their tail; their progress is nearly as fast as a man can walk. We have fish that walk. Back in Europe, that sounds like a fantasy. But it's true. By the way, in the Wapisiana language, the word *kadakob* for big-mouthed catfish is sometimes used to mean *"politician"*, but that is another story.

Yet Guyanese novelists have, in the main, ignored all this and adhered to the style of social realism. Why does Guyanese literature not avail itself of the opportunities provided by the marvels of reality, plenty of which abound within the country's borders?

There are, it seems to me, two main reasons for this. The chasm existing between Guyanese literature and literature from the rest of South America is primarily that of language. There was surprisingly little contact between Anglophone literature and Latin American literature with its voracious cross-cultural appetite. Some colonies leaned towards more racial mixture and some adhered to segregation. Jorge Amado, for instance, reflects the image of an optimistic *mestizo* Brazilian culture. He moved easily between worlds of spirit and material life as in his novel *Dona Flor and Her Two Husbands* – one of whom happens to be a ghost. Guyana is isolated in respect of being the only English-speaking country on the continent. The other countries (with the exception of Suriname and French Guiana) have languages derived from the Iberian peninsula and are thus more easily permeable to each other's literature. Comparatively few Guyanese writers have been exposed to Latin American literature, despite the availability of good translations.

The second reason relates to the difference in colonial histories. Many of the Latin American colonies achieved independence a century and a half before Guyana, and therefore gained a certain maturity in national expression through literature much earlier than Guyana – although even the fine Argentinean writer Jorge Luis Borges complained of feeling inferior in relation to the European canon of literature. Guyana was relatively late in developing any confidence in its native literature.

In fact, literary fiction native to Guyana can scarcely be said to have existed before Edgar Mittelholzer burst onto the scene with his ground-breaking work. There were two earlier novels but these were written by English-born men visiting what was then British Guiana. The first was *Lutchmee and Dilloo*, written in 1877, and the second was *In Guiana Wilds*, written in 1899. Mittelholzer can reasonably be said to be the first native-born writer to emerge from British Guiana. What were

his influences? Mittelholzer himself admits that some of his primary influences were the “*penny dreadfuls*” from North America, violent thrillers and bodice-rippers. English language and literature of all genres were his primary influences. English literature itself has a strong tradition of social realism dating from the nineteenth century. Mittelholzer adhered mainly to this social and historical realism, even if his style was somewhat florid. *My Bones and My Flute* was an exception.

The distinguished Guyanese novelist Roy Heath stuck firmly to the social realist tradition. He believed that the novelist has a responsibility to depict the conditions that shape the lives of those around him. He ended his 1983 Mittelholzer lecture by saying:

I have indicated that the sources of fiction reside mainly in the socioeconomic condition and that the individual experience, while capable of imbuing a work with numinous quality, takes its direction and broader vision from the socioeconomic condition. In my view any forecast regarding the direction of fiction will have to take the above into account.

It is undoubtedly true that the social realist history of Guyana, with its powerful facts of slavery, indentured labour, ethnic suppressions, independence struggles and post-colonial developments, will produce a literature in that same tradition. Contemporary writers such as Rooplall Monar, Jan Lo Shinebourne, Oonya Kempadoo, Fred D’Aguiar, Grace Nichols, Ruel Johnson and David Dabydeen have all brought to the fore the various histories, realities and living conditions peculiar to their own ethnic backgrounds. Writers have a responsibility to put their pens to the service of struggles they see being carried on around them in daily life or in the broader political perspective. Martin Carter in his poetry illuminated crucial points of Guyana’s political and social history as, in his own way, did Mittelholzer with his *Kaywana* Trilogy.

But on enquiring into what literature has influenced Guyanese writers, it seems that very few have been influenced

by other South American writers. Guyanese writers will more often have links to English literature and Anglophone writers from the Caribbean islands such as George Lamming, Samuel Selvon and Andrew Salkey, although Martin Carter acknowledges the influence of Peruvian poet Caesar Vallejo and dedicated work to him. Carter no doubt found a point of union with Vallejo's radical political perspectives. Other South American writers such as Márquez, Machado de Assis, Borges, Jorge Amado, Mario Vargas Llosa, Julio Cortazar, Juan Gabriel Vasquez seem to have left no mark on Guyanese literature.

In conversation, Wilson Harris has said that he was first influenced by Homer and the literature of ancient Greece. He says that in his work there is both an overground and an underground life, reflecting a similar division between the over-world and underworld of ancient Greek mythology. Early on, Harris was also influenced by the German novelist Thomas Mann. Gradually, and quite independently, he found his own writing "*voice*". He has read very little other South American literature but the scholar Martin Seymour Smith points to an intuitive parallel between Wilson Harris and Miguel Angel Asturias from Guatemala. Harris feels that he is not in tune with the conventional novel and says that the conventional, social realistic novel, does not help Guyana to understand itself. He maintains that he is a "*quantum writer*" and explains this by giving the example of a quantum bullet that is fired once but leaves two holes. He plays with time and shows an indigenous Mayan Indian influence in merging the past and the future.

This sort of work is perhaps what Roy Heath means when he refers to the experimental novel. Harris weaves into his work concepts from all sorts of sources, including contemporary particle physics. Drawing on mythology and legend does not necessarily mean that a work belongs to the magical realist genre. When asked if he considered himself to be a magic realist writer, Harris replied that he was not sure what it meant but he slightly preferred the term magic realist to the term experimental.

Roy Heath went on to say in his 1983 lecture:

Does experimental fiction give us a clue to the new directions of Guyanese literature or will the bias be in favour of the fiction of Gabriel Marquez's magical realism? I have no idea, for if the sources of art are identifiable its future is elusive.

Sadly Roy Heath is now dead but there is no doubt that when he raised this question about the future of Guyanese literature he had Wilson Harris in mind as the proponent of an experimental fiction. But perhaps all such labelling is invidious and restrictive to a writer. Harris's work defies easy categorisation. He is a visionary. In many ways the work is more bold and innovative than magical realism.

Readers often fail to understand and underestimate the degree to which writers are shaped by what they themselves have read. Most writers are as much influenced by what they have read as how they have lived. The poet John Agard, raised in Guyana, cites Eastern European poets and Sufi poets as major influences on his work. Wilson Harris cites Homer as his main early influence. Gabriel García Márquez says that the British writer Graham Greene taught him how to write about his own Caribbean landscape and that he was influenced by Kafka and Virginia Woolf. The writers' interior landscape is layered with experiences, memories, dreams and, crucially, the literature that he or she has read or heard.

The Spanish writer Javier Cercas, talking of influences, describes the position of a writer as being like that of a chariot-driver with a rein in each hand: the literature of your own language in one hand and universal literature in the other. The resulting work is the balanced control of both.

To conclude, it would be fair to say that Guyanese literature has not been greatly influenced by the magical realist movement that spread through other parts of South America. Maybe that is yet to come. On the other hand, each successive generation tends to rebel against the style of the previous generation. So maybe Guyanese writers will leapfrog that phase. Whatever is the case, we need many more writers. Up-and-coming Guyanese writers should be prepared to call on any source that inspires them and need to be aware of the wealth of literature produced in the other countries of the South American continent.

In the end it must be remembered that all fine literature transcends the boundaries of nationality and speaks to the greater nation of humanity. Literature should illuminate the human condition wherever it is set. It is the reader who writes half the book, since every reader brings his or her own experiences and imaginative interpretation to the table.

Every writer will tell you that to live in the world of the imagination and create work from it is a great privilege and a thrill. The British writer Martin Amis was once addressing an audience much like this one. Trying to convey his enthusiasm and passion for his work he suddenly looked up and said: *"I don't know how you can all bear NOT to be novelists."* It is a wonderful profession. On that note, this lecture will finish.

**Fifteenth Series, 2013**

**Adventures in Form: 'Outsider'  
Fiction in the Caribbean**

*Jane Bryce*



One of the most exciting things about literature is the way earlier texts, novels written forty or fifty years ago, are rediscovered or re-read in the light of new developments in writing and reading. Writing, in other words, is not a once for all time act that closes with the final full stop, and nor is reading a fixed or stable single act of passive reception. Reading is fluid, adaptive, processual and constantly changing according to the needs of the times. An example of this is the way a foundational text of African literature, Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, which was received on publication in 1958 as the defining expose of colonial encounter (the story of the arrival of the white man in Africa, dramatizing the impact of Christianity and colonial administration on a village in eastern Nigeria and on one man, Okonkwo, who resists change and falls victim to it), has acquired new levels of meaning with successive re-readings. Linguists fluent in Igbo, Achebe's first language, have read it as an act of translation from Igbo into English, bringing to light the cultural and philosophical resonances, muted in English, that are implicit in an Igbo world view. In the 1980s, feminist scholars concerned with the invisibility of women in canonical writing, read the text as a narrative of the contest between Igbo and colonial patriarchies in which women were relegated to minor roles. In contrast, a deconstructive or semiotic reading points out the way Achebe balances masculine and feminine voices in the novel, so that though women as characters may be constrained by the social relations of the time, feminine storytelling and the power and words of the female priestess, speak back strongly to masculine words and power.

The canon, in other words, is always under pressure, and books which are considered important at one time or in one way may shift their position as new preoccupations come into view. In the light of a colonial education that promoted the English canon as *the* measure of literary excellence, the work

of West Indian literary critics in the 20<sup>th</sup> century was to establish the credentials of a West Indian canon that could hold its own on the world stage. This major undertaking, which went hand-in-hand with nationalism and the establishment of a post-colonial identity, succeeded in identifying and projecting writers who are now recognized as essential to the West Indian sense of self – from Wilson Harris to George Lamming, Brathwaite to Walcott, Mittelholzer to Selvon and Naipaul – followed some twenty years later by a wave of women writers including Olive Senior, Pauline Melville, Zee Edgell, Merle Hodge and Jamaica Kincaid. Essential as it was, however, the process of canonisation has inevitably privileged certain kinds of texts and authors, and overlooked or marginalized others. For example, although a strain of what is now termed ‘speculative fiction’ – fiction that plays with the paranormal and reimagines reality – has always been a feature of West Indian writing, such writing has tended to be less valued in canonical terms than more conventionally realist novels. Novels which fall into recognizable generic categories, such as romance, have also suffered. Two early critics, Bruce King and Ken Ramchand, both accept the canonical status of H.G. de Lisser’s *Jane’s Career*, a realist novel, while dismissing his later ‘romantic’ novels, including *The White Witch of Rose Hall* with its use of the supernatural. ‘Conventionally realist’, therefore, signifies that realism is a way of writing, a literary mode, that uses a set of conventions to give the appearance of ‘reality’, and as such has often been confused with reality itself. Realism, in other words, is taken to have a relationship with *truth*, and therefore to be closer to *history*, to the way things ‘really’ happened, than non-realist modes. With some exceptions (Wilson Harris, for example), first generation West Indian writers, however much they tempered it with satire, humour and creole dialogue, stayed within the purview of realism and therefore arguably within the limitations of literary excellence as defined by the English canon.

This limitation is perfectly understandable in a context where there has never been an indigenous publishing industry of any note, and where most writers, to survive, have been forced to ‘escape’ and make their careers elsewhere.

Migration, physically forced or economically driven, has been a defining feature of WI culture from the settlement of the territories to today, to the extent that Jamaican-British cultural critic, Stuart Hall, describes the region as “*the signifier of migration itself - of travelling, voyaging and return as fate, as destiny; of the Antillean as the prototype of the modern or postmodern New World nomad*”. (Hall, 1994, 401) The relationship to ‘elsewhere’, which Stuart Hall describes as ‘doubleness’ (meaning the capacity for being more than thing at a time), characterises Caribbean cultures, which are “*born of travelling, rupture, appropriation, loss, exile.*”<sup>1</sup> There is however a problem, according to Hall, with the way we conceptualise culture, the models that we use to talk about it. There is, he says, “*a rift between the culture we are currently living in late modernity and how we tend to think about it*”, and how we tend to think about it is as a single homogenous entity, rather than as multiple, contradictory, disseminated or diasporised. The concept of the canon, similarly, is predicated on a particular idea of acceptability and exclusion. This has meant ‘popular’ generic forms like romance, detective and crime fiction, thrillers and science or speculative fiction have been relegated to the status of ‘outsider’ fiction, along with the newer category of ‘queer’ writing by authors like Thomas Glave or Shani Mootoo. But the canon is not a stable entity and its boundaries are under constant pressure from new forms which demand to be let in. The very fact that the West Indian canon emerged in a context of anti-colonial struggle and its texts engaged with creole forms, orality and folklore, renders it ‘unofficial’ in relation to the dominant tradition of the European realist or modernist novel, written for the most part in SE. Both elite and outsider fiction bear the marks of the constant interchange between the region and its satellite communities, whether in Brooklyn, Toronto or Brixton. The close relationship between these two traditions can be demonstrated through the history of publishing.

## PUBLISHING AND ROMANCE FICTION

The story of post-War migration to Britain and the role of the BBC programme, *Caribbean Voices*, in the emergence of

'serious' writers like Edgar Mittelholzer, George Lamming, Derek Walcott and Kamau Brathwaite is well known. In the 1940s and 50s, *Caribbean Voices* worked in tandem with the 'little magazines' which were the only other outlet for WI writing in the region itself – *Bim* in Barbados, *Kyk-Over-Al* in Guyana and *Focus* in Jamaica – in a selection process that laid the template for WI literary fiction. Jamaica is the only country which has consistently been able to support a publishing industry, from Pioneer Press in the 1950s to Kingston Publishers in the 1980s and Ian Randle today. A more recent example is Papillote Press in Dominica, a one-person outfit devoted to publishing local writers; because it occupies a highly specialized niche, it has been able to publish both literary stories by a writer like Phyllis Allfrey, and a collection of racy vignettes of local life, *Most Wanted: Short Stories from the Caribbean* by Christborne Shillingford (2007). Though such local presses do exist they are too small to compete in the multinational-dominated international arena. In the 1950s it was, therefore, through British publishers – Andre Deutsch, Faber and Faber, Heinemann and Longman – that WI writing first came to light. In the 1960s, smaller presses were established by emigrant West Indians in London, like Bogle l'Ouverture and New Beacon Books, followed by Leeds-based Peepal Tree Press from 1985 onwards.

The marginalization and exclusion of popular genres included non-conformist works like the historical romances of Jamaican, H.G. De Lisser, which were for a long time relegated to the sidelines. The growth of women's writing and feminist criticism, as well as the contemporary ascendancy of popular genres, have allowed us to re-read his romances, including *The White Witch of Rosehall* (1958) and *Arawak Girl* (1958), in a more appreciative way. For example, the centrality De Lisser gives to the feminine perspective and the mulatto or creole, as opposed to pan-African voice, prefigures the concerns of later writers. Above all, in his choice of historical romance as the vehicle for stories of doomed love affairs between people divided by race and class, he effectively subverts the convention of the happy ending and implicitly critiques the legacy of slavery. Compare this with a later historical romance, such as *Ti-Marie* (1988) by Trinidadian,

Valerie Belgrave, which envisages racial harmony and happy endings, and we can see how far ahead of his time De Lisser was.

The boundary between 'literary' and 'popular' is, as I have said, constantly being crossed, and 'literary' writers have used romance when it suited them. The Guyanese-British writer, Beryl Gilroy, opted for an elite, literary treatment in her fictionalization of true stories of inter-racial love under slavery in her novels, *Inkle and Yarico* (1996) and *Stedman and Joanna, a Love in Bondage: Dedicated Love in the Eighteenth Century* (1991). Other literary works like Olive Senior's short story 'Lily Lily' (in *Arrival of the Snakewoman*) and Joan Riley's novel *Romance* have raised questions about the relevance of romance, as a white, European, bourgeois form, to the Caribbean context where inherited colonial ideals of respectability and ladylike behaviour continue to police femininity. In 1993, Heinemann conformed to this tradition when it launched a romance series called Caribbean Caresses, overtly modelled on Mills & Boon and aimed at a youthful readership ('16 year olds upwards'), specifying that the novels should be linguistically simple and free of overt sexuality. In spite of this, the six novels that were published in this series did succeed in reshaping the romance formula for a local readership. They did this by introducing specifically Caribbean elements not found in the conventional romance formula, for example, the importance of the extended family, female-headed households and absent fathers, the struggle for survival and heroines who are working women with a strong sense of self-worth. Settings involve down-to-earth descriptions of city life and small apartments, rush hour and office, village and community, and the use of West Indian linguistic inflections. Though the heroine in these novels ends up marrying the romantic hero, gender relations are reconfigured and the romance formula is reworked to address the reality of a situation where women are required to be self-reliant and nuclear families are far from being the norm. Another romance novel, published by Heinemann in its Caribbean Writers Series - *Pick of the Crop* (2004), by Barbadian author, Nailah Folami Imoja - incorporates dialect into the dialogue and calypso lyrics into the

narrative; while Roslyn Carrington's New York-published romances – *A Thirst For Rain* (1999), *Every Bitter Thing Sweet* (2001) and *Candy Don't Come in Gray* (2002) - are effective in transposing the formula into a Port of Spain setting that calls to mind earlier barrack-yard fiction in its attention to realistic detail. The readers' discussion guide on her website draws attention to this emphasis:

In a typical West Indian society, the sense of community is of primary importance. A neighbourhood lives like a family; each household looks out for the other, and children are seen as a collective responsibility. To what extent is this true of the small community portrayed in *A Thirst For Rain*, and what influences do you think have caused this lifestyle to deteriorate? ([http://roslyncarrington.com/books/atfr\\_guide.htm](http://roslyncarrington.com/books/atfr_guide.htm))

Carrington's consciousness of form and how it can be used to question the status quo is shown by the way she calls the Trinidad romances her 'literary novels', to distinguish them from genre romances she writes under the pseudonym Simona Taylor for the African American market (published by Harlequin Kimani). Another novel that raises the question of 'literariness' is *Unburnable* (2006) by Antiguan Marie-Elena John, which combines 'popular' generic forms – romance, mystery, crime – with a 'literary' style, in a narrative set partly in Dominica and partly in the US. Published by Harper Collins imprint, Amistad, it has been embraced as a romance by African American readers at the same time as she is celebrated as a WI writer covering some of the same territory as Dominica's most famous writer, Jean Rhys – territory such as female trauma, madness and family secrets.

It is, unexpectedly, a male author, Colin Channer, who has done the most to challenge formulaic romantic stereotypes. Jamaican-born and Brooklyn-based, his titles' use of lines from Bob Marley lyrics: *Waiting in Vain* (1998) and *Satisfy my Soul* (2002), signals his belief that love has always been part of WI popular discourse. Meanwhile, by centering a male, rather than a female protagonist, Channer rewrites the script of Caribbean masculinity. His heroes are sensitive men who, by not being afraid to make themselves emotionally vulnerable,

challenge prevailing expectations of Caribbean manhood. Channer, who is closely identified with a reggae aesthetic, has moved into the 'official' literary world through university appointments as a creative writing teacher; with Jamaican poet, Kwame Dawes, he also co-founded the Calabash Literary Festival in Jamaica. He therefore exemplifies the crossover potential of popular fiction, the possibility of using it – by mixing genres, upsetting expectations - to attain 'serious' literary ends. By the publication of *Girl With The Golden Shoes* (2007), set in a fictional Caribbean Island in the 1940s, the American writer, Russell Banks, was comparing it to Hemingway and Faulkner. The novel is published by Akashic, which describes itself on-line as 'an independent New York publisher dedicated to the reverse-gentrification of the literary world', for which Channer has also edited the Jamaica collection in their Noir series from different parts of the world (2012). ([www.akashicbooks.com](http://www.akashicbooks.com)) This publisher's simultaneous promotion of black authors and deliberate self-distancing from 'official' or 'gentrified' literature parallels that of X-Press on the other side of the Atlantic (see below).

WI popular fiction publishing in general follows the pattern set by romance, so that while WI writers have engaged with a range of genres, including mystery, crime thriller and detective fiction, only a minority are published locally. But it's important to note that these genres didn't emerge out of nowhere and that they do have precursors in earlier WI writing. In 1930s and '40s Trinidad, 'barrack-yard' fiction took as its subject the urban working class living in the communal housing areas known as barrack-yards. Alfred Mendes's *Her Chinaman's Way* (1929), which dramatizes a violent crime as a result of the flouting of cultural and gender expectations and CLR James's *Minty Alley* (1936) are lively accounts of life in this milieu. Emigrant Trinidadian, Samuel Selvon's, *The Lonely Londoners* (1956) broke new ground with its humorous creolised narration of immigrant urban life in London; while Anthony Winkler's *The Lunatic* dramatises a Creole voice in a rural Jamaican setting (1987). None of these writers is regarded as 'popular', yet their location in urban or rural working class culture, a down-to-earth approach to poverty and marginality and their creole linguistic inflections link them in key ways to WI popular fiction.

## CARIBBEAN CRIME FICTION

In the 1980s, a number of novels appeared which reflected the dysfunctional politics and violence of the Manley era in Jamaica, showing crime as arising from a sense of post-Independence disillusion and disempowerment. Among these, some were published in Jamaica: *The Cuban-Jamaican Connection* (1983) by Lee Duffus, *No Medicine for Murder* (1983) by Jeanne Wilson, *Power Game* by Perry Henzell (1982), while *An East Wind in Paradise* (1981) by Carl Jackson (set in Barbados) and *We Shall not Die* (1983) by Clyde Knight were published in London and Michael Thelwell's *The Harder They Come* (1980) in New York. The last-named of these was distinctive in being a novelized version of the 1972 film by the same title, directed by Perry Henzell, in which a young man leaves the country for fame and fortune in Kingston – and gets it by becoming a notorious criminal. A key feature of the film is the avenue offered by popular music – reggae – for escape and dreams of a better life, and the way the recording industry, like politics, has been hijacked by unscrupulous power brokers. As in Africa, WI popular fiction is enmeshed in the popular culture which supplies the expressive forms of the economically dispossessed – Carnival, calypso, reggae, dancehall and other popular musical styles – and shares with them the element of social protest.

A subset of the crime novel, the police procedural, introduces the WI detective. The Jamaican-set novels of Jeanne Wilson, *No Medicine for Murder* (1983), *Model for Murder* (1993) and *Take Time for Murder* (1996), dramatise the difficulties of detection and crime prevention in a postcolonial context where power is still underwritten by old hierarchies, and the police are seen as 'Babylon' by the oppressed. When the detective is female the problems are compounded, and she often has to resort to performing her femininity in traditional ways, such as flirting with a senior officer. Trinidadian Michael Anthony's *The High Tide of Intrigue* (2002) starts by centering a female police officer who however soon fades into the background, as if prevented by patriarchal prejudice from sustaining a central role. Two New York-based writers, Victor Noel and Glenville Lovell, in different ways work with

the criminalization of blacks in the US and the resulting vulnerability of immigrant communities. While Noel's *The Four Two Precinct* (1986) and *Tears of the City* (2002) expose the racist stereotypes informing policing in New York, they also reinforce stereotypes of the Caribbean as an exotic destination for metropolitan visitors. In his novels, *Too Beautiful to Die* (2004) (which he describes as 'a very sexy noir') and *Love and Death in Brooklyn* (2004), Glenville Lovell's detective, Blades Overstreet, is, like his author, a diasporic figure, concerned with the insecurity of illegal immigrants from the Caribbean and their exploitation by criminal gangs. The fact that Blades is also bi-racial brings him directly into conflict with American attitudes to race, which he has to negotiate in his own family. Lovell, who is himself of Barbadian origin, is an example of diasporic doubleness, living and writing in the US while dedicating his books to "the Caribbean massive everywhere" (glenvillelovell.com).

A dominant motif of WI crime fiction is drugs, and the social problems that arise as a result of the position of the Caribbean as a transit point for drug smuggling between the cocaine producing countries of Latin America and the US, as well as a site of ganja production in its own right. Jeanne Wilson's *Model for Murder*, for example, deals with the two-way trade between Jamaica and the UK, of ganja in one direction and pethidine in the other. *The Caribbean Connection* by Peter Morgan (1995), set in Barbados, and *The High Tide of Intrigue*, set mainly in Grenada, are similarly centred on the drug trade in the Caribbean. It is, however, the London-based X-Press novels which most deeply inhabit the transnational world of Caribbean drug culture, a world from which the detective has been expunged and the criminal has become the uncontested central subject. If the crime thrillers of the 1980s explored the conditions for and response to social breakdown in Jamaica, these novels dramatize a world in which the drug dons have deserted Kingston for the larger metropolitan stages of London, Toronto and New York. Set up in 1992 by Black British writers Victor Headley, Dotun Adebayo and Steve Pope, X-Press novels confront the realities of metropolitan urban existence for a generation fifty years removed from the Empire Windrush and the first wave of immigration. The West

Indians who arrived in Britain in 1947 saw it as the Motherland and sought to make it their home. For the protagonists of the X-Press novels, there is no such thing as home, only money and the power it gives them over their environment. Uninvested in either Caribbean nationalism or the British social status quo, their stories are told in a British vernacular cocktail of Patois and Cockney. Where in *The Harder They Come* it was reggae that spoke to the urban underclass, its peace-and-love message has given way to the more aggressive macho masculinity of hiphop, ragga and dancehall. Victor Headley kicked off the genre with *Yardie* (1992), followed by a succession of novels with titles like *Excess* (1993) *Yush* (1994), *Fetish* (1995), etc. On its website, X-Press announces itself as “Europe’s biggest publisher of Black Books” (<http://www.xpress.co.uk>), with multiple imprints including reprints of classic WI novels in racy covers. It also features a line of erotic female-authored novels which are as far from romance as the crime novels from *The Harder They Come*. Moreover, the potential for popular fiction to spill into and influence other areas of popular culture is demonstrated by the making of Patrick Augustus’s *Baby Father Series* (2003) into a popular BBC television serial, and Dotun Adebayo’s *Sperm Bandits* (2002) into a docudrama.

## SPECULATIVE FICTION

A very different ‘outsider form’ that has gained a high degree of visibility in recent years is the sci-fi genre known as ‘speculative fiction’. Although it was first used some sixty years ago, it has emerged as a generic category in the early twenty-first century in response to the association of ‘science fiction’ with names like Kurt Vonnegut, Ray Bradbury, Arthur C. Clarke, Isaac Asimov, Jules Verne and H.G Wells. Although twentieth century women writers like Ursula le Guin, Margaret Atwood and Octavia Butler were writing futuristic fantasy before the term speculative fiction came into vogue, more broadly the advent of feminist and postcolonial writers has changed the perception of ‘science fiction’ from a form driven by masculine and First World preoccupations with technology, warfare and the conquering of other worlds (along

the lines of *Star Wars*), to a form that challenges and transforms these elements through the use of myth, magic and the supernatural. 'Speculative fiction' therefore considers what might happen if submerged, sublimated or suppressed stories, voices or philosophies became so dominant as to create a radically different world. Women writers like Trinidadian-Canadian Nalo Hopkinson and Barbadian Karen Lord (winner of the Frank Collymore Literary Endowment Award two years running for her first two speculative novels, and with a third one coming out) have published elaborately imagined novels of fantasy and future worlds. Hopkinson's first two novels, *Brown Girl in the Ring* (1997) set in a devastated futuristic Toronto, and *Midnight Robber* (2000), set in the fantasy world of Halfway Tree, revision traditional sci-fi iconography through the use of Caribbean myth and folklore. Karen Lord's *Redemption in Indigo* (2010) similarly draws on both Senegalese folk-tale and Caribbean myth in a self-reflexive work that plays gently with reader expectations. Her latest, *The Galaxy Game*, is described on sfsignal.com as "re-envisioning science fiction for the 21<sup>st</sup> century". In their earlier novels, both she and Nalo Hopkinson use a combination of African and Caribbean folklore to create a strongly feminized alternative world in which a female protagonist challenges and either defeats or subverts the threat of patriarchal power. Caribbean iconography also informs the technologically-driven fantasies of Caribbean-born US-based writer, Tobias Buckell's space operas, *Crystal Rain* (2006) and *Ragamuffin* (2007). The use of speculative fiction by these writers elaborates and embroiders a storytelling tradition that is unmistakably of the region; it is the genre, par excellence, by which popular fiction reimagines the present and pushes the boundaries of a possible future through the means of Caribbean myth and magic.

After I was invited by Dr Creighton to deliver the Mittelholzer lecture, I was thinking about this topic when I noticed a reference to Mittelholzer's *My Bones and My Flute* on a website dealing with speculative fiction: [www.sfsignal.com](http://www.sfsignal.com). This is an American weblog or fanzine dedicated to science fiction, where new books are reviewed and discussed. It also carries a podcast called 'Crossing the

Gulf', hosted by Karen Burnham, where she is joined for three episodes by Karen Lord who has been invited to talk about Caribbean speculative fiction.<sup>2</sup> What caught my attention was that, along with two recent novels, *The Rainmaker's Mistake* (2007) by Erna Brodber and *Ghosts* (2012) by Curdella Forbes, Lord had chosen to talk about *My Bones and My Flute* (1955) in order to demonstrate the long history of speculative fiction in Caribbean writing. In her discussion of *My Bones and My Flute*, Lord pays tribute to Mittelholzer as the forerunner of Caribbean speculative fiction, *avant la lettre* or before the label existed. She recounts how, having read the novel at school in Barbados, when she wanted to revisit it she had to go back to her old school store cupboard to find a copy, and the one she found had her name in it from when she was a pupil. I had a similar experience when I looked for a copy in the Cave Hill library and the most up-to-date one I found was the reissued Corgi edition of 1966<sup>3</sup> (though there have subsequently been two editions by other publishers, in 1974 and 1982). In other words, though Mittelholzer is regarded as a canonical writer, and British-based publisher, Peepal Tree Press, has so far republished four of his novels, this book at least is not highly enough regarded to merit republishing for a contemporary readership, and the potential reader therefore has to look hard to find it. Moreover, on a site devoted to Mittelholzer and subtitled: 'Guyana's Greatest Novelist', Victor Chang's comprehensive overview of Mittelholzer's work, written in 2006, fails to mention *My Bones and My Flute* except as one of the few of his books still available in print.<sup>4</sup> While she acknowledges that the implicit racism and sexism of the book may be off-putting to a contemporary reader, Karen Lord celebrates its use of Caribbean myth and folkloric supernatural beliefs, which she says characterize so much later Caribbean writing. She also claims that the consciousness he and other Caribbean writers show of different levels of reality which somehow need to be brought into balance distinguishes their writing from Latin American magical realism. This is where the label 'speculative fiction' comes into play.

As a Caribbean writer of speculative fiction, Karen Lord is especially struck, as any reader must be, by the part played

by the jungle in the creation of an other-worldly atmosphere in *My Bones and My Flute*. For her, the jungle represents primordial fears that are only manifest in that particular landscape. The river on which the Nevinson family and Milton Woodsley travel by boat in search of Mynheer Voorman's grave, is, she says, unlike a road which is man-made and under human control; a river is unpredictable, it conceals submerged threats and shallows, or it can quicken into rapids and sweep you away. It is therefore both material and metaphorical; in the novel, its physical presence is described in a way that maximizes its mysteriousness:

From the river came a bubbling, as though a palm-berry had fallen into the water. Or it might have been a fish. When the sound died away, the silence fanned down upon us once ore, heavy and charged with that waiting quality characteristic of the jungle in these parts. There was no wind. The air seemed to hang like dissolved curtains in space. The river lurked like a sullen enemy which at any instant might send black, sluggish tentacles groping towards us through the dark. From upstream there came a low gruff barking, and I found myself stiffening, for I knew that no dog could utter such a sound; it was too powerful and harsh. (47)

The way each of the material details here – palm-berry, fish, air, the sound of barking – is brought into question and made to resemble something other than itself is of a piece with speculative fictional techniques of transforming everyday reality into something familiar yet strange, recognizable yet requiring a new set of coordinates to be read. The fact that Mittelholzer accomplishes this without resorting to an altogether imaginary world is remarkable. In this context, the phantom flute becomes an emanation of the jungle itself:

Occasionally a sound, soft and flimsy, like the distant crash of waves on a beach, would come to the hearing, would swell gradually on the air, and then fade. It was only a breeze rustling through the jungle, but it was so far away that it never reached us here. It had a strange, phantom quality about it. (66)

Note that, while this sound is not the flute but the natural sound of the forest, it prefigures the flute in its distance, strangeness and ghostliness. Lastly, the experience of the supernatural is rendered, less as an encounter with an extraordinary and nameless horror than as an *amplification* of the ordinary; Mittelholzer's word is '*manifestation*', implying something already present that takes a concrete or material form. Notwithstanding the dramatic descriptions of an evil creature with glowing eyes that looms over the sleeping women at night, this description of the river is actually more effective in conveying us bodily into an alternative world:

The stars sparkled up at us from the smooth black water and the sky seemed more terrible in its immensity as a scooped bowl beneath us than as a dome overhead. Often I had the sensation that we were about to plunge irretrievably down into an emptiness of speckled gloom instead of advancing on a level with the river, and a vague nausea would attack me. (160)

Here, foreboding and unhomeliness are embodied by the way the planes are reversed, so that the river, rather than a flat surface of water, becomes instead an inverted sky whose depths are dizzying. The 'vague nausea' this induces in Milton is shared by the reader as a sensation of vertigo, as reality teeters on the brink of wholesale transformation. What Mittelholzer achieves here is the concretisation of a state of mind through the use of natural imagery; the otherness of the river gives credence to the external evil of the supernatural, so that if we believe in one, we must then believe in the other.

Mittelholzer frames his story as a retrospective retelling by an older Milton, years after the event. In his Introductory Note, Milton explains that he delayed the writing for twenty years because he couldn't decide what form the story should take; in the end, he claims, as Mrs Nevinson and Jessie objected to him publishing his diary notes, and pushed him to write "*a good thrilling sort of old-fashioned ghost story, with the mystery solved at the end*" and "*a lot of atmosphere and excitement*", that is what he has written (7). At the same time, he makes the somewhat contradictory claim that he has produced "*a*

true record, including nothing that might be attributed to my imagination” (7). In this way, Mittelholzer lays claim to two things: popular storytelling in the form of a ghost-story, and realism, or truth. In his essay, Victor Chang notes that Mittelholzer’s autobiography, *Swarthy Boy*, details the source of his early inspiration to become a writer as “the silent film serials, the Buffalo Bill stories, and the detective stories involving Nelson Lee and Sexton Blake”.<sup>5</sup> In situating Mittelholzer in relation to this populist tradition, Chang is of the opinion that it accounts for a negative trend in his writing:

We find that Mittelholzer’s novels are packed with exciting and frequently violent action...traced, in part, to the fact that (his) first literary inspiration derived from a love of cheap detective fiction and silent film serials, where frenzied action was the main staple.<sup>6</sup>

The censorious tone is that of the canonical gatekeeper, reluctant to grant admission to works that have assimilated popular modes of storytelling. (Interesting to note that a review of Curdella Forbes’s *Ghosts* in *Publisher’s Weekly* also castigates it on formal grounds: “The uncertainty unfortunately bleeds into the structure of this hectic novel with sci-fi overtones, creating a blurry book that never comes together.”<sup>7</sup>) Yet how can we make sense of *My Bones and My Flute* without admitting the popular? In aiming for “a good thrilling sort of old-fashioned ghost story”, he is deliberately using a popular form – as literary critics say, he is *intertextual* with it – and this may account for why it is less critically endorsed than some of his other ‘canonical’ works. Karen Lord’s recognition and claiming of it as a forerunner shows how some novels have to wait for literary taste to change and for later writers to provide a context for what a novelist was doing several decades earlier. Her relating it to a work by Erna Brodber, a canonical writer and one of the first generation of Caribbean women writers, suggests that a shifting of boundaries may be under way, that speculative fiction may be poised to enter the canon. In a review of *The Rainmaker’s Mistake*, which, she says “rests on intricate reworkings of ancient myths...exploring the possibilities of fable and myth as transformative ways of knowing”,

Curdella Forbes declares that it “*emphasises Brodber’s stature as one of the Caribbean’s foremost philosophers, cultural activists and writers of fiction. The story of her contribution to the theory of the novel is yet to be written*”<sup>8</sup>

Forbes’s comment suggests that speculative fiction is more than just the creation of a fantasy world, it is also a different way of telling a story, a different approach to narrative that allows the ‘real’ and the ‘unreal’ to coexist. In her second book, *Redemption in Indigo* (2010), Karen Lord’s playful and reflexive storytelling mode reminds us of Mittelholzer in the way it openly admits to being a narrative and using fictional techniques.<sup>9</sup> In the opening paragraph she declares: “*A rival of mine once complained that my stories begin awkwardly and end untidily...All my tales are true, drawn from life, and a life-story is not a tidy thing.*” (1) And in the last pages she concludes:

Now I have come at last to the end of my story. For some in my audience a tale is like a riddle, to be solved at the end. To them I say the best tales leave some riddles unanswered and some mysteries hidden. Get used to it. (170)

Like Mittelholzer, she performs a sleight of hand, insisting on the truth value of her story while simultaneously revealing that it is a tale she has shaped. Like him, she does not shy away from tried and tested modes of storytelling. To those who “*utterly, utterly fear the dreaded Moral of the Story*”, she retorts:

Everything teaches, everyone preaches, all have a gospel to sell!...I told you from the very beginning it was a story about choices – wise choices, foolish choices, small yet momentous choices – for with choices come change, and with change comes opportunity, and both change and opportunity are the very cutting edge of the power of chaos...(170-1)

“*The cutting edge of the power of chaos*” could be Milton Woodsley at his most bombastic! This deliberately oxymoronic statement, linking chaos to choice and change to opportunity, connects Lord, not only to Mittelholzer, but to other contemporary writers who play with the supernatural as the agent of chaos. Pauline Melville is another writer whose

stories repeatedly resolve themselves by allowing chaos, or the supernatural, to invade and alter ordinary life. In the collection, *Shape-shifter* (1990), who can forget the putative rapist in 'You Left The Door Open', who takes the protagonist prisoner and then disappears without leaving a trace for the forensics experts, only to reappear dressed as a character invented by the victim herself? Or the clever schoolgirl in 'The Girl With The Celestial Limb', whose love of mathematics transforms her leg into a "*web of delicately interconnecting geometric forms, tessellations, cuboctahedrons, star-pentagons, rhombic faces...cones, triangles and the cubic lattices of crystallography*" (139). Or the President who doesn't realize he's dead in 'The President's Exile' in the collection *The Migration of Ghosts* (1998). Similarly, Mark McWatt's characters in *Suspended Sentences* (2006) tell stories like 'Alma Fordyce and the Bakoo', in which a bakoo seduces a local spinster; or 'Uncle Umberto's Slippers', in which a normal daily event is the apparition of the Indian chief whose bones are said to be buried under the house, "*arrayed in a plumed headdress and beaded loincloth and sitting awkwardly on the bed or on the edge of Aunt Irene's mahogany bureau*" (23); or 'The Visitor', in which a character suddenly finds himself in the Guyanese interior but a hundred years in the future; or 'The Tyranny of Influence', where a painter enters a painting by the 15<sup>th</sup> century Italian artist Antonello, and finds himself re-enacting the deposition of Christ's body from the cross at the top of Kaitetur Falls, before conceiving a magical child with an Amerindian woman who might be an angel.

No-one calls Melville's or McWatt's work speculative fiction, yet their stories are in a direct line of descent from *My Bones and My Flute*, not only in investing the landscape and society of Guyana with supernatural and mythic elements, but also in their consciousness of how the artistic process can work on daily reality so as to transform it into something strange and fantastical. A number of Melville's stories feature writers, like 'The Truth is in the Clothes', which ends with the author entering a magical room:

...which I recognised immediately as the place where I was supposed to be...I shut the door gently behind me. Everything

was peaceful...On the table stood a typewriter. Sunlight fell on it from a window that was no more than a slit in the enormously thick walls. Placed next to the typewriter was an opened packet of plain foolscap paper. I took out a sheet of paper and inserted it into the typewriter. I barely needed to touch the keys. The typewriter wrote of its own accord: THE TRUTH IS IN THE CLOTHES. (112)

McWatt's painter in 'The Tyranny of Influence' similarly finds himself painting a world he has imagined as a result of entering of Antonello's painting. In both cases, the artistic process becomes the act of reproducing something given to the artist from a mysterious source. McWatt's artist starts out believing that "*the substance of art is physical, material and yet quite other than reality and no amount of trickery or illusion can bridge the gap between the two...*"(217) and ends up understanding, like the characters in *My Bones and My Flute*, that 'reality' is not stable at all and can transform itself in a moment.

What these examples show is how, under the umbrella of popular fiction, new publishing and distribution networks have created new readerships, and readers and writers who felt excluded from 'official' literary circles have been drawn in as new forms have gained in popularity. At the same time, canonical forms have started to come under pressure from 'outsider' forms that have traditionally been marginalized or excluded from the canon. The degree of self-consciousness with which writers engage with and manipulate genres and markets of course varies widely; but the choice to be 'popular' and therefore remain 'outside' rather than belonging to the circle of the elite is always partly an ideological one, an identification *otherwise* than with formal culture. Outsider fiction is a harbinger of change in Caribbean writing, and, to quote again from Karen Lord, "*with change comes opportunity, and both change and opportunity are the very cutting edge of the power of chaos...*"(170-1)

#### FOOTNOTES:

<sup>1</sup> Stuart Hall, 'Caribbean culture: future trends,' *Caribbean Quarterly*, 43.1/2 (Mar-Jun 1997); 25-33. Downloaded on ProQuest, no page numbers.

<sup>2</sup> 'Crossing the Gulf' podcast, 8/8/12: [www.sfsignal.com/archives/2012/08](http://www.sfsignal.com/archives/2012/08)

<sup>3</sup> Edgar Mittelholzer, *My Bones and My Flute*. London: Corgi Books, (1958)1966.

<sup>4</sup> Victor Chang, '**Edgar Mittelholzer (1909-1965), Biography.**' [edgarmittelholzer.blogspot.com/2006/03/victor-l.html](http://edgarmittelholzer.blogspot.com/2006/03/victor-l.html)

<sup>5</sup> [edgarmittelholzer.blogspot.com/2006/03/victor-l.html](http://edgarmittelholzer.blogspot.com/2006/03/victor-l.html)

<sup>6</sup> [edgarmittelholzer.blogspot.com/2006/03/victor-l.html](http://edgarmittelholzer.blogspot.com/2006/03/victor-l.html)

<sup>7</sup> *Publishers Weekly* review of *Ghosts*: [www.publishersweekly.com](http://www.publishersweekly.com)

<sup>8</sup> Curdella Forbes, '*The Rainmaker's Mistake*', review in *Postcolonial Text*, Vol. 5, No 3 (2009): [postcolonial.org/index.php/pct/article](http://postcolonial.org/index.php/pct/article)

<sup>9</sup> Karen Lord, *Redemption in Indigo*. Easthampton, MA: Small Beer Press, 2010.



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