

EDGAR MITTELHOLZER (1909-1965) AND THE SHAPING OF HIS NOVELS

by

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ABSTRACT

This thesis is a response to the critics of the pioneering novelist Edgar Mittelholzer whose second novel was instrumental in paving the way for other Caribbean novelists during the 1950s. Critics of Mittelholzer have accused him of fascism, racism, an unhealthy interest in sexually sensationalist topics and death. He has until the recent centenary of his birth been marginalised and understudied. The first chapter of this thesis outlines the areas of study that have thus far been focused on and explores the underlying methods and theoretical framework of this thesis. The second chapter focuses on the author's background, career and contribution to the Caribbean. The third explores the genesis of Mittelholzer's creativity with a view to revealing how intertextuality is key to an understanding of his novels. It also discusses his creative use of the Middle Eastern notion of the Jinnee. The fourth chapter offers a critical analysis of *The Life and Death of Sylvia* and demonstrates how Mittelholzer employed the themes of sex, race and death. The fifth Chapter establishes that the texts of Yogi Ramacharaka were his primary source of inspiration and that Mittelholzer's novels can be best understood in terms of the Oriental Occultist's teachings. The sixth chapter explores Mittelholzer's racial identity and finds that his mixed ancestry was a key source of creative inspiration. The final chapter concludes that further research is needed into his work and that an exploration of the intertextual references serves to clarify the author's objectives.

DEDICATION

To the '*Shadowed Breathing in the Room*'

&

To my husband, Roderick Westmaas

- This thesis would never have been completed without your support -

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

"[It] is the complex nature of [...] social origins, and the conflicting loyalties involved in the scheme of [...] race, class and economic status, which dictate that each must tread his own lone-wolf path of literary expression."¹

INTRODUCTION

Who was Edgar Mittelholzer?

Of Guianese² birth, Edgar Austin Mittelholzer (1909-1965) was the first of the Caribbean literati to make a professional career out of writing novels. Several of his 22 novels were translated into at least six European languages with one – *A Morning at the Office* – being published by Penguin. Other published works include an anti-capitalist novella, a travel journal, an autobiography, numerous articles, short stories and poems. According to A J Seymour, he was known at the height of his career to millions of English-speaking people across the world, whilst others claimed that his novels were the "hottest sellers in the paperback market" and that his books would sell an average of 8,000 copies.³ The importance of his objectives as a novelist and success as a writer was recognised soon after the publication of *Shadows Move Among Them* (1952), when he became the first Caribbean to be awarded the esteemed Guggenheim Fellowship. The aforementioned novel, dramatised by Moss Hart, as *The Climate of Eden*, became the first Caribbean play to be staged

¹ Mittelholzer, E. "Color, Class and Letters" in *The Nation* (New York: 17 January 1959) p. 57.

² It should be noted that this thesis refers to the territory of Mittelholzer's birth as British Guiana or Guiana as a means of underlining the colonial context into which the author had been born. British Guiana became independent from the United Kingdom in the year after Mittelholzer's death (on 26th May 1966) and was named the Co-operative Republic of Guyana on 23rd of February 1970. The term Guyana is used to refer to events after his death or to critics whose works appear after 1966.

³ Cited in Lewis P, "Mittelholzer Found Dead" in *Guiana Graphic* (Georgetown: 7th May 1965) p. 6.

on Broadway (at the Martin Beck Theatre, New York) in 1953. The play, according to Wagner, secured a national television showing in the United States six years later.⁴ His novel, *My Bones and My Flute* was described in the *Daily Telegraph* as equal to the novels written by Joseph Thomas Sheridan Le Fanu (1814-1873), the leading ghost story writer of the 19th century.⁵ It was later dramatised for radio by Frances Farrier and is still remembered with awe and trepidation by many Guyanese listeners.

At the time of his death, Mittelholzer was the most important literary figure that British Guiana had produced. But this was not just in terms of writing entertaining novels. In a tribute to the author on 10th May 1965, the Guianese Prime Minister, L S F Burnham referred to him as: “a great author who had done much to bring our art to the eyes of the world. [...] [B]y his work the author had put British Guiana on the map.”⁶ This contention has been widely acknowledged. Before the publication of Mittelholzer’s Guiana-novels few Americans were aware of the country’s existence let alone its history. A J Seymour’s interviewer, during a radio programme in Minneapolis, admitted that the city’s knowledge of Guiana had been derived primarily from the *Kaywana* series. Mittelholzer’s aim – to record the history of Guiana in the form of popular fiction, with the specific aim of commanding a wide international audience – had worked.⁷

In 1963, an American journalist further asserted that three key West Indian novelists (Mittelholzer, Lamming and Naipaul) could claim responsibility for showing Americans (and this was presumably true for rest of the English-speaking world) “the Caribbean as they could never see it for themselves”. He went so far as to claim that their writings were: “far more interesting and valuable than the work of the social scientists who abound in the area”.⁸ This

⁴ See footnote no. 2 in Wagner, G. “Edgar Mittelholzer: Symptoms and Shadows” in *BIM* (Vol. 9, No. 33; July-Dec. 1961) p. 29.

⁵ Cited in Mittelholzer, E. “Our Readers Say: My Bones and My Flute” in *Sunday Advocate* (Barbados: 6 December 1955) p. 4.

⁶ Anon. “A Great Author” in *Daily Chronicle: Mail Edition* (Georgetown: 11th May 1965) p. 1.

⁷ Mittelholzer had recognised the need for a history of Guiana but realised that he would be unable to convince any publishers to take on the risk of a non-fictional text about a so-called colonial backwater. See Hogarth Press Archives (Ref: MS2750/284, 1949-54) – 18 unpublished letters between Mittelholzer and his publishers held at Reading University.

⁸ Di Giovanni, N. T. “Return of a West Indian” in *The Nation* (New York: 26 Oct. 1963) p. 263.

certainly seems to be an accurate assessment since foreign government officials and international missions were regularly advised to read Mittelholzer's novels (and in particular, *The Life and Death of Sylvia*) by way of historical and sociological introduction to the country.⁹ As Seymour recognised Mittelholzer's novels also offered (and still offer) upcoming generations a key point of contact with the past.¹⁰

Despite these extraordinary achievements Mittelholzer's novels have failed to attract a wide range of serious in-depth critical attention. This can be attributed to numerous allegations of Euro-centrism, racism, fascism, of being out of step with the mid-twentieth century nationalistic agenda of the Caribbean, of being morbidly obsessed with the theme of death and of failing to reign in his obsession with the full gamut of sexual perversions. Potential scholars have naturally privileged the work of other pioneering novelists in light of these accusations. His death by self-immolation on 6th May 1965 only served to fuel the rumours that he was mentally unstable. It should be pointed out that the 'silences' that exist around the Mittelholzer canon has come not so much from the Guianese/Guyanese community but rather from their counterparts in the wider Caribbean. As (Denis) Williams has argued, Guianese writers had a different racial outlook from their Caribbean counterparts: "the Black consciousness which arises out of polarisation to the white world [was] not part of [their] mystique or make-up [...]." ¹¹ It was only on travelling to Europe that Guianese people became conscious of Black "in that polarised sense".

This notion appears to be supported by Sparer, who notably rejected the assumptions that were made in Coulthard's *Race and Colour in the Caribbean Literature* (1962). According to her issues of race in Guiana were primarily expressed in terms of a "search for identity" and not by "strong Africanising tendencies" or the vehemently anti-white, anti-Western Civilisation theme that

⁹ See Seymour, A. "Edgar Mittelholzer: The Preacher" in *Kaie* (Vol. 1, Oct. 1965) p. 31 and Swan, M. *British Guiana: The Land of Six Peoples* (Her Majesty's Stationery Office, London, 1957) p. 126.

¹⁰ See Seymour, A. "Edgar Mittelholzer: The Preacher" in *Kaie* (Vol. 1, Oct. 1965) p. 33.

¹¹ Dance, D. *New World Adams: Conversations with Contemporary West Indian Writers* (Peepal Tree: Yorkshire, 1992) p. 47.

Coulthard identifies as being in the rest of the Caribbean.¹² The desire to delineate and define a West Indian aesthetic in the late 1960s notably implied the preclusion of Western critics. Louis James was according to his own testimony dissuaded from giving serious consideration to the work of Mittelholzer.¹³ He had been lambasted for his Eurocentric, and by implication invalid, assessment of West Indian literature in his role as editor of *The Islands in Between* (1968).¹⁴ These various factors perhaps explain why Mittelholzer has only been able to secure a place on the margins of the Caribbean literary canon.

MITTELHOLZER'S NEW LEASE OF LIFE

A resurgence of interest in Mittelholzer has taken place since the one hundred-year anniversary of his birth in 2009. A keynote lecture by Cox, on "Corentyne Thunder: A Quiet Revolution" for the *XXVIII Annual West Indian Literature Conference 2009* (at Castellani House: Georgetown, 28th April 2009) was well received. Peepal Tree Press have in the meantime republished four of his key novels: *Corentyne Thunder* (2009), *The Life and Death of Sylvia* (2010), *A Morning at the Office* (2010) and *Shadows Move Among Them* (2010) and have plans to republish others including *My Bones and My Flute*. Historical distance from the anti-colonial struggles of the pre-independence period and the decades of heightened nationalism, have given way to greater tolerance of heterogeneous identities with scholars like O'Callaghan arguing for the social relevance of voices previously perceived as belonging to "outsiders"¹⁵, and Donnell calling for expansion of the present model of Caribbean literature with its emphasis on "folk, black consciousness and cultural nationalism".¹⁶ As Paquet has argued in *Caribbean Autobiography: Cultural Identity and Self-Representation* the works of

¹² Sparer, J. "Attitudes to Race in Guyanese Literature" in *Caribbean Studies* (Vol. 8: No. 2, 1968) p. 24.

¹³ Despite having an interest in Mittelholzer, James only wrote one substantive but short essay about his first novel, *Corentyne Thunder*. See Introduction to Mittelholzer, E. *Corentyne Thunder* (Heinemann: London, 1970). Louis noted in an email to Juanita Cox (dated 18th January 2006) that Mittelholzer's novels did not fit in with the indigenous agenda for Caribbean literature and that he – i.e., Louis James – had been subjected to attack by West Indian critics for his viewpoints.

¹⁴ See 'Caribbean Critics: 1969' in Brathwaite, K. *Roots* (The University of Michigan Press: Michigan, 1996 [1986]) pp. 111-126.

¹⁵ See Paquet, S. P. *Caribbean Autobiography: Cultural Identity and Self-Representation* (The University of Wisconsin Press: Wisconsin, 2002) p. 181.

¹⁶ Donnell, A. *Twentieth Century Caribbean Literature* (Routledge: London, 2006) p. 34.

creative writers like Mittelholzer not only provide insights into the creative possibility of autobiography as a genre but also offer glimpses into subjective and collective notions of identity: the continuities, discontinuities and overlaps of identity amongst Caribbean people as well as an understanding of how these differ across spatial and temporal junctures.¹⁷

THE OBJECTIVES OF THE THESIS

Having read all the novels in the Mittelholzer canon, this thesis was and is in many respects a response to the critics. The central argument is that while several critics have made seminal contributions to our understanding of Mittelholzer's novels, his work is characterised by subtleties of meaning that thus far remain unexplored. It further contends that some critics have misunderstood the complexities of Mittelholzer's attitudes to race; have shown little or no appreciation of his religious beliefs, have failed to identify and interpret the deeper metaphorical significance of his 'sex' theme; and failed to appreciate the artistic endeavour and level of sophistication involved in his work. That is not to say that this thesis is not going to be innocent of the same errors. As Jacqueline Ives highlighted in her recollections of the author (she was his second wife): "To get at the whole truth about Edgar – without simplifying, without attempting to dictate to him how he should say things, without "toning him down" – would be a life-time's study."¹⁸ The objective of this thesis is therefore to provoke the widespread reassessment of his novels, by beginning to address the aforementioned gaps in understanding.

The following section offers an overview of the key body of criticism, which Mittelholzer's novels attracted between 1960 and 2010. The main purpose of this overview is not only to highlight the findings of the key critics (A J Seymour, Michael Gilkes, Frank Birbalsingh and Frances Williams) - who are all

¹⁷ Op. Cit., Paquet, S. P. pp. 3-4.

¹⁸ Ives, J. *The Idyll and the Warrior: Recollections of Edgar Mittelholzer* (unpublished and in the possession of Mrs J. Ives) p. 51. [Published version appears as "Edgar Mittelholzer – A Wife's Memoir" in *Contemporary Review* (Sept 1996) and also as Mittelholzer, J. "The Idyll and the Warrior: Recollections of Edgar Mittelholzer" in *BIM* (June 1983: Vol. 17, Nos. 66 and 67)].

incidentally Guyanese with the exception of Williams - but to draw attention to more general approaches to Mittelholzer's work and to make clear, in spatial and temporal terms, the textual context that has influenced the shape of this thesis, particularly in terms of focus, aims and objectives. This section will be followed by an explanation of the methodology used and summary of the chapters to follow.

KEY CRITICAL ASSESSMENTS

The 1960s

The reception of Mittelholzer's novels in the 1960s is marked by the appearance of a few short reviews and following his death in 1965, a number of biographical pieces e.g., Collymore's "Edgar Mittelholzer: A Biographical Sketch" (1965), Lamming's "But Alas Edgar" (1966) and Rickards "A Tribute to Edgar Mittelholzer" (1966). In "Writing in the West Indies" (1960) Collymore establishes that Mittelholzer's themes, sex and religion, are permeated with the philosophical ideas of Nietzsche.¹⁹ Braithwaite in "The New West Indian Novelists: Part One" (1960) notes that Mittelholzer's fiction could best be described as "novels of ideas" and as such contributed little to the development of West Indian society: they (i.e., nationalists) were more interested in "the actions of people in a given, recognizable society", in other words, in social realism.²⁰

The short but non-judgemental critiques of Collymore and Braithwaite differed strongly with that of Wagner's highly influential article. Wagner's 1961 paper, "Edgar Mittelholzer: Symptoms and Shadows", offered a scathing evaluation (often sarcastic in tone) of Mittelholzer's early novels, with particular focus on *Shadows Move Among Them*. He argued that Mittelholzer's books, replete with every possible perversion, were published around the same time

¹⁹ Collymore, F. "Writing in the West Indies: A Survey" in Maclure, M. et al (eds.) *Tamarack Review* (Toronto; Issue 14, Winter 1960) p. 121.

²⁰ Braithwaite, L. E. "The New West Indian Novelists: Part One" in *BIM* (Vol. 8: No. 31, July-Dec 1960) p. 207.

that Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover* was banned. He attacks the ideas presented in the novel: authoritarianism, the ambivalent social mores of Berkelhoost and representations of the absurd. He disapproved of the mission community's insistence on the celebration of the "uninhibited imagination" and the "life of the psyche". He argued too that the novel was full of monotonous sexual sensationalism, racism and latent fascism with Mr Harmston in the role of the Führer. Published in BIM, this far from positive article received wide circulation in the Caribbean.

Joseph's MA thesis, *The Treatment of Sex in the Novels of Edgar Austin Mittelholzer* appeared as the first academic response to Mittelholzer's novels in 1966. Joseph argued that Mittelholzer's characters fell into three basic categories: those who were sexually restrained, curbing their natural sexual drives for reasons that were good and wise; those who were perverse, and those who were sexually repressed. She observed that Mittelholzer depicted repression as a negative force for it "attempts to convince man that he is not what he does not want to be."²¹ The abnormal desires of some characters, according to Joseph, led to acts of suicide. She explained that sexual abnormalities are associated, in the novels, with tainted blood. Characters that are perverse are conversely represented as the opposite of restrained: fulfilling however unwisely, all their sexual desires whilst willing to bear the consequences of their actions. Joseph concluded that Mittelholzer viewed sex as a vital force in human lives and the motivation behind their actions. She argued that "Mittelholzer's emphasis on the socially disgusting is essentially the truth, undisguised and unvarnished."²² Her thesis appears to have languished in obscurity as none of her findings appear to have been quoted in the works of later critics.

In "The Rhythm of Society and Landscape" (1966) Cartey observed that Mittelholzer's desire was to free himself from the colonial backdrop and that this

²¹ Joseph, E. M. *The Treatment of Sex in the Novels of Edgar Austin Mittelholzer* (MA thesis, Howard University: Washington, D. C., May 4th, 1966) p. 57.

²² Ibid; p. 64.

impulse was reflected in his writing through his concern with societal hierarchy, social order and the history of Guyana. He highlighted Mittelholzer's interest in the idea of animate psychic landscapes and the various ways in which they mirrored or altered the emotional states of his characters. He importantly noted, based on a reading of *A Swarthy Boy* that some events in Mittelholzer's life have been fictionalised and links Mittelholzer's interest in his genealogy and family, to representations of family in the *Kaywana* Trilogy with their fates being determined by genetics: strong fire-blood versus the weak painter-dreamer. Cartey was perceptive in his observation that Mittelholzer's novels operated on many levels; were multi-voiced and many-layered. But in common with Joseph's findings, this analysis failed to attract significant attention.

Seymour, who had reviewed Mittelholzer's novels in *KyK-Over-Al* as and when they were published, was the first Guyanese critic to write authoritatively on the topic of Mittelholzer's novels. He wrote two insightful articles – “The Novels of Edgar Mittelholzer” (1958) and “Edgar Mittelholzer – The Preacher” (1965) before presenting the first Edgar Memorial Lecture entitled *Edgar Mittelholzer: The Man and His Works* in 1967. This seminal and insightful lecture has been a key source of critical interest and remains so today. In drawing upon personal memories and the letters Mittelholzer wrote to him over many years, Seymour provided a brief outline of the author's career starting with *Creole Chips* (1937) through to his death in 1965. His three key assertions were that Mittelholzer's true self could not be properly ascertained through the basic means of “catechising”²³ those who knew him: that his novels were a projection of his inner-world: one that he explored, nurtured and increasingly withdrew into; and that his life and works were “an essay in freedom”.²⁴ In a discussion on the Guyana-set novels, Seymour highlighted the presence of semi-autobiographical characters and argued, like Collymore and others, that Mittelholzer's novels were influenced by Nietzschean philosophy, his love of Wagnerian music, his interest in history and the role that his family had played. He notes as positive his

²³ Seymour, A. “Edgar Mittelholzer: The Man and His Works” in *The 1967 Edgar Mittelholzer Memorial Lectures – First Series* (Georgetown, National History and Arts Council, 1968) p. 7.

²⁴ Ibid; p. 14.

“imaginative possession”²⁵ of landscape and recognised the influence of Rousseau and Edgar Allen Poe in his work.

He remarked on the varying quality of Mittelholzer’s literary output: viewing the English-set novels as morality sermons and, similar to Brathwaite, as “the novel of ideas”.²⁶ He claimed too that themes of sexual restraint were matched in his later novels by Byronic sexual eroticism; that Mittelholzer became violently opposed to the lack of discipline in society and expressed extreme views on the legal treatment of criminals. He concluded that the psychological tension in his novels were primarily products of his own psyche: the result of conflicting emotions that the author harboured about his mixed racial origins. In the final part of his lecture, Seymour suggested that later critics might find it useful to examine the author as a “political animal”²⁷ by analysing his “sermons”. Seymour concluded that his pioneering canon, marked by unity, consistency and complexity, deserved a high place in the literary history of Guyana and the Caribbean.

Sparer in “Attitudes Towards ‘Race’ In Guyanese Literature”²⁸ praised Mittelholzer’s dedication to writing, his ambitious historical novels, and his evocation of landscape but condemned what she described as an inordinate fascination with outlandish and sensationalist ideas. She accuses him of ill thought-out philosophies and “sextravaganzas”: seeing them as the outpouring of immature fantasies.²⁹ She argued that he had self-destructive racial prejudices, which patently deepened with time. Sparer was particularly critical of the Kaywana Trilogies noting that his attitudes to the slaves, the slave revolt of 1763 and to concepts of “black blood”³⁰ reflected an internalised disdain of Africans and “a belief in ‘essential’ character and personality traits of groups”.³¹

²⁵ Ibid; p. 21.

²⁶ Ibid; p. 37.

²⁷ Ibid; p. 43.

²⁸ Sparer’s article assesses the work of Carew, Harris, E. R. Braithwaite, Lauchmonen, Nicole, Dathorne, Williams, Seymour, Carter as well as Mittelholzer.

²⁹ Sparer, J. “Attitudes to Race in Guyanese Literature” in *Caribbean Studies* (Vol. 8: No. 2, 1968) p. 25.

³⁰ Ibid; p. 25.

³¹ Ibid; p. 27.

She claimed too that in *Sylvia*, the heroine's adulation of her white father was a reflection of the author's hero-worshipping stance toward his white ancestors and that, like his eponymous heroine, notions of tainted blood tormented Mittelholzer and culminated in a death wish. Sparer argued that while an attempt was made to understand the needs of each racial group in *A Morning At The Office* Mittelholzer was ultimately unable to transcend his internalised prejudices. According to Patrick Guckian, Sparer's views were widely circulated in the *Guiana Graphic* and Guyana's *Sunday Chronicle* and caused long-lasting damage to Mittelholzer's reputation.³²

(Denis) Williams explored the relationship between Guyanese writers/artists and their Old World ancestors in the 1969 Edgar Memorial Lecture, *Image and Idea in the Arts of Guyana*. Williams claimed that Mittelholzer's novels reflected the internalisation of Old World notions of racial purity and that as a writer he was unable to shake off the belief that miscegenation not only led to the mongrelisation of 'pure races' but also the corruption of one's moral values and contamination of one's soul. Mittelholzer's preoccupation with the theme of blood and ancestry as expressed through the Kaywana Trilogy led Williams to conclude that Mittelholzer bore "the sense of a man who had been deeply wronged".³³ Though his analysis was more balanced than Sparer's, his conclusions did little to subvert the growing atmosphere of negativity toward Mittelholzer's work.

Birbalsingh's first influential piece of criticism "Edgar Mittelholzer: Moralist or Pornographer?" appeared in 1969. He identified three key themes: "social reform, sexual love and transcendentalism"³⁴ and two minor themes, "West Indian nationalism and colour-consciousness".³⁵ Birbalsingh argued that Mittelholzer's original ideas were full of contradictions, pointless titillation and

³² Guckian, P. "The Balance of Colour: A Reassessment of the Work of Edgar Mittelholzer" in *Jamaican Journal* (Vol. 4: March 1970) p. 38.

³³ Williams, D. "Image and Idea in the Arts of Guyana" in *The 1969 Edgar Mittelholzer Memorial Lectures - Second Series* (Georgetown: National History and Arts Council, 1969) p. 35.

³⁴ Birbalsingh, F. "Edgar Mittelholzer: Moralist or Pornographer?" in *Journal of Commonwealth Literature* (Heinemann Educational Books: Vol. 7, July 1969) p. 88.

³⁵ Ibid; p. 96.

sensationalism. He compared Mittelholzer to Charles Brockden Brown and accused him of failing to exercise sufficient control over his imagination. He noted that all of his work is characterised by the presence of: “philosophical ideas or theories of moral significance that become confused and are supplemented by erotic or other fantasies that convey a purely sensational effect”.³⁶ Birbalsingh fell short of viewing him simply as a pornographer because of the author’s evident intent to “incorporate the highest ideals of human brother-hood”.³⁷ More interestingly Birbalsingh noted that Mittelholzer’s interest in transcendentalism ranging from necromancy, “crude demonology to pure mysticism” represented a “cast of thought rather than a systematic philosophy” with affinities to the nineteenth century New England transcendentalists.³⁸ He pointed out that their sources of information were diverse and included the Hindu sacred text, The Bhagavad Gita; and English romantic theory.

Birbalsingh found that the two minor themes of colour-consciousness and West Indian nationalism could have been relevant to the Caribbean if these ideas of identity had not been glossed over. He further asserted that the author was inconsistent on the issue of colour-consciousness and miscegenation. Birbalsingh concluded that there was little or no aesthetic value to his work: that his imaginative excesses and failure as a writer were attributed to the limitations of a Victorian colonial society and in the case of the Kaywana trilogy, unreliable historical resources. He further suggested that Mittelholzer’s literary failings were the result of hidden personal conflicts, inner tensions and a deep dissatisfaction with his puritanical upbringing. Birbalsingh recognised the interdependence between Mittelholzer’s life, and art: and pointed out that the two virtually merge in *The Jilkington Drama*. He also importantly suggested: “Mittelholzer will gradually come to be regarded as the true innovator of a literature that is finally free from parochialism.”³⁹

³⁶ Ibid; p. 90.

³⁷ Ibid; p. 91.

³⁸ Ibid; p. 94.

³⁹ Ibid; p. 103.

The 1970s

The first five years of the 1970s were productive in terms of Mittelholzer criticism. James⁴⁰ and Figueroa⁴¹ had respectively written insightful introductions to the republished novels: *Corentyne Thunder* and *A Morning at the Office*. Howard had written, "Edgar Mittelholzer's Tragic Vision": a short but interesting piece about the frustration and loneliness of characters in *A Morning at the Office* and had suggested that the death-wish, the dominant response to life's complexities in the Mittelholzer canon, were a reflection of the author's own tragic vision.⁴² Howard's piece echoed the widespread fascination with Mittelholzer's death by self-immolation and the already long held belief that he was 'mad'. Guckian's "The Balance of Colour" (1970) importantly attempted to address the "irresponsible attack[s]"⁴³ targeted at Mittelholzer and his novels in the 1960s. His four central arguments were that the proliferation of sex in the author's novels reflected an attempt to challenge sexual prudery; that the anti-Christian rhetoric of characters like Hendrickje van Groenwegel (of *Children of Kaywana*) were not shared by the author; that while he depicted the racism that existed in society, he was not himself a racist; and finally that "the astonishing and regrettable phenomenon of self-contempt" that is found in many Caribbean novels were not embedded in his.⁴⁴ Guckian's MA thesis *Failure in Exile* (1970) addresses the aforementioned issues (sex, religion, racism, etc) in the same way but also includes an examination of the author's failure in exile. He suggested that Mittelholzer became disorientated by life in England and that he, having withdrawn from society, became the only source of material for his novels. He argued that Mittelholzer's 'Barbados' novels exposed his "fatal lack of insight into

⁴⁰ James, L. "Introduction" in Edgar Mittelholzer's *Corentyne Thunder* (Heinemann: London, 1970).

⁴¹ Figueroa, J. "Introduction" in Edgar Mittelholzer's *A Morning At the Office* (Heinemann: London, 1974).

⁴² Howard, W. J. "Edgar Mittelholzer's Tragic Vision" in *Caribbean Quarterly* (Vol. 16, No. 4; Dec. 1970) p. 28.

⁴³ Guckian, P. "The Balance of Colour: A Reassessment of the Work of Edgar Mittelholzer" in *Jamaican Journal* (Vol. 4: March 1970) p. 38.

⁴⁴ *Ibid*; p. 45.

the society of Barbados” but importantly stated that at least five of his novels deserve a place of honour in the development of West Indian literature.⁴⁵

Gilkes’s seminal PhD thesis, *The Caribbean Syzygy: A Study of the novels of Edgar Mittelholzer and Wilson Harris* (1974), his Edgar Memorial Lecture, *Racial Identity and Individual Consciousness in the Caribbean Novel* (1974) and his article, “The Spirit in the Bottle” (1975) helped to retain the interest of the Guyanese public in Mittelholzer. With unique access to Mittelholzer’s diaries and some unpublished material including unpublished novels⁴⁶, Gilkes approached his thesis from a psychoanalytical perspective and focused primarily on the themes of identity, heredity and duality. He argued that the tensions in Mittelholzer’s novels were created by the theme of “fragmented consciousness”.⁴⁷ He, like Brathwaite and Seymour, pointed out that Mittelholzer assiduously sought to cultivate his Germanic side. Arguing that he had a “highly oppressive super-ego”, he went on to note that Mittelholzer had been drawn to the pessimistic philosophy of Schopenhauer and the heroic resonances of Wagner’s Teutonic music.⁴⁸ Mittelholzer’s characters were, Gilkes asserted, prone like him to suicide or death as a result of their unwillingness to believe in the findings of psychology or in the possibility of being shaped by their environment.

Gilkes explored the issue of the “divided consciousness” in the *Corentyne Thunder* and *The Life and Death of Sylvia* with reference to an unpublished story, “Angela Vimiero” that had originally been planned as a sequel to Mittelholzer’s first novel.⁴⁹ Whilst he noted that both novels contain accurate and sensitively observed details, he argued that they were rendered sub-literary by the presence of the author “bustling about in the wings”⁵⁰ and by his preoccupation with

⁴⁵ Guckhian, P. *Failure in Exile: A Critical Study of the Works of Edgar Mittelholzer* (University of West Indies: Barbados, 1970) p. 21.

⁴⁶ These were donated to the National Library of Guyana but recent enquiries would suggest that these are now missing, lost or stolen.

⁴⁷ Gilkes, M.A. *The Caribbean Syzygy: A Study of the novels of Edgar Mittelholzer and Wilson Harris* (1973-74 A8j Ph.D., Kent, 24-332) p. 11.

⁴⁸ *Ibid*; p. 13.

⁴⁹ *Ibid*; Chapter One.

⁵⁰ *Ibid*; p. 53.

tainted blood as well as concepts of strength versus weakness. While Gilkes's analysis of the Kaywana Trilogy is focused on the theme of blood, it also addresses Mittelholzer's preoccupation with "two-ness": spirit versus flesh, strength versus weakness, black versus white, good versus evil. Although Gilkes did not explore Mittelholzer's use of music, he did point to the author's use of musical form as the framework for four key novels: *The Life and Death of Sylvia*, *Kaywana Blood*, *Latticed Echoes* and *Thunder Returning*. He also noted that Mittelholzer's pioneering concern with identity, the theme of fragmented consciousness and genetic heritage, were particularly Caribbean themes. His ultimate conclusion however, that the author's work was largely sub-literary and looked "outward towards a "parent" culture"⁵¹ for its approval, could not have endeared Mittelholzer to nationalistically-minded Caribbean intellectuals.

The 1980s

Gilkes's works continued to be the primary source of critical analysis with respect to the Mittelholzer canon. In *The West Indian Novel* (1981), Gilkes included a substantial section on the author, which like his thesis, largely focused on the theme of psychological disunity.⁵² In 1983 Mittelholzer's second wife had written a biographical piece "The Idyll and the Warrior: Recollections of Edgar Mittelholzer"⁵³ for *BIM*: concerned with the last five years of his life, it seemingly confirmed that the author had grown increasing pro-German and racially prejudice with age. Chang had produced a useful overview of Mittelholzer's biography, major works and themes, his critical reception, honours and awards, and bibliography for the bio-bibliographical critical sourcebook, *Fifty Caribbean Writers* (1986). McWatt had written a critical introduction for the republished, *My Bones and My Flute* (1986) but had presumably been influenced by the findings of earlier critics:

⁵¹ Ibid; p. v.

⁵² Gilkes, M. "Edgar Mittelholzer (1909-1965)" in *The West Indian Novel* (Twayne Publishers: Boston, 1981) pp. 41-85.

⁵³ Mittelholzer, J. "The Idyll and the Warrior: Recollections of Edgar Mittelholzer" in *BIM* (June 1983: Vol. 17, Nos. 66 and 67).

At some point early in life Mittelholzer acquired a strong sense of racial and psychological taint associated with his own admixture of negro blood so evident in his swarthy appearance. This sense he carried through out his life and it underlies some of his own ideas about evil as well as those of many of his fictional characters – the notion that one’s “bad blood”, the adulteration of one’s racial purity, is response for a tendency toward evil or irrational behaviour.⁵⁴

Salick and Birbalsingh had discussed the representation of Indians in Mittelholzer’s novels in the respective articles: “The East Indian in Three West Indian Novels of Adolescence” (1986)⁵⁵ and “Indians in the Novels of Edgar Mittelholzer” (1986)⁵⁶. Salick’s response to *Corentyne Thunder* was that of disappointment: “Mittelholzer, eschewing Eliot’s romanticism, allows his miser to die without confession, compunction or revelation”.⁵⁷ Birbalsingh, although not comfortable with the miserly representation of Ramgolall, acknowledges that the novel is “largely authentic” in terms of its socio-historical background.

The 1990s

Cartey’s “Rhythm of Man and Landscape: The Mixings” (1991) appears to be a reworking and expansion on the piece that he had written in 1966. On the subject of the Kaywana Trilogy he importantly recognised a metaphorical connection between sex and its broader associations with creativity.⁵⁸ He noted too the importance of fire-blood but ultimately sees this as an undue preoccupation with genetic traits. Davids’s article, ‘The Daydream of What is Essential’ (1992) picks up on the interest both Howard⁵⁹ and Gilkes⁶⁰ had

⁵⁴ McWatt, M. “Critical Introduction” in Mittelholzer, E. *My Bones and My Flute* (Longman: Jamaica, 1986) p. v.

⁵⁵ Salick, R. “The East Indian Female in Three West Indian Novels of Adolescence” in *Caribbean Quarterly* (Vol. 32, Nos. 1&2; March-June 1986) pp. 38-46.

⁵⁶ Birbalsingh, F. “Indians in the Novels of Edgar Mittelholzer” in *Caribbean Quarterly* (Vol. 32: Nos. 1 & 2, March-June 1986) pp. 71-79. Also published in *Passion and Exile: Essays in Caribbean Literature* (Hansib: London, 1988)

⁵⁷ Op. Cit., Salick, R. p. 48.

⁵⁸ Cartey, W. “Rhythm of Man and Landscape: The Mixings” in *Whispers from the Caribbean* (Center for Afro-American Studies: Los Angeles, 1991) p. 14.

⁵⁹ Howard, W. J. “Edgar Mittelholzer’s Tragic Vision” in *Caribbean Quarterly* (Vol. 16, No. 4; Dec. 1970) pp. 18-28.

⁶⁰ Gilkes, M. “The Spirit in the Bottle: A Reading of Mittelholzer’s A Morning At The Office” in *Caribbean Quarterly* (Vol. 21: No. 4, 1975) pp. 1-12.

expressed in a short allegorical story – “The Jen” – that is embedded in *A Morning at the Office*. Davids’s close analysis offers a refreshing new insight into this novel in that he demonstrated that the issue of “literature” was one of its central themes.

Birbalsingh writing for the *Twentieth-Century Caribbean and Black African Writers Series* built on his earlier research into the life and works of Edgar Mittelholzer. His article, “Edgar Mittelholzer”⁶¹ focused on the author’s key achievements, provided an overview of his career, and attempted to group his novels by genre: “experimental political theories, abnormal forms of psychology, sexual deviation, the supernatural, and the occult”⁶², and the historical novel; while noting that they all overlapped to some degree. He suggested the author’s high rate of productivity might be the reason why Mittelholzer tended to emphasise the entertainment value of his novels. He concluded that Mittelholzer’s achievements should to be recognised within the context of the limited literary and cultural resources that were available to him in British Guiana, and in connection to that his exposure to the racist stereotypes of the Sax Rohmer film serials.

Forrester’s article “Revolting Bodies: Homosexual Dream and Masculine Anxiety in Edgar Mittelholzer’s *A Morning at the Office* and Caryl Phillip’s *Higher Ground*” (1994), focused on a previously ignored protagonist in Mittelholzer’s *A Morning at The Office*: the homosexual, Mr Reynolds.⁶³ Mittelholzer’s *A Morning at the Office* also inspired Eriksen to offer an ethnographic analysis in his article, “The Author as Anthropologist” (1994). According to his findings the novel was: “based on first-class ethnographic field material; it covers many fine nuances of inter-ethnic micro relations, and it is surprisingly comprehensive”.⁶⁴

⁶¹ Birbalsingh, F. “Edgar Mittelholzer” in Lindfors, B & Sander, R. (eds) *Twentieth-Century Caribbean and Black African Writers* (Brucoli Clark Layman: London, 1992) pp. 236-246 Reproduced in Birbalsingh, F. “Edgar Mittelholzer (1909-1965)” in Lindfors, B. & Gonzalez, A. (eds) *African, Caribbean, and Latin American Writers* (Brucoli Clark Layman: London, 2000).

⁶² Ibid; p. 238.

⁶³ Forrester, F “‘Revolting Bodies’ Homosexual Dream & Masculine Anxiety in Edgar Mittelholzer’s *A Morning in the Office* & Caryl Phillips’, *Higher Ground*” in *Caribbean Studies* (Vol. 27: Nos. 3 & 4, 1994) pp. 311-330.

⁶⁴ Eriksen, T. H. *The Author as Anthropologist*

Gilkes drew upon further findings from his thesis in a chapter he wrote, "Edgar Mittelholzer", for King's *West Indian Literature* (1995). He reiterated that it was Mittelholzer who "first raised the question of psychic imbalance and the resultant angst of identity": the most "central and urgent" themes of West Indian literature.⁶⁵ But like Sparer, Williams and McWatt he again argues that the author was preoccupied in *Sylvia* with "the psychological effects of genetic 'taint'"⁶⁶ and that in the Kaywana Trilogy: "an inherited strain of coloured ('bad') blood inevitably precipitates a 'weakness' or 'taint' of character which, unless heroically resisted, is finally destructive to the psyche".⁶⁷ Birbalsingh meanwhile submitted an article "Edgar Mittelholzer (1909-1965)" for the 50th Anniversary of *Kyk-Over-Al* which acknowledged that the author had received a bad press despite his "professional, productivity and pioneering".⁶⁸ He stated that Mittelholzer's novels deliver less than they promise and are marred by "opulent self-indulgence", "mad logic" and a belief in "jungle justice". While Birbalsingh claimed: "Mittelholzer's genius is indisputable: his originality and inventiveness are peerless; his sense of drama wrenching; his evocation of landscape brilliant; and his intellectual curiosity diverting and entertaining"⁶⁹ these assertions are not backed up by the overall content of his article.

(Frances) Williams completed the first book length analysis of Mittelholzer's work in the form of a PhD entitled *Edgar Mittelholzer: Romancier Guyanais (1909-1965) – Voyage Au Coeur Du Monde, Voyage Au Coeur De L'Homme*.⁷⁰ Like Gilkes, Williams applied a psychoanalytical approach to her study of Mittelholzer's canon. She argued he had been psychologically damaged in the early years of his childhood by the racism his family had meted out on him.

Available at: <http://folk.uio.no/geirthe/Authoranthrop.html> (posted date unstated: site visited 10 October 2002) also available in Archetti, E. P. (ed.) *Exploring the Written* (Scandinavian University Press: Oslo, 1994).

⁶⁵ Gilkes, M. "Edgar Mittelholzer" in King, B. (ed) *West Indian Literature: Second Edition* (Macmillan Education Ltd: London, 1995) p. 128.

⁶⁶ Ibid; p. 132.

⁶⁷ Ibid; p. 133.

⁶⁸ Birbalsingh, F. "Edgar Mittelholzer: 1909-65" in *Kyk-Over-Al: 50th Anniversary Edition* (Vol. 46/47, December 1995) p. 82.

⁶⁹ Ibid; p. 88.

⁷⁰ Williams, F. *Edgar Mittelholzer: Romancier Guyanais (1909-1965) – Voyage Au Coeur Du Monde, Voyage Au Coeur De L'Homme* (Ph.D., Universite De Haute-Bretagne, Rennes: 1995/96).

Drawing upon the work of Franz Fanon she pointed out that to speak a language is to take on the culture of that particular world: “Parler une langue, c’est assumer un monde, une culture”⁷¹, and that Mittelholzer had manipulated the English language as masterfully as an Englishman. Williams like many earlier critics argued that his neurosis was reflected in his themes, that he immersed himself in European literature (in particular Nietzsche) and believed in race-based binary oppositions of strong white blood versus weak black blood.

Williams’s central claim is that the English-set novel *Uncle Paul* is key to understanding the author’s neurosis and offers the ultimate depiction of a man whose heart and soul had been tortured by his double heritage:

Nous avons mis à nu un cœur déchiré, torture, malade de ce double héritage qui inlassablement réapparaît, d’une façon ou d’une autre, à travers la totalité de son œuvre romanesque. L’homme est l’œuvre; l’œuvre est l’homme. Toute l’œuvre, même dans sa formation, est l’expression de cette double appartenance raciale.⁷²

According to Williams, Mittelholzer, the man and his novels are intimately interlinked with each other. It should be highlighted that Williams commenced her research on Mittelholzer in 1966 at a time when she was working in the English Department at the University of Guyana alongside Sparer and appears to have been heavily influenced by the attitude of her contemporaries toward Mittelholzer. That said Williams’s assessment is more sympathetic in approach. She importantly asserted Mittelholzer’s crisis of identity represented a historical fact and that the suffering expressed in his work was as a reflection of the colonial system that produced him: though a participant in that system, he had also been a victim and did not deserve to be marginalised. Her thesis has had limited impact in the English-speaking Caribbean territories presumably because it was written in French and is yet to be translated. A rendering of her work in

⁷¹ Ibid; p. 674.

⁷² Ibid; p. 672.

English appeared in 1996 in a short article, 'Through a Guyanese Lens, Brightly: Edgar Mittelholzer - *A Morning at the Office*'.⁷³

Wilson-Tagoe's "Novel as History" (1998), in drawing a comparison between Mittelholzer's Kaywana Trilogy and Reid's *New Day*, questioned if the past could be apprehended through the historical novel. She argued that the Kaywana Trilogy was written from the perspective of the "conqueror and master" and that: "Mittelholzer, throughout his recreations of Guianese history, links himself rather uncreatively with the ruling power, thus missing out on other aspects of the region's history which could have liberated him from fixations on power and identity".⁷⁴

The 2000s

Only a few academic papers of note have focused their attention on the novels of Mittelholzer in the first decade of the 21st century: Hira's "Reflections of History and Historical Imagination in Two West Indian Novels" (2000)⁷⁵, which offered a comparative analysis of Mittelholzer's *Corentyne Thunder* and Lamming's *In the Castle of My Skin*; (Frances) Williams' chapter on "Colonial Literature or Caribbean Orature" (2001)⁷⁶, which provided an analysis of Mittelholzer's *Creole Chips*; Brown's "A Contrary Tradition: Edgar Mittelholzer's West Indian Literature" which forms part of a larger PhD project, *Occidental Drift: London, Modernism, and Politics of Form in Early West Indian Fiction* (2006)⁷⁷; and (Sandra) Williams' "Greed can Kill" from her MA dissertation, *Destruction of the Caribbean Landscape Through Colonization in Edgar Mittelholzer's Corentyne Thunder, Jean Rhys' Wide Sargasso Sea, and Wilson*

⁷³ Williams, F. "Through a Guyanese Lens, Brightly: Edgar Mittelholzer – A Morning At The Office" in *SAHIB* (No 4 Pressen Universitaires Rennaises: RENNES; March 1996) pp. 249-265.

⁷⁴ Wilson-Tagoe, N. "The Novel as History" in *Historical Thought and Literary Representation in West Indian Literature* (James Currey: Oxford, 1998) p. 43.

⁷⁵ Hira, H. "Reflections of History and Historical Imagination in Two West Indian Novels" in *Stanislaus Journal of Research* (California State University: Vol. 5: No. 1, Fall 2000) pp. 19-23.

⁷⁶ Williams, F. "Colonial Literature or Caribbean Orature? Creole Chips by Edgar Mittelholzer" in Bardolph, J (ed.) *Telling Stories: Postcolonial Short Fiction in English* (Amsterdam / Atlanta: Rodolphi, 2001) pp. 129-143.

⁷⁷ Dillon Brown, J. "A Contrary Tradition: Edgar Mittelholzer's West Indian Literature" in *Occidental Drift: London, Modernism, and the Politics of Form in Early West Indian Fiction* (Ph.D., University of Pennsylvania: USA, 2006) pp. 49-97

Harris's Palace of the Peacock (2010)⁷⁸. All four take a markedly more positive stance toward Mittelholzer's work. Brown's analysis, for instance, drew upon articles Mittelholzer had written during the 1950s for the Barbados Advocate and in so doing convincingly demonstrated that the author's views, contrary to numerous accusations of racism and fascism, were progressive.

METHODOLOGY

The methodology of this thesis has been based on a series of preliminary observations. Birbalsingh has asserted that Mittelholzer's work was sub-literary because of the limitations of his colonial upbringing: "In a world of colonial estrangement his literary heritage chiefly consisted of the Bible, *The Pilgrim's Progress*, stories of Buffalo Bill, *The Union Jack*, Victorian Penny dreadfuls of the Nelson Lee and Sexton Blake Libraries, Clive Bell's *Civilization*, and the ghost stories of M. R. James".⁷⁹ This view appears to have been drawn from the author's autobiography, *A Swarthy Boy* as many of these texts are referred to therein. His assertions, given that the autobiography ends in 1928, when Mittelholzer is only 19 years old, appears to be misplaced. According to Lionel Luckhoo – Mittelholzer's one-time neighbour and close friend – the author was a prolific reader with access in Georgetown to the novels of widely acclaimed European authors.⁸⁰

The seriousness with which he read these texts can be deduced from Mittelholzer's comments in a letter addressed to the American photographer, novelist and patron of the Harlem Renaissance, Carl van Vechten:

The two books you sent me...arrived safely some days ago, and at odd moments during the past few evenings I've been reading the first named. This is how I

⁷⁸ Williams, S. "Greed can Kill" in *Destruction of the Caribbean Landscape Through Colonization in Edgar Mittelholzer's Corentyne Thunder, Jean Rhys' Wide Sargasso Sea, and Wilson Harris's Palace of the Peacock* (M.A., East Carolina University: USA, 2010).

⁷⁹ Birbalsingh, F. "Edgar Mittelholzer: Moralist or Pornographer?" in *Journal of Commonwealth Literature* (Heinemann Educational Books: Vol. 7, July 1969) p. 98.

⁸⁰ Luckhoo, L. "Edgar M – A Giant" in *Sunday Chronicle* (Georgetown, 25th November 1979) p. 10.

read every book, for I hate skipping and skimming, and insist on digesting and dissecting everything I read.⁸¹

Whilst it may be an exaggeration for Mittelholzer to state that this is how he read every book, it importantly indicates that he 'studied' literature and thereby engaged with it on a deep, critical level. It is possible to extrapolate from Mittelholzer's remarks in the preface of his novel, *Thunder Returning* (1961) that he had believed some readers would apply the same degree of intellectual seriousness to his novels: "... I had hoped that some readers would be interested to *study* as well as read the books."⁸² On the topic of one of his short stories he similarly notes: "It's the sort of thing a Freudian student would like to munch on."⁸³

In a letter to Mittelholzer about his novel, *Shadows Move Among Them* (1951), Leonard Woolf observes with some dismay: "...you are so interested in putting across your thesis that you make your characters preach and that when you do, they go dead".⁸⁴ As arguments over the content of this novel ensued, Mittelholzer remained firm in his decision not to make amendments, noting that whilst the attitudes of the book were considered offensive: "They were **my** attitudes".⁸⁵ Writing in 1952 Mittelholzer similarly explains:

I like indulging my moods. [...] I might even go so far as to say that I consider it a good thing to be self-opinionated; to be more influenced by one's own individual summings-up on people and things than by the finding of others. [...] I am speaking to the writer who lives his ideas, who respects his own opinions and is

⁸¹ Letter dated 20th July 1953 held at the Beinecke Rare Books & Manuscript Library (Ref: Carl Van Vechten Correspondence) – 10 unpublished letters between Mittelholzer & Carl Van Vechten held at Yale University.

⁸² Mittelholzer, E. *Thunder Returning* (Secker & Warburg: London, 1961) p. 6.

⁸³ See letter dated 3rd January 1950 from Mittelholzer to Swanzy in Henry Swanzy Collection (Ref: Box 1: MS42 1945-1952) held at the University of Birmingham.

⁸⁴ See unpublished letter from Leonard Woolf to Mittelholzer dated 10th January 1950 in Leonard Woolf Archives (Ref: LWP Part III General Correspondence / M – held at Sussex University).

⁸⁵ Ives, J. *The Idyll and the Warrior: Recollections of Edgar Mittelholzer* (unpublished and in the possession of Mrs J. Ives) p. 83.

determined if the heavens cave in, to say what, deep in his heart – or in his reason – he feels to be the truth about people and things.⁸⁶

Given the consistency of the author's themes and preoccupations, there is little doubt that his attitudes, beliefs and preoccupations provide the dominant tone of his literary canon. As George Lamming was to note: "The person and the performer you call writer were inseparable."⁸⁷ Further support for this assertion lies in a letter the author wrote to *The Times Literary Supplement* in 1961:

Sir, - Had your reviewer, in your issue of November 24, been less hasty in his perusal of my novel, *The Piling of the Clouds*, he would have discovered that I made it clear though obliquely that the views expressed by my hero were my own. (Page 66- "...we know it's supposed to be the character thinking these things, but behind it hovers the author. You haven't got to be so naïve as to believe it's all been written with the complete detachment of the artist...")⁸⁸

Many of Mittelholzer's novels are self-referential and point to the author's presence, opinions or *modus operandi*. The most intriguing self-reflexive comments suggest that the author's novels are written with a private objective in mind. In *A Twinkling in the Twilight*, key protagonist, Brian Liddard observes:

Whatever I put down at any given sitting, for better or for indiscrete must stand. It must constitute a sort of diary entry, reflecting my state of being at the time of writing. To revise it afterwards would amount to an act of dishonesty – a falsification – and would upset the purpose I have in view.⁸⁹

What then is the purpose that Mittelholzer had in mind? A letter dated 20th July 1950 from Mittelholzer to Swanzy indicates one of his objectives was to use literature as a means of discovering his 'True Self':

⁸⁶ Mittelholzer, E. "Literary Criticism and the Creative Writer" in A. J. Seymour (ed) *Kyk-Over-Al* (Vol. 5, No. 15; Year-end 1952) pp. 19-20.

⁸⁷ Lamming, G. "But Alas Edgar" in *New World Quarterly: Guyana Independence Issue* (Vol. 2, No. 3; 1966) p. 19.

⁸⁸ Mittelholzer, E. "The Piling of the Clouds" in *The Times Literary Supplement* (London Printing House Square: 1st December 1961; No. 3118) p. 865.

⁸⁹ Mittelholzer, E. *A Twinkling in the Twilight* (Secker & Warburg: London, 1959) p. 10.

Here is a poem which I wrote since 1947 and recently unearthed. What interested me about it chiefly was to discover that my philosophy had undergone no change whatever; in those days I could not clearly have defined my outlook, but this poem proves that beneath my rather muddled state lay all the unbudded ideas which have now begun to reveal themselves in my work: especially in *THE SIBILANT AND LOST* and *SHADOWS MOVE AMONG THEM*, my new novel.⁹⁰

Other evidence to suggest that writing served a personal function can be found in a comment that Mittelholzer made to A J Seymour about the eponymous *Uncle Paul*: “[he is] really an intensive character study of myself – though only I will know that.”⁹¹ This indicates too that Mittelholzer’s novels operated on various complex levels. While he wrote on the one hand to entertain, inform and educate his readers (as will be highlighted where relevant throughout the thesis), it is clear that he also wrote with private objectives in mind.

In *The Jilkington Drama* (1965) Lilli Friedlander remarks on the many strange comments of the central character, Garvin Jilkington. In response, the latter states: “To you – yes. Strange. But to me there is no strangeness in anything I say. I see my own pictures in detail, Lilli. I know what every detail means.”⁹² These details cannot be shared with Lilli or indeed the reader because: “The terms of reference aren’t there.”⁹³ Garvin does however point out that:

I can convey fragments of this picture to you. [...] I’ve already been doing that, now I come to think of it. These strange things you say I’ve been telling you. These are the fragments. The details. If you were clever enough to be able to fit them together in the right jigsaw fashion you’d be able to see the picture as a whole. But you couldn’t. No one could. Even the most perceptive genius.⁹⁴

⁹⁰ See letter dated 20th July 1950 in Henry Swanzy (Caribbean Voices) Collection (Ref: Box 1: MS42 1945-1952) held at the University of Birmingham.

⁹¹ Seymour, A. “Edgar Mittelholzer: The Man and His Works” in *The 1967 Edgar Mittelholzer Memorial Lectures – First Series* (Georgetown, National History and Arts Council, 1968) p. 17.

⁹² Mittelholzer, E. *The Jilkington Drama* (Abelard-Schuman: London, 1965) p. 56.

⁹³ Ibid; p. 56.

⁹⁴ Ibid; p. 56.

Published posthumously, *The Jilkington Drama* underscores on one level the problems associated with attempting to discern authorial intention and echoes the problem of incomprehension that Mittelholzer faced. To quote Michael Swan: “there is no one who can talk his language”.⁹⁵ But Garvin’s remarks subtly challenge the critic – “If you were clever enough” – to undertake the task of decoding the more obscure aspects of the overall canon so as to identify an esoteric pattern of meaning.

Given that writing is for Mittelholzer an act of self-expression (and sometimes too of self-projection) this thesis draws on Georges Poulet’s⁹⁶ belief that: “criticism must...begin in an act of renunciation in which the critic empties his mind of its personal qualities so that it may coincide completely with the consciousness expressed in the words of the author. [...] The ‘intimacy’ necessary for criticism...is not possible unless the thought of the critic becomes the thought of the author criticized, unless it succeeds in re-feeling, in re-thinking, in re-imagining the author’s thought from the inside [...]”.⁹⁷ The methodology thus involves close analysis and an *attempt* to ‘listen’ to the author. This necessitated extensive research into the author’s private memorabilia, personal correspondence, author-publisher correspondence, non-fictional writings and so forth. An attempt has also been made to explore the history of individual novels so as to gain a better understanding of Mittelholzer’s relationship with the publishing industry and to establish if this approach offers particular insights into the author’s literary objectives.

The attempt to establish authorial intention may be viewed as controversial given Barthes’ assertions in “The Death of the Author”: “to use the figure of the author to stabilize meaning is to join modern, Western society’s attempt to present itself in possession of a singular, unified and indisputable

⁹⁵ Swan, M. *British Guiana: The Land of Six Peoples* (Her Majesty’s Stationery Office, London, 1957) p. 122.

⁹⁶ George Poulet is associated with the Geneva School of Criticism.

⁹⁷ Goring, P., Hawthorn, J., & Mitchell, D. *Studying Literature: The Essential Companion* (Arnold: London, 2001) p. 157.

meaning or Truth”.⁹⁸ But Barthes’ celebration of plurality and the infinite play of meaning were rooted in the determination to free literature from the dominant cultural ideologies of the white Western male. To reject biography as a tool for anchoring meaning in the case of a marginalised Caribbean writer like Mittelholzer would conversely hinder the critic’s appreciation of the author, his novels and achievements. The problem occurs not when biography is used to anchor meaning, but when ill-founded assumptions are made about an author’s ideological positioning.

As the critical responses to Mittelholzer’s work show, an author’s text can lead to a wide range of interpretations: so that while the parameters of interpretation are to some extent determined by the selection and order of words, ‘meaning’ requires the collaborative involvement of the reader.⁹⁹ Given that the signified is unstable, as Barthes and Derrida have noted - becoming the potential signified of something else ad infinitum – it is the individual reader who determines its ultimate significance.¹⁰⁰ Whilst language is based on shared conventions of meaning its significance is nuanced by differences in historical juncture, class positioning, political agenda, cultural background, ethnicity, religion and so forth. Often-inherited narratives about an author can also affect these readings. It is hoped therefore extensive research into Mittelholzer’s personal life and upbringing, middle class background, historical juncture and career will aid the ‘listening’ process and help to prevent this thesis from making interpretations that are insupportable or that stretch credibility.

This thesis also takes its methodological cues from two structuralists: Gerard Genette and Michael Riffaterre, who employ intertextual theory as a means of anchoring meaning within literary texts but in different ways. Michael Riffaterre asserts that intertextuality is related to a novel’s literariness: “Intertextuality is ...the mechanism specific to literary reading. It alone, in fact produces *significance*, while linear reading, common to literary and non-literary

⁹⁸ Allen, G. *Roland Barthes* (Routledge: London and New York, 2003) p. 74.

⁹⁹ See Goring, P., Hawthorn, J., & Mitchell, D. *Studying Literature: The Essential Companion* (Arnold: London, 2001) p. 159.

¹⁰⁰ Allen, G. *Roland Barthes* (Routledge: London and New York, 2003) p. 79.

texts, produces only meaning [my italics].”¹⁰¹ But while Riffaterre generally explores these relationships in terms of microstructures, at the level of a sentence or short text, this thesis intends to explore intertextual significance primarily in terms of its relevance to Mittelholzer’s novels as a structural whole. Genette talks more broadly in *Palimpsests* of ‘transtextuality’ and defines this as “all that sets the text in relationship, whether obvious or concealed, with other texts.”¹⁰² Genette identifies five types of transtextual relationship, one mode of which Mittelholzer, as will be demonstrated, regularly adopts: namely ‘metatextuality’. This latter form of transtextuality differs from intertextuality in that it relates to the *discursive* position one text takes in relation to another (sometimes without even naming it).¹⁰³

One benefit of tracing Mittelholzer’s intertextual references are the unique glimpses it offers into his intellectual world and an understanding of the dominant discourses that had an impact (conscious and unconscious) on his own literary output. The possibility of re-constructing the author’s thoughts and responses to hegemonic discourse becomes even more viable when combined with an understanding of his historical period, of his personal life and professional career. That said it was inevitably impossible given the size of the author’s literary output to identify, read and determine the relevance of all of the intertexts that appear in the Mittelholzer canon.

The Internet, in providing quick access to synopses of the published works referred to in Mittelholzer’s novels, played an invaluable role in the identification of texts for closer examination. Though frequent mention is made in Mittelholzer’s novels to the poems of T S Eliot, the Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam, J. G. Frazer’s *Golden Bough* it soon seemed likely, for instance, that these texts were primarily invoked - in common with random references to books like Lucille Iremonger’s *The Ghosts of Versailles* and Han Suyin’s *The Mountain is Young* - to highlight the wealth of external support for Mittelholzer’s occultist

¹⁰¹ Riffaterre’s definition of, and approach to, intertextuality is outlined in Genette, G. *Palimpsests: Literature in the Second Degree* (University of Nebraska Press: Nebraska, 1997) p. 2.

¹⁰² Ibid; p. 1.

¹⁰³ Ibid; p. 4.

beliefs. The selection was narrowed by a focus on texts, which the author was metatextually commenting on, or which revealed the foundational source of his beliefs (for instance Yogi Ramacharaka's texts on Oriental Occultism). Other intertexts that go unmentioned in his work were conversely read because - referred to in his correspondence (for instance Lillian Smith's *Strange Fruit*) or said to have been a favourite book of the author's (e.g., Nietzsche's *Thus Spake Zarathustra*) - they appeared to have significantly influenced the trajectory of one or more of Mittelholzer's novels.

It should be noted that no conscious effort is being made to psychoanalyse the author. However as Mittelholzer had been interested in the works of Freud and had put some of his ideas to literary use, an awareness of Freudian theory was sometimes necessary particularly when metatextually referred to. Explanatory notes are offered where necessary. The concept of Romanticism is also variously alluded to, in particular via characters that bear a Romantic sensibility. The aesthetic precepts of this movement are clarified as and when necessary.

A SUMMARY OF THE CHAPTERS TO FOLLOW

Chapter Two of this thesis offers insights into Mittelholzer: the man, the writer and his career. It explores the publication history of his novels in relation to the juncture in which they were actually written and/or conceived. This textual history is divided into two sections: novels set in a Caribbean locale and those set in England. The second half of this chapter offers a broad overview of Mittelholzer's career from his beginnings in New Amsterdam through to his death in 1965. It highlights some of the key factors that shaped his literary aspirations, the pioneering and radical nature of his literary ambition; the nature of his success following the publication of *A Morning At the Office*, the significant role his novels played as a platform from which to discuss the future of Caribbean literature and the major contributions he made to the BBC's *Caribbean Voices* programme. Close attention is also paid to the events that led up to the author's sense of estrangement from the Caribbean. Major turning points in his

life are highlighted including the reasons for his growing lack of popularity in the latter part of his career. It ends with a summary of Mittelholzer's idiosyncrasies and a call to remember the author by drawing on the opinions of those who actually knew him.

Chapter Three begins by remarking upon Mittelholzer's stated approach to writing: his rejection of mimicry, pastiche, cliché and conformity. Two key texts – *A Morning at the Office* and *Corentyne Thunder* – are closely analysed with a view to demonstrating how the author engaged with the canon of Western literature, while transforming and manipulating it to suit his own complex aims. The first half of the chapter focuses on the allegorical story of 'The Jen' in *A Morning at the Office* and explores its relationship to the *Arabian Nights* Tale of "The Fisherman and The Jinnee". It considers the interpretations of earlier critics and demonstrates how a multifarious approach to Mittelholzer's life and works clarifies meaning, helps to anchor the slippery territory of authorial intention and opens up the text to deeper interpretation. It explores how the Jen and the Jinnee are complexly associated with names and/or terms that are onomastically contiguous; used and developed within the Mittelholzer canon as a private code to connote (amongst other things) aspects of the real spiritual self, 'Truth' and 'Reality'. It suggests that the story of "The Jen" was presented as a prototype upon which a Caribbean literary aesthetic could be developed. This chapter also demonstrates how intertextuality is used by the author as a means of readdressing negative representations of race. The latter half of the chapter focuses primarily on the intertextual references in *Corentyne Thunder* and reveals how the subversive underbelly of the text speaks back to Western texts. This section also highlights the danger of indiscriminately reading as 'biography', events that take place in Mittelholzer's novels. It ends by looking at how the story of "The Jen" sheds retrospective light on the seditious role of the character Jannee in *Corentyne Thunder*.

Chapter Four focuses exclusively on *The Life and Death of Sylvia* and is presented as an analytical template for future research into Mittelholzer's novels. It starts by highlighting the disparity between the date of initial

composition in 1945 and its eventual publication in 1953 and asks questions about the possible impact of this temporal disjunction. It outlines the novel's critical reception in order to highlight the broad range of responses to the novel from highly negative to high praise. It explores Mittelholzer's knowledge of the novel's Georgetown setting; the aspects of his personality that enabled him to transcend the snobbery of his coloured middle class background and to offer in *Sylvia* an authentic representation of its demographical diversity. It demonstrates that one of the novel's aims is to give voice to the marginalised and oppressed women of 1930s Georgetown. In order to add context to the novel's setting a summary of Guiana's colonial history is outlined. This chapter remarks on how Mittelholzer's subversive manipulation of the traditional Bildungsroman becomes a metaphor for his key protagonists unwillingness to conform to social conventions. The remainder of the chapter explores Mittelholzer's response to literary representations of the tragic mulatto and demonstrates how he uses this as a means through which to showcase radically sophisticated aesthetic techniques. It analyses the multilayered metaphorical structures that permeate the novel and explores the radical function of key themes: race, sex, music and death.

Chapter Five explores the significance of the author's self-declared themes of 'religion and sex'. It begins with an examination of the author's 'religious' background: his Christian upbringing, his interest in Guianese tales of the supernatural and his 'conversion' to Oriental Occultism. It demonstrates how Mittelholzer's 'sex' theme is informed by three distinct threads of thought: sex as a natural response to the physical demands of the human body; Christian doctrine (e.g., sex is sin) as the primary cause of sexual repression and Oriental Occultism as a form of spiritual faith that allows for a healthier relationship with the sexual demands of the body. The central section of this chapter perceives Mittelholzer in the role of a 'Preacher Man'. It focuses on the relevance of the religious texts that are referred to in his novels - in particular those written by the Oriental Occultist, Yogi Ramacharaka - and it demonstrates how eclectic Hindu and Buddhist beliefs have informed various sub-themes in Mittelholzer's work: the notion that there is no God, that nature provides the laws that should

govern our lives, that life is brutal, and that death is nothing to be feared for man is eternal. It also reveals that the roots of Mittelholzer's right wing attitudes are religious and not political, and explains why his belief in the psychic leads to his disdain for psychoanalytical theory. The final section explores the claims that have been made about Mittelholzer's preoccupation with binary oppositions and in particular his spirit versus flesh theme. It reveals that this theme is underpinned by the spiritual objective of transcending illusory notions of duality and demonstrates how Oriental Occultist texts and ideas have inspired the author's creative imagination. The concluding section demonstrates how a wide variety of myths fed into Mittelholzer's fascination with 'spirit as fire' and came to inform the type of death (self-immolation) that both he and the key protagonist of his posthumous novel, *The Jilkington Drama*, chose.

Chapter Six addresses the issue of Mittelholzer's 'racial' identity by first considering what, according to his own account, he is not. It traces his shifting perception of self and then explores the ways in which his desire to transcend the delimiting nature of racial classifications are expressed in his novels. This involves an analysis of the complex means by which the author was able to address Caribbean issues of identity (Who are you?) whilst employing esoteric codes that enabled him to create a private mythology around the potency of mixed-blood (fire-blood). It explores the form and function of the heroic reincarnations of the Jen in novels like *My Bones and My Flute* and the Kaywana trilogy. It demonstrates as entirely false the claim that Mittelholzer believed in the Old World conceptualisation of race as white-good-strong versus black-bad-weak. It argues that his belief in the brotherhood of man was thwarted by the outside world's insistence on 'choosing sides', on notions of nationhood and loyalty. It explores his aspirations for the Black-Caribbean community and his growing affinity with his German ancestry. This chapter also explores how Mittelholzer's crisis of confidence in the early 1960s led to a reconsideration of the 'tragic mulatto' motif (termed in this chapter, 'tragic manqué') in the form of *Uncle Paul*. The analysis reveals that 'pure' blood is not associated with superiority but rather mediocrity. His character's failings are attributed to his peculiar mix of genes and not to the genes of mixed race people in general. The

chapter ends by asking if Mittelholzer is a racist and concludes that what matters is the fact that he sought to free himself, his characters and his community from 'mental slavery'.

Chapter Seven concludes with an overview of the thesis and gives consideration to the value of its findings, while making suggestions for other areas of research.

CHAPTER TWO

THE MAN, THE WRITER AND HIS CAREER

[B]earing in mind the limitations of the society which produced him, and the pioneer nature of his tremendous single-mindedness and discipline, I feel Edgar Mittelholzer must take a high place indeed in the history of our young literature of Guyana and the Caribbean.¹ (A J Seymour 1968)

INTRODUCTION

The nature of Mittelholzer's career – pioneering, controversial and marred by numerous episodes of bad luck – needs to be delineated because of the key role Mittelholzer played as a writer at the nascent juncture of Caribbean and perhaps more importantly Guianese literature. It should be noted that the sole novel to be written and published by a Guianese² prior to Mittelholzer's, was A R F Webber's *Those that be in Bondage* (1917). This chapter aims to demonstrate that he was a highly significant figure in the development of Caribbean literature and a major inspiration to other would-be writers in the region. It also aims to highlight possible reasons for Mittelholzer's gradual alienation from regional affairs and address the latter end of his life, when his books had largely fallen out of favour.

The delineation of Mittelholzer's career will be preceded by a publication history of his novels in relation to when they were actually written and conceived as well as in terms of their settings in the Caribbean versus those in England. It is useful for a variety of reasons to think of Mittelholzer's novels as falling into these two separate categories. At an obvious level his Caribbean-set novels were published prior to the publication of his English-set novels with only

¹ Cited in Popkin, M. (ed) "Mittelholzer, Edgar (1909-1965)" in *A Library of Literary Criticism: Modern Black Writers* (Frederick Ungar Publishing Co: New York, 1978) p. 304

² Webber was born in Tobago in 1880 before moving to British Guiana in 1889. Though generally considered a son of B.G., he is notably also claimed by Trinidad. His novel was published in British Guiana.

two exceptions: *The Weather in Middenshot* (1952) and *A Tinkling in the Twilight* (1959) and are to some extent reflective of different phases in the author's life. This distinction seems appropriate too, in terms of discussions beyond this thesis. While it is likely that an interest in Mittelholzer's Caribbean-set novels can be reinvigorated by new/different critical approaches the same cannot be said of his English-set novels. The former novels (in particular *Corentyne Thunder*, *A Morning at the Office*, *The Life and Death of Sylvia* and *Shadows Move Among Them*) remain of socio-historical interest to the Caribbean and deserving of re-publication. The latter English-set novels are limited in their appeal given their overt preoccupation with British society and their (in most cases) sub-literary 'preachiness' on the topics of criminality and Oriental Occultism.

PUBLICATION HISTORY

The Prolific Novelist

Mittelholzer has been recognised for being the first professional novelist to emerge out of the English-speaking Caribbean: partially made possible by his high rate of productivity.³ His facility was not always viewed positively: reviews implied a high quantity output was suggestive of superficiality. His publication rate – 21 novels in the space of 15 years⁴ – combined with his penchant for melodrama, persuaded many reviewers that he was a hack whose work need not be taken seriously. Some critics similarly concluded, for aligned reasons, that he favoured entertainment over more serious literary considerations. Many reviewers remained unaware that several of Mittelholzer's novels languished unpublished for years and existed in different versions before eventually being published.⁵ Despite his productivity, it should be noted that most of his Caribbean-set novels date back in one way or another to the pre-1950s period.

³ Mendes records that he could fill 30 pages of foolscap a day. See Levy, M. (ed.) *The Autobiography of Alfred H. Mendes, 1897-1991* (University of the West Indies Press: Trinidad & Tobago, 2002) p. 133.

⁴ He published 21 novels between 1950 and 1965 as well as a novella, *The Adding Machine* (1954); a travel journal, *With A Carib Eye* (1958); and an autobiography, *A Swarthy Boy* (1963).

⁵ A point that is briefly hinted at in Collymore, F. "Edgar Mittelholzer: A Biographical Sketch" in *BIM* (Vol. 10, June-Dec. 1965) p. 23 when he notes that some of the novels published in London post 1950 had been written during Mittelholzer's sojourn in Trinidad.

More importantly some on closer (critical) analysis reveal extraordinary depths and complexities that are not always immediately obvious. That his works vary in quality is not in dispute here: *Eltonsbrody* and *Uncle Paul* stand out as peculiarly ill-conceived novels. For practical reasons, Mittelholzer sometimes interspersed his 'serious' novels with more light-hearted, less sophisticated ones. When it became obvious, for instance, that it may take time to find a publisher for *The Life and Death of Sylvia*, Mittelholzer informed Collymore: "In the meantime, of course, I have to live, so I shall turn out one or two horror-thrillers to get myself established."⁶

Toward the end of his career (in 1962), Mittelholzer claimed the level of seriousness found in his novels varied according to his mood, at the time of writing:

[...] my serious books must always be threaded through with my own individual philosophy. // It takes this form: Life, I feel, functions on the principle (whether we like it or not) that the strong overcomes the weak; this is true of every form of life. Human society, through an over-civilising process, tends at a certain stage to jettison the essential virtues of strength and discipline, and this results not only in decadence but in eventual defeat and annihilation. Hence I preach: only through strength and discipline can we be saved. // There come moments when I feel I must take a holiday from 'seriousness' and then I plunge into a book that is more or less a lightweight attempt at fantasy or comedy or mystery or the supernatural (to wit, *OF TREES AND THE SEA*, *MY BONES AND MY FLUTE*, *A TINKLING IN THE TWILIGHT*, *THE WEATHER FAMILY* and *ELTONSBRODY*).⁷

He listed as serious novels those that were "sociological" and "sociological-philosophical": *A Morning at the Office*, *The Life and Death of Sylvia*, *A Tale of Three Places*, *Shadows Move Among Them*, the Kaywana trilogy, *The Weather in Middenshot*, *The Mad MacMullocks*, *The Piling of the Clouds* and *The Wounded at the Worried*. Between 1962 and 1965 Mittelholzer published an autobiography,

⁶ Letter dated 29th January 1946 in *Frank Collymore Collection* (Ref: Letters from Mittelholzer to Collymore) held in the Department of Archives, Barbados.

⁷ Mittelholzer, E. "The Intellectual Cissies" in *Books and Bookmen* (Hansom Books: London, August 1962) p. 21.

A Swarthy Boy and three further novels: *Uncle Paul*, *The Jilkington Drama* and *The Aloneness of Mrs Chatman*. Of these, it is *The Aloneness of Mrs Chatham*, that Mittelholzer considered the most important: "It's my most important novel to date, for in it I've expressed what I feel not only about contemporary society but also about my beliefs in the Occult (Yoga)."⁸ This latter quote importantly indicates that the older-Mittelholzer made a distinction between his serious and trivial novels based on content rather than on their literary merits.

Novels set in a Caribbean-Locale

Mittelholzer is said by Dr Louis Bone to have sold *Corentyne Thunder* (1941) in serial form via Davson's bookstore in 1938, where the author worked for a short period.⁹ Though this claim has not been corroborated, it is known Mittelholzer submitted the first 30,000 words to a writing competition in that year. He did not win the competition, but was offered a publishing deal on the proviso the completed novel was as good. This offer was later retracted. In 1939, Mittelholzer received another offer with the aid of a literary agent, this time from Thornton Butterworth. They however went into liquidation. *Corentyne Thunder* was eventually published in 1941 after Eyre and Spottiswoode bought the rights to the stocks of the liquidated company (having lost most of their own stock in the blitz).¹⁰

Though his second novel did not appear until 1950, it is clear that he carried on writing in the interim years. *Eltonsbrody*, a novel that was not published until 1960 was, for instance, inspired by a short visit to the Scotland District of Barbados in March 1944.¹¹ By December 1945, according to a letter he wrote to Collymore, he was already in the process of re-writing *Eltonsbrody*

⁸ See letter dated 15th June 1962 in Ruth Wilkinson Collection (private ownership): Letters from Mittelholzer to Ruth Wilkinson (circa March 1941 – 15th June 1962).

⁹ See Cox, J. 'Introduction' in Mittelholzer, E. *Corentyne Thunder* (Peepal Tree Press: Leeds, 2009 [1941]) p. 6.

¹⁰ See James, L. 'Introduction' in Mittelholzer, E. *Corentyne Thunder* (Heinemann: London, 1970).

¹¹ According to Guckhian he lodged in Crumpton Street in Bridgetown during this 1944 trip. On his return to Barbados in 1946 he stayed in Oistins. See Guckhian, P. *Failure in Exile: A Critical Study of the Works of Edgar Mittelholzer* (University of West Indies: Barbados, 1970) p. 46.

and hoped to have it “complete...in another three or four weeks”.¹² The novel must have been subjected to further changes as the published version is set in the late 1950s and makes historically pertinent references to Khrushchev¹³ (a political figure who was Premier of the Soviet Union between 1958 and 1964). In the same letter Mittelholzer referred to another already completed novel – “There’s no word yet of The Story of Sylvia. Harper’s have now had it eight weeks clear...”.¹⁴ But *The Life and Death of Sylvia* as it was eventually entitled remained unpublished until 1953.

In 1946, Mittelholzer informed Collymore about the progress of a gothic tale based on a trip he had made to “the jungle of the Berbice River” in 1933.¹⁵ A version of this tale, *My Bones and My Flute* (1955) had been written two years earlier in 1944:

I’m doing....something I really enjoy - a novel set on the Berbice River (the locale of SHADOWS); it is a ghost story but with sharply delineated characters and lavish atmospheric effects (in the old-fashioned manner). It’s really a revision of something I did years ago [in 1944], and is called MY BONES AND MY FLUTE.¹⁶

Shadows Move Among Them (1951), was clearly influenced by the same Berbice River trip of 1933¹⁷, and more speculatively by the views of a naturalist, J E D Watkins¹⁸ whom Mittelholzer had met in England circa 1948/1949. Since Mittelholzer sought Leonard Woolf’s opinions of it in December 1949, he had in

¹² Collymore states that *Eltonsbrody* was written in the 1940s, but revised by Mittelholzer some years later. See Collymore, F. “Edgar Mittelholzer: A Biographical Sketch” in *BIM* (Vol. 10, June-Dec. 1965) p. 25.

¹³ Mittelholzer, E. *Eltonsbrody* (Secker & Warburg: London, 1960) p. 7.

¹⁴ See *Frank Collymore Collection* – Letter dated 3rd December 1945.

¹⁵ *Ibid*; Letter dated 26th April 1946.

¹⁶ See letter dated 23rd June 1954 (and another dated 9th July 1954 which states that the novel was originally written in 1944) in the *Carl van Vechten* Collection held in the Beinecke Rare Books & Manuscript Library, Yale University.

¹⁷ Guckian notes that Mittelholzer travelled on aboard the Arawana in 1933 in order to visit his Uncle at Coomaka and that the ‘Bucks’ of Berkelhoost are the Indians of Coomaka. See Guckhian, P. *Failure in Exile: A Critical Study of the Works of Edgar Mittelholzer* (University of West Indies: Barbados, 1970) Appendix 1.

¹⁸ Mittelholzer became an active naturalist when he befriended two avant-garde professional couples in joint ownership of The North Kent Sun Club in 1948, a private commune that advocated social nudity. He was able to discuss highly unconventional ideas with them and in particular J E D Watkins.

all probability completed it earlier that year. *A Morning at the Office* (1950) was written sometime between 1946 and February 1948, whilst working alongside Mendes as a clerk in the Port Services Department.¹⁹ His less well-known novella of 20,000 words, *The Adding Machine* (1954) was written even earlier sometime between June 1942 and January 1943.²⁰ Even the *Kaywana* trilogy, which involved many years of research, was at the very least, conceived in the 1930s/40s:

I'm hard at work on a big historical novel [that] is the first of a trilogy. All the research work was done years ago when I was in B.G. [i.e., pre 1941] and now it's merely a matter of doing the spade work of writing.²¹

Furthermore, although part three of *A Tale of Three Places* (1956), which is set in St Lucia, and was presumably written after a trip Mittelholzer made to the island in December 1954, parts one and two, set respectively in Trinidad and England, were commenced around April 1948 and neared completion in December of that year.²² Indeed had both local and global conditions in the 1940s been different Mittelholzer would hypothetically speaking have provided the link between the older generation of Caribbean writers (e.g., C L R James and Alfred Mendes) and those who appeared alongside him during the literary movement of the 1950s.²³

Of his published Caribbean-set novels only four - *The Mad MacMullochs* (1959), *The Weather Family* (1958), *Latticed Echoes* (1960) and *Thunder Returning* (1961) - appear to have been written after the 1940s period. It should be noted that *The Mad MacMullochs*²⁴, actually completed in 1953²⁵, was

¹⁹ Levy, M. (ed.) *The Autobiography of Alfred H. Mendes, 1897-1991* (University of the West Indies Press: Trinidad & Tobago, 2002) p. 133.

²⁰ Seymour, A. *Edgar Mittelholzer: The Man and His Works* (The Edgar Mittelholzer Memorial Lectures – First Series: Georgetown, 1968) p. 13.

²¹ See Henry Swanzy Collection at the University of Birmingham – Letter dated 20th October 1950.

²² See Frank Collymore Collection – Letters dated 3rd April 1948 & 8th December 1948.

²³ As Lamming stated Mittelholzer belonged to a “different generation” from writers like him and Selvon. See Donnell, A. & Lawson Welsh, S. *The Routledge Reader in Caribbean Literature* (Routledge: London, 1996) p. 257.

²⁴ Mittelholzer was advised against publishing this novel in 1953 by Secker and Warburg, and again in 1954 by The John Day Company: it was believed it would damage his reputation.

²⁵ See letter dated 20th April 1959 in *A J Seymour Collection* at the University of Guyana and the letter dated 6th August 1953 from Mittelholzer to Richard Walsh - “I have completed THE MAD

first published under the pseudonym H. Austin Woodsley. Though set in Barbados, it is almost certainly inspired by two secluded naturist communes that Mittelholzer had frequented in England between 1948 and 1952: The North Kent Sun Club and Sheplegh Court.²⁶ *The Weather Family* is more obviously a response to Mittelholzer's first-hand encounter with the 1955 Hurricane Janet and therefore written sometime between then and its publication three years later. *Latticed Echoes* and *Thunder Returning* were both partially inspired by a brief visit to British Guiana in 1956 and originally planned as a trilogy. He did not, however, begin writing *Latticed Echoes* (provisionally entitled 'Problems and Moods') until December 1958:

What I'm busy on at the moment is an Experiment, Arthur. (Note the capital E) [...] I started early in December [1958], and re-wrote the first 10 or 12 pages about five times before I got them just as I thought I wanted. [...] You see, the trouble is that I'm in the process of inventing a new literary technique for the novel (please keep this under your hat, will you?) It is the Leitmotiv technique.²⁷

By 1st April 1959 the novel was complete. Some seventeen months later, Mittelholzer observed, "I completed the second one in the Letimotiv [sic] trilogy about two months ago, entitled THUNDER RETURNING, and it was accepted by my publishers only about three weeks ago."²⁸ His break from Secker and Warburg in 1961 meant that the last in the Leitmotiv trilogy was never completed.²⁹

Novels set in an English Locale

Though *The Aloneness of Mrs Chatham* was published in 1965 as his penultimate novel, it was written sometime in the early 1950s, and was

MACMULLOCHS much earlier than I had foreseen." - in *John Day Archives* (Ref: C0123; Bxs 316/27: 1951-1955) held at Princeton University.

²⁶ Mittelholzer was so closely involved with The North Kent Sun Club that he was invited to perform the opening ceremony of the first Festival of Naturism in 1951. See Anon, *Naturist Recreation* (North Kent Sun Club: August 1951) p. 8.

²⁷ Op cit., *A J Seymour collection* - letter dated 20th April 1959.

²⁸ Ibid; letter dated 3rd September 1960.

²⁹ Rickards, C. "A Tribute to Edgar Mittelholzer" in *BIM* (Vol. 11, Jan-June 1966) p. 104.

originally set in Barbados before morphing, after numerous re-writes, into a novel set in England. There is some suggestion that Secker and Warburg had been considering whether or not to publish it as early as 1953. In June 1954 Mittelholzer informed his American publisher, Richard Walsh that:

My last novel, THE ALONENESS OF MRS CHATHAM is held up in London because of a trial to come off next month. My publishers have been prosecuted for "obscenity" in Stanley Kauffman's novel *The Philander* (published in U. S. as *The Tightrope*). [...] They see nothing offensive in MRS. CHATHAM, they say, but naturally have to be cautious because of the police witch-hunt.³⁰

Secker and Warburg ultimately decided against the novel because Mittelholzer was unwilling to amend an incestuous scene that appeared toward the end of the story. *The Aloneness of Mrs Chatham* continued to be rejected by publishers even when the references to incest were toned down because the novel's increasingly 'fascist' overtones, akin to those expressed in *The Weather in Middenshot* (1952), were considered offensive and distasteful. This latter novel, evidently inspired by Bagshot, Surrey where the Mittelholzer family lived from 1949 to 1951, was written by December 1951 and published soon afterward.

A Tinkling in The Twilight (1959), Mittelholzer's second English-set novel was written during his separation from Roma in 1958 and at a time when he was living, like his protagonist in *Maida Vale* (1958-59).³¹ Comparatively little archival information exists on the creative evolution of the following novels: *The Piling of the Clouds* (1961), *The Wounded and The Worried* (1962), *Uncle Paul* (1963) and *The Jilkington Drama* (1965).³² This is largely because Mittelholzer had fallen out with his long-term publisher, Secker and Warburg, and because he had stopped writing in the 1960s with any regularity to close friends, such as A J Seymour and Frank Collymore. However, the fact these books are not referred

³⁰ See letter dated 23rd June 1954 in the *Carl van Vechten* Collection held in the Beinecke Rare Books & Manuscript Library, Yale University.

³¹ See letter dated 20th January 1959 in the *A J Seymour collection* held at the University of Guyana.

³² *The Jilkington Drama* (1965) was published posthumously.

to in earlier correspondence points to the likelihood they were conceived of and written in the 1960s.

This publication history indicates that Mittelholzer spent much longer working on his novels than previously thought. To view him as a hack is make assumptions about his writing based on when his books were published rather than when they were written. As will be demonstrated in the chapter on *The Life and Death of Sylvia* most, if not all of his novels, benefit from close critical analysis. One can speculate that some of Mittelholzer's novels were overworked precisely because they remained unpublished for so long. Gilkes, who was fortunate enough to have access to the different versions of *The Aloneness of Mrs Chatham* in the 1970s (before they went missing), has convincingly demonstrated that the literary value of that particular novel diminished as a result of numerous rewrites.³³ He further argues that the different versions reveal a shift in the author's interests and gradual hardening of his attitudes. His claim that the first version of *The Aloneness of Mrs Chatham* is perhaps his greatest novel, points to the vagaries of the publishing industry, where one's success can simply be a matter of timing and luck. The texture of Mittelholzer's novels as will be highlighted in the following section, were also influenced by his state of mind, the events that were taking place around him as well as by his financial position.

MITTELHOLZER'S CAREER

Formation of the Man

Whilst a man with all the complexities of Mittelholzer could only ever have emerged from British Guiana - a product of his time and space - his career is distinguished by a personal, almost sub-textual, self-sustaining mythology that was rooted in his religious beliefs (to be dealt with in a later chapter) as well as notions of German blood and an iron-will. According to his autobiography, A

³³ Gilkes, M.A. *The Caribbean Syzygy: A Study of the novels of Edgar Mittelholzer and Wilson Harris* (1973-74 A8j Ph.D., Kent, 24-332) pp. 444-456.

Swarthy Boy, he was, as the eldest of four children, “the Dark One at whom [his father, William Austin] was always barking or frowning”.³⁴ His fair-skinned father, a confirmed Negrophobe of Swiss-German and African ancestry, was so extreme in his dislike of ‘blackness’ or any other associations with Africa, that he would stroke his children’s hair murmuring, “Goat-hair”, and then “Not sheep-wool. They have sheep wool”, while glancing at darker-skinned people standing nearby.³⁵ His mother, of English, French and African origin would in the meantime allow his ‘soft’ hair to grow as long as a girls, as though to emphasise his European ancestry.

Many of the incidents chronicled in Mittelholzer’s autobiography indicate that his father’s Negrophobia was as extreme as his evident admiration of all things German. He would enthusiastically repeat to his children discussions he had had about Bismarck and Germany with his *pure* German ‘friend’, Mr Von Ravensburg. It would have been virtually impossible for Mittelholzer to obtain any sense of self-worth within this Negrophobic atmosphere had his father not offered the possibility of redemption: “Just one drop of that great blood. Just one drop in your veins, and it makes you different from everyone else. German blood!”³⁶ Mittelholzer’s similarly Teutonic Aunt Louise was responsible for his early education at the Geneva Academy, which was run from her ‘Rosendale’ home. It was in her home that Mittelholzer found a copy of his grandfather’s German grammar book and begun to teach himself German.

Mittelholzer’s affinity with German culture arguably exposed him to philosophical ideas many of his middle class counterparts would not have embraced with such avidity. As his close friend and fellow novelist, Andrew Salkey has highlighted:

³⁴ Mittelholzer, E. *A Swarthy Boy* (Putnam: London, 1963) p. 28.

³⁵ *Ibid*; p. 42.

³⁶ *Ibid*; p. 43.

[Mittelholzer's] respect, attention and emulation had their sources in the work of the 17th, 18th and 19th century German philosophers, poets, political essayists, and musical composers.³⁷

Given that Mittelholzer was born in British Guiana - a colony largely populated by Amerindians, Africans, Indians, Portuguese, Europeans and Chinese that had not as yet formed a unified national identity - it is hardly surprising that he, like many others looked not just to Britain but also to his ancestors (of Swiss-German origin) for some sense of identity. Guckian makes a similar point in his MA thesis *Failure in Exile*, when he notes that: "Every West Indian whether of African, European or Asian stock, or a mixture of any or all of these looks longingly over his shoulder to his ancestral home, to a lost culture, a forgotten God, to a place where he belongs among the people."³⁸ German artistic and cultural achievements of previous centuries had from the 1860s to the First World War been joined by scientific, technological and economic achievements in a Germany politically unified under Bismarck. German prestige in these fields could offer Mittelholzer a private source of pride, and continued to do so, despite the course of German history from 1914 to the end of the Second World Wars.

Mittelholzer's affinity with Germany was given concrete expression in his refusal to write under a pseudonym – publishers felt his German name would affect the sale of his novels – and his decision to give all of his children German names. Writing in 1943 about the birth of his first child, Mittelholzer was to state: "I have had her registered under the names Anna Rosemunde—both German names, as you'll see. And there is good justification, too. Apart from my own German blood, Dad's sister as you know is Anna and her grandmother (maternal) is called Rosamond. So what I have done is simply to Germanize the French Rosamond into Rosemunde."³⁹

³⁷ Guckhian, P. *Failure in Exile: A Critical Study of the Works of Edgar Mittelholzer* (University of West Indies: Barbados, 1970) p. 185.

³⁸ Ibid; pp. 49-50.

³⁹ Letter dated 30th July 1943 – see Ruth Wilkinson's private collection: Letters from Mittelholzer to Ruth Wilkinson (circa March 1941 – 15th June 1962).

It should be emphasised that Mittelholzer perceived little difference between the British and Germans. Winston Churchill's use of the V sign to symbolise "V for Victory" during World War II echoed the German World War 1 slogan of "Sieg oder Tod" ("Victory or Death"). The Morse code sign for 'V' - dot, dot, dot, dash⁴⁰ - was audibly reproduced by the BBC as a call sign to occupied Europe. Many like Mittelholzer would not have missed the irony that the opening bars of the call sign – da da da daaaa – were from Beethoven's Fifth Symphony. Whether learnt or cultivated, Mittelholzer was attached to, and exhibited so-called 'Teutonic' characteristics: discipline, perseverance, hard work, an iron will, courage and a refusal to surrender. Whilst it was undoubtedly these attributes that enabled him to endure the difficulties he faced before achieving success in the world of publishing, his uncompromising rigidity appears in the longer term to have led to his downfall. It is also clear that Mittelholzer was affected by the damage done to Germany's reputation in the years following the Second World War, in particular by revelations of the atrocities committed during the Holocaust. The author's preoccupation with issues of identity permeated his work and will be discussed in greater depth in Chapter Six.

Before discussing Mittelholzer's career, some consideration has to be given to his family's musical background since music played a significant role in his writing. Music (both popular and classical) played a central role in his family life. Louise Mittelholzer played the mandolin and like her brother, Albert, the violin. Her Rosendale home, recognised as the hub of arts in New Amsterdam, was used not just as a venue for the Geneva Academy but also as a space in which she could teach the piano, hold cultural evenings and stage 'serious' concerts. Back in Coburg Street, Mittelholzer was encouraged to play the piano by his maternal Aunt Bertha, and as a teenager, was taken by his mother to numerous Town Hall concerts where jazz songs were played. In being situated directly opposite the Central Police Station, Mittelholzer's life was regulated by the daily

⁴⁰ See Ruth Wilkinson's private collection: in 1941 Mittelholzer sometimes ended his letters '...V-
'.

sounds of the Reveille and the Last Post as well as by the military band music that the police regularly played.

It was his Aunt Anna, an active member of the Berbice Musical Society, who “made [Mittelholzer] aware of the beauty in music”.⁴¹ She would play excerpts from operas and operettas and pieces from Beethoven, Chopin and Schubert whilst explaining the character or meaning of each piece to him. Anna also notably played the piano accompaniment for silent films at the local cinemas Mittelholzer and his sister were allowed to attend. Without access to a public library or children’s books before the age of 11, it was the silent film serials and Buffalo Bill stories that first inspired Mittelholzer to start creating stories. Importantly, it was the music and the way it added meaning to the events unfolding on screen that captured Mittelholzer’s imagination. One other defining moment for Mittelholzer, which cannot go without mention, was his introduction in the 1930s to Wagner.

The major musical innovations that developed during the German Romantic Era deeply moved and impressed Mittelholzer. It is worth outlining (albeit briefly) some of the key innovations of composers like Beethoven, Schubert and Wagner, particularly since they are among the composers mentioned in Mittelholzer’s novels including *Corentyne Thunder* and *The Life and Death of Sylvia* (the novel under discussion in Chapter Four). Beethoven’s 3rd, 5th, 6th and 9th symphonies were variously groundbreaking, whether in terms of performance time (which was significantly increased), the number of movements (traditionally four), complexity of orchestration, the range and density of sound, the music’s expressiveness and “colossal ideas”, as well as the introduction of human voices. Whilst music from the Classical era communicated abstract ideas and was non-representational, Romantic music expressed deep human emotions and was often structured programmatically around external ideas (from literature, art, poetry, etc) that told a story.

⁴¹ Mittelholzer, E. *A Swarthy Boy* (Putnam and Co: London, 1963) p. 122.

Lieder (i.e., songs for a solo voice accompanied by piano) were similarly transformed during the Romantic period. Schubert created a highly expressive form by allowing the poem, folk song or piece of literature to direct the course of the music.⁴² The piano became an integral part of the song, creating the atmosphere and mirroring the “inner drama and feelings of the character.”⁴³ Brought up in a theatrical family Wagner was the first to unite opera (not well established in Germany at the time) with drama. In attaching easily recognisable musical themes or Leitmotifs to various elements (characters, situations, objects) in the drama, Wagner was able to fully integrate the two separate art forms and in so doing produced what he referred to as a *Gestamkunstwerk* i.e., a synthesis of myth (or folklore), performing art, literature and the visual arts. In later years Mittelholzer attended the annual Bayreuth Festivals (where performances of Wagner’s operas are held) as often as possible. A diary entry dated 13 September 1948 reads “Wagner concert. Excellent. An evening that must not be described – only remembered in detail for all time.”⁴⁴ This given Mittelholzer’s normal practice of writing brief factual notes, points to the emotional impact it had on him and mirrors the enthusiastic response of Mr Holmes in *The Weather in Middenshot*, whose depression disintegrates the first time he hears Wagner’s Siegfried leitmotif:

It was from that afternoon that hope took possession of him; the seeds of his fantasy-garden swelled and sprouted. From that afternoon he was sure he would recover; he almost felt superstitious about the Siegfried leitmotif. Whenever he hummed or whistled it it gave him courage, confidence and made him feel he could fight anything and win. [...] So he had fought and won. And henceforth he had seen himself a hero fighting back – always fighting back when he thought himself attacked...⁴⁵

⁴² Traditionally the poem would have been set to a melody that is repeated in verses.

⁴³ Swann, J. *Classical Music and Romantic Music – Part One* at [http://trumpet.sdsu.edu/M345/Romantic Music1.html](http://trumpet.sdsu.edu/M345/Romantic%20Music1.html) (site visited 11/08/09).

⁴⁴ See Gilkes, M.A. *The Caribbean Syzygy: A Study of the novels of Edgar Mittelholzer and Wilson Harris* (1973-74 A8j Ph.D., Kent, 24-332) p. 199.

⁴⁵ Mittelholzer, E. *The Weather in Middenshot* (The John Day Company: New York, 1953 [1952]) p. 59.

One need only refer to novels like *Corentyne Thunder*, *The Life and Death of Sylvia*, *My Bones and My Flute*, *Latticed Echoes* and *Thunder Returning*, to realise that Mittelholzer was also drawn on an intellectual level to the linked Romantic concepts of synaesthesia (the fusion of music, art and nature) and Gestamkunstwerk.

The Pioneer: A Quiet Revolutionary

When Mittelholzer made the radical decision in 1928, following the completion of his first serious story, *The Doubloon*, to become a professional novelist, he was according to John Figueroa thought (by the middle-classes of New Amsterdam) to be verging on the lunatic:

Mittelholzer...was considered mad. He was a person who decided to be a writer – and when he said it, it must have been really frightening to everybody else.⁴⁶

Creative writing, as A J Seymour explained, was viewed as the preserve of Americans or Europeans. Young colonials who thought otherwise were - apart from acting above their station – considered to be incapable of contributing anything new or noteworthy to the admired tradition of European literature.⁴⁷ This view of the non-white colonial was widespread as exemplified by George Bernard Shaw's response to Claude McKay's literary aspirations: "Tell me, young man, why do you want to write poetry? ... That is not your business, you should take up boxing like Jack Johnson, you know, not this sort of thing".⁴⁸

Like most young men of similar background Mittelholzer was expected to take up a respectable position in the civil service. He did, but not for long. One anecdote tells how his Town Hall employers were forced to reprimand him for failing to salute the visiting white Governor. After asking why it was his job to

⁴⁶ Waters, E. "Interview with John J M Figueroa" in *The Caribbean Writer: On-line Interview* (<http://www.thecaribbeanwriter.com/volume6/v6p69.html>).

⁴⁷ See Seymour, A. "Edgar Mittelholzer: The Man and His Works" in *The 1967 Edgar Mittelholzer Memorial Lectures – First Series* (Georgetown, National History and Arts Council, 1968).

⁴⁸ Dance, D. *New World Adams: Conversations with Contemporary West Indian Writers* (Peepal Tree: Yorkshire, 1992) p. 48.

greet the man since he was there first (akin to the character, Horace, in *A Morning at the Office*), he quickly retorted that they could “keep their blasted job”.⁴⁹ This incident, since jobs were not readily available in the 1930s would not have helped his reputation. Other practices similarly compounded the prevailing belief that he was mad: his unconventional dress code (he was often seen without the requisite jacket, tie or hat) and unorthodox practice of selling self-published skits, i.e., *Creole Chips* (1937)⁵⁰, from door-to-door.

We know very little about his pre-1941 efforts since much of what he wrote has failed to survive the passage of time. Indeed according to Williams’ article, *Colonial Literature or Caribbean Orature?* Mittelholzer “systematically destroyed all the manuscripts returned by publishing houses between 1928 and 1941”.⁵¹ One can speculate that the young author’s drive to write Caribbean-set stories was triggered off, in part, by the marginalisation of ‘the Other’ within the British-centred education system: “I simply could not whip up any interest in lessons. [...] Who wanted to know where Ullswater and Derwentwater were? What did it matter in which year Edward the First began to reign and which year he ceased to reign?”.⁵² This does not however imply that he wanted to reject European culture: that for Mittelholzer was an inherent part of his identity. The extent to which he had for instance absorbed European musical traditions can be deduced from a letter he sent to Macmillan & Co in 1933. Referring to his latest manuscript, *Symphony Fantastique*, Mittelholzer explained:

The first movement (Andante) is slow in action, with much dialogue of somewhat philosophical nature and vivid character painting. The general atmosphere is prosaic and lightly realistic. There are occasional variations; breaks (cantabile and maestoso assai), with certain “cadences” (crescendo and

⁴⁹ This anecdote comes courtesy of Ruth Wilkinson and is partially represented in *A Morning at the Office* when Horace Xaviers insists that Mr Jagabir should, having arriving in the office after him, be the first to extend his greetings.

⁵⁰ Sold at 4 cents each.

⁵¹ Williams, F “Colonial Literature or Caribbean Orature? Creole Chips by Edgar Mittelholzer” in Bardolph, J (ed.) *Telling Stories: Postcolonial Short Fiction in English* (Amsterdam / Atlanta: Rodolphi, 2001) p. 130.

⁵² Mittelholzer, E. *A Swarthy Boy: A Childhood in British Guiana* (Putnam: London, 1963) p. 76.

decrescendo). Toward the end the action quickens (più mosso) and the dialogue becomes of a light nature.⁵³

It is not known what the publisher's response was to this particular manuscript. What we do know is that some of the publishers he contacted would, on rejecting his novels, write back with advice on how to improve his craft.

We also know from Guckian's research that Mittelholzer joined a group of young intellectuals in the 1930s that met in Georgetown under the chairmanship of Hilton Harewood of the *Daily Chronicle* for discussions on art and music. P H Daly, a member of the group remembers Mittelholzer as a "lean ascetic-looking, cocky and confident young man evidently in a tearing hurry to write his name into the world."⁵⁴ He is also said to have frequented a meeting place for free thinkers in Main Street (perhaps this is the one Guckian mentions) where attendees argued about politics, their hatred of the British presence and the ideologies of Marxism, whilst listening to jazz and drinking rum.⁵⁵

Mittelholzer nevertheless faced numerous challenges including the absence of a local publishing industry. Petty jealousies appear to have existed amongst those who might have been in a position to provide a supportive outlet for his short stories. In a letter dated 24th March 1941, Mittelholzer made the following claim:

[Leonard] Evelyn Moe, the Editor of the Argosy has rung to say he won't publish the sketches Oscar Wight sent up to him. He doesn't like me, you see. Never did. He was jealous of me since I wrote *Creole Chips*. He feels he is the only man in the colony who should write creole stuff (He is Uncle Stapie) and since that time he's been up against me and never likes to publish anything of mine.⁵⁶

⁵³ See letter dated 24th July 1933 addressed to Macmillan and Co Ltd in *Hogarth Press Archives* (Ref: MS2750/284, 1949-54) – 18 unpublished letters between Mittelholzer and his publishers held at Reading University.

⁵⁴ Guckian, P. *Failure in Exile: A Critical Study of the Works of Edgar Mittelholzer* (University of West Indies: Barbados, 1970) p. 41.

⁵⁵ My thanks to Barbara Malins-Smith, daughter of Philip Fitzherbert van Batenburg Gunning for this information (emailed to me on 12 August 2011).

⁵⁶ Ref Ruth Wilkinson's private collection: Letters from Mittelholzer to Ruth Wilkinson (circa March 1941 – 15th June 1962).

His attempt to succeed as a writer at this stage of his life was frustrated by his failure to get others, particularly in Georgetown, to take the arts seriously. His desire to put on a play provides a notable example of the cultural context within which he had to work:

Rehearsals on play being held up by inability to cast two parts – very important parts, too. Manly, Rodrigues, Goring, Mrs. Cookson, all let me down in the long run. Gerard de Freitas and Miss Hunt only two I'm sure of. Seems as if the play is going to be shelved. Me alone versus Philistine Georgetown.⁵⁷

Numerous examples exist to demonstrate that relatively few members of the coloured middle class shared Mittelholzer's single-minded interest in intellectual and cultural self-/community- advancement. One contemporary was to note:

In the early 1930s Edgar worked for a short time as a clerk in what was known as the "Berbice Gazette Store". During that time he tried to educate the mind of the people by suggesting books he considered better reading than those they asked for, but much to his disgust they insisted on purchasing what they wanted...⁵⁸

With personal aspirations at odds with his local counterparts, Mittelholzer was destined to be a lone wolf: no one (as one West Indian writer was to remark) could speak "his language".⁵⁹ Mittelholzer nevertheless remain focused. According to Guckian he successfully published, albeit without payment, more than one hundred articles and short stories about the colonial predicament.⁶⁰ In the absence of local book publishers (and indeed of a significant reading audience) he simply doubled his efforts to break into the British publishing industry. As an isolated as yet unpublished non-conformist novelist with a

⁵⁷ Ibid; letter dated 24th May 1941.

⁵⁸ Hahnfeld, D. "Tribute to Edgar Mittelholzer" in *Edgar Austin Mittelholzer 1909-1965 'Serve your Country': Guyana Week 1968* (The Government Printery: Georgetown, 1968).

⁵⁹ Swan, M. *British Guiana: The Land of Six Peoples* (HMSO; London, 1957) p. 122.

⁶⁰ See 'Abstract' in Guckian, P. *Failure in Exile: A Critical Study of the Works of Edgar Mittelholzer* (University of West Indies: Barbados, 1970). It is not clear however where Guckian obtained this information as the assertion is not supported by bibliographical references to the articles. Further corroborative research is therefore required.

single-minded determination to succeed Mittelholzer was the source of unwitting inspiration for a younger generation of British Guianese with literary aspirations – including according to his own testimony, the recently knighted, Wilson Harris.⁶¹

By the time *Corentyne Thunder* (1941) was published - after the series of false starts and the rejection of approximately 15 other novels⁶² - Mittelholzer was too mentally and physically drained to wallow in his success: “The reality, at last, after the anguish of a thousand massacred dreams. I did not celebrate. The mood for celebration had left me. The daily struggle merely to eat and keep alive was too exigent.”⁶³ It nevertheless seems likely that his morale – despite the blinkered comments about “primitive peoples” - would have been boosted by the positive reviews (as exemplified below) that *Corentyne Thunder* received.

There is always a certain fascination in reading of primitive peoples, of their ways and customs and what seem to be their curiously restricted lives, but such accounts are usually to be met with in biographies or books of travel; *it is seldom that the novelist succeeds in presenting these people in such a way as to hold the interest of the reader of fiction, who does not easily identify himself with the lives and thoughts of primitive society; but that is what Mr Mittelholzer has, with this novel, succeeded in doing.* [...] There is an odd beauty in this book and a haunting pathos. [my italics]⁶⁴

The novel’s limited success - “most of the edition was destroyed in the Blitz”⁶⁵ - was in keeping with Mittelholzer’s general run of bad luck. Copies appear, nevertheless, to have been circulated amongst the Caribbean literati. In a letter to a close friend, Mittelholzer announced: “Mendes and his friends made me positively embarrassed with their praise of *Corentyne Thunder* which they have

⁶¹ See Rickards, C. “A Brilliant Writer: His Loss Will Be Mourned by Millions” *Daily Chronicle* (1965).

⁶² Mittelholzer, E. “A Pleasant Career” in Ives, J. *The Idyll and the Warrior: Recollections of Edgar Mittelholzer* (unpublished and in the possession of Mrs J. Ives) pg 80

⁶³ Ibid, p. 82.

⁶⁴ Royde-Smith, E. “Novels of the Week” in *Times Literary Supplement* (London: 24 May 1941) p. 249.

⁶⁵ Collymore, F. “Writing in the West Indies: A Survey” in Maclure, M. et al (eds) *Tamarack Review* (Toronto; Issue 14, Winter 1960) p. 120.

read. Mendes thinks it the best novel so far written about this part of the world.”⁶⁶ The publication of *Corentyne Thunder* must in some ways have represented a literary coup.

The reality was that while three West Indian novelists had preceded Mittelholzer’s success (in that their novels had been published in the UK), none had achieved this, from within the Caribbean region solely through their own efforts.⁶⁷ As C L R James noted: “We couldn’t make it at home. Mendes and I had work published before we left, but that was because distinguished people came to the island, we were introduced to them as “literary persons”, and they took our work away and gave it to editors; that’s how I was first published.”⁶⁸ It is similarly likely that De Lisser’s entrance into the UK publishing industry was facilitated by one of the many elite officials he fraternised with. These included people such as Lord Sydney Olivier, the Governor of Jamaica (1907-1913) to whom his first novel *Jane’s Career* (1914) was dedicated.⁶⁹ Claude McKay’s novels were notably published in the USA long after he had left Jamaica (never to return) in 1912.⁷⁰ *Corentyne Thunder*, given the context of its publication, arguably became a symbol of hope for other would-be novelists whilst conferring a certain degree of prestige on Mittelholzer, if only amongst the literati.

The Writer: Awaiting Fame

Mittelholzer had long sought a way out of British Guiana, for as A J Seymour remarks, “Nothing real ever happened in Guyana. The real world was

⁶⁶ See letter dated 5 May 1942 in Ruth Wilkinson’s private collection: Letters from Mittelholzer to Ruth Wilkinson (circa March 1941 – 15th June 1962).

⁶⁷ The authors and the novels referred to are: C L R James’s *Minty Alley* (1936), Mendes’s *Pitch Lake* (1934) and *Black Fauns* (1935) and De Lisser’s *Jane’s Career* (1914), *Susan Proudleigh* (1915), *White Witch of Rosehall* (1929), and *Under the Sun* (1937). H G De Lisser was a ‘pass for white’ Jamaican supporter of the colonial order, whilst C L R James and Alfred Mendes were both Trinidadians.

⁶⁸ James, C. L. R. “Discovering Literature in Trinidad: The 1930s” in *Spheres of Existence* (Allison and Busby: London, 1980) p. 239.

⁶⁹ Morris, M. “Jane’s Career and Susan Proudleigh” in *Making West Indian Literature* (Ian Randle: Kingston, 2005) p. 52.

⁷⁰ McKay’s first novel was *Home to Harlem* (1928) was published in New York where he lived on and off for many years.

outside, where people lived, where things happened....”⁷¹, where evidently Mittelholzer felt he had a greater chance of succeeding. The opportunity to leave arose in December 1941 when he secured a position with the Trinidad Royal Naval Volunteer Reserve (TRNVR) on board HMS Helene as a naval rating. Whilst docked in Port of Spain, Mittelholzer met Roma Halfhide. Two days later on 27th February 1942 the HMS Helene received orders to sail to Georgetown. In order to remain with Roma, Mittelholzer was forced to feign illness until the ship sailed. Theirs was a whirlwind love affair. In May 1942 Mittelholzer remarked to a close friend: “Since March the 25th [1942] when I was married [to Roma Halfhide] I have known such happiness as I’m not accustomed to”.⁷² He speaks also of his appointment as an Orderly in the Quartermaster’s office at the Port of Spain branch of HMS Benbow. Most of Mittelholzer’s later experiences as a naval rating are shrouded in mystery, with this period being described by him as “one of the blackest and most unpleasant interludes” of his life.⁷³

Research has nevertheless revealed that only a few months later (on 5th July 1942) Mittelholzer wrote to Captain C. C. Denison complaining that he had been transferred back to “Headquarters for A B Training” by the “monstrous tyrant”, Lt. Commander Wilkinson, on wages which did not sufficiently cover his domestic expenses or the needs of his wife. Whilst Denison’s response to this letter is not known, Mittelholzer’s position was firmly articulated:

No, I cannot tolerate this. Shortly after posting this, I shall give myself up for arrest and will come before you for trial. [...] It is the price I must pay for having left my civilian comforts to come forward voluntarily and offer services to the Empire. In fact, I shall accept many more such sentences of imprisonment, for I absolutely refuse to give service under such a commanding officer as Lt. Commander Wilkinson, and no matter what suffering I may have to undergo in the future, I shall never be shaken in this resolve.⁷⁴

⁷¹ Seymour, A. *Thirty Years A Civil Servant* (Georgetown: Guyana, 1982) p. vi.

⁷² See letter dated 5th May 1942 in *Ruth Wilkinson’s private collection*: Letters from Mittelholzer to Ruth Wilkinson (circa March 1941 – 15th June 1962).

⁷³ According to Chang he was dismissed in August 1942. See Chang, V. L. “Edgar Mittelholzer (1909-1965)” in Dance, D. C. (ed.) *Fifty Caribbean Writers: A Bio-Bibliographical Critical Sourcebook* (Greenwood Press: London, 1986) p. 329.

⁷⁴ See letter dated 5th July 1942 in *Michael Gilkes’ private collection*.

According to Sam Selvon (a Trinidadian novelist, friend and fellow TRNVR naval rating) Mittelholzer, when informed by the Lt. Commander that he could not leave the navy so “long as he was wearing the King’s uniform”, “stripped himself naked and walked off the ship”.⁷⁵ In August 1942, presumably for related reasons, Mittelholzer was discharged on medical grounds but appears to have remained under naval surveillance.⁷⁶

According to his family his letters were regularly intercepted, whilst any jobs that he secured tended to be short-lived. There is evidence to show that he worked as a Stock Clerk at the Planning and Housing Board until April 1943 (a job that was terminated on account of an unfavourable report from Naval Intelligence) and as a receptionist at the Queen’s Park Savannah Hotel circa July 1943. According to Roma, Mittelholzer became a stay-at-home father and full-time writer from September 1943 until he left Trinidad in 1948. She meanwhile returned to her job as a stenographer.⁷⁷ It should be noted that Mittelholzer was a part-time writer for the *Trinidad Guardian* between 1944 and 1946 and that Mendes claims Mittelholzer was attached to the Harbour Engineer of Port Services from 1946 until he left Trinidad for the UK in 1948.⁷⁸ Mendes reveals that instead of concentrating on his role as a clerk, Mittelholzer spent the entire period writing short stories and novels including *A Morning at the Office*. The differing recollections aside, Mittelholzer evidently broke with convention by spending at least two years if not more as a stay-at-home father.

The public, presumably unaware of the consequences of Mittelholzer’s quarrel with the navy, fiercely ridiculed him for, amongst other things, the unconventional “division of labour in the family”. As George Lamming recalls:

⁷⁵ Cited by Jan Carew in interview. See Cox, J. *Conversations with Jan Carew* (Unpublished: Louisville, 14th November 2009).

⁷⁶ Chang, V. L. “Edgar Mittelholzer (1909-1965)” in Dance, D. C. (ed.) *Fifty Caribbean Writers: A Bio-Bibliographical Critical Sourcebook* (Greenwood Press: London, 1986) p. 329.

⁷⁷ See Appendix 4 “Lettre de Roma Mittelholzer” in Williams, F. *Edgar Mittelholzer: Romancier Guyanais (1909-1965) – Voyage Au Coeur Du Monde, Voyage Au Coeur De L’Homme* (Ph.D., Universite De Haute-Bretagne, Rennes: 1995/96).

⁷⁸ Levy, M. (ed.) *The Autobiography of Alfred H. Mendes, 1897-1991* (University of the West Indies Press: Trinidad & Tobago, 2002) p. 133.

His wife went to an office; and he did the housework, shopping and the lot, leaving himself some seven or eight hours a day for writing. [...] They didn't call him a witch [as the French peasants regarded Joan of Arc]; but they said he wasn't altogether right in the head. This is always a way in the West Indies of warning that no-one will take you seriously.⁷⁹

Though Lamming was not well acquainted with the author at this juncture, he readily acknowledges: "It was the sheer courage of Mittelholzer, the uncompromising nakedness of the man before the spiritual squalor, the atrocious lack of heart which characterised Port-of-Spain, that ordered me without a word being said to pay attention to the one and essential duty [of writing] that would be my life."⁸⁰ Mittelholzer had importantly been able to retain his sanity and optimism thanks to the emotional stability, financial support and advice provided by Roma, his wife and intellectual equal. Irrespective of whether he was formally employed or working at home, it is clear that Mittelholzer always set time aside for writing.⁸¹

Mittelholzer's failure to secure a second publishing deal before 1950 can be attributed to wartime conditions, post-war paper scarcity, labour shortages and the tendency of publishers to work with already established novelists during economically uncertain periods. Thus while remaining dedicated to his writing, Mittelholzer also helped to nurture those who shared his interest in literature. This was not an easy task. As Mittelholzer notes in a letter to Collymore:

I'm sorry to say that in Trinidad, people are not yet as literature-conscious as they should be, and I can well visualise BIM lying down and getting dusty on Davidson's and Todd's bookshelves. That's what's happening to CARIBIA now.

⁷⁹ Popkin, M. (ed) "Mittelholzer, Edgar (1909-1965)" in *A Library of Literary Criticism: Modern Black Writers* (Frederick Ungar Publishing Co: New York, 1978) p. 303.

⁸⁰ Lamming, G. "But Alas Edgar" in *New World Quarterly: Guyana Independence Issue* (Vol. 2, No. 3; 1966) p. 18.

⁸¹ A letter written during his naval appointment - dated 19th January 1942 - supports this view: 'I have managed to write a short story with the scenery here as a setting. I called it Green Water Glitters.' See *Ruth Wilkinson's private collection: Letters from Mittelholzer to Ruth Wilkinson* (circa March 1941 – 15th June 1962).

A whole stack of them just lying pathetically on the book-stand, and the world going by unheeding, and this after two prominent advertisements have appeared in the Guardian plus a review. It's discouraging.⁸²

A few months later, Mittelholzer offered to sell 50 copies of each new edition of Collymore's *BIM* to his friends and acquaintances in Trinidad⁸³ and was by 15th February 1947 able to note:

Here am I again with another *BIM* sales campaign at an end. *BIM* went off so fast and seems to have met with such a favourable reception here—I've heard many compliments—that next time I suggest you send 75 copies.⁸⁴

Mittelholzer having joined the Readers and Writers Guild⁸⁵, a literary group that was chaired by the Irish Judge, Sir Eric Hallinan, was in a perfect position to sell copies of *BIM* to the likes of Ramon-Fortune, Arnold Thomasos, A C Farrell, Ernest A Carr, Gaston Lore, Neville Giuseppi and Seepersad Naipaul. His commitment to literature in the region was also reflected by his "frank, considered and appreciative" assessments of three books of poetry by Collymore.⁸⁶ Collymore presumably found these assessments encouraging as he subsequently began sending Mittelholzer unpublished pieces for comment. This long-term friendship, commencing around 1944, was mutually beneficial. Like Seymour's *Kyk-Over-Al*, Collymore's *BIM*, offered Mittelholzer the opportunity of publishing short stories, poems and articles, particularly in the years before his major literary successes.

Another vital outlet for short story writers and poets in the region was the BBC's *Caribbean Voices* programme. Mittelholzer's first contribution to *Caribbean Voices* pre-dates the appointment of the highly acclaimed programme editor, Henry Swanzy (1946-1953) and resulted in a broadcast on 29th November 1945 of an essay, *Of Casuarinas and Cliffs*. This essay is worthy of note

⁸² Letter dated 23rd March 1946 in *Frank Collymore Collection* (Ref: Letters from Mittelholzer to Collymore) held in the Department of Archives, Barbados.

⁸³ Ibid; letter dated 26th August 1946.

⁸⁴ Ibid; letter dated 15th February 1947.

⁸⁵ See Scott, D. "The Sovereignty of the Imagination: An Interview with George Lamming" in *Small Axe* (Vol 12: September 2002) p. 89.

⁸⁶ Baugh, E. *Frank Collymore: A Biography* (Ian Randle Publishers: Kingston, 2009) p. 198.

as it points to Mittelholzer's belief in the validity of the Caribbean world as a source of aesthetic inspiration. In recalling the assertions of a despondent artist that: "There's just nothing in Barbados to paint", Mittelholzer goes onto reflect in a celebratory tone the esoteric beauty of the Barbados landscape; the forbidding "dignity" of Hackleton's Cliff, the awesome mystery of "swishing" Casuarinas and the "too-blue-to-be-true" sea.⁸⁷ While he may not have been able to persuade the artist that he had something to paint, he had at least demonstrated that as far as the aspiring writer was concerned, the Caribbean landscape was a positive source of literary inspiration.⁸⁸

Once the war was over the author's expectations of success heightened. When his literary agent, Christine Campbell Thomson, failed to secure a deal for his novel, *A Morning at the Office* after approximately eight attempts, the author concluded she lacked willpower. Mittelholzer left Trinidad on 9th February 1948 on board the S. S. Ariguani, determined to find a publisher. He landed in Avonmouth, England, three weeks later.⁸⁹ On the sixth day of his arrival, he wrote to the BBC enquiring about the possibility of contributing to the West Indian Section of their broadcasts. By April 1948 he had become a reader on *Caribbean Voices*⁹⁰ and less than two months later, was working as a copy-typist in the Books Department of the British Council. Whilst not initially being, as Lindo remarked to Swanzy, "a good reader", Mittelholzer represented one of the first Caribbean-born individuals, to read the literary submissions that were broadcast. Since most of the prose experimented with West Indian dialect, a reader with an authentic regional accent was, as Swanzy acknowledged, preferable to that of a trained English actor. Mittelholzer's role as a reader

⁸⁷ Mittelholzer, E. "Of Casuarinas and Cliffs: An Essay" in *BIM* (Vol. 2, No. 5; 1945) p. 55.

⁸⁸ In the years that followed *Caribbean Voices* transmitted several of Mittelholzer's short stories and sketches, many of which also appeared in *BIM: Carnival Close-Up* (1947), *Pawpaw Tree* (1947), *The Burglar* (1948), *Tacama* (1948), *The Trip to Barbice* (1949), *Sorrow Dam and Mr Millbank* (1949), *Mr Jones's Little Problem* (1949), *Amiable Mr Britten* (1950), *The Sibillant and the Lost* (1950), *A Plague of Kindness* (1950), *Wedding Day* (1951) and *Hurricane Season* (1954); as well as a few poems such as *Island Tints* (1948) and *In the Beginning – Now – and Then* (1950).

⁸⁹ Note that Mittelholzer arrived in England some two years before writers like Sam Selvon and George Lamming. It is also interesting that Mittelholzer's arrival in the UK preceded the arrival of the S. S. Empire Windrush, which left the Caribbean in May 1948 and arrived in Tilbury Essex on 22nd June 1948.

⁹⁰ Mittelholzer despite being considered a "fast" and "nervous" reader was regularly called upon by Swanzy to work with the *Caribbean Voices* producers following his arrival in Britain in 1948.

would also have alerted Caribbean writers back home, especially in British Guiana and Trinidad where he was well-known, to the economic opportunities open to writers.

Success at Last

In June 1949, on the advice of a colleague from the British Council, Mittelholzer met the Fabian Socialist and Hogarth Press publisher, Leonard Woolf. Though this meeting resulted in the publication of *A Morning of the Office* (1950), discussions surrounding its distribution to booksellers expose the type of challenges that Mittelholzer had to overcome.⁹¹ One bookseller, L A M McMurtrie, who had been sent the proofs of *A Morning at the Office* made the following riposte: "...is it so much the age of the "common man", that we must have most of our books about him, in addition to everything else? I doubt if he reads the books, I'm sure he doesn't buy them."⁹² Though McMurtrie acknowledges that Mittelholzer's novel was "very well written", she goes on to argue that his leading characters; "little people, with...petty jealousies", could hardly be considered stimulating or of interest: "It's like putting on the chorus to play lead in the theatre". Whilst McMurtrie acknowledged that a few "anthropological enthusiasts" and "arm-chair travellers" in Britain might have been interested in reading about "primitive peoples", she opined that the English public would not be interested in West Indians whose background of "infinite permutations and combinations of race mixtures" was too far removed from their own.⁹³ Though Woolf and Parsons did not share her views, it is evident that highbrow conservative mores still played a significant role in the literary material that certain booksellers acquired for sale. Thus, while Mittelholzer had

⁹¹ Since a niche market for Commonwealth literature had not yet been formed it is also important to acknowledge the commercial difficulties publishers faced. Publishers like Andre Deutsch had for instance to sell 3,000 copies of a book in order to break even. This became viable, in the post-war context of well-funded libraries (their primary customer), and enabled them to publish writers like V S Naipaul and Michael Anthony. See Low, G. *Publishing Commonwealth: The Case of West Indian Writing, 1950-65* Available at: http://people.brunel.ac.uk/~acsrrrm/entertext/2_1_pdfs/low.pdf (posted 2002; site visited 18 July 2005).

⁹² See *Hogarth Press Archives* (Ref: MS2750/284, 1949-54) – Letter dated 11th April 1950 from Miss L A M McMurtrie of The Abbey Bookshop to Ian Parsons of Hogarth Press.

⁹³ Ibid; letter dated 11th April 1950.

succeeded in overcoming these perceived geographical, cultural, racial and class barriers as can be inferred from the *Times Literary Supplement's* review of *Corentyne Thunder* (quoted earlier), some British publishers and booksellers had evidently remained unconvinced of the value of literature from the colonies.

Irrespective of the racially prejudiced attitudes of the times - attitudes which Mittelholzer was consciously attempting to subvert - *A Morning at the Office* quickly secured an international audience:

I wrote it not so much as a piece of fiction as a social document intended to clear up the fallacies existent in northern countries in respect to the West Indian colonies. Many people in England and America, believe it or not, imagine that the West Indies are populated by semi-barbarous "natives" who live in huts and fulfil all the expectations of Hollywood glamour films that feature sarongs and "exotic" native dances. In England I was more than once asked what was my native language and what my native costume!⁹⁴

Contrary to Wagner's misleading claim that Mittelholzer, "came to fame on the crest of a "new wave" of West Indian writers", *A Morning at the Office* preceded and thus paved the way for the 1950s literary movement.⁹⁵ The significance of Mittelholzer's novel was immediately recognised by Henry Swanzy, editor of the BBC's Caribbean Voices programme:

"I suppose that the [Caribbean Voices] programme may be indirectly responsible for luring so many young adventurers here, and I must say that I respect the desire for wanderjahre. Obviously, one does not altogether want to discourage the more promising from chancing their arm... [...] *The task is not made any easier by the success of Edgar Mittelholzer, whose novel is really outstandingly good, much the best I have ever read about the West Indies, and very high in*

⁹⁴ See letter dated 23rd January 1953 in the *Carl van Vechten* Collection held in the Beinecke Rare Books & Manuscript Library, Yale University.

⁹⁵ Wagner, G "Edgar Mittelholzer: Symptoms and Shadows" in *BIM* (Vol. 9, No. 33 July –Dec 1961) p. 29.

contemporary English writing I should think. [...] His novel, and the West Indian cricketers, may give some openings to the writers in London..." [my italics]⁹⁶

Apart from the successive publication of his own novels, *Shadows Move Among Them* (1951), *Children of Kaywana* (1952) and *The Weather in Middenshot* (1952), novelists such as Selvon, Lamming and Mais received their first major breaks with the respective novels: *A Brighter Sun* (1952), *In the Castle of My Skin* (1953) and *The Hills were Joyful Together* (1953).⁹⁷

Whilst the critical success of *A Morning at the Office* generated behind-the-scenes excitement, it also provoked debate about the direction of West Indian literature. Like Swanzy, Collymore and others, Cedric Lindo was to acknowledge in a letter dated 1st June 1950, that he had thoroughly enjoyed reading Mittelholzer's novel before asking: "Am I mistaken or was there a dig at Henry Swanzy, Arthur Calder Marshall et al in the reference to the faddists [in *A Morning at the Office*] who insist on West Indian culture?"⁹⁸ Less than four weeks later in a *West Indian Symposium* transmitted by Caribbean Voices on 9th July 1950, Calder Marshall, the chairman, questioned whether Mittelholzer shared the view expressed by one of his characters that: "West Indian culture was invented by faddists." In response to this Mittelholzer indicated that from his perspective culture was not something that West Indians could consciously or deliberately create. He went on to argue:

... a culture that is truly West Indian would have to be one that derives from the whole mass of conflicting racial influences – not only from the African – for the West Indian colonies aren't populated solely by Africans. We have East Indians, Portuguese, Chinese, Spaniards, Assyrians, [and] English. In fact, the strongest influences, for generations past, have been European. How can these influences be thrown overboard overnight and something totally unformed and ill-defined be substituted? This is really the core of my argument. Again, I feel it would be

⁹⁶ Letter to Frank Collymore dated 17th May 1950 in Henry Swanzy (Caribbean Voices) Collection (Ref: Box 1: MS42 1945-1952) held at the University of Birmingham.

⁹⁷ Victor Stafford Reid published *New Day* in 1949 in the USA and had little impact on the UK market.

⁹⁸ See Henry Swanzy collection (University of Birmingham) – Letter dated 1st June 1950.

affected and insincere to lay claim to a culture which doesn't yet exist in any recognisable form.⁹⁹

Whilst he went on to argue that the writers' role was to focus on "universal" concerns and aspects of "human nature", with some like Sam Selvon agreeing, others including Alfred Mendes and Doreen G. Grayson maintained that the focus needed to be more inward looking; the latter strongly favouring the development of folklore over the alternative possibility of becoming an "imitation of a British Council dummy". With *Caribbean Voices* as the conduit, *A Morning at the Office* demonstrably fuelled the public debate about the ideological direction of West Indian literary culture.

Between mid-1951 and mid-1956 Mittelholzer's direct involvement with *Caribbean Voices* virtually ceased (the main exception being the broadcast of *Hurricane Season*). This is perhaps attributable to his lack of partiality for the short story form and given the financial security he had attained following the publication of his third novel, *Shadows Move Among Them* (1951), he no longer needed to write them:

I might have mentioned...the short story is not my favourite medium. Whatever spare time I have I generally devote to work on a novel. I write these short stories for you, to be honest, merely to secure the wherewithal to buy my season ticket to and from Bagshot!¹⁰⁰

He may also have been put off by the tendency of those English critics who, in playing an authoritative role in the critical sections of the *Caribbean Voices* programmes, downplayed the significance of similarities between the Caribbean and Britain, insisting instead, on literary representations of 'difference'.¹⁰¹ Calder-Marshall's role and views are worth examination. He was

⁹⁹ See *Caribbean Voices* collection – Vol. 7, Nos. 503-515 – (9th July 1950).

¹⁰⁰ See Henry Swanzy Collection (University of Birmingham) – Letter dated 22nd March 1949.

¹⁰¹ George Lamming noted in retrospect that the English writers (Roy Fuller and Arthur Calder Marshall) might not have been well placed to offer critical judgements on the Caribbean particularly in view of their "disconnection with the origins of the material". They were also guilty of "condescending false praise" and of using their status as Englishmen to contradict or dismiss the views of Caribbean writers. See Grant, C. "Caribbean Voices: Part Two" in *The*

viewed as a specialist on the West Indies by the BBC's *Caribbean Voices* and the *Times Literary Supplement* and wrote reviews for them. This presumably because he had written the non-fictional book, *Glory Dead* (1939) about Trinidad. In it he notably refutes Albert Gomes's strongly held view – "Great art is universal. It rises above its time and place. Dostoievski [sic] is not for Russia but for the whole world" - with the counterargument that Trinidadian verse was a deplorable "derivative from the Victorian and Edwardian traditions of English literature" that had "no relation to the life of the island".¹⁰² Since Mittelholzer shared Gomes' views to the extent that he wrote for "humanity at large"¹⁰³, it would not be surprising if he felt frustrated and disillusioned by *Caribbean Voices'* literary agenda.¹⁰⁴ Speculation aside, it is clear Mittelholzer no longer wanted or needed to live in the UK and that this coincided with his newly acquired status as a professional novelist. In March 1952 he resigned from the British Council fully aware that he was soon to be awarded (in April 1952) the Guggenheim Fellowship.¹⁰⁵ This enabled him to spend three months building upon already garnered historical material for his *Kaywana Trilogy* at the British Museum, before moving (at the end of August 1952) to Montreal, Canada with his family.

The income Mittelholzer received from book sales in Canada was markedly less than he had received in the UK as a result of the unfavourable exchange rate. As a result of this and the intolerably cold winter in Canada, he and his family moved in April 1953 to the warmer climes of Barbados, remaining resident there until May 1956. As the focus of critical attention and scrutiny, Mittelholzer's growing body of fiction continued to play a key role in the evolution of West Indian literature. A review of Mittelholzer's *My Bones and My Flute*, in November 1955, offers exemplification of this point. While V S Naipaul

Wednesday Documentary (BBC World Services [On-line] Available at: http://www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/documentaries/2009/07/090727_caribbean_voices_2.shtml : 29 July 2009; site visited 19 August 2010).

¹⁰² Calder-Marshall, A. *Glory Dead* (Michael Joseph: London, 1939) p. 148.

¹⁰³ BBC. "Interview with Edgar Mittelholzer and George Lamming" in *BBC Monitor Programme: West Indian Writers* – TX 11.09.1960.

¹⁰⁴ Swan records that Mittelholzer was said after his first period of residence in Britain to feel disillusioned and like an exile. See Swan, M. *British Guiana: The Land of Six Peoples* (Her Majesty's Stationery Office, London, 1957) p. 122.

¹⁰⁵ See Henry Swanzy collection (University of Birmingham) – Letter dated 17th April 1950.

(winner of the 2001 Nobel prize for literature) acknowledged that Mittelholzer's representations of local colour and dialect reflected his undeniable skills as a novelist, he bemoaned the absence of "West-Indianness [sic] in Mittelholzer's work", arguing that "Mittelholzer's characters [could] fit in anywhere". This contrasted with novels like *In the Castle of my Skin* and *A Brighter Sun*, whose characters "could belong to nowhere but the West Indies".¹⁰⁶ The impact of many of these reviews on Mittelholzer's literary counterparts can be deduced from an observation that V S Naipaul made in a later programme: "One can learn a lot from all writing – perhaps more from bad writing than from good – and I learned a lot from Caribbean Voices. [...] I became very careful and very worried about everything I wrote. I learned to avoid certain themes."¹⁰⁷ Within this context, Döring's suggestion that Mittelholzer's *With A Carib Eye* (1958) influenced the shaping of Naipaul's *The Middle Passage* (1962) seems highly plausible:

[*With a Carib Eye*] forms so immediate a precursor to Naipaul's own project that his complete silence about it, despite several references to other contemporary writers, seems highly significant. In fact, it suggests purposeful omission.¹⁰⁸

Whatever the case it is certainly likely that the critical response to Mittelholzer's work would have had some influence on the material that his counterparts went on to produce, particularly in the absence of an already established Caribbean literary tradition.¹⁰⁹

A Caribbean Voice

Mittelholzer's Weltanschauung was from the beginning discernibly at odds with the Afro-centric nationalistic viewpoint being expressed by the West Indian intelligentsia. That being the case, he nevertheless remained committed to the West Indies and to fellow writers up until the late 1950s when key events

¹⁰⁶ See Caribbean Voices collection – Vol. 17, No. 1121 (13th November 1955).

¹⁰⁷ Ibid; Vol. 24, No. 1395 (31st August 1958).

¹⁰⁸ Döring, T. *Caribbean-English Passages* (Routledge: London, 2002) p. 42.

¹⁰⁹ Jan Carew points out that Roy Heath's *A Man Come Home* (1974) was a successor of Mittelholzer's *A Morning at the Office*, whilst his own *A Guyanese Wanderer* (2007), was 'a Mittelholzer type of story'. See Cox, J. *Conversations with Jan Carew* (Unpublished: Louisville, 14th November 2009).

(outlined further on in the discussion and not dissimilar to Naipaul's evolution) appear to have seriously damaged his sense of connectedness with the region. Celeste Dolphin, Editor of KAIE, for instance recalled how Mittelholzer, during a brief visit to British Guiana in February 1956, not only encouraged her to persevere with her writing career but also "expressed his faith in the literary evolution of the Caribbean".¹¹⁰ Not long afterwards, in October 1956 Mittelholzer, perhaps hoping to wield greater influence over the direction of West Indian literature, accepted the important role of *Caribbean Voices* editor/presenter. Mittelholzer's involvement in these programmes needs to be considered because of the key role that *Caribbean Voices* played in the development of a Caribbean literary tradition.

Mittelholzer's programmes, spanning October 1956 to June 1958, took on a variety of forms. In most cases they were divided into two halves; the first presenting one or two short stories (dependent on their length) followed by a selection of verse. These were read in most instances by West Indians based in the UK: e.g., Andrew Salkey, Gordon Woolford, Ulric Cross, Ellsworth Keane, Karl Hudson Phillips, V S Naipaul and Pauline Henriques. Mittelholzer frequently interspersed these readings with a critical discussion based on the perceived merits of the works in question. It is worth pausing here to take note of Mittelholzer's approach to editing the programmes:

Choosing the stories for "Caribbean Voices" can sometimes prove an extremely difficult task. Should a badly written story be broadcast? And note I say written, for many a story that reaches us here is excellent in content-matter, but fails in literary technique and grammatical composition. Such stories are hard to reject, for it is in content-matter that a writer truly reveals his talent. Literary technique, and even grammatical composition, may be brushed up in the process of time, but if a writer lacks imagination to infuse into his work, the solid qualities of a good tale – meaning narrative, characterisation and atmosphere

¹¹⁰ Seymour, A. "Edgar Mittelholzer: The Man and His Works" in *The 1967 Edgar Mittelholzer Memorial Lectures – First Series* (Georgetown, National History and Arts Council, 1968) p. 1.

above all – then the most polished literary style...will not raise his work out of the rut of the drab and uninspired.¹¹¹

In bestowing greater importance on creative imagination than grammatical composition or literary technique, Mittelholzer's programmes notably included material that other forums of literary expression might otherwise have rejected. Whilst he occasionally addressed the 'failings' of some these works, it is significant that Mittelholzer primarily endeavoured to offer encouragement. Having observed that his own novels were often the subject of varied and contradictory reviews, Mittelholzer tended to end his (at times controversial) critiques with a disclaimer encouraging listeners of *Caribbean Voices* to make their own assessment about the merits of any particular reading.

Mittelholzer importantly believed very strongly in the individual's right to self-expression. As he once observed: "it is the complex nature of [Caribbean] social origins, and the conflicting loyalties involved in the scheme of...race, class and economic status, which dictate that each must tread his own lone-wolf path of literary expression."¹¹² This awareness seems to have allowed Mittelholzer to put aside his personal ambivalence toward the evolution and development of folk culture, calypso and Anancy stories specifically with respect to the material that was selected for transmission. As the transcripts reveal he not only invited key figures like the playwright Errol John to share his personal views on the importance of calypso to the region, but also regularly featured stories of the aforementioned type as a matter of course, never failing to pour praise on those, like Andrew Salkey's *Anancy and The Ghost Wrestler's*, or Stanley Brown's *Pocomania*, which he felt were well written, entertaining and/or insightful.

Mittelholzer shared with his editorial predecessors a sincere desire to nurture and inspire other aspiring writers. By drawing on his own experiences as a professional writer, Mittelholzer contributed to *Caribbean Voices* in a unique way. Like other aspiring writers and listeners of the programme, he knew what

¹¹¹ See Caribbean Voices collection – Vol. 19, No 1201-1203 (10th February 1957).

¹¹² Mittelholzer, E. "Colour, Class and Letters" in *The Nation* (17th January 1959) p. 57.

it felt like to believe in the quality of the one's own work and what it felt to be rejected by prospective publishers. In noting that he had often regretted that there had not been amongst his acquaintances a "brutally honest critic" to tell him what was "wrong" with his work and why it was unlikely to be considered by a publisher, he was indicating that his views (whether negative or positive) were aimed at helping others to achieve their dreams.¹¹³ With the same objectives in mind, Mittelholzer invited David Farrer, the Director of Secker & Warburg and Innes Rose, Head of John Farquharson's literary agency to offer advice to "those young men and women in the West Indies dreaming of literary fame", particularly on the subject of how to get published, the benefits of employing a literary agent as a medium and on the type of stories that were currently in vogue.¹¹⁴

In a bid to provide variety and maintain the interest of listeners Mittelholzer also invited the Grenadian writer/researcher, Edward Scobie to share insights into the lives of Caribbean figures such as Ignatius Sancho: an ex-slave who, born in British Guiana waters in 1729, later became the owner of a bookstore in London and a man of letters. Other programmes recalled the contribution of writers such as Alfred Mendes, H G De Lisser, Eric Waldron and C L R James; focusing not just in the case of the latter on his literary efforts but also on his non-fictional work, *The Black Jacobins*. Apart from the historical interest these programmes must have generated, they arguably demonstrated that if early pioneers had succeeded in pursuing their literary ambitions despite the adverse socio-political climate, there was little excuse for modern-day West Indians to be discouraged by relatively fewer obstacles.

In the interests of employing literature as a tool of integration, Mittelholzer was additionally careful to ensure, not only that he selected material from a broad range of writers across the region but also that all 'racial' groups

¹¹³ On similar lines Mittelholzer is known to have comforted Jan Carew when the latter's novel, *Black Midas* (1958) received bad reviews by pointing out that *Shadows Move Among Them* had received rave reviews but failed to sell, whilst the Kaywana series had become best selling novels despite the disparaging views of popular critics.

¹¹⁴ See Caribbean Voices collection – Vol. 19, No 1166 (7th October 1956).

and 'classes' were, where possible, represented. In the case of stories that treated minority groups such as Claude Thompson's *Mr Wu Contemplates Peace*, and Edward Scobie's *The Return of the Carib*, Mittelholzer delivered potted histories that located them firmly within the Caribbean. This was clearly for the benefit of those territories whose listeners were less aware of the extent of racial diversity in places such as Trinidad and Guyana. The content of his programmes arguably represented Mittelholzer's hope, as a person of mixed ancestry, that the literary culture of the West Indies would develop along inclusive lines, taking into account the full racial/class diversity of the region.

Conscious of the problems of producing, publishing and distributing literary journals within the region, Mittelholzer once again sought to promote Frank Collymore's *BIM*, noting in one particular programme that:

BIM is the one magazine in the Caribbean area which has rigidly upheld the policy of publishing only what measures up to the best, by universal standards, in creative literature. BIM's attitude has never been; for the West Indies, this is good enough.¹¹⁵

Reference to any other regional journals, was never made by Mittelholzer. Was this a reflection of the dearth of literary journals and the fact that some like *Focus* were not consistently in production or more likely the case that he did not rate the efforts of other key protagonists in the region? The latter is certainly suggested by his emphasis on the term "universal standards" and by the remarks Mittelholzer made in private correspondence to Collymore:

I've looked through the Forum, but am afraid this type of magazine doesn't appeal to me very much. It is too conscious in its "uplift" tone. [...] As I remarked to Charles Springer a year or two ago, Forum seem to me to be on the goody-goody side and has a provincial, milk-and-water flavour that doesn't go down with me. Then, again, there is the churchy note that never seems missing, and anything that treats of orthodox religion simply annoys me intensely. I have

¹¹⁵ See Caribbean Voices collection – Vol. 19, No 1206-1207 (3rd March 1956).

no use for the church and Jesus Christ and the concomitants that go along with these things.¹¹⁶

As a close friend and admirer of Collymore, he was perhaps also biased in favour of *BIM*. Credit should nevertheless be given to Mittelholzer for helping to raise a greater awareness of *BIM* across the region and for inviting other writers to make contributions to it.

A Caribbean Exile

Mittelholzer presented his last *Caribbean Voices* programme on 1st June 1958, just three months prior to the official dissolution of the programme on 7th September 1958. The reasons behind his untimely departure are worthy of mention and reside in his decision to invite Arthur Calder-Marshall to review his travel journal, *With A Carib Eye* (1958). Since Mittelholzer had not invited anyone to review his novels during the 21-month period of his editorship, despite for instance the publication of *A Tale of Three Places* (1957), the function of this programme stands out as different from all the others. Mittelholzer viewed him as an interfering ‘faddist’ and had long suspected the English novelist of being responsible for writing a significant number of the negative reviews, which appeared in highbrow publications.¹¹⁷ Mittelholzer’s suspicions were largely correct. Since the recent release of contributors’ names, it is now known that Calder-Marshall had for instance claimed that Mittelholzer’s *The Life and Death of Sylvia* (1953) was “a deeply unsatisfactory book” and that the author was “a masculine writer who seems unable to penetrate intuitively into the mind of a woman”.¹¹⁸ With Mittelholzer’s alleged flaws constantly being highlighted, Calder-Marshall felt justified in stating that: “[His] faults are those of the pioneer... That he will be superseded there is no doubt. But all praise to him

¹¹⁶ Letter dated 22nd February 1946 in Frank Collymore Collection (Ref: Letters from Mittelholzer to Collymore) held in the Department of Archives, Barbados.

¹¹⁷ Reviews appearing in journals like *The Times Literary Supplement* during this period were anonymous.

¹¹⁸ Calder-Marshall, A. “Commonweath Relations” in *Times Literary Supplement* (15 May 1953) p. 313.

for giving others an archetype on which to gloss.”¹¹⁹ Though this remark contains a degree of truth, the praise is backhanded and may not have been written – in Mittelholzer’s eyes – without some malice.

The programme, which took place on 4th May 1958 was intended, in light of the aspersions made by Mittelholzer about Calder-Marshall in *With A Carib Eye*, (albeit without reference to his name), as a showdown between the two men. To clarify, Mittelholzer had referred in his travel journal to an, “English novelist – well known rather than distinguished”, who had written a book on Trinidad following a short stay in the island.¹²⁰ Calder-Marshall’s representations were assured critical acclaim according to Mittelholzer precisely because they were based on the drunken ramblings of his host and the “slum districts...of Port of Spain”. Mittelholzer’s primary objective was to confront the English writer over the Western world’s obsession with portraying West Indians as: “distinctly primitive, backward and exotic”.¹²¹ This evidently backfired in Calder-Marshall’s favour. Unfortunately Mittelholzer had got one key fact wrong; *Glory Dead* (1939) had in fact “received extremely antagonistic reviews”.¹²² Armed with this revelation, Calder-Marshall went onto argue that Mittelholzer had created a false picture about the geology of Barbados, down-played the importance of the cultural changes taking place in the West Indies and was deluded in his “thesis that West Indians are just like Europeans”. Since Mittelholzer, a deeply sensitive person attached to notions of truth and integrity, had written the travel journal with the assumed authority of an insider, these comments must have been publicly humiliating.

Whilst Mittelholzer went on to host the programmes consecutively aired on the 11th and 18th of May, he was notably absent on the 25th of May, when Calder Marshall was this time invited by W. R. A. Pilgrim, a programme producer, to

¹¹⁹ Calder-Marshall, A. “Tropical Mixture” in *Times Literary Supplement* (7 February 1958) pg 73 on the topic of *Kaywana Blood*.

¹²⁰ See Caribbean Voices collection – Vol. 23, No 1334-1335 (4th May 1958).

¹²¹ Mittelholzer, E. *With A Carib Eye* (Secker & Warburg: London, 1958) p. 11.

¹²² See Calder-Marshall, A. *Glory Dead* (Michael Joseph: London, 1939) Calder-Marshall’s book would certainly be regarded as politically incorrect in today’s world asserting as he does, white superiority in the references he makes to “negroes of a low mental type” (p. 138) and to the lassitude of the coloured middle class whose “white blood... seems to have run thin”. (p. 92).

offer a review of V. S. Naipaul's *The Suffrage of Elvira*. His opening comments indicate that the *Caribbean Voices* team favoured his perspective of the West Indies over that of Mittelholzer's:

Some weeks ago on this programme Marghanita Laski, Edgar Mittelholzer and I were arguing as to whether West Indians were just the same as Europeans; and I was maintaining that just as British, French, Germans and Yugoslavs, for example, are very different from one another; so West Indians are very different from Europeans – and I'd go farther and say that the people differ from island to island.

It seems to me that Vidia Naipaul's new book bears out my contention most brilliantly; it is not merely an essentially West Indian book, but a specifically Trinidadian or Trickyadian book.¹²³

It is possible to speculate that as his last programme was aired on 1st June, four weeks after his clash with Calder Marshall, that Mittelholzer had either given notice of his resignation or been asked to step down from his post as programme editor.

Though Mittelholzer's involvement in *Caribbean Voices* apparently ended on a sour note, his contribution to the programme and to Caribbean literature in general was not forgotten. In a programme aired on 10th August 1958, and dedicated to the pioneers of Caribbean literature, Lamming acknowledged the regions indebtedness to three novelists: Edgar Mittelholzer, Vic Reid and Roger Mais. As he was to remark:

[West Indians] have had to live with a large and self-delighted middle class, who have never understood their function. One cannot accuse an illiterate man of avoiding books, but one wonders what is to be done with people who regard education as something to have, but not use. [...] The absence of that [reading] public, the refusal of a whole class to respond to that activity which was not honoured by money; it was that dense and grinning atmosphere that [...] Mittelholzer survived [...] by fleeing the land...

¹²³ See *Caribbean Voices* collection – Vol. 23, No. 1340 (25th May 1958).

Reid, Mittelholzer and Mais carried on their private war for more than twenty years. And different as they are in texture and theme [we offer] recognition of our debt to their work.¹²⁴

The omission of Mittelholzer's name in the recent BBC *World Service* retrospective on the *Caribbean Voices* programmes (broadcast in 2009 during the centenary of the author's birth) seems, within this context, extraordinary.¹²⁵ It is nevertheless a reflection of the wider marginalisation of Mittelholzer from the canon of West Indian literature.

A Darkening Cloud of Opprobrium

With his perspectives on the Caribbean so critically dismissed, Mittelholzer presumably felt rejected, deeply alienated and unable to continue writing about the Caribbean from the perspective of an 'insider'. His embittered mind-set failed to soften as this letter to Seymour, written in October 1959, indicates:

What's the matter with your Information Officer? Sent a cablegram to me out of the blue asking for a message from me about something I knew absolutely nothing! *History-Culture week! What on earth is that?* How can I give a message of goodwill on something I know nothing about? I can't be a hypocrite, Arthur, I had to write and tell your I. O. that. [my italics]¹²⁶

By 1961 Mittelholzer's sense of Caribbean identity had shifted. He wrote in a letter to his publishers that he was sick of potted biographies and no longer wanted them to be included in the jackets of his novels. But assuming they must

¹²⁴ See Caribbean Voices collection – Vol. 24, No. 1375-1378 (10th August 1958).

¹²⁵ See Grant, C. "Caribbean Voices: Part One" in *The Wednesday Documentary* (BBC World Services [On-line] Available at: http://www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/documentaries/2009/07/090721_caribbean_voices_1.shtml : 22 July 2009; site visited 19 August 2010) and Grant, C. "Caribbean Voices: Part Two" in *The Wednesday Documentary* (BBC World Services [On-line] Available at: http://www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/documentaries/2009/07/090727_caribbean_voices_2.shtml : 29 July 2009; site visited 19 August 2010).

¹²⁶ Letter dated 16th October 1959 in A J Seymour Collection (unpublished letters between Seymour and Mittelholzer held at the University of Guyana).

write something about a book's author they could briefly state that he was of "Swiss-German origin, though ... born in British Guiana, South America [...] and now permanently resident in England."¹²⁷ It seems likely that this situation was not helped by the unsettled state of the author's personal life, for when Mittelholzer became estranged from Roma Halfhide in 1957 (followed by their divorce in May 1959), he lost his greatest critic; the one person whose advice he respected:

My wife is my severest critic, and her method is this: If she reads a book of mine and thinks well of it she'll hand me back the MS. without a word of comment; if she discovers the slightest defect she announces it in no uncertain manner and makes sure to drive it home.¹²⁸

It was on her advice, following the poor reviews of *The Weather in Middenshot* (1952) that Mittelholzer reverted to the Caribbean as the sole setting of his novels right up until the end of their marriage.¹²⁹ The impact of their divorce on Mittelholzer's writing was signalled by the publication of the English-set novel, *A Tinkling in the Twilight* (1959). These two events – the *Caribbean Voices* debacle and the breakdown of his marriage – perhaps explain why all of the novels he *conceived* from 1958 onwards were set in the UK. It should be reiterated that novels such as *Eltonsbrody* (1960), *The Mad MacMullocks* (1959), *Latticed Echoes* (1960) and *Thunder Returning* (1961) all belong, in terms of their conception, to the pre-1958 period. The two latter highly experimental novels that were admittedly developed in the post-1958 period were only done so, with the encouragement of his second wife, Jacqueline Pointer, to whom *Latticed Echoes* is dedicated.¹³⁰ Since the semi-autobiographical protagonist, Richard Lehrer, is

¹²⁷ See letter dated 25th July 1961 in Bodley Head & Hogarth Press Archives (Ref: MS2606, 1961-64) – 43 unpublished letters between Mittelholzer and his publishers held at Reading University.

¹²⁸ Letter dated 20th December in *Leonard Woolf Archives* (Ref: LWP Part III General Correspondence / M) held at Sussex University.

¹²⁹ Roma may also be responsible for his ambivalent attitude to folklore. She notably admitted being disappointed that he had included folklore in his novel *A Morning at the Office*. See Williams, F. *Edgar Mittelholzer: Romancier Guyanais (1909-1965) – Voyage Au Coeur Du Monde, Voyage Au Coeur De L'Homme* (Universite De Haute-Bretagne, Rennes: 1995/96) p. 707.

¹³⁰ Mittelholzer met Jacqueline Pointer in August 1959 at a writers' workshop and married her in April 1960.

presented as a West Indian 'outsider', the novels arguably reflect the impact of Mittelholzer's clash with Calder-Marshall on his state of mind.

With Roma no longer voicing her objections, Mittelholzer began writing once again about the flaws in British society. This was perhaps a means through which he could assuage his anger at Western writers, who like the aforementioned Calder-Marshall, continued to publish stereotyped representations of the Caribbean. But it also genuinely reflected the unsettling emotions he had about the increasingly liberal nature of British society, particularly with regard to its treatment of criminals.¹³¹ The fascistic ideas that his characters expressed in his early novels, *Shadows Move Among Them* and *The Weather in Middenshot* were considered by most of his English contemporaries to be comic, harmless or misplaced. After 1945 – in response to the horrors of the Holocaust - fascist ideas of any sort tended to invite opprobrium. It is thus possible that the decline in Mittelholzer's reputation was hastened when, on a *BBC Monitor Programme* (1960), he admitted sharing the extreme views of his characters. In response to the interviewer's suggestion that he was 'violently anti-violent', Mittelholzer consented:

Yes, I mean in *The Weather in Middenshot* for instance... my theme there is that anyone who is guilty of violence to the human person or property should be considered as human vermin and eradicated. I know that it's a violent thing to advocate but I can't see any other cure to the crime problem. Because I feel decent people should be protected against thugs, these cosh boys and all the rest of it.¹³²

He added that he felt strongly about this and went so far as to say that some humans should be categorised as "vermin" and "treated as lice and bed bugs". Britain, he argued, had become "effete", like "rotten cheese"; caring more about

¹³¹ Mittelholzer was not alone in being concerned about the future of Britain. Historians have noted that the early 1960s was a period of unease in Britain with many growing obsessed with the idea that Britain was sliding into a period of decay. See for instance Morgan, K. "The Stagnant Society: 1961-1964" in *Britain Since 1945: The People's Peace* (Oxford University Press: Oxford, 2001).

¹³² BBC "Interview with George Lamming and Edgar Mittelholzer" in *BBC Monitor Programme* – TX 11.09.1960.

the welfare of criminals, cats and dogs, than it did about human safety. Whilst the viewership and public response to this programme is unknown it certainly cannot have helped his relationship with Secker & Warburg, who had already refused to publish *The Mad MacMullocks* in 1953 (it was published by Peter Owen in 1959) on the strength of its controversial themes and the likelihood that his reputation would be damaged.

Mittelholzer's long-term relationship with Secker and Warburg (fourteen of his novels had been published by them¹³³) came to an end, according to Chang, over the pornographic content of *A Piling of the Clouds* (1961).¹³⁴ Though Secker and Warburg had been found not guilty of the charge of obscenity following their publication of Kauffman's *The Philanderer*, they may have remained afraid to "touch any book that even whisper[ed] about sex".¹³⁵ These fears may have been compounded by the prosecution of Penguin Books, for its first edition of *Lady Chatterley's Lover* in 1960, under the Obscene Publications Act, 1959.¹³⁶ It is also evident, however, that Frederic Warburg was no longer willing as a man of Jewish heritage to accommodate Mittelholzer's 'fascist' views. He is said by Jan Carew (and corroborated by Mittelholzer's own accounts) to have "hurled" the script back at the author along with the advice that it be put in a "bottom drawer" and forgotten.¹³⁷

The novel, published in 1961 by Putnam after five rejections, received poor reviews. The *New Statesman's*¹³⁸ view, that the author's ideas on human vermin were no less frightening than the novel's storyline about the rape of a

¹³³ This figure is sometimes cited as 13 since *The Harrowing of Hubertus* (1954) is the same novel as *Kaywana Stock* (1959) in all but name.

¹³⁴ Chang, V. L. "Edgar Mittelholzer (1909-1965)" in Dance, D. C. (ed.) *Fifty Caribbean Writers: A Bio-Bibliographical Critical Sourcebook* (Greenwood Press: London, 1986) p. 330.

¹³⁵ Cited in letter dated 26th May 1954 in the John Day Archives (Ref: C0123; Bxs 291, 330, 316, 330, 343, 353, 363, 392 and 417, 1951-1955) – correspondence between Mittelholzer and his publishers held at Princeton University.

¹³⁶ The trial of Penguin Books took place between 20 October and 2 November 1960. The jury acquitted them.

¹³⁷ Mittelholzer, E. *A Pleasant Career* (unpublished second part of his autobiography of which *A Swarthy Boy* is the first part – in the possession of Mrs J. Ives).

¹³⁸ Anon. "A Dubious Hand" in *The New Statesman* (London, 10 November 1962) p. 714.

child, was not untypical.¹³⁹ Others dismissed his work as unworthy of attention. The *Daily Telegraph*, for instance, described the novel as “a desperately silly piece” of work, and provoked Mittelholzer into taking the unusual step of writing a rebuttal in the “Letters to Editor” section of the paper.¹⁴⁰ Other broadsheet reviews revealed a broader all-encompassing disdain for West Indian writers:

Isn't it time we killed off V. Selvon Mittelholzer? West Indian novels have been appearing in Britain for over 10 years now. Yet you could never tell from their reviews that they weren't all the work of a composite Caribbean author writing sunnily of quaint brown lives in the sugar-fields, with occasional passionate excursions into the jungle.¹⁴¹

The tone of J B Singer's 1962 article, *The Caribbean Mixture*, meanwhile exposes the tendency of an influential body of reviewers to view writers like Mittelholzer as colonial upstarts:

Some West Indians appear to feel that, since they have come so late to the English language, they have every right to experiment with it, to try to give it a dramatic new course and prove themselves the true successors of Joyce. Mittelholzer is a name that again figures prominently among these more experimental writers. [...] But it is characteristic of the new-found arrogance of West Indians that Mr. Mittelholzer should soldier gaily on, even though his limitations as a poet keep his literally senseless words [Singer is referring to *Latticed Echoes*] from acquiring any sort of meaning. The whole scheme has a monumental impudence about it...¹⁴²

¹³⁹ Of the views expressed in this novel the most distasteful, from today's perspective, relate to the author's view of Black people; the dismissal of their experiences during the Notting Hill Riots and Little Rock in America; and his belief that Black South Africans were capable of more shocking atrocities than the Nazis. See Mittelholzer, E. *The Piling of the Clouds* (Putnam: London, 1961) p. 208-209. This attitude toward race contrasts strongly with his earlier attitudes, and in particular, those expressed in novels like *A Morning at the Office* (1950), *The Life and Death of Sylvia* (1953) and *My Bones and My Flute* (1955).

¹⁴⁰ See Mittelholzer, E. 'Letters to the Editor' in *Daily Telegraph* (18th December 1961) – newspaper cutting in Michael Gilkes' private collection.

¹⁴¹ Bryden, R. "One Foot in the Grave" in *The Sunday Telegraph* (London: 26th May 1963) p. 13.

¹⁴² Singer, J. B. "The Caribbean Mixture" in *The Times Literary Supplement* (London: 10th August 1962) p. 578.

These reviews, marred by the arrogance and racial prejudice of Western elitists, undoubtedly harmed Mittelholzer's literary career.

Writing An Essay in Freedom

Whilst Mittelholzer's anti-liberal ideas were in conflict with the socio-political mood of the times and remain controversial from today's perspective, it is necessary to understand, when assessing his work, what writing meant to him. In a letter written in the same year as the BBC Monitor Programme (1960), the deeper significance of writing for Mittelholzer, as a means of self-expression, becomes clear:

I have heaps of ideals, but ... I don't feel that I should hold a public demonstration to prove I hold them. [...] I honestly feel that if one believes strongly in anything one doesn't have to show it in public. In conversation – yes. In one's letters or literary works – yes, because these are the means by which one can express one's ideas. These are the means of communication, and even here, *I feel, one should express oneself merely with the purpose of "having one's say", not with the idea that one is going to change the order of things* [my italics].¹⁴³

Like his eponymous protagonist, Sylvia, Mittelholzer had found that one's personal ideals, obsessions or desires (particularly those that generated the greatest amount of inner turmoil) could be sublimated through writing. In 1964 – by this time fighting for his literary survival - Mittelholzer wrote to the *Telegraph* (1964), railing against publishers who practiced "a form of subtle censorship": their rejection of books expressing sympathy with victims of crime and by extension, books that expressed ideas they did not share.¹⁴⁴ The right to voice his opinions through writing was also symbolic of his freedom and a means of asserting his equality in a world that still insisted on hierarchies of race. It is

¹⁴³ Letter dated 4th February 1960 in Anna Mittelholzer's private collection (a collection of correspondence from Mittelholzer to Jacqueline Pointer before their marriage in April 1960).

¹⁴⁴ Cited in letter dated 11th April 1964 in *Bodley Head & Hogarth Press Archives* (Ref: MS2606, 1961-64) – 43 unpublished letters between Mittelholzer and his publishers held at Reading University.

surely not accidental that the key black protagonist in *A Morning at the Office* is named Horace Xavier: whilst his first name alludes to his classical namesake (the son of a freed Roman slave who established his acclaimed status by becoming a poet of equal standing to Ovid and Virgil), his surname sounds like Saviour. To be silenced was to be enslaved for as A J Seymour noted Mittelholzer's "life and work [was] an essay in freedom".¹⁴⁵

Mittelholzer remained unwilling to compromise with his publishers, despite having (by 1960) two families to care for. Though *The Wounded and the Worried* (1962) and his autobiography, *A Swarthy Boy* (1963) were published by Putnam, he struggled to find publishers for *Uncle Paul* (1963) and more notably *The Aloneness of Mrs Chatham* (1965), which was rejected by fourteen publishers and one leading North American agent. It was eventually accepted by a little known publisher (Library 33 Ltd) and given the rarity of the book today, presumably sold few copies. Four publishers rejected *The Jilkington Drama* before its eventual acceptance by Abelard-Schuman a few months before the author's death. Mittelholzer's inability to win praise from the literati led in the meantime to a crisis of confidence in his literary abilities¹⁴⁶ and as importantly to his financial ruin.

His fear of impoverishment becomes palpable in a letter Mittelholzer wrote to Roger Lubbock at Putnam & Co in August 1962:

Could you give me an early decision, because if you definitely feel you can't do it as it now stands, I'll want to show it to other publishers. Again it's that annoying business of having to live. *I wish I were in a position to be casual and*

¹⁴⁵ Seymour, A. "Edgar Mittelholzer: The Man and His Works" in *The 1967 Edgar Mittelholzer Memorial Lectures – First Series* (Georgetown, National History and Arts Council, 1968) p. 14

¹⁴⁶ Guckhian states Judge Hallinan (the founder of the literary club Mittelholzer attended in Trinidad): "who was staying in London in the early sixties, had a visit from the author, whose anxiety over the failure of his creative faculty evoked the judge's sympathy." See Guckhian, P. *Failure in Exile: A Critical Study of the Works of Edgar Mittelholzer* (University of West Indies: Barbados, 1970) p. 59.

leisurely about these things! If I don't publish an average of two books a year I just won't be able to exist, and that's the plain, cold truth.¹⁴⁷ [my italics]

He attempted suicide nearly one year later in July 1963, informing his family during recovery, that his financial circumstances had become intolerable.¹⁴⁸ In a letter to Collymore (dated February 1965) he made it clear that his financial situation had not improved: "I'm barely existing. [...] However I keep hoping that some miracle will put matters right."¹⁴⁹ In desperation he played the football and cricket pools. Pride meantime prevented him from accepting the financial support of his wife or friends. When he committed suicide by self-immolation on 6th May 1965¹⁵⁰, he left a note for the police explaining that: "For the past two or three years my financial situation has been hopeless and I have found it difficult to support those who depend on me. [...] As I'm unable to obtain cyanide, and in order to avoid the fiasco like that in 1963, I am resolving to the drastic method of a petrol bath and a lighted match."¹⁵¹ In a letter to a cousin he more candidly admitted that: "he had always been a fighter but he was tired in spirit, and the burden of disappointment and discouragement and insecurity had become too heavy".¹⁵² Suicide for Mittelholzer, who had lived most of his life according to the mantra 'Sieg Oder Tod!' ('Victory or Death!'), had always been a possibility, so while it is possible he would not have killed himself under different financial circumstances¹⁵³ his actual death was "charged with a feeling of fate".¹⁵⁴

¹⁴⁷ See Hogarth Press Archives (Ref: MS2750/284, 1949-54) – 18 unpublished letters between Mittelholzer and his publishers held at Reading University.

¹⁴⁸ Mittelholzer's first attempted suicide – he drank corrosive fluid – took place in 1936. This was attributed (by Jacqueline Ward) to a fear that he would never be able to leave British Guiana. Gilkes has meantime suggested that it was linked to a failed love affair, whilst F E Brassington, claimed, in the *Trinidad Guardian* (see 'Mittelholzer as I knew Him' – 6 May 1965) that it had been brought on by grinding poverty.

¹⁴⁹ See letter dated 25th February 1965 in Frank Collymore Collection (Ref: Letters from Mittelholzer to Collymore) held in the Department of Archives, Barbados.

¹⁵⁰ Since many critics cite Mittelholzer's death as being 5th May 1965, it should be clarified that whilst it is likely that he died on the evening of the aforementioned date, he was not certified dead until 2.20am on 6th May 1965 by Farnham Hospital.

¹⁵¹ See suicide note in inquest notes from H M Coroner's Court in Surrey. Quoted with permission of Mittelholzer's widow, Jacqueline Ward.

¹⁵² Seymour, A. "Edgar Mittelholzer: The Man and His Works" in *The 1967 Edgar Mittelholzer Memorial Lectures – First Series* (Georgetown, National History and Arts Council, 1968) p. 17.

¹⁵³ His widow viewed: "he would not have killed himself if he could have supported our son and myself, and his other family, as he wanted." Ives, J. *The Idyll and the Warrior: Recollections of Edgar Mittelholzer* (unpublished and in the possession of Mrs J. Ives) p. 53.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid; p. 57.

Re-Membering the Man

One striking point about the publishing archives is the revelation that many publishers expressed a belief in Mittelholzer as a talented novelist and would have been more than willing to publish his work so long as relatively minor amendments were made. The overly preachy (almost ranting) segments of *A Piling of the Clouds* could, for instance, have been expurgated without dramatically affecting the flow or structure of the story. But Mittelholzer was as already described, and as Jan Carew attests, a man of “amazing integrity”. This can be seen in a letter he wrote to Collymore:

We want to get at the real truth of things, no matter how ugly or painful the truth may prove to be. That is why when I write anything *I simply express myself sincerely and as I want to; I don't care two hoots what the reader thinks; this is the only way, I believe, I will achieve anything worth while - - by being dead honest and true to myself and what I feel* [my italics].¹⁵⁵

Mittelholzer placed great value on being an individual as exemplified by just a few of his personality traits: he was an agnostic-cum-Yogi and naturist.¹⁵⁶ He believed in the occult and was known for his love of routine; his dislike of alcohol except in controlled moderation, carnival and calypso as well as his rejection of ‘hypocritical’ practices and ‘pointless’ social traditions. All of these unconventional aspects of his persona - combined with his vivid imagination, his love of mythology, his emotional highs and lows - compelled him to write stories that are distinguished by an extraordinary inventiveness, the bizarre and the contentious. He was on key issues intractable:

¹⁵⁵ Letter dated 22nd February 1946 in Frank Collymore Collection (Ref: Letters from Mittelholzer to Collymore) held in the Department of Archives, Barbados.

¹⁵⁶ Mittelholzer drew strength and validation from men like the naturalist and explorer Charles Waterton, who was described as being ‘one of the most uncompromising individualists’ that stuck to the faith of his fathers ‘even in the darkest days of unpopularity and persecution’. See Aldington, R. *The Strange Life of Charles Waterton: 1782-1865* (Evans Brothers: London, 1949) pp. 12-13.

...I find it quite impossible to let criticism alter my way of seeing things. You see, I've discovered that human beings, the best of them, can differ so completely on questions of right and wrong that I long ago decided that my best policy would be to let my self be influenced by no one. For how am I to tell whether A or B or C will finally prove right? Again, too, I think that the basis of true integrity is to have faith in one's own intuitions whatever they may be worth.¹⁵⁷

Both letters reveal a sincerity and level of integrity that is to be applauded. His intractability, his stubborn refusal to compromise, was however self-destructive.

Whatever our views are of Mittelholzer, it is clear that his commitment to the development of a Caribbean literary tradition was sincere. Even when in the late 1950s he appears to have turned his back on the Caribbean, letters reveal that he remained deeply connected to it; one, dated 1962 conceded, "The situation in B. G. depresses me". Up until his death, he notably received regular updates on British Guiana from his sister, Lucille, including copies of the local newspapers. As a self-taught, largely isolated intellectual man, with a magpie-like appetite for an eclectic range of material and who wrote about complex morale issues, without (as Carew points out) the benefit of a University education, it is perhaps not surprising that some of his ideals were misguided.

To people that knew him these views were forgivable. In Jan Carew's words, "he was a nice, and kind, and decent person...in spite of all those wilder views... I think the perception from outside would be harsher. They didn't see all the sides to him".¹⁵⁸ Collymore similarly notes: "to him hypocrisy was the unforgivable sin, and we must not be misguided if in some of his writing he tended to offend the squeamish. He was one who was prepared to undergo martyrdom for his beliefs. Perhaps he did."¹⁵⁹ Though Mittelholzer appeared to have a somewhat abrasive, prickly persona to strangers, his friends and fellow-writers have evoked his memory with fondness. Andrew Salkey remarked

¹⁵⁷ Letter dated 5th December 1948 in *Henry Swanzy (Caribbean Voices) Collection* (Ref: Box 1: MS42 1945-1952) held at the University of Birmingham.

¹⁵⁸ Cox, J. *Conversations with Jan Carew* (Unpublished: Louisville, 14th November 2009).

¹⁵⁹ Collymore, F. "Edgar Mittelholzer: A Biographical Sketch" in *BIM* (Vol. 10, June-Dec. 1965) p. 26.

shortly after Mittelholzer's death: "I consider myself fortunate in having been one of the few people with whom he had an easy relationship and I shall treasure my memories of him."¹⁶⁰ Similarly whilst many have characterised Mittelholzer as being humourless and un-gregarious, this is far from the truth. As a friend, Mittelholzer was an entertaining and vital personality. This contention is supported by Henry Swanzy as well as Frank Collymore, who liked him "very much"; and Michael Anthony who recalls discovering he was, "really warm, human [...], simple and free from airs."¹⁶¹

¹⁶⁰ Rickards, C. "A Tribute to Edgar Mittelholzer" in *BIM* (Vol. 11, Jan-June 1966) p. 103.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid*; p. 103.

CHAPTER THREE

MITTELHOLZER'S CREATIVE GENES(IS) & THE GENI(US) BEHIND IT

"Words. What were words?"¹

"He's only black, but he's intelligent. One day he may be a famous writer, who knows? I must ask him if he's never tried his hand at writing stories. He could begin with simple little tales like *The Jen...*"²

"Words. High-flown words cleverly strung together".³

INTRODUCTION

The prevailing view that Mittelholzer wrote for, and sought the acceptance of, a Western readership appears to have led to the unfortunate misconception that his literary style *simply* reflected a preference for, and uncomplicated assimilation of, Western culture (i.e., a belief that West is best). Mittelholzer's own remarks may have encouraged this perception: "I want the English and the Americans to realize that there are coloured natives out here who can be just as educated and refined as they can be [...]. We also know about Bach and Beethoven and Gauguin and Rembrandt and T. S. Eliot [...]"⁴ Indeed it is perhaps this that led Seymour and later critics to talk about Western influences on the author's literature and beliefs (some based on the repeated mention of specific texts in the Mittelholzer canon, intuitive hunches and apparent similarities between his work and that of other authors) without giving further consideration to the alternative possibility that Mittelholzer was more

¹ Mittelholzer, E. *The Life and Death of Sylvia* (John Day: New York, 1954) p. 263.

² Mittelholzer, E. *A Morning at the Office* (Peepal Tree Press: Leeds, 2010) p. 206

³ Op. Cit., Mittelholzer, E. *The Life and Death of Sylvia* p. 276.

⁴ Seymour, A. "Edgar Mittelholzer: The Man and His Works" in *The 1967 Edgar Mittelholzer Memorial Lectures – First Series* (Georgetown, National History and Arts Council, 1968) p. 13.

complexly engaging with, radically subverting and/or transforming the texts of Empire in new and unique ways.

This chapter takes as its starting point comments Mittelholzer made in *Kyk-Over-Al* in 1952 about the art of writing. In it he revealed that he was not interested in writers who represent the “consensus of opinion” or who produce “a pastiche of half-veiled cribbings [sic] from the works of other writers” or a collection of “sensational clichés”. His admiration lay with those writers who love their “own ideas”, who “respect [their] own ideas” and are “determined, if the heavens cave in, to say what, deep in his heart – or in his reason – he feels to be the truth about people and things.”⁵ He was, of course, obliquely referring to the way he approached his own writing and if we accept these comments at face value, then we need also to question why his novels contain numerous references to the texts of various Western authors. Was he self-deluded and ironically guilty of pastiche or do his transtextual references serve a more complex purpose?

What follows is a critical analysis of the first two novels that Mittelholzer published – *Corentyne Thunder* (1941) and *A Morning at the Office* (1950) – with a particular focus on the significance of transtextual references. The novels will be considered, however, in reverse order as it is the mysterious story of “The Jen” in *A Morning at the Office*, that seemingly provides central clues to some of the author’s obscure terms of reference and which on being applied to most, if not all, of Mittelholzer’s novels significantly aids an appreciation of his work and objectives. It is accepted, as indicated in Chapter One, that attempts to identify authorial intention are fraught with uncertainty. It is therefore necessary where possible to demonstrate the validity of the various extrapolations by anchoring them against pertinent primary sources, biographical information and an understanding of the author’s socio-historical context.

⁵ Mittelholzer, E. “Literary Criticism and the Creative Writer” in A. J. Seymour (ed) *Kyk-Over-Al* (Vol. 5, No. 15; Year-end 1952) p. 20.

The structure of this close analysis takes the following form. It begins with a brief synopsis of *A Morning at the Office* and the embedded allegorical tale of “The Jen”. The section, “Unmasking “The Jen””, will focus on the exegeses of W. M. J. Howard, Michael Gilkes, Jens-Ulrich Davids and Frances Williams followed by an explanation of how recent findings reveal that “The Jen” is metatextually linked to the *Arabian Nights* tale of “The Fisherman and The Jinnee”. A study of the relationship between this Arabic text, “The Jen” and key aspects of *A Morning at the Office* aims to expose Mittelholzer’s intent to subvert negative representations of race, whilst shedding light on the author’s literary aspirations for the West Indies. The final section of the paper will focus on the critical reception of *Corentyne Thunder*, before arguing that Mittelholzer’s relationship with the Luckhoo family and Corentyne Coast help to anchor the significance of the novel’s metatextual references. The ultimate section – The Jinnee’s Release – reveals how the story of “The Jen” aids our awareness of the author’s private desire to subvert Guiana’s colonial order.

A MORNING AT THE OFFICE & MITTELHOLZER’S JEN

A Synopsis of A Morning at The Office

A Morning of the Office (1950) is set in 1947 between four minutes to seven and noon at the premises of a British-owned distribution company, ironically named, Essential Products Ltd. The story pivots around a love-note that Horace Xavier, the ambitious black office boy, has anonymously left on the desk of the socially unattainable coloured middle-class character, Nanette Hinckson. The note – a passage copied out of Shakespeare’s *As You Like It* - attracts the attention of various members of the office from the hard-working yet insecure East Indian Assistant Accountant, Jagabir; to Edna Bisnauth, a middle-class East Indian stenographer; and Patrick Lorry, a coloured Customs Clerk who hopes to manipulate his way into Mrs Hinckson’s bed. When the gay Salesman, Mr Reynolds inadvertently tells Horace that Mrs Hinckson knows he wrote the note, Horace is filled with indignant shame. Angered by the injustice of the

socially constructed hierarchies of race, colour and class, he storms out of the office.

The finely nuanced interactions between the diverse characters in the office – e.g., the junior Black staff, including an office sweeper; the lower- and middle-class East Indians, the Coloured middle-class stenographers, French-Portuguese Creole switchboard operator, Spanish Creole Junior Accountant, Chinese Stenotypist and the White senior management – skilfully represent in microcosm the broad dynamics of race, colour, class and sexual orientation in Trinidadian society. But *A Morning at the Office* is so much more: it is a novel about the literary heritage of the West Indies; the power of literature to express our feelings; a deliberation on literary techniques, literary form, and the moral responsibility of writers (“a novelist ought to laugh at his characters – and even at himself – but his laughter should be in respectful undertones”⁶); a consideration of literary aspiration (e.g., in characters like Arthur Lamby, Edna Bisnauth, Mortimer Barnett, Everard Murrain and Horace Xavier) and the difficulty of fulfilling these ambitions within the context of a milieu that does not endorse the arts or view it as a respectable career.

An additional theme of psychic phenomena is unobtrusively woven through the narrative, with one character, Eustace Benson, the coloured Chief Clerk reflecting on the possible existence of “unprobed force[s]” as he reads over Santayana’s *Scepticism and Animal Faith*, and another, Miss Henery, whose racy daydream is interrupted by the sensation of a ghostly hand stroking her leg – the hand of the dead carpenter who made the desk at which she sits. When Mittelholzer expressed surprise at the novel’s considerable success claiming it was: “mere social document in the guise of a novel, a grand tract nicely dressed up”⁷, one suspects false modesty on the part of a sometimes, mischievous author.⁸ Apart from being masterfully written, the novel’s embedded allegory -

⁶ Op. Cit., Mittelholzer, E. *A Morning at the Office* p. 209.

⁷ Seymour, A. J. “The Novels of Edgar Mittelholzer” in *Kyk-Over-Al* (No. 28; December 1958) p. 11.

⁸ Mittelholzer explains in *Kyk-Over-Al* that *A Morning at the Office* had been turned down by “seven of the most reputable London publishers” and was evidently struck by the conflicting response of critics and publishers to his work: where one might describe a piece of his work as masterful another might consider it a flop. As the article indicates he was sometimes tempted to

“The Jen” – skilfully unites the novel’s themes of literature and race and psychic phenomenon, while revealing the source of the author’s creative urge.

Arthur Lamby writer of the “The Jen” is said by his lover, Edna Bisnauth to have “genius” but this was being stifled by the newspaper office in which he worked: “It was cramping his soul, killing his creative urge.”⁹ His name (arguably connoting young Author¹⁰) and job self-reflexively link him to Mittelholzer. His story is said to be of vital comfort to Edna in moments of despair. Indeed Edna Bisnauth, who “liked music” but was more fascinated by “the linking together of words”¹¹, tells us in a moment of self-admission that she is the Jen.¹² Mittelholzer as one would expect similarly enjoyed word-play/-association, including as Williams convincingly asserts, “onomastics”.¹³ This technique - most obvious in *Creole Chips* with characters for instance being named Mrs Shrew, P C Batton, Mr Blunt, Mr J. Wordsworth Nowall Esq., Mrs Waite and Mrs Moutheley - continues to be used throughout the author’s career but in more complex, less decipherable forms. An awareness of the author’s exploitation of onomastics, becomes as will be demonstrated, a key consideration in the attempt to decode the Jen’s significance.

A Synopsis of “The Jen”

Mooney, a five-year old girl, who lives in a big house near the Canje Creek, is afraid of noises that emerge from the surrounding bush. The black water is also frightening as one can never be sure what is wriggling within it besides fish. One rainy afternoon, while stuck in-doors, Mooney’s nurse, Beatrice tells her a story about the Jen. The Jen is ambiguously described as a “Thing” that lives in the dense bushes and water. It is dreadfully bad (or at least pretends to be),

poke fun at the inconsistencies of their profession. Op. Cit., Mittelholzer, E. “Literary Criticism and the Creative Writer” pp. 19-22.

⁹ Op. Cit., Mittelholzer, E. *A Morning at the Office* p. 125.

¹⁰ Arthur is associated in sound to Author and Lamby suggestive of youth (as in Lamb).

¹¹ Op. Cit., Mittelholzer, E. *A Morning at the Office* p. 82.

¹² Ibid; p. 203.

¹³ Williams, F “Colonial Literature or Caribbean Orature? *Creole Chips* by Edgar Mittelholzer” in Bardolph, J (ed.) *Telling Stories: Postcolonial Short Fiction in English* (Amsterdam / Atlanta: Rodolphi, 2001) p. 136.

cries “Whooo-ooo, Whooo-oom”, frightens everyone and cannot be killed off once it reaches maturity. One day while Mooney was in bed the Jen entered her room. With her mother and nurse downstairs in the kitchen, and her father at work, Mooney was on her own. Though terrified she asks if he is really so dreadful. He tells her that he is worse than a dragon, does not have a head but does have a chain that is always in action and likes reasons because he is the reason for many things. The Jen goes on to reveal that he had a friend who was once just as dreadful as him. His friend was prevented from harming anyone because people were so scared of his dreadfulness that they “bought millions of masks to hid their faces from him”. The Jen (after Mooney begs him not to kill her) cries out that he is lonely: “Too great and lonely and dreadfully dreadful for anyone to let [him] hurt them”.¹⁴ By the time Mooney removes the pillow from her eyes, he has gone, and the sun is still shining.

“The Jen” & the Critics

The first point to note is that the tale, though described as “simple”, does not offer itself up to easy interpretation. Figueroa applauds the cohesion of the novel but states: “it is not clear whether the “Fairy Tales” which are introduced are really to the point...”¹⁵; and thus makes no attempt at interpretation. Ramcharitar, in the introduction to a recently republished edition of the book, makes no attempt to interpret it either, conversely asserting that it is self-explanatory: “Mittelholzer/Lamby not only brings the Jen fable into the novel twice, but very explicitly interprets its significance.”¹⁶ It is true that Arthur Lamby explains the public significance of the fable however as the Jen infers it also contains deeper meanings that are far from transparent. This fact is acknowledged within the fable when Mooney bemoans she cannot “understand a word” the Jen is saying and receives the reply, that is part of “my badness”, he doesn’t intend her to.¹⁷ This it should be noted was Mittelholzer’s general

¹⁴ Op. Cit., Mittelholzer, E. *A Morning at the Office* p. 125.

¹⁵ Figueroa, J. “Introduction” in Edgar Mittelholzer’s *A Morning At the Office* (Heinemann: London; 1974) p. xiii.

¹⁶ Op. Cit., Mittelholzer, E. *A Morning at the Office* p. 16.

¹⁷ Ibid; p.124.

approach to writing. In a letter to Leonard Woolf he explained: "I purposely embarked on a policy of evasion, and tried to sustain it throughout. [On this occasion he is referring to *Shadows Move Among Them* but the same applies to most if not all of his novels.] Why can't we preserve a few mysteries?"¹⁸

Howard in "Edgar Mittelholzer's Tragic Vision" conversely recognises that "The Jen" – he describes it as an "Indian Nancy Story" – is of central importance to the novel and warrants deeper consideration. He views the Jen's friend from the offset as the "monster of fear", whilst the Jen is thought to be a "*situation* [my emphasis] in which a longing encounters frustration".¹⁹ It thus represents, from his perspective, "the functional structure for interpreting *A Morning at the Office*" (and by extension all of his novels) in that it draws attention to a primary theme: a repeated pattern of frustrated longing and loneliness that is experienced by the novel's protagonists. He goes on to argue that the narrator believes the destructive force of the Jen – "cause of racial prejudices and unhappiness" - can be overcome by the inherent goodness of humanity.²⁰ In most cases however the Jen (i.e., a frustrating situation) becomes the source of loneliness as well as death. This pattern is said by Howard to be exemplified in *Sylvia* by the circumstances leading to the eponymous heroine's death-wish, and in *The Piling of the Clouds* where the 'Jen', in its most terrifying form, results in the "humane taking of life".²¹ In Howard's estimation, the 'Jen' is a reflection of the tragic vision that led to the author's suicide.

Williams' analysis of "The Jen" raises more questions than answers. She wonders first if the Jen relates to the chains of slavery but asks if we are to suppose that these chains still exist. Given that the author situates the birth of the Jen in Guiana, but has like him, crossed the sea to Trinidad, Williams then suggests that the Jen is most likely about the insidious, hypocritical nature of

¹⁸ See letter dated 20th December 1949 in Leonard Woolf Archives (Ref: LWP Part III General Correspondence / M) – 4 unpublished letters between Mittelholzer and Leonard Woolf held at Sussex University.

¹⁹ Howard, W. J. "Edgar Mittelholzer's Tragic Vision" in *Caribbean Quarterly* (Vol. 16, No. 4; Dec. 1970) p. 20.

²⁰ *Ibid*; p. 21.

²¹ *Ibid*; p. 25.

racism in the West Indians. Another possible interpretation according to Williams is that the Jen may in fact represent the author and the chains of heredity that he drags around with him. From an onomastic viewpoint, Williams wonders if the Jen equates to 'Gen' – i.e., the "genuine", real Mittelholzer:

L'onomastique revelerait peut-etre que le "Jen" egale "Gen", "genuine", c'est-a-dire le vrai Mittelholzer. Ce conte anodin recele des secrets profonds, inconnus peut-etre de l'auteur lui-meme...²²

Having argued that a meaningful interpretation of "The Jen" is obscured by Mittelholzer's introduction of the Jen's even more dreadful friend, Williams' concludes that the tale holds deep obscure secrets that are perhaps unknown even to the author.

Gilkes²³ and Davids²⁴ have also given consideration to the significance of "The Jen". According to their analyses the characters in *A Morning at the Office* are united on a deep level by "a shared psychological impediment" or inner frustration that results in the sensation of being trapped in their skin. The Jen (a point that Davids again concurs with) is meanwhile viewed as being "a projected aspect of the human psyche", a latent part of the creative self that is repressed but which can also cause "immense upheaval if allowed to act". This for Gilkes explains the Jen's policy of evasion and why it is seen as the reason for many things. The black Canje Creek and bush are seen as metaphor for the "mysterious forbidden interior" of the unconscious mind, the Id. Private introspections of the various characters would seem to support this argument. The coloured salesman, Mr Reynolds, is for instance a lonely homosexual, with a "feeling of differentness" that he is too afraid to explore:

²² Williams, F. *Edgar Mittelholzer: Romancier Guyanais (1909-1965) – Voyage Au Coeur Du Monde, Voyage Au Coeur De L'Homme* (Ph.D., Universite De Haute-Bretagne, Rennes: 1995/96) p. 528.

²³ See Gilkes, M. "The Spirit in the Bottle: A Reading of Mittelholzer's *A Morning At The Office*" in *Caribbean Quarterly* (Vol. 21: No. 4, 1975) pp. 1-12.

²⁴ Davids, J. "The Daydream of What is Essential: From Mittelholzer's *A Morning at the Office* to Ravinder Randhawa's *A Wicked Old Woman*" in Collier, G (ed) *US/Them: Translation, Transcription and Identity in Post-Colonial Literary Cultures* (Rodophi: Amsterdam-Atlanta, 1992) pp. 341-350.

He was afraid of himself. He dreaded introspecting, for when he introspected he pitied himself and saw his *loneliness* as a thing of *magnified terror and ugliness* [this is his 'Jen'] – something that would pursue him to the end of his days.²⁵ [my italics]

Gilkes ends his paper by asserting that the Jen is influenced by the:

...well-known Grimm fairy-tale of the “spirit (or “Jinn”) in the bottle” a tale which itself conjures up the dual nature of the Unconscious as a potential force capable of causing irreparable damage as well as possessing magical, creative power.²⁶

The critiques of Howard, Williams, Gilkes and Davids all contain elements that aid our understanding of this tale. But with the benefit of recent research into the author’s writing technique/objectives, alongside a consideration of the author’s non-fictional work, it is now possible to build upon their analyses. The interpretation of “The Jen” that follows acts only as a starting point from which it can be understood. Its broader implications, those private to the author, will be made more apparent in the chapters that follow.

Unmasking the Jen

The survival of a letter written by Mittelholzer during an episode of depression in 1941 offers some credence to Gilkes’s and Davids’s interpretation of “The Jen”:

I’m ... writing now because if I didn’t write something I believe my mind would corrode and I’d either get some violent brain fever or perhaps go insane. [...] It seems as though some *jinnee* dwells on my shoulder – a *jinnee* of unrest – and whenever I imagine that everything is settled and going smoothly the *jinnee*

²⁵ Op. Cit., Mittelholzer, E. *A Morning at the Office* p. 169

²⁶ Op. Cit., Gilkes, M. “The Spirit in the Bottle: A Reading of Mittelholzer’s *A Morning At The Office*” p. 9.

grins a drab, ironical grin and sets everything up against me so that I'm faced again with insecurity and uncertainty.²⁷ [my italics]

In a much later letter to his then girlfriend, Jacqueline Pointer (dated 7th September 1959), the author makes another implicit reference to his belief in Jinnee:

And even as I was behaving in this stupid way [i.e., crying] I thought I could hear one of my "presences" on the Other Side trying to soothe me and assure me that you were all right.²⁸

It should be noted that because the former letter appeared long before the publication of *A Morning at the Office* (1950): the Jen (Jinnee/Jinn), in terms of its interpretative relevance, can be applied retrospectively to the novel *Corentyne Thunder* as well as to those that came after it.

Given Mittelholzer's choice of spelling, - the word "jinnee" is absent from the Grimm Brothers' tale of "The Spirit in the Bottle" – we can deduce that "The Jen" refers metatextually to the tale "The Fisherman and the Jinnee"²⁹ in *One Thousand and One Nights*, (more commonly known as the *Arabian Nights*³⁰). Before examining how this text influenced the story of the Jen, it would be pertinent to outline the key characteristics of a jinnee. A jinnee can be thought of in much the same way as its European cognate, genie: a magical servant that turns up when summoned and grants wishes. But in Arabic folklore, Jinn, Djinn or Jinnee are said to be good, evil, genius, demonic or neutral spirits, that inhabit the earth, have the power to influence mankind and assume various forms. They are variously portrayed as living independently or as part of a particular object. In the Qur'an it is said that they are made of smokeless flames or 'scorching fire'.

²⁷ See letter dated 15th September 1941 in the Ruth Wilkinson Collection (private ownership): Letters from Mittelholzer to Ruth Wilkinson (circa March 1941 – 15th June 1962).

²⁸ See Anna Mittelholzer's Collection (private ownership): 27 letters between Mittelholzer & his second wife (Aug. 1959- Mar. 1960).

²⁹ See Dawood, N. J. (trans.) "The Fisherman and the Jinnee" in *Tales from the Thousand and One Nights* (Penguin Books: London, 1973).

³⁰ This is further supported by a reference to the *Arabian Nights* in Mittelholzer's novel, *My Bone's and My Flute*.

They are also referred to as children of fire: the relevance of which will become evident in Chapter 6, "Hoo-Are-Yoo?"

"The Fisherman and The Jinnee" is a fable about a fisherman who would cast his net into the sea four times a day in order to support his wife and three children. One day he cast his net out only to scoop up a dead donkey. On the second attempt he pulled in an earthen vessel, on the third bones and broken glass. Frustrated he throws the net in one last time and brings out "a bottle made of yellow copper". When he breaks off the seal a column of smoke rises high into the air and resolves into a Jinnee. Akin to Mooney, the fisherman sees the Jinnee as a huge, blasphemous giant with an aspect made fierce and menacing by eyes that blaze like torches. The Jinnee tells his story and explains that he was a rebel jinn, "who together with Sakhr the Jinnee, mutinied against Solomon" and was later imprisoned for refusing to pledge obedience to his master or embrace his faith. The Jinnee had initially vowed to bestow riches on whoever set him free but after hundreds of years of enslavement he became so enraged that he changed his vow to that of death to the person that freed him. The fisherman, as his saviour, was annoyed at having his good turn repaid with the apparent evil of death and though terrified determined to re-enslave him. He cunningly tells the Jinnee that he does not believe it is possible for a creature so huge to emerge out of a small bottle and asks him to prove it. The Jinnee re-enters the bottle and the fisherman promptly reseals it.

"The Fisherman and the Jinnee" is made up of a series of interlinking short stories (which are importantly told by different, but interrelated, characters). When the Jinnee asks to be forgiven and re-released, the fisherman tells him a parable about King Yunan (who in turn tells a story about King Sindbad). The parables are used to demonstrate why the Jinnee deserves his fate: the moral being that if you repay good with evil you will be punished. But the Jinnee pleads: "If I have done you evil, repay me with good and, as the saying goes, punish me with kindness. Do not do as Umamah did to Atikah!"³¹ The fisherman wanting to hear their story releases him from the bottle. With a

³¹ Op. Cit., Dawood, N. J. (trans.) "The Fisherman and the Jinnee" p. 92.

triumphant kick, the Jinnee sends the bottle flying back into the sea. Once again the fisherman is terrified about what the giant Jinnee will do to him but puts on a defiant air and reminds him to stick to his pledge. The Jinnee then leads him to a vast lake and tells him to cast his net in, whereupon the fisherman immediately catches four fish of different colours. He is told to take the fish to the King's palace where he will be given gold in return. With that as his final word the Jinnee stamps his foot on the earth and disappears. The fisherman is dubious about the Jinnee's motives but does as he is told. Another chain of events ensues but ultimately leads to the enrichment of the fisherman and the eradication of evil. The key points to be noted are: the fisherman's fears were unfounded for whilst the Jinnee appeared terrifying, he was not; the fisherman's defiance of the Jinnee prompted the use of his cunning and creativity; the telling of one story, leads to a telling of another in the pattern of 'call and response'.

An analysis of "The Jen" and its wider import is made easier once we recognise its transtextual link to "The Fisherman and the Jinnee". The theme of transtextuality is picked up in Arthur Lamby's tale for it is Beatrice, Mooney's nurse, who first tells us of the Jen's existence. She does not go into detail however as it makes her "sick to talk about it".³² Mooney's personal willingness to face "the dreadful monster" results in the expansion and transformation of Beatrice's Jen story. As the Jen approaches Mooney it screams a ghost-like: "Whooo-ooo! Whooo-oom!" It is asking her to explore questions about *who* she is. But questions of identity frighten Mooney and by extension, the society to which Mooney belongs: as Beatrice implores, "don't let's talk about it."³³ Mooney, - signifying Mittelholzer, the 'mad' author, since the French for Moon is Lune and hence 'Looney-Mooney' - bravely faces the Jen. But what aspect of "who" does the Jen want Mooney to focus on?

Given Mittelholzer's love of word play and interest in onomastics, as well as the tales context (a novel concerned with the themes of Race, Literature and Psychic phenomena) it is possible to deduce that Mittelholzer also associated the

³² Op. Cit., Mittelholzer, E. *A Morning at the Office* p. 122

³³ Ibid; p. 122

Jen/Jinnee, more remotely and complexly with a passage from John 1: 1-14 in the Bible. Firstly the name Jen³⁴ or Jenny (originally pronounced Jinny) was a common hypocorism of names like Johanna, Jane, Jean, Joan and Janet: all of which are feminine forms of the male name, John. Several of Mittelholzer's characters are significantly - as will be demonstrated in later chapters - given these names e.g., Jan and his wife, Jannetje (Dutch male/female forms of John) in *My Bones and My Flute*, and Jeannette Elmfold in *A Piling of the Clouds*. Secondly the passage from John 1: 1-14 invests the 'Word' (signifying literature) with the spiritual truth of 'God' via his apostle John:

¹In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. [...] ⁵The light shines in the darkness, but the darkness has not understood it. ⁶There came a man who was sent from God; his name was John. ⁷He came as a witness to testify concerning that light, so that through him all men might believe. ⁸He himself was not the light; he came only as a witness to the light. [...] ¹⁰He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognise him. ¹¹He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him. [New International Version]

Similar to the Arabic Jinnee (or children of fire), those who receive John's 'Words of Truth', become children of God.

¹²Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God – ¹³children born not of natural descent nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God. [New International Version]

The Jen-John-Jinnee and indeed Jumbie (the latter, similarly contiguous by way of the synonymic and 'sound-association' matrix) is thus, when crying "Whooo-ooo! Whooo-oom!" referring to a need for Mooney to face the truth and recognise the 'Real (spirit) Self', or "*Genuine*" self as Williams has described. The Jen also

³⁴ The tendency to attach the name Jen to Jennifer is a relatively recent development. See Lamont, S "Etymology and popularity of Jenny, Jennifer and related names" in *The Jencyclopedia* Available at: <http://www.gizmo1.demon.co.uk/jencylco/data/etymology.htm> (posted 1996: site visited 4th Jan 2010).

relates to the nagging question of genetic (biological) inheritance for in John 1:14 (NIV) we are told: “The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us.” The link between spirit and flesh is further echoed in a passage from Nietzsche’s *Thus Spake Zarathustra* - “Write with blood: and you’ll discover that blood is spirit” and in the teachings of Oriental Occultism: “[Yogis] know that the body is the instrument in which, and by which the spirit manifests and works. [...] They know that the body is the Temple of the Spirit.”³⁵

If we accept that Mooney is a proxy for Mittelholzer-the-child, then her fear of the Jen could be rooted in a fear of her genetic (racial/biological) inheritance. We need only recall the response of the swarthy author’s pale-skinned father to his birth - “an occasion of momentous disappointment”³⁶ - to appreciate how deeply issues of race and colour must have affected the young Mittelholzer. While the adult Mittelholzer claimed to have: “faced the awful truth that I am, by accident of birth, a human mongrel. And having faced it [...] forgotten it”; he nevertheless recognised the importance of challenging pernicious ideologies of race and was inspired to do so via his novels.³⁷ In *A Swarthy Boy* Mittelholzer wonders if his pale-skinned father had “heard of Mendelism”: this being a theory of heredity that demonstrates the recurrence or re-emergence of certain characteristics in ones descendants, is dependent on the presence of genes. It importantly supports Williams’ suggestion that the Jen’s chain may be a metaphor for the burdensome chains of genetic (racial/biological) inheritance. Thus when Mooney asks if the Jen’s chain is used beat people it becomes associated with *Beatrice*’s name and indicates that her fears relate to the violent history of slavery. In Chapter 5, it will be shown that the chains of *genetic* (spirit-flesh) inheritance are, for the adult Mittelholzer, primarily associated with Oriental Occultist notions of Karma. The assertion that the question, ‘Who am I?’ becomes the central theme of Mittelholzer’s novels

³⁵ First quote from Nietzsche, F. *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (Penguin Books: London, 2003) p. 67 and second from, Ramacharaka, Y. *Hatha Yoga or the Yogi Philosophy of Physical Well-Being* (L N Fowler: London, no date [this publication c. 1960, 1st published 1904]) p. 17.

³⁶ Mittelholzer, E. *A Swarthy Boy: A Childhood in British Guiana* (Putnam: London, 1963) p. 17.

³⁷ Mittelholzer, E. *At Forty-Three – A Personal View of the World* (Unpublished, typed manuscript, ref: 108, held in Beinecke Rare Books & Manuscript Library at Yale University) p. 14.

(even when it takes on a different form in English settings³⁸), is also reinforced by the words of Jacques van Groenwegel from *Children of Kaywana* (Jack³⁹ is yet another a pet form of John):

They heard a goatsucker *hoo-you-ing* amid the bamboos [...].

‘Do you hear that? A goatsucker. Amelia, you won’t ever know how much that bird means to me. *This is my terrain.*’ [my italics]⁴⁰

Who is the Jen’s Dreadful Friend?

Like the Jinnee in the Fisherman’s tale, the Jen is said to have had a friend. The Jen’s friend is said to have been even more dreadful than him: so dreadful in fact that people found all sorts of ingenious ways to hide their faces from him. The characters in *A Morning at the Office* inadvertently help to identify the Jen’s friend. Mrs Hinckson for instance states that religion “as practiced by the churches” is a lot of “impractical mumbo-jumbo” that serves only to delude people and help them “*escape from reality...*” [my italics].⁴¹ Others, like Mr Reynolds (a homosexual), use helping people and a busy job as “screens against the sight” of themselves.⁴² The Jen’s friend – or “monster of fear” as Howard described him – is therefore ‘Reality’: an issue of great importance to Mittelholzer as this unpublished extract from one of his memoirs reveals:

Human beings have invented innumerable ways of escaping from reality, and by reality I want to make it clear that I mean not the ultimate spiritual reality the Orientals speak of but reality as represented by the unpleasant things that afflict

³⁸ In the Caribbean-set novels the question, ‘who are you?’ tends to relate to issues of race, national identity and the legacies of slavery. In the English-set novels, the focus is on the genetic inheritance of the individual.

³⁹ Mittelholzer interestingly begins a letter dated 31st December 1959 to Jacqueline Pointer, his second wife: “Jacqueline (the magic name!)”. The magic was linked to his sense of her spirituality as exemplified in a letter dated 7th December 1959 when Mittelholzer notes: “You looked really spiritual sitting there looking at me...” See Anna Mittelholzer’s Collection (private ownership): 27 letters between Mittelholzer & his second wife (Aug. 1959- Mar. 1960).

⁴⁰ Mittelholzer, E. *Children of Kaywana* (Secker & Warburg: London, 1960 [1952]) p. 494.

⁴¹ Op. Cit., Mittelholzer, E. *A Morning at the Office* p. 152.

⁴² Ibid; p. 169.

us, such as war and the fear of war, money and domestic worries, ill health, social ostracism and social maladjustment to name but a few.⁴³

Mittelholzer goes on to explain that he refuses to escape reality, choosing instead to face unpleasant truths and to “find a solution” for them. Edna Bisnauth’s advice therefore acts as affirmation of the allegorical significance of “The Jen”:

Everybody in the world feared a dreadful bogey. But what you had to do was to face it bravely. If you did that you might discover that it wasn’t half as dreadful as you imagined it to be.⁴⁴

The Jen, having tried to appear truly dreadful eventually breaks into tears and admits to being desperately lonely: “too...dreadfully dreadful for anyone to let [him] hurt them”. On the note of “Whooo-hooo-hooo! I must be off! Whooo!” (analogous in sound to a trumpet and in timing to a musical finale), the Jen disappears.⁴⁵ The Jen-Jinnee-John can thus be interpreted in terms of psychic phenomena as the ‘Real’ spiritual-self (far from dreadful once confronted) and source of creative genius, or psychoanalytically following Gilkes, as a projected aspect of the psyche. But the Jen is also a symbol of freedom – for by facing ‘Truth’ and ‘Reality’ – it becomes possible to break asunder from the chains (to use the words of Marcus Garvey and Bob Marley) of “mental slavery” and the Rousseauian notion that man is born free but is everywhere in chains.⁴⁶ Reflection on, and expansion of, Beatrice’s Jen story importantly became the genesis of Mooney’s creativity. It provided her with a topic to explore and resulted in the metatextual subversion of the fears that her nurse had passed onto her. The story concludes with Mooney lifting her head from the pillow: she has been left unharmed, the sun has remained bright and the sky, blue.

⁴³ Mittelholzer, E. *At Forty-Three – A Personal View of the World* (Typed manuscript, ref: 108, held in Beinecke Rare Books & Manuscript Library at Yale University) p. 1.

⁴⁴ Op. Cit., Mittelholzer, E. *A Morning at the Office* p. 203.

⁴⁵ Ibid; p. 125.

⁴⁶ Though it is not the remit of this thesis to explore Mittelholzer’s interest in Romanticism to any depth, it is worth highlighting that Mittelholzer appears to have been influenced by Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s key texts: *Of the Social Contract, Or Principles of Political Right* (1762) and *Discourse on the Origin and Basis of Inequality Among Men* (1754); his privileging of nature and the noble savage, his idealisation of childhood innocence and the notion that all humans are born decent; and that it is the process of institutionalization, acculturation and civilization that are at the root of evil in society.

Establishing a Literary Agenda

As Ramicharitar has observed, “The Jen” in *A Morning at the Office* attempts to influence the direction of Caribbean literature by establishing the cultural foundations upon which it should be based.⁴⁷ Edna Bisnauth explains:

Of course, what Arthur was really trying to do in *The Jen* was to debunk the old West Indian nancy-story [West African in origin]. He wanted to show that it was a mistaken idea of certain West Indian cultural groups that West Indian literature and art should be based on these primitive tales. West Indians were not primitives. Only a handful of backwoods peasants were familiar with nancy-stories that featured such characters as Compère Tigre and Compère Lapin. [...] Arthur felt that if one had to write fairy tales at all with a West Indian flavour the creatures or characters in them should be very nearly in the European tradition, for weren't the West Indians practically European in manners and customs?⁴⁸

While Mittelholzer judged the people he met on an individual basis (albeit subjectively) he was unable like many members of the coloured middle class to ascribe anything of value to Africa. When in the 1940s for instance, a vibrant discourse emerged as to the value of Calypso, Steelband and Carnival to West Indian culture, Mittelholzer's response did not endear him to his anti-colonial intellectual contemporaries. Writing in the *Trinidadian Guardian* on 13th November 1945 he argued that: “Carnival be abolished as a barbarous, degrading and retarding custom: further, that calypsos be composed and sung ad lib; and as before, be continued to be regarded, as in years past, as calypsos, and just calypsos – not masterpieces of music equal in grandeur to the *Eroica* or *Gotterdammerung*.”⁴⁹ His characteristically impulsive, blunt outburst was short-sighted, and only served to obscure the reality that he had enjoyed writing

⁴⁷ Ramicharitar, R, “Introduction: The Moment before the Dawn in Trinidad” in Mittelholzer, E. *A Morning at the Office* (Peepal Tree Press: Leeds, 2010).

⁴⁸ Op. Cit., Mittelholzer, E. *A Morning at the Office* p. 202.

⁴⁹ Cited in Rohlehr, G. “Drum and Minuet: Music, Masquerade, and the Mulatto of Style” in Aiyejina, F. & Morgan, P. (eds) *Caribbean Literature in a Global Context* (Lexicon Trinidad Ltd: St Juan, 2006) p. 261.

calypsos with Cy Grant (during the 1930s), enjoyed Guyana's Masquerade tradition and in his own middle class stuffiness had also somewhat enjoyed – akin to Alfie Desseau in *A Tale of Three Places* – partaking in Carnival: “He watched the milling crowds of masqueraders, not contemptuous, not disapproving, yet not enthusiastic. He merely felt quietly entertained.”⁵⁰

Barbadian novelist, Austin Clarke, has accurately summed up the historical roots of these attitudes. During an interview in the 1990s on the subject of his own key protagonist in *The Meeting Point* (1967), Clarke observed:

[...] Henry, coming from Barbados, could not rationally choose an African model since the model of Africa imported through the media to Barbados was one of a man running around in a state of savageness, grass skirt, etc. So the West Indian regarded himself all the time, even if not now, as superior to the African and in some cases superior to the Black American. This of course is based on ignorance of fact.⁵¹

It is however as likely that Mittelholzer's desire to debunk Anancy stories related to its symbolic message of survival at all costs.⁵² This would certainly have run contrary to Mittelholzer's personal mantra of “Victory or Death” and was irreconcilable with his misguided perception – manifest in his sense of shame – that the majority of enslaved Africans (and the descendants of-), acquiesced to the institution of plantation slavery. Whatever the case, it should not be assumed that Mittelholzer viewed the West with an uncritical eye. When Edna Bisnauth suggests that “The Jen” is the type of story that Horace Xavier (the office boy) should consider writing, one senses the presence of irony:

⁵⁰ Mittelholzer, E. *A Tale of Three Places* (Secker & Warburg: London, 1957) p. 72.

⁵¹ See Dance, D. *New World Adams: Conversations with Contemporary West Indian Writers* (Peepal Tree: Yorkshire, 1992) p. 68.

⁵² While it is clear Mittelholzer's Caribbean-set fiction reflects what Edmondson has coined the ‘brown aesthetic’, his aversion toward Anancy stories was out of step with many of his middle class contemporaries as Anancy Story competitions had notably been run by newspapers like the Jamaican *Gleaner* from as early as the late 1800s. See Edmondson, B. *Caribbean Middlebrow: Leisure, Culture and The Middle Class* (Cornell University Press: Ithaca, 2009) p. 27.

He's only black, but he's *intelligent*. One day he may be a famous writer, who knows? I must ask him if he's never tried his hand at writing stories. He could begin with *simple* little tales like *The Jen*.... [first two words in italics, my emphasis]⁵³

As already indicated the tale, working on many levels, is far from simple. That "The Jen", was influenced by "The Fisherman and the Jinnee", is of itself significant: whilst it had been translated into English and had become the source of inspiration for many writers in the West (including The Brothers Grimm who wrote their own version of it), the origins of the narrative are Middle Eastern.

"The Jen" is also importantly linked to folktales that were commonly told within Guiana's creolized community.⁵⁴ As Mittelholzer explained to a close friend, prior to the publication of *A Morning of the Office*, his novel touched on "politics, literature and the arts, and ... a bit of *folklore*" [my emphasis].⁵⁵ Similarities between "The Jen" and the ones that were told to him by his nanny, Dorith⁵⁶ are self-evident. Consider for instance the following passage in Mittelholzer's travel journal, *With a Carib Eye* (1958).

When we were children, our nurse told us tales of Ithaca and the Water People, and according to her version, the Water People – or Fair Maids – were sinister creatures not to be trifled with. If you fell into the river after dark you could easily be pulled down to your death by a Fair Maid.⁵⁷

If however you picked up the Fair Maid's comb, assuming you happened to see it while walking along the river, it would not be long before she came crying and wailing at your window in search of it. As a reward for returning the comb to her, the finder would be given a thousand guilders. The tales of Ithaca were

⁵³ Op. Cit., Mittelholzer, E. *A Morning at the Office* p. 206.

⁵⁴ In this respect, Mittelholzer's approach was in line with his 'brown' contemporaries. The Jen cannot be described as "a trumped-up European fairytale" and indeed draws upon the oral tradition. Op. Cit., Edmondson, B. *Caribbean Middlebrow: Leisure, Culture and The Middle Class* p. 27.

⁵⁵ See letter dated 19th June 1949 in Frank Collymore Collection (Ref: Letters from Mittelholzer to Collymore) held in the Department of Archives, Barbados.

⁵⁶ Mittelholzer's sister, Lucille informed me in conversation that their nanny was named, Dorith.

⁵⁷ Mittelholzer, E. *With A Carib Eye* (Secker & Warburg: London, 1958) p. 141.

most likely taken from Homer's *Odyssey*: so too, the tales of Water People given the narrative parallels between them and the dangerous sirens that are said to have lured sailors to their deaths. But the tales of Water People are also very much a part of the Afro-Caribbean tradition and thought to be derived from the stories of the Mami Wata.⁵⁸ These mermaid-like spirit creatures, capable like the Jinnee of taking on various forms, were sometimes seen grooming their hair by the side of a river and known to abduct passers-by. The abductees might be taken underwater or to a spirit world but if returned to dry land, were seen to grow spiritually as well as materially rich. Many versions of the Mami Wata exist but the basic elements appear to be common to most parts of West and Central Africa.⁵⁹

Another key source appears to have been the story of Baccoo, or Bakoo, a figure from Guianese folk mythology that is described by Heath as a little man who lives in a bottle and is known to enrich his owners whilst causing damage to the homes he robs.⁶⁰ Mittelholzer, it is worth noting, wrote a 'Creole Chip', No. 9 of 25 (see Appendices) about strange wailing sounds that were heard coming out of the Benjamin's family home at night. Locals attributed the noise to a Baccoo that is allegedly kept by Cousin John in the kitchen. They later notice that the Benjamins' cook has a livid brand on her bare arm and take this as proof of their suspicions. It is more likely however that Cousin John *is* the Baccoo (or Jinnee) as the noise only occurs on his return to St Ann Street, New Amsterdam (after a trip to Nickerie) and that the wailing is the consequence his sub-rosa affair with the cook. The 'livid brand' is the symbolic evidence of the cook's encounter with Cousin John, a 'child of fire'. The point here is that the Baccoo, whilst appearing to be rooted in the commonplace trope of the 'Genie in the Bottle', has taken on a distinctly Guianese form.

⁵⁸ For more information see Van Stipriaan, A. "Watramama/Mami Watta: Three centuries of creolization of a water spirit in West Africa, Suriname and Europe" in *Matatu: Journal for African Culture and Society* (2005: Vol. 27/28) pp. 323-337.

⁵⁹ One can speculate that the Mami Wata story emerged out of the historical contact of Europeans slave traders and Africans living near the coast, and were influenced by the mermaid figureheads on European slave-trading ships. It would also explain why the Mami Watas were sometimes called Fair Maids (white men with long hair). However, as this is outside of the scope of this thesis, this supposition would need to be corroborated by further research.

⁶⁰ Heath, R. "The Function of Myth" in Salkey, A. (ed) *Caribbean Essays: An Anthology* (Evans Brothers Ltd: London, 1973) p. 91.

Subverting Negative Representations of Race

It should also be noted that Mittelholzer subverts aspects of the Anglicised Arabian tale through the positive characterisation of Horace Xavier. One of the sub-tales of "The Fisherman and the Jinnee" speaks of a cutthroat thieving slave, "a pitch-black, thick-lipped Negro" who lives in a "desolate wasteland [sic] strewn with garbage heaps".⁶¹ Horace's role in the novel, is not only a symbolic vision of what can be achieved by the black community within the context of the Caribbean, but also a rebuttal of negative representations of 'race' in Western literature. Far from being reduced to a racist stereotype deserving only of fleeting derogatory attention, Horace is depicted as being five feet nine, thick set and broad shouldered. He has well-developed muscles as a result of regular swimming and weightlifting. Of dark brown complexion, he has a wide doomed forehead with thick eyebrows, low cheekbones and a strong firm chin. He is an intelligent individual who happens to be black and indeed the entire book is effectively dedicated to a vision of his successful future.

The nature of Horace's untainted love for Nanette Hinckson acts at the same time as a foil. It is intended to counter the portrayals of the "grotesque" affair that the aforementioned "Negro" slave is said to be having with King Massoudah's adulterous wife. She is described as a "black-souled whore" and "harlot", whose association with the slave makes her "a thousandfold too vile" for the King. The "filthy" Negro shows little respect for the King's wife, treating her with a disdain and a level of cruelty that seems undeserving of her love. Both are killed in an act of revenge by an ally of the King. In *A Morning at the Office* Horace conversely feels foolish for falling in love with Nanette: "he should have remembered that he was only a black boy, whereas she was a coloured lady of good family".⁶² But in a moment of daring and as an expression of his "deep and sacred feelings" he writes a passage from Shakespeare's *As You Like It* and anonymously places it her letter tray. When the ever-prying character, Mr

⁶¹ Op. Cit., Dawood, N. J. p.99.

⁶² Op. Cit., Mittelholzer, E. *A Morning at the Office* p. 29.

Jagabir comes across Horace's love-verse he does not initially realise whom it has been penned by. Later when it becomes obvious, Jagabir exclaims: "If that wasn't a joke! A stupid little black boy like that. How Mrs Hinckson would laugh if she knew!"⁶³ Though the discovery of Horace's note does amuse her, Mrs Hinckson feels a range of other emotions: she is flattered, feels pity and also depressed:

Horace. The office boy. Apart from his age, his social position and the fact that he was black made him an impossible candidate. But he was a human being – a male human being. [...] He was the intellectual type. The serious, plodding, ambitious kind who studied at night and who had "noble" ideals. She admired and respected such men because, ... she herself was intellectual.⁶⁴

Whilst Mrs Hinckson admits she could never engage in intimate relations with a person of black blood, she also recognises that her attitudes are the result of middle-class social conditioning: the pettifogging issue of race, ultimately being rooted in bigotry.

Edna Bisnauth is, in the meantime, visibly moved by Horace's hopeless infatuation. Her eyes become "soft with pity"; the sincerity of his feelings invoke the "lofty fire" of creativity, compelling her to write a really "deep and lovely poem" on the theme of "love and pity and humility". Later when Pat Lorry, the coloured customs clerk, creates the false impression that the love-verse had been taken from a Shakespeare play by him, Edna's poem acquires a "tarnished" quality:

[Pat Lorry's] motive was an unworthy and reprehensible one. He was lusting; he was not in love. Looked at in this light, the incident was ugly, not beautiful.⁶⁵

⁶³ Ibid; p. 52.

⁶⁴ Ibid; p. 105.

⁶⁵ Ibid; pp. 120-121.

The tension in *A Morning at the Office* is almost entirely created by speculation over the writer of the love-verse and Horace's fears of being humiliated by the discovery that he was responsible for it.

In the end Horace asserts his individuality, integrity and right to be respected. When he finally explodes in protest his unconscious fear of rebuking white people has patently been overcome: "To hell wid all o' you!" /.../ "Because I black? You-all not better dan me!" then marching out of the office, he tells his colleagues: "Keep you' job! I don't want it!"⁶⁶ The Charles Dickens' novel that he gathers up as he leaves the office – *A Tale of Two Cities* – acts as a reminder that so long as the elite persist in maltreating the majority, the oppressed will and must eventually assert their right to equality. Set before and during the French revolution *A Tale of Two Cities* acts as a metaphoric warning to Trinidad's colonial masters. The English expatriate and overseer, Sidney Whitmer had in an earlier incident pointed out that anti-colonial revolution in Trinidad and elsewhere in the Caribbean would be justified: "The hypocrisy and the *nerve* of you English hounds. You come out to these colonies and squeeze the guts out of 'em – and then you *piss* on the natives! Insult to injury."⁶⁷

Mittelholzer's response to the representation of black people (and those who fraternise with them in the Fisherman's tale) as a "whore race" is notably embedded in the first name of his hero but with an antithetical objective in mind. Horace, would have been recognised or so Mittelholzer arguably assumed, by educated readers of his generation as the namesake of the famous Roman lyric poet: the son of a freed slave whose literary works were considered equal to great writers like Virgil and Ovid.⁶⁸ His surname, Xavier, implies that he will become through his actions, the saviour of his race. As Reynolds reassures: "He's

⁶⁶ Ibid; p. 207.

⁶⁷ Ibid; p. 132.

⁶⁸ The term 'The Golden Mean' from Horace's Ode of the same name was a part of common parlance and used by Arnold J Toynbee, the famous British historian (in his 12 volume *A Study of History*) to express his vision of how civilisations were born: too much challenge and a civilisation would be crushed, too little and it would stagnate. Seymour importantly recognised that Mittelholzer applied the Toynbee criterion of history i.e., the golden mean, to the 'Kaywana Trilogy'. See Seymour, A. J. "The Novels of Edgar Mittelholzer" in *Kyk-Over-Al* (No. 28; December 1958) p. 4 & 6.

a bright fellow. Must rise in this world. I'm going to get him another job tomorrow – easy as kissing hands.”⁶⁹ Pat Lorry, who by virtue of his colour/class status would consider himself superior to Horace, is conversely given a name that mocks. Despite attending Queen's Royal College and attaining a high standard of education, he had no interest in books or literature. He, far from being the self-described, “Poet Lorry [i.e., Laureate]”, lacks the drive to become anything other than “Pat” (denoting glib) and is not deserving of his relatively privileged status. Mittelholzer believing that there were many unpalatable truths that he and his fellow West Indians need to face, hoped that his novels would provoke his readers. As he explained in a letter to Collymore:

...it is time that readers in this part of the world were “repelled” by things they read. Too much goody-goody sickly-sweet literature is going around.⁷⁰

Given the debate that raged over cultural “faddists” in the BBC *Caribbean Voices* programme - a *West Indian Symposium* - that was broadcast on 9th July 1950, he had to some extent achieved his goal.

CORENTYNE THUNDER – A QUIET REVOLUTION

Corentyne Thunder: The Critics

Gilkes has argued that *Corentyne Thunder* “is very much the [work of a] young, would-be colonial author”⁷¹ and bases this assertion on the concessions he makes to “the metropolitan reader’s ignorance” of the history and geography of Guiana. He cites as exemplification the fact that the reader is not just told Ramgolall (one of the key protagonists) lived on the Corentyne coast but also that he was an East Indian “*who had arrived in British Guiana in 1889 as an immigrant indentured to a sugar estate*” and that the territory was “*the only*

⁶⁹ Op. Cit., Mittelholzer, E. *A Morning at the Office* p. 208.

⁷⁰ See letter dated 22nd February 1946 in *Frank Collymore Collection* (Ref: Letters from Mittelholzer to Collymore) held in the Department of Archives, Barbados.

⁷¹ This and all quotes within this paragraph are taken from Gilkes, M. “Edgar Mittelholzer” in King, B. (ed) *West Indian Literature: Second Edition* (Macmillan Education Ltd: London, 1995) p. 128.

British colony on the mainland of South America" (Gilkes's italics). He notes, too, that the psychological conflict felt by Ramgollal's grandson, Geoffry Weldon, arises out of an "inability to reconcile intellectual and physical urges" as well as a pull between his love for the rural landscape and "the outer world of ambition and culture".⁷² While the essence of his analysis is not in dispute, the remainder of this chapter aims to demonstrate that Mittelholzer cannot be labelled 'colonial' in the acquiescent sense of the word.

A few other critics have written short articles on *Corentyne Thunder*. A J Seymour notably highlighted the novel's successful use of realism whilst Louis James praised the novel's lyricism and representations of environment. The latter has also provided key insights into the novel's troubled publication at the start of the Second World War. Birbalsingh has assessed the authenticity of the East Indians in the novel and concluded that it has been written from the perspective of:

[...] a sympathetic outsider, one who perceives the general limitations of the group he observes, but who lacks the balancing knowledge of an insider's complete experience to be able to render the plausible human response of individual group members to the limitations of their group.⁷³

His primary charge is that Ramgolall's miserliness is over-exaggerated and that (as in the case of Jannee) the author offers no balancing virtues. Birbalsingh determines that Mittelholzer is more interested in psychological drama and that as a result "social documentation" plays a secondary role in Mittelholzer's work.

With the exception of these seminal studies comment on *Corentyne Thunder* novel has largely focused on Mittelholzer's pioneering treatment of the Indo-Guyanese peasant as a worthy subject for fiction and discussions that see the novel in quasi-sociological rather than literary ways. The following aims to

⁷² Ibid; p. 130.

⁷³ Birbalsingh, F. "Indians in the Novels of Edgar Mittelholzer" in *Passion and Exile: Essays in Caribbean Literature* (Hansib: London, 1988). [Also published in *Caribbean Quarterly* (Vol. 32: Nos. 1 & 2, March-June 1986)] p. 77.

demonstrate how the 'call and response' metatextual structure of "The Jen" and exploitation of onomastics, provides the basis upon which all of Mittelholzer's novels can be understood. As before autobiography and knowledge of the historical context will be drawn upon as a tool, by which meaning can be anchored. Whilst the following only concerns *Corentyne Thunder*, the method applies to all.

A Swarthy Boy in the Corentyne

Mittelholzer's insights into the lives of East Indian peasants on the Corentyne coast, as revealed in his autobiography, *A Swarthy Boy* (1963), came directly from experience.⁷⁴ Though a significant number of the coloured middle class held their East Indian counterparts in contempt, viewing them as untrustworthy, cunning and secretive 'coolies', Mittelholzer was able to benefit from relatively unrestricted contact with the family's well-educated and professionally successful Indo-Guianese neighbours, the Luckhoos. The importance of Mittelholzer's relationship with this family, as far as the writing of *Corentyne Thunder* is concerned, cannot be overestimated:

We had no car, but the Luckhoos had one, and there were occasions – the most dazzling of all – when we were invited to spend a day on the Corentyne Coast at the home of some relative or friend of the Luckhoos. But for these trips to the flat, savannah lands of the Corentyne Coast, with their canals and smells and scattered sugar plantations and villages, I would probably never have been able to write my first published novel, *Corentyne Thunder*. It was on these outings that I absorbed the atmosphere of the district and even got to cultivate a deep affection for it.⁷⁵

Prior to the writing of *Corentyne Thunder*, most of Mittelholzer's literary efforts had been handwritten in notebooks and only very occasionally typed when he had sufficient funds to hire the necessary equipment. Lionel Luckhoo, his close

⁷⁴ Mittelholzer's autobiography covers his life from birth, in 1909 through to 1928 when he would have been 19. It is thus limited in terms of the critical periods of his life when he was a published author.

⁷⁵ Op. Cit., Mittelholzer, E. *A Swarthy Boy* p. 70.

friend and one of the few supporters of his literary aspirations, gave him his first typewriter (circa 1938). Mittelholzer's relationship with Luckhoo family more importantly led him to question the racial prejudices of the society he lived in and expose, in *Corentyne Thunder*, the hypocrisies and snobbery of the middle classes as well as the racial tensions between members of the Black and Indian community.

***Corentyne Thunder* & its Dialogic Intertexts**

Readers who are unaware of this background might conclude, like Birbalsingh, that the representation of Ramgolall, as a miserly peasant, was an ill-conceived reinforcement of the prevailing racial stereotypes about East Indians and a reflection of the author's own internalized prejudices. On the contrary we should look for Ramgolall's origins in literature – as the following analysis aims to make evident – and see *Corentyne Thunder* as a tribute to the East Indian community.

While it is likely that this novel was influenced (consciously and unconsciously) by numerous texts that are not readily identifiable, it remains valid to explore those that are, most particularly those that have been deliberately signposted by the author. The following section explores the obvious intertextual references: i.e., Moliere's *L'Avare*, Stapledon's *Last and First Men*, Beethoven's *Pastoral Symphony*, Francis Bacon's, *Of Vicissitude of Things*, as well as some of the more subtle passing references to Joseph Conrad and Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. The latter two intertexts have been selected for the inadvertent insights they provide into the socio-historical context, that of racism and marginalisation, and Mittelholzer's response to it, his self-belief and assertion of equality. Whilst some of the 'intertexts' reveal which writers Mittelholzer admired or conversely disdained, it is also evident he employed them as a dialogic means of challenging the prejudices within Guyanese society as well as the prejudice he expected his writing would attract as the work of an 'inferior' colonial.

The very explicit reference to Molière's *L'Avare* in chapter 17 (when Beena talks to Stympy about Ramgolall's canister of hoarded savings) points to the author's literariness:

'Yes. 'E got dem tie up in bundle,' she smiled. 'Me an' Kattree used to spy on 'e plenty time when e' open it to put in mo' money.' [Stympy] grinned and muttered something about Molière's *L'Avare* [i.e., *The Miser*].⁷⁶

Indeed deliberate similarities between the two pieces of literature are made evident with respect to elements of dialogue and plot. In *The Miser*, the key protagonist, Harpagon, becomes hysterical on discovering that his money-box has been stolen (by his son, Cléante) from its hiding place in the garden:

"Ahh! My poor, my dear money, my lovely money, my friend, they've taken you from me! And now you've gone, I've lost my prop, my comfort, my joy. I'm finished. There's nothing for me now. I can't live without you. It's the end, I can't go on, I'm good as dead and buried".⁷⁷

Sosee, (Ramgolall's daughter by his first marriage), mirrors Cléante's behaviour by stealing money from her father's hoard; in her case to buy a sexually alluring dress which she hopes will make her more attractive to James Weldon, the planter who later sets up home with her.⁷⁸ In Chapter 7 when Ramgolall reflects on the events of that day his response to the theft patently echoes Harpagon's hyperbole:

Sombre day! He thought he would have died from very sorrow. He had been ill and fevered for a week after, talking wild tales and fighting so that he had to be strapped down to the hospital bed.⁷⁹

⁷⁶ Mittelholzer, E. *Corentyne Thunder* (Heinemann: London, 1970) p. 69.

⁷⁷ Molière "The Miser" in *The Miser & Other Plays*, translated by John Woods (Penguin Books: London, 2004) p. 202.

⁷⁸ Cléante requires the money to woo Marianne, the woman who he loves and later marries.

⁷⁹ Op. Cit., Mittelholzer, E. *Corentyne Thunder* p. 31.

In Molière's play, Harpagon profits from the theft of his money: his son, Cléante repays what he has stolen as soon as he secures his lover's hand in marriage, whilst his daughter-in-law's father generously shares his wealth. In Ramgolall's case, Weldon sends him a gift of fifty-pounds; this allows him to start a new independent life of cattle rearing and more than makes up for the stolen fifty shillings. Unfortunately for Ramgolall, the story does not end here. Towards the end of the novel, his money is stolen once again: this time by his daughter Beena who uses it to pay the legal fees of Jannee, a married rice farmer who, though guilty of murder, she secretly loves. This time there is no happy ending and Mittelholzer breaks through the literary archetype, making a genuinely imaginative response to the life sealed up in the canister.

Ramgolall is here portrayed as a character whose miserliness, when compared to Harpagon's (who is a member of the gentry), can be excused or at least understood. His was not a "background of material solidity"⁸⁰ but rather a life rooted in hard struggle and suffering:

He crouched...looking at the fat bundles [of money], looking at them and smiling a smile of memory, for he had had to work very hard for the money in these bundles. The rain had soaked him and the sun dried him. He had walked knee-deep in mud, surrounded by clouds of mosquitoes. The ague of malaria had shaken him and the fever scorched him so that his anguished brain dreamt weird visions. Angry shouts from the overseers he had borne without a murmured word, without a frown. He had nearly been beaten to death in a riot when the labourers went on strike. Many had been shot by the police, many had been wounded.⁸¹

By drawing upon Molière's play, Mittelholzer achieves various objectives. It firstly allows him to address the social perceptions of East Indian frugality, whilst demonstrating that miserliness was not the preserve of East Indians as stereotyped but rather an idiosyncrasy that could be found anywhere. Whilst

⁸⁰ Ibid; p. 40.

⁸¹ Ibid; p. 31.

Birbalsingh has contended that Ramgolall's miserliness is "too excessive"⁸², it is here argued that Mittelholzer's depiction of him is executed with empathy.

The injection of caricature (seen as a negative by some critics) arguably has the important effect of enforcing a degree of emotional detachment between Ramgolall and the reader. He represents an old way of life. Whilst his children adapt to the changing society, he is too old to embrace the wearing of shoes or of banking with the Post Office. He must therefore die, in accordance with the laws of nature, to make way for a modern generation. The 'failure' of Mittelholzer to develop Ramgolall's character enables the reader to respond to the news of his death in the same unperturbed way as the environment:

Surely the savannah must know that Ramgolall was dead and that there were pebbles and pieces of dried mud lying scattered on the floor of the mud-house. It all looked so untroubled, so flat and at peace as though nothing at all happened. And the sky, too, and the wind, the sunshine – all untroubled, the same as they had been yesterday and all the days before: the sky blue, the wind cool, the sun red because it was low in the west.⁸³

The above passage which appears towards the end of the book links in neatly with one that appears at its beginning. On that occasion Ramgolall had ironically feared that his daughter Beena might die:

And Ramgolall, weak in body and in mind, could only look about him at a loss. His dark eyes seemed to appeal to the savannah and then to the sky. But the savannah remained still and grey-green, quiet and immobile in its philosophy. And the sky, too, would do nothing to aid him. Pale purple in the failing light and streaked with feathery brown and yellow clouds, the sky watched like a statue of Buddha.⁸⁴

⁸² Birbalsingh, F. "Indians in the Novels of Edgar Mittelholzer" in *Passion and Exile: Essays in Caribbean Literature* (Hansib: London, 1988). [Originally published in *Caribbean Quarterly* (Vol. 32, Nos. 1 & 2; March-June 1986)] p. 76.

⁸³ Op. Cit., Mittelholzer, E. *Corentyne Thunder* p. 229 - A similar concept to this is expressed in Olaf Stapledon's book, *Last and First Men*, (Gollancz: London, 1999 [1930]) when he states: "Great are the stars, and man is of no account to them". p. 303.

⁸⁴ Ibid; p. 11.

The emotional detachment we feel towards Ramgolall along with the representations of a detached environment, serve the added objective of reinforcing Mittelholzer's ideas about the aloneness of man within the larger scheme of the universe. It is a reflection of the author's early loss of faith in orthodox Christianity, combined with his attraction to oriental religions (e.g., Hinduism and Buddhism), which remained with him for life. His semi-autobiographical character, Garvin, in *The Jilkington Drama* (1965) articulates what the author demonstrates through his representations of environment in *Corentyne Thunder*: "...It's the weather that acts as my link with God"; but the author's God is one who does not intervene in the everyday affairs of man.⁸⁵

Mittelholzer uses other intertextual references to express his interest in laws of the universe. In chapter 23 of *Corentyne Thunder*, Dr Roy refers to Olaf Stapledon's, *Last and First Men*, which Big Man Weldon tells us would appeal to his son, Geoffry. Stapledon's book, though a novel, reads much more like a scientific thesis on the evolutionary rise and fall of man over a future period of two thousand million years. He expounds views on cycles of life, civilisation, human development and the converse possibility of degeneration: views that appear to be echoed in microcosm in *Corentyne Thunder* (and indeed in later novels). Thus while Ramgolall's death marks the end of an era - as experienced by the first generation of East Indians in British Guiana - the lives of his children highlight the gradual process of creolization: Baijan saves his money in the Post Office; Beena travels beyond plantation life to New Amsterdam where she learns how to exploit the legal system and Sosee sets up home outside her ethnic group. Although these events are intended to reflect generational changes, Mittelholzer also suggests some of the degenerative aspects of a so-called civilised society. It clearly does not benefit society, for instance, that a murderer (i.e., Jannee) escapes imprisonment, purely because his lawyer has the skills to manipulate the jury into finding him not guilty. But perhaps, given Mittelholzer's later obsession with crime and insistence on severe forms of punishment for criminals

⁸⁵ Mittelholzer, E. *The Jilkington Drama* (Corgi Books: London, 1966) p. 30.

(including death), Jannee's release from prison bears deeper significance. This aspect of the novel's plot will be discussed in the closing sections of this chapter.

The reference to Stapledon's novel - a book the author evidently wants others to read - exemplifies Mittelholzer's conscious attempt to educate his readership:

...I've just finished reading Olaf Stapledon's *Last and First Men*. If you want to read about civilisations read that. / ... / Oh, it's a wonderful book, man. You should read it....⁸⁶

Not satisfied with merely recommending *Last and First Men*, Mittelholzer (speaking through Dr Roy) draws attention to specific passages he would like his readers to take note of:

A particular chapter there towards the end - it's entitled "Cosmology", I think - the thing reads like a piece of music, the movement of a Brahms sonata or something.⁸⁷

Apart from highlighting his interest in cosmology, this passage also draws attention to the possibilities of weaving musical accents and rhythms into prose. As this is a technique Mittelholzer employs, the reference also serves the purpose of validating his own aesthetic innovations.

In Chapter 19 following heavy rains on the Corentyne, Geoffry observes that:

There was something detached about them [i.e., the sound of the cockerels crowing], yet serene and yearning, like the shepherd's song of thanksgiving after the storm in... [Beethoven's] Pastoral Symphony. They soothed his soul.⁸⁸

⁸⁶ Op. Cit., Mittelholzer, E. *Corentyne Thunder* pp. 104 - 105.

⁸⁷ Ibid; p. 105.

⁸⁸ Ibid; p. 81.

The reference to Beethoven's *Pastoral Symphony* is significant since events that occur in *Corentyne Thunder* loosely reflect its five-movement structure.⁸⁹ The first movement – 'Awakening of cheerful feelings upon arrival in the country' – is recreated in Chapter 10 and opens with the excitement Big Man Weldon feels as he anticipates the imminent arrival from school in Georgetown of his son, Geoffry:

Today, when Geoffry was coming home for the Easter vacation, Big Man felt the magic of life quickening the beats of his heart...⁹⁰

The second movement, 'Scene at the brook', is briefly echoed in Chapter 17 when Geoffry and Kattree spend the day fishing along the canal, while Stymphy and Beena talk in Ramgolall's hut. The third movement, 'Happy gathering of country folk' is played out in the scene where Beena and Stymphy join Kattree and Geoffry in the adventure of catching fish and similarly ends with the approach of rain:

Looking towards the east and the north-east, they saw a hazy, grey-white curtain of rain approaching swiftly across the savannah. Full of power and menace it seemed. They could hear it in the breezeless silence coming with a hollow, far-off roar – an awing roar that came in waves, rising to a whoop and then falling to a soft swashing as though thousands of busy devils were groaning and hissing for all they were worth behind the thick misty sheet of drops. The savannah hazed and vanished at the edge as if it were crumbling of into a fog of space beyond the horizon and would never reappear. Flocks of white birds uttered thin, harsh cries of panic and flew waveringly towards the south and the west.⁹¹

As in Beethoven's symphony, the third movement is 'interrupted' by the fourth, 'Thunderstorm', with a sudden and dramatic change in atmosphere:

⁸⁹ See Jones, D.W. *Beethoven: Pastoral Symphony* (Cambridge University Press: 1995).

⁹⁰ Op. Cit., Mittelholzer, E. *Corentyne Thunder* p. 40.

⁹¹ Ibid; p. 71.

In less than half a minute they were all huddled together within the frowsy gloom of Ramgolall's home. The rain hissed down in a fierce, slating drop of showers. It crashed and prattled on the dry-leaf roof...⁹²

The conceptual similarities between novel and symphony are reinforced by the unsettled feelings the storm appears to cause. In *Corentyne Thunder* these feelings, occurring in only two of the novel's characters are not, however, an inextricably linked side-effect of the weather as proposed by Beethoven:

The crash of the rain troubled him [i.e., Ramgolall] and the thought of the future. Even the sight of Geoffry, for some strange reason, had within the past few minutes begun to raise dark phantoms in his mind.⁹³

On returning home with Stymphy during a lull in the storm, Geoffry's thoughts are similarly troubled (in his case about the possible contents of Clara's letter). The scene in Chapter 19 where Geoffry feels calm following the end of the storm is meanwhile suggestive of the fifth and final movement in allegretto of Beethoven's symphony: 'Shepherd's song; cheerful and thankful feelings after the storm'.

Mittelholzer's application of Beethoven's *Pastoral Symphony* serves various purposes. While both novel and symphony follow the same basic 'movements' and are about life in the countryside, Mittelholzer's objective is to counter Beethoven's notion about the inextricable link between environment and the various human emotions supposedly produced by it. Whilst the "silent peace" that succeeds the storm soothes Geoffry, it is only able to do so "in a cold and forlorn way": his personality and personal circumstances having a greater impact on his mood than anything else. It is furthermore legitimate to assume Mittelholzer hoped alert critics would recognise that he interpreted *his* world and *the* world in musical terms, following Stapledon, in *Last and First Men*:

⁹² Ibid; p. 71.

⁹³ Ibid; p. 72.

Man himself, at the very least, is music, a brave theme that makes music also of its vast accompaniment, its matrix of storms and stars.⁹⁴

This musical philosophy, as will be demonstrated in Chapter Four, was applied to the narrative structure of *The Life and Death of Sylvia*⁹⁵ with extraordinary skill and complexity. That aside, it should now be evident that the title, *Corentyne Thunder*, is not a just a reference to weather, but also to musical drama as metaphor for the dramas of life. The narrator in effect invites the reader to think about the sounds produced in nature as a form of music and to take artistic inspiration (as did Mittelholzer and Beethoven) from this. By reworking European classical music into a Caribbean context, Mittelholzer aimed to demonstrate that British Guiana was a legitimate territory for sophisticated fiction, and that Caribbean people were more than capable of creating literature that engaged with a venerable tradition and made something new and noteworthy out of it.

Relevant to Mittelholzer's counterargument to Beethoven is an intertextual reference to Francis Bacon's *Of Vicissitude of Things*. While Geoffry ponders over a letter from Clara (containing news that she is pregnant), Stymphy states:

'Well look here, you'd better stay up here and read this fateful letter of dread. I'll go downstairs to the others and give you a chance to ponder in solitude on the vicissitudes of life.'

'Oh, don't make an ass of yourself.'

'That essay of Bacon's on the vicissitudes of things ought to be of some help.'

'Certain it is, that matter is in a perpetual flux, and never at a stay. The great winding-sheets that bury all things –'

'Oh, shut up! I don't want to hear any silly Bacon.'⁹⁶

⁹⁴ Stapledon, O. *Last and First Men*, (Gollancz: London, 1999 [1930]) p. 304

⁹⁵ *The Life and Death of Sylvia* was also published in later editions under the shorter title of *Sylvia*.

⁹⁶ Op. Cit., Mittelholzer, E. *Corentyne Thunder* p. 76.

Bacon's short essay explores the changing fates of mankind across the ages and the differences between human groups across geographical regions of the world. He argues that regions such as the West Indies are prone to earthquakes, lightning, deluges, and conflagrations that "bury all things in oblivion". Survivors of these natural disasters are "commonly ignorant" and can give: "no account of time past; so that the oblivion is all one as if none had been left".⁹⁷ Here Mittelholzer's tendency to question, challenge or reject colonial representations of British Guiana (and the West Indies in general) - and more specifically the prevalent belief that tropical climates had a degenerating effect on its inhabitants - is embedded in a seemingly casual piece of dialogue.

We know that Mittelholzer had been required to study Bacon at school and evidently dismissed his essays as nonsense.⁹⁸ Only five years after the publication of *Corentyne Thunder*, he sent a letter to the editor of the *Trinidad Guardian* refuting reports about a hurricane that had allegedly brought destruction to Guiana, before going on to make general observations about the Western tendency to portray inhabitants of the tropics as both primitive and exotic.

A country in the tropics, according to the best romantic fiction and journalism originating in England and America, is a place where the sun shines fiercely and "natives" disport themselves nude or semi-nude in the vicinity of trash-huts, with occasional war-dances, ritualistic tribal orgies, hurricanes and volcanic eruptions thrown in for colour and excitement.⁹⁹

The notion that these misrepresentations troubled Mittelholzer at a personal level is further reinforced by events in *The Weather Family* (1958). The key protagonist, Caroline tells Mr Harbin that Barbados has not had a hurricane since 1898. Until his move from England to Barbados, Mr Harbin had mistakenly assumed that the colony was subject to hurricanes every year:

⁹⁷ Bacon, F. "Of Vicissitude of Things" in *Essays, Civil and Moral & the New Atlantis; Aeropagitica & Tractate of Education & Religio Medici* (Cosimo Classics: New York, 2009) p. 143.

⁹⁸ Op. Cit., Mittelholzer, E. *A Swarthy Boy* p. 141.

⁹⁹ Mittelholzer, E. "Letters to the Editor: "Hurricane" in Guiana?" in *The Trinidad Guardian* (Port of Spain: 12th March 1943) p. 4.

We talked about hurricanes and I showed him Granddad's papers dealing with the 1898 one. He was surprised to hear we had never had a hurricane in Barbados since 1898. He said before he came out here three years ago he used to think we had a hurricane at least once every year – one that used to hit us and do damage. I told him most English people must think so about the West Indies. I said we do have hurricanes every year – lots of them – but they don't have to strike an island. They sometimes don't even pass near any island but remain out at sea far away.¹⁰⁰

The tone Mittelholzer employed varied according to the publication he was writing for, but what the above examples demonstrate is that his end purpose was often to refute views that he considered fallacious. The reasons for this didactic approach are supplied in his travel journal, *With a Carib Eye*. Granting the West the "benefit of doubt", he asserts that "northern attitudes" were shaped largely by ignorance (note the backhanded insult) rather than by notions of civilized superiority and could by implication have their attitudes transformed through re-education:

The northerner's attitudes, I think, may be traced not so much to his feeling of civilised superiority as to his ignorance of the social history of the Caribbean territories. [...] This, I admit, is a pardonable error, more so when we consider that Caribbean people themselves have, until within the past decade or two, been almost as ignorant of each other's neighbour-colony set up (socially as well as in other respects) as people far away in Texas, Nova Scotia or Devon.¹⁰¹

While Mittelholzer wanted to be acknowledged as an equal by the West his approach was never that of the ingratiating colonial as the subtly snide tone of this quote suggests.

Clues as why Mittelholzer felt justified in using literature as a way of educating his readers (and of exposing unpleasant truths about society), can be indirectly elicited through the passing reference to Shakespeare's *Hamlet*:

¹⁰⁰ Mittelholzer, E. *The Weather Family* (Secker & Warburg: London, 1958) p. 11.

¹⁰¹ Op. Cit., Mittelholzer, E. *With A Carib Eye* pp. 12-13.

Geoffrey grunted. 'There's the rub, my dear chap, as our friend Hamlet said.'¹⁰²

The first observation to be made is that Mittelholzer had clearly read *Hamlet* – subtle references to this text appear in several of his novels – and since Shakespeare was considered to be one of the world's greatest playwrights, it would not be far-fetched to extrapolate that as an aspiring novelist he took heed of the following advice from Act 2:

...the play's the thing

Wherein I'll catch the conscience of the King.¹⁰³

And from Act 3;

Be not too tame [...], but let your own discretion be your tutor, suit the action to the word, the word to the action, with this special observerance, that you o'erstep not the modesty of nature; for anything so o'erdone is from the purpose of playing, whose end both at first and now, was and is to hold as 'twere the mirror up to nature, to show virtue her feature, scorn her own image, and the very age and body of the time his form and pressure. ¹⁰⁴

In *Corentyne Thunder* 'the conscience of the King' can be attributed to Western writers/readers who fallaciously conceive of the West Indies as primitive or to members of the coloured middle class who know little about the lives of East Indians and yet insist on perpetuating reductive stereotypes. The impact of the Shakespearian quote on the novel is similarly self-evident and mirrors an early objective of the author:

I want to have the truth out, I want the English and Americans to realize that there are coloured "natives" out here who can be just as educated and refined as

¹⁰² Op. Cit., Mittelholzer, E. *Corentyne Thunder* pp. 84-85.

¹⁰³ Wilson, John (ed.) *Hamlet in The Complete Works of William Shakespeare* (Galley Press: Leicester, 1982) Act 2, Scene 2, Lines 618-619, p. 847.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid; Act 3, Scene 2, Lines 17-26, p. 849.

they can be.../[but at the same time] *all our failings and foibles* will be pictured without bias. [my italics]¹⁰⁵

In *Corentyne Thunder* Mittelholzer achieves this by painting a range of characters that represent at one end of the spectrum the ex-indentured peasant farmer Ramgolall and at the other Geoffry Weldon, who has demonstrably assimilated European 'high' culture. The passing reference to Hamlet also points intriguingly to similarities between Shakespeare's eponymous hero and Mittelholzer's Geoffry. Both characters harbour incestuous feelings (Hamlet for his mother, and Geoffry for his half-Aunt, Kattree); both treat their 'loved' ones (Ophelia/Kattree) with cold detachment and then despondently reflect on what wretches they are for doing so; both have a dim view of human existence – Hamlet recommends that Ophelia goes to a nunnery rather than be “a breeder of sinners”¹⁰⁶, whilst Geoffry refers to Clara's unborn child as a “contemptible little foetus”; both contemplate suicide and both believe in jumbies/ghosts.

These literary resonances usefully warn critics against making extrapolations about the autobiographical nature of Mittelholzer's work - of matching *events* in his characters' lives to those of the author's - without supporting evidence. This is a complex issue in terms of analysis for as Denis Williams has noted Mittelholzer was (at least to some extent) a 'Romantic'.¹⁰⁷ Romanticism does not lend itself to easy definition but can be seen as concept that unifies key aesthetic precepts, which Mittelholzer evidently empathized with: a veneration of the creative process, free expression of the imagination and a sense of freedom from classical notions of art; rebellion against the inherited values of external authority; the privileging of deep emotion as a legitimate experience; contemplation on the sublime in nature; a belief in a transcending spiritual force that permeates the whole of creation; an emphasis on free will and the subjective (i.e., intuitive) experience of Truth but most importantly a

¹⁰⁵ Seymour, A. *Edgar Mittelholzer: The Man and His Works* (The Edgar Mittelholzer Memorial Lectures: Georgetown, 1968) p. 13.

¹⁰⁶ Op. Cit., Wilson, John (ed.) *Hamlet in The Complete Works of William Shakespeare* Act 3, Scene 1, Line 121, p. 848.

¹⁰⁷ Williams, D. "Image and Idea in the Arts of Guyana" in *The 1969 Edgar Mittelholzer Memorial Lectures - Second Series* (Georgetown: National History and Arts Council, 1969) p. 5.

preoccupation with the elevation of heroic individuals including the biographical elevation of self.¹⁰⁸ It is thus almost impossible to read Mittelholzer's novels without, as most critics have noted, sensing the presence of the author and without automatically (sometimes legitimately, sometimes not) drawing connections between the characters and the author. One suspects for instance that the following description of *Corentyne Thunder's* Geoffry Weldon, might as easily be applied (given his self-representations in *A Swarthy Boy*¹⁰⁹) to the author: "He had power, a deep, tight-locked power that, one felt, might make a terrible whirl of damage, like a cyclone, if unlocked without warning. Seeing him, one thought of a coppery sky and a dead smooth sea – the China Sea of Conrad – and a falling barometer."¹¹⁰

This reference to Conrad is worth noting for its evocative association with the short novel, *Typhoon* – a story about a Captain tasked with delivering a steamer load of Chinese 'coolies' to Southern China. When he and his crew first set off on their journey, the sea is calm but a vague awareness of impending danger is marked by the steady fall of the barometer.¹¹¹ Instead of altering his route, Captain MacWhirr decides to face the typhoon head on, leading him and his crew into a struggle for survival against the elements. Given his isolation as a writer, Mittelholzer would perhaps have identified with the single-mindedness of Conrad's Captain MacWhirr and derived confidence about the viability of publishing a story based upon the East Indian community, and the 'thunder', from his reading of Conrad's *Typhoon*. In view of Mittelholzer's commitment to subvert marginalised representations of the 'Other', Conrad's novel may have been yet another provocation to write a story in which 'coolies' were central figures, since in *Typhoon* they (the Chinese 'coolies') are notably dehumanized, faceless and voiceless.

¹⁰⁸ See Butler, M. *Romantics, Rebels & Reactionaries* (Oxford University Press: Oxford, 1981) for a broader discussion on Romanticism.

¹⁰⁹ Op. Cit., Mittelholzer, E. "The Light – and the Snarl" in *A Swarthy Boy* pp. 52-56.

¹¹⁰ Op. Cit., Mittelholzer, E. *Corentyne Thunder* p. 41.

¹¹¹ A sense of pending disaster permeates *Corentyne Thunder*: Ramgolall worries about Geoffry, and Beena about Jannee; and rightly so, since Geoffry gets Kattree pregnant and Jannee murders Boorharry.

The hard-working Ramgolall and his five children represent a broad and diverse range of East Indian characters. Whilst Sosee is the plump, class-conscious, poorly treated submissive mistress of Big Man Weldon, her beautiful half-sister, Beena is portrayed as an independent, proud, strong-minded, intelligent and self-sacrificing young woman. Sosee's brother Baijan has none of the snobbery of his sister. As a successful rice mill owner he returns to the Corentyne to get married and generously share his wealth, in stark contrast to his miserly father, Ramgolall. Kattree is meanwhile characterised as an enigmatic young woman who, in swimming nude, harbours none of the sexual repressions of the coloured middle classes. She chooses the path of a single mother, unlike her half-sister, Sosee, and appears to live the type of relatively uncomplicated life that Geoffry finds enviable. Apart from Ramgolall's immediate family, Mittelholzer creates a host of cameo characters with East Indian ancestry from gate-porters, butlers, butchers, and grocers, to doctors and lawyers. *Corentyne Thunder* was thus a quietly revolutionary novel; giving humanity and voice to those who, in literature, had been traditionally marginalised.

The Jinnee's Release

What makes Mittelholzer's achievements even more noteworthy is the sophisticated and no doubt self-satisfying manner in which (contrary to the representations of the intellectually-challenged colonial) he was able to critique Western literature/ideologies. It is clear however that Mittelholzer felt the need to employ complex codes for the more controversial ideas he had, particularly given the context of colonialism and his reliance, in the absence of local publishing houses, on Western publishers. When we recall the story of the Jen/Jinnee, the killing of Boorharry by the East Indian rice farmer Jannee, takes on deeper significance. Note that when Boorharry taunts Jannee with the words: "Jannee – pannee – *chimpanzee*"[my italics], the latter promises to "put 'e in 'e place good-good one o' dese days. You wait, see."¹¹² As he talks to his friend, Beena about this, his eyes focus on the brick chimneys of Speyerfeld out of which

¹¹² Op. Cit., Mittelholzer, E. *Corentyne Thunder* p. 38.

the pouring “thin black smoke” looks like “a thunder-cloud gathering to be born”.¹¹³ Jannee thus represents the dreaded spirit-jinnee, while alluding also to the aforementioned apostle John: the latter described by Jesus as a son of Thunder on account perhaps of his quick temper and desire (along with his brother, James) to destroy some unwelcoming Samaritan villagers by calling “down fire from heaven”.¹¹⁴

Though East Indian, Jannee is on analysis, possibly a projection of the author and his anger at racial labels (being derogatorily called a ‘monkey’) that he and his Guianese counterparts were sometimes subjected to. A more subtle inference is that the author-Jinnee did not want to be categorised as ‘black’ in much the same way that the East Indian, Mungalsingh (this notably sounds like Mongrel-singh) in *A Morning at the Office* violently objects to being called a “nigger” by the English crook, James Fenwick.¹¹⁵ Though similar in complexion, Mungalsingh points out: “Ah got smooth, straight hair. Nigger got crooked hair.”¹¹⁶ Boorharry’s name is significant too, for when broken down into ‘boor’ and ‘harry’ it points to someone that makes ill-mannered attacks on people. Not only does he lord his privileged position over those less fortunate, he also tries to take that which is not his, i.e., Jannee’s wife Sukra. Needless to say Sukra refers to Guiana’s sugar as in the French homophone, ‘sucre’. This explains not only why the author ‘plotted’ Boorharry’s death but also why he chose to ‘write’ Jannee free from prison. Mittelholzer voices in this instance the views of the Creole nationalist for as Hintzen has noted: “Creole nationalism allowed accommodation of the white elite into the national space even while rejecting British colonial domination”.¹¹⁷ Ramgolall’s death and Jannee’s release are thus intended to mark a new, sought-after period in Guiana’s history. This theme

¹¹³ Ibid; p. 38.

¹¹⁴ For respective references in the Bible to John and James, as ‘Sons of Thunder’ and their desire to call down fire from heaven, see The Holy Bible, Mark 3: 17 and Luke 9: 51-56.

¹¹⁵ According to Thompson, while Indians were perceived by Europeans as being black on account of their dark skin, the former sought “to repudiate the association of ‘black’ with themselves, because they connected the term almost exclusively with Africans and the outcasts of Indian society.” See Thompson, A. *The Haunting Past: Politics, Economics and Race in Caribbean Life* (Ian Randle Publishers: Kingston, 1997) p. 231.

¹¹⁶ Op. Cit., Mittelholzer, E. *A Morning at the Office* p. 32.

¹¹⁷ Hintzen, P. “Creoleness and Nationalism in Guyanese Anticolonialism and Postcolonial Formation” in *Small Axe* 15 (Vol. 8, No.1: March 2004) p. 112.

reappears in *A Morning at the Office*, when the English overseer, Sidney Whitmer fully articulates Jannee's frustrations: "You come out to these colonies and squeeze the guts out of 'em – and then you piss on the natives! Insult to injury"¹¹⁸ and again in *The Life and Death of Sylvia*, when Grantley Russell (prone like Boorharry to promiscuity) is represented as an expatriate who is employed to do a job in which local Guianese were already skilled. The themes of Mittelholzer's "The Jen", i.e., the issues of identity and genetic heritage, and the ills of colonialism take centre stage in *The Life and Death of Sylvia*.

¹¹⁸ Op. Cit., Mittelholzer, E. *A Morning at the Office* p. 132.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE LIFE AND DEATH OF SYLVIA

“[British Guiana] is my homeland – it is me.”¹

“[A] man should always be judged by what he himself is – not by what his ancestors were. But I’m telling you what is – not what ought to be. I’m being a realist. I’m telling you what sort of world you’re growing up in and suggesting how you should tackle it if you want to be tolerably happy in it—”²

“It’s friction that creates everything in life”.³

PUBLISHING SYLVIA

In Chapter Two it was pointed out that a completed version of *The Life and Death of Sylvia* (hereafter, *Sylvia*) existed in 1945⁴ and had been sent to Harper’s for their consideration. The disparity between the date of composition and date of publication are worthy of further exploration. When Mittelholzer wrote to Collymore on 29th January 1946, it was to inform him that the novel had not been accepted for reasons directly associated with post-war conditions (e.g., labour and paper shortages). But other factors, according to his agent, were also impeding the manuscript’s acceptance: the novel was considered “too intimate” and “obscene” for publication. Mittelholzer’s response was one of indignation:

In Sylvia [...] there isn’t even a seduction – that is to say, despite her adventures through life and various escapades inevitable to any normal girl...the heroine dies a virgin. [...] one day Sylvia will be published [...] and there won’t be any expurgations.⁵

¹ Mittelholzer, E. *With A Carib Eye* (Secker & Warburg: London, 1958) p. 134.

² Mittelholzer, E. *The Life and Death of Sylvia* (John Day: New York, 1954) p. 63.

³ Woodsley, H. A., *The Mad MacMullocks* (Peter Owen Ltd: London, 1959) p. 51.

⁴ See Letter dated 3rd December 1945 in Frank Collymore Collection held in the Department of Archives, Barbados.

⁵ Ibid; Frank Collymore Collection - Letter dated 29th January 1946.

This summation of the story sounds similar to the final version of *Sylvia*, published by Secker and Warburg in 1953. But was it? A murder that took place in Guiana, and which is remarkably similar to the one that takes place in *Sylvia*, was reported in the *Trinidad Guardian* on 21 July 1946. Mittelholzer who was living in Trinidad at the time as freelance writer for the *Trinidad Guardian* would have seen the story:

The couple [J. B. Adamson, a married Customs Clerk and his mistress, Lucille Forte, a Nurse], it is alleged were sitting on the Sea Wall at “Scandal Point”, trysting-place at Dixie, East Coast, Demerara, when an assailant sneaked up on them from along the beach and carried out the attack. Badly slashed about the face, neck, body and legs [in a brutal cutlass attack], Adamson stumbled along the wall in search of help.⁶

Whilst this was not the first time that a cutlass attack had taken place along Guiana’s Sea Wall, the hunt for Adamson’s assailant was said to have been “one of the greatest in the colony’s history” and was – perhaps because of his white middle class status – extensively reported in Guiana’s *Daily Chronicle*. It is also evident from letters in the private collection of Ruth Wilkinson, that Mittelholzer was well acquainted with the Adamson family.

The *Sylvia* referred to in Mittelholzer’s dairy (on 29th July 1948) - “Rec’d letter from Macmillan’s (rejected *Sylvia*). Wrote Hart and Bucklin Moon of Doubledays”⁷ - may therefore have differed from the one sent to Harper’s in 1945 and differed again from the one referred to in a letter dated 27th May 1952:

Incidentally, tomorrow will see the last chapter of THE LIFE AND DEATH OF SYLVIA written. I honestly think this my most solid and moving book, and hope you will agree.⁸

⁶ See Sunday Guardian Correspondent “Arrest Made in Dixie Slaying” in *Trinidad Guardian* (21 July 1946) p. 10.

⁷ See footnote in Gilkes, M.A. *The Caribbean Syzygy: A Study of the novels of Edgar Mittelholzer and Wilson Harris* (1973-74 A8j Ph.D., Kent, 24-332) p. 38.

⁸ John Day Archives (Ref: C0123; Bxs 291, 330, 316, 330, 343, 353, 363, 392 and 417, 1951-1955) – correspondence between Mittelholzer and his publishers held at Princeton University.

The argument being made here is that while Mittelholzer was rarely willing to make expurgations at the request of his publishers, *Sylvia* appears to have been, like *The Aloneness of Mrs Chatham*, subject to amendments and additions over a numbers of years. One thus needs to bear in mind that the presence of some (if any) discursive contradictions or structural flaws may be a consequence of the merging of attitudes that had changed overtime, or the result of over-working the novel.

SYLVIA: A CRITICAL RECEPTION

The critical reception of *Sylvia* was (in common with the author's other novels) extremely mixed. A *Time* magazine reviewer, for instance, dismissively declared (in 1954) that the novel: "shows what happens when the laws of the jungle are replaced by the codes of the suburbs, and it portrays with grimness the lives of coloured people whose worship of ancestral ju-jus has changed into keeping up with the Joneses."⁹ Whilst A J Seymour's assessment was not tainted by racial prejudice (as above), he similarly felt that the novel was less than satisfactory, attributing it to "an end-of-the-war disillusionment".¹⁰ He opined furthermore that Mittelholzer's character "analyses [was] not rounded enough to be a completely conceived work of fiction".¹¹ In stark contrast, Escoffery views *Sylvia* as a much "more ambitious project than the highly acclaimed novel, *A Morning at the Office*", and confidently asserts that: "No amount of theorising by the characters around her can shake our faith in her existence."¹² The most positive assessment appears to have been expressed by the *Observer*, who on the strength of *Sylvia* hailed Mittelholzer's talent as "one of the most surprising to have appeared in English literature for twenty years".¹³

⁹ Op. Cit., Mittelholzer, E. *With a Carib Eye* pg 22. See also Mittelholzer, E. 'Color, Class and Letters' in *The Nation* (17 January 1959) p. 55.

¹⁰ Seymour, A. J. "The Novels of Edgar Mittelholzer" in *Kyk-Over-Al* (No. 24, Dec. 1958) p. 10.

¹¹ Ibid; p.10.

¹² Escoffery, G. "Reviews - The Life and Death of Sylvia: Edgar Mittelholzer" in *BIM* (Vol. 5, No. 18; June 1953) p. 237.

¹³ Mittelholzer, E. *A Pleasant Career* (unpublished second part of his autobiography of which *A Swarthy Boy* is the first part – in the possession of Mrs J. Ives).

In the twenty or more years following the author's death critics (Guckian exempted) have either ignored *Sylvia* as worthy of study or offered less than favourable assessments of the novel. Gilkes has argued that the novel despite "the considerable creative effort is finally undermined by an inherent, inner division".¹⁴ Birbalsingh's overall conclusion in an early assessment was that the artistic value of his work was "inconsiderable"¹⁵ and it is not until a much later reassessment in 1992 that he notes: "Sylvia emerges as the most sensitive and compassionate study of character in all Mittelholzer's novels".¹⁶ More damaging were the widely disseminated opinions of Sparer. According to her assessment, *Sylvia* reflected the author's white ancestor worship and racial prejudice.¹⁷ A thesis completed by Williams (a former colleague of Sparer's at the University of Guyana) supported her views and concluded that his obsession with race was at the heart of his psychosis and probably resulted in his death.¹⁸ Guckian, however, argued that *Sylvia* should be recognised as the first tragedy in West Indian literature and pointed out that Mittelholzer clearly benefitted from his understanding of musical form as the novel's death scene "has the serenity of a Mozartian andante".¹⁹ This latter observation is worthy of further exploration given Mittelholzer's musical background.

Research suggests that the limited, and largely negative, appraisal of Mittelholzer's novels by Caribbean critics was initially influenced by his "controversial" themes and an atmosphere of general hostility toward him.²⁰

¹⁴ Gilkes, M.A. *The Caribbean Syzygy: A Study of the novels of Edgar Mittelholzer and Wilson Harris* (1973-74 A8j Ph.D., Kent, 24-332) p. 38.

¹⁵ Birbalsingh, F. "Edgar Mittelholzer: Moralist or Pornographer?" in *Journal of Commonwealth Literature* (Heinemann Educational Books: Vol. 7, July 1969) p. 98.

¹⁶ Birbalsingh, F. "Edgar Mittelholzer" in Lindfors, B & Sander, R. (eds) *Twentieth-Century Caribbean and Black African Writers* (Brucoli Clark Layman: London, 1992) p. 245.

¹⁷ Sparer, J. "Attitudes to Race in Guyanese Literature" in *Caribbean Studies* (Vol. 8: No. 2, 1968) p. 26.

¹⁸ Williams, F. *Edgar Mittelholzer: Romancier Guyanais (1909-1965) – Voyage Au Coeur Du Monde, Voyage Au Coeur De L'Homme* (Universite De Haute-Bretagne, Rennes: 1995/96).

¹⁹ Guckian, P. "The Balance of Colour: A Reassessment of the Work of Edgar Mittelholzer" in *Jamaican Journal* (Vol. 4: March 1970) p. 43.

²⁰ Andrew Salkey is quoted as saying in Walmsley, A. *The Caribbean Artists Movement 1966-1972: A Literary and Cultural History* (New Beacon Books: London, 1992) that Mittelholzer was admired and detested in equal measure. See p. 44.

Birbalsingh's evaluation, in an article written in the late 1970s, is representative of the former perspective:

[Mittelholzer's] morbid preoccupation with sexuality, death, and suicide, gave his work a predominantly sensational appeal that tended to obscure its more serious or topical elements.²¹

The latter assertion is best represented by the response of the coloured middle class to *Sylvia* for while novels like, *Corentyne Thunder* had invoked shock – New Amsterdammers like Louis Bone noted that it was the first time they had seen the word 'SEX' in black and white – it was *Sylvia*, as Guckhian argued, that resulted in the "bitterest revenges" on Mittelholzer.²² This was largely because Mittelholzer had dared to highlight in *Sylvia* some of the far from laudable aspects of Guianese middle class society. Seymour's recollections of the response to the novel's publication are particularly insightful:

There was a noticeable protest in Georgetown among middle class readers when [*Sylvia*] reached the country. The protest was partially discomfort, the beginning of the rage of people who see their image like Caliban's, in a mirror and don't like what they see. It was true that shade of complexion and quality of hair were decisive status elements in their world. [...] They had heard stories that prominent members of the community would chew promissory notes before the amazed eyes of beneficiaries like Mr. Knight in the story, in order to dispose of them and be free of the financial obligation they involved, but it hadn't happened to them. So in a sense of pride of city, they didn't like the image of Georgetown which was being projected to the world. Some of them said they suspected that the author had taken an unsavoury story from life of a weak, uneducated, unfortunate girl who had caught his attention and interest, on some of his visits to the capital city, and had written up her story. *There are many revenges which*

²¹ Birbalsingh, F. "Sam Selvon and the West Indian Renaissance" in James Black's (ed) *Ariel* (University of Calvary: Vol. 8 No3, July 1977) p. 13.

²² See Cox, J. 'Introduction: A Quiet Revolution' in Mittelholzer, E. *Corentyne Thunder* (Peepal Tree Press: Leeds, 2009) p. 6 for Louis Bone's comments.

*readers, made uncomfortable, will take upon an author, and Georgetown was full of them when the novel was published [my italics].*²³

But the realism in *Sylvia* offers present-day readers with an important point of contact with the Guianese past and general milieu of 1930s Caribbean society. As Seymour stated in the 1967 Edgar Memorial Lectures: “The tangled cliques and clans and sub-cliques and sub-clans that the author refers to constitute the bitter truth in the Georgetown world”.²⁴

SYLVIA’S GEORGETOWN SETTING

In order to aid our understanding of the culture Mittelholzer represents and the extent of his achievements, a brief history of the colony needs to be outlined. British Guiana was formed in 1831, when the three adjoining colonies: Demerara, Berbice and Essequibo (after a long history of intra-European²⁵ rivalry), were officially ceded to Great Britain. Rooted in a long history of slavery, Guiana had inherited a society stratified along intimately interrelated lines of race, colour and class. At the top of the social pyramid were a small white European elite, at the bottom enslaved Africans and acting as a buffer between the two, an intermediate class of freed coloureds; the offspring in origin of white men and enslaved African women. Though free, coloureds were not considered equal in law to the whites and were prevented from legitimately challenging the status quo through meaningful political or legal process. The relatively small indigenous Amerindian community, since it resided largely in the interior of the colony, tended to be viewed as a relatively autonomous appendage to plantation society.

As the white plantocracy retained their political hegemony following the passing of the Emancipation Act in 1833, subject only to the supreme authority of the Crown, freedom did not lead as one might expect to the restructuring of

²³ Seymour, A. “Edgar Mittelholzer: The Man and His Works” in *The 1967 Edgar Mittelholzer Memorial Lectures – First Series* (Georgetown, National History and Arts Council, 1968) p. 28.

²⁴ Ibid; p. 28.

²⁵ This involved the Spanish, Dutch, French and English.

Guianese society. Though shifts in the pattern of occupational activities did occur, particularly amongst the coloured and black population, the basic colour matrix prevailed. Extremely racist and 'civilising' ideologies – given credence by the authority of pseudo-science²⁶, disseminated by the teachings of Christian missionaries²⁷, imbedded in a wide range of 'educational' texts²⁸, implicit in the politico-economic power relationships and explicit in Gobineau's *The Inequality of Human Races* (1854) – were widely accepted as 'truths' and became the ideological underpinning of the white-brown-black social pyramid:

The Negroid variety is the lowest, and stands at the foot of the ladder. The animal character, that appears in the shape of the pelvis, is stamped on the Negro from birth, and foreshadows his destiny. His intellect will always move within a very narrow circle...No Negro race is seen as the initiator of a civilisation. Only when it is mixed with some other can it be initiated into one.²⁹

The Coloureds (notably divided into even smaller social groups according to such petty criteria as occupational status, complexion, phenotype and hair texture³⁰) sought to 'better' themselves through the emulation of white British

²⁶ For an excellent book on the development of pseudo-scientific race ideologies see Lively, A. *Masks: Blackness, Race and the Imagination* (Vintage: London, 1999). See also Augstein, H. F. (ed.) *Race: The Origins of an Idea, 1760-1850* (Thoemmes Press: Bristol, 1996).

²⁷ As late as 1906 Missionary societies were encouraged to "Contrast the darkness of Africa with the light of civilisation in England". See Eldridge, C. *The Imperial Experience: From Carlyle to Forster* (Macmillan Press: London, 1996) p. 147.

²⁸ The writings of Europeans like James Rodway, whose book *History of British Guiana* was for a long time one of the few readily available sources of information about British Guianese history, were riddled (as Moore has noted) with racist material. The use of Rodway's book as a key source upon which Mittelholzer based his Kawayana trilogy, provides interesting exemplification of how these ideologies can be consciously and unconsciously retransmitted. Rodway accepted as given, the inferiority of the black race as the following extract exemplifies: "As a race the Negro has little of that internal power that makes for progress – he must be compelled to move on"; to him blacks were savages albeit with the potential for slow but steady progression. See Rodway, J. *The Story of the Nations: The West Indies and the Spanish Main* (T Fisher Unwin: Paternoster Square, 1896) p. xii. The replication of these attitudes is evident in some of Mittelholzer's works.

²⁹ Quote from Gobineau's *The Inequality of Human Races* (1854) cited in Williams, E. "Nineteenth-Century Colonialism" in *From Columbus to Castro: The History of The Caribbean 1492-1969* (Andre Deutsch: London, 1997 [1970]) p. 398.

³⁰ Ayearst notes that the coloured middle class preoccupation with their physical approximation to Europeans was often taken to unhealthy extremes. See Ayearst, M. *The British West Indies: The Search for Self-Government* (New York University press: Washington Square, 1960) pp. 56-57. See also Smith, R. *British Guiana* (Greenwood Press: Connecticut 1980 [1962]) p. 134 on the topic of marriage, in which marriage partners were selected on the basis of their nearness to the white European ideal.

Victorian middle class ideas, values and customs. To quote the historians, Jeffrey and Baber:

The Coloured person could do nothing about his African ancestry but he was able to demonstrate through the conscious adoption of European values that he had left behind the cultural attributes of the slave and the 'nigger-yard' and had acquired those of free men, i.e., of the Europeans.³¹

Gravitating largely towards the towns, they viewed themselves as superior to the black community. Following emancipation Blacks moved increasingly away from the core of plantation society, forming villages of their own, while whites introduced a system of Indentureship with the dual pronged aim of bolstering labour shortages and weakening the position of blacks in terms of wage negotiation.

The Indentureship period (circa 1835 to 1917) witnessed the introduction of Portuguese, Chinese and Indian immigrants: the latter forming the bulk of the new immigrant population. These groups added significantly to the complex dynamics of race, colour and class in Guiana. The differing experiences of plantation life, economic and educational opportunity as well as cultural heritage, disposed each 'racial' group to seek their fortune in different ways.³² The Indian population were still largely resident on the plantation estates as late as 1946³³, but a few had amassed a significant amount of wealth through cattle rearing and rice production. A small professional and commercial class of Indians had also begun to emerge by the 1920s/30s. The Portuguese having secured a virtual monopoly in the retail of alcohol as well as pawn-

³¹ Jeffrey, H. B., & Baber, C. *Guyana: Politics, Economics and Society* (University of Texas: Texas, 1986) p. 40.

³² For further information on this issue see Premdas, R. "Ethnic conflict in the Caribbean: The Case of Guyana" in Ralph Premdas (ed.) *The Enigma of Ethnicity: An Analysis of Race in the Caribbean and the World* (University of the West Indies: St Augustine, 1993).

³³ The Indians comprised at this time 90% of the estate population and at least 38% of the total Indian population were estate residents. See Secharan, C. "The Shaping of the Indo-Caribbean People: Guyana and Trinidad to the 1940s" in *Journal of Caribbean Studies* (Vol. 14: Nos 1-2, 1999-2000) p. 69.

brokerage by the 1870s, became heavily involved in all aspects of retail trade.³⁴ The Chinese similarly made their mark in the retail, service and restaurant industries, whilst the black community gradually dominated the lower reaches of colonial bureaucracy. Though a few had successfully obtained middle-class status through the professions (teaching, law and medicine), their rural counterparts tended towards small-scale farming, supplementing their incomes through casual labour. Others gravitated toward the gold, diamond and balata industries of the interior. Some of the Coloured middle-classes were involved like the Portuguese in large retail business but most were occupied in the civil service, local government, legal or medical professions.

Though constitutional changes in 1891 had opened the door to local professional men from various ethnic backgrounds, the introduction of a Crown Colony government in 1928 effectively increased the power of those who represented European commercial interests and the Plantocracy.³⁵ The decreasing white population thus remained at the pinnacle of the social hierarchy controlling “most of the colonies economic wealth and official political positions”.³⁶ Although all of Guiana’s ‘racial’ groups became economically interdependent and while colour differences had not prevented a degree of class mobility, Guianese society remained stratified; segmented according to the primary determinants of race, colour and class. The population census of 1946³⁷ provides some indication as to the complexity of the Georgetown society that Mittelholzer represents in *Sylvia*:

³⁴ Moore, B. *Race, Power and Social Segmentation in Colonial Society: Guyana after Slavery, 1838 – 1891* (Gordon & Breach: Philadelphia, 1992) p. 142.

³⁵ Though women were given the vote for the first time in 1928, it was dependent on property qualifications: “the individual must own 80 acres of land, of which not less than 40 acres must be under cultivation.” See Op. Cit., Smith, R. pp. 51-57.

³⁶ Premdas, R. “Ethnic conflict in the Caribbean: The Case of Guyana” in Ralph Premdas (ed.) *The Enigma of Ethnicity: An Analysis of Race in the Caribbean and the World* (University of the West Indies: St Augustine, 1993) p. 161. For further insights into the white community see also Johnson, H. & Watson, K. *The White Minority in the Caribbean* (Ian Randle Publishers: Kingston, 1998).

³⁷ Op. Cit., Smith, R. p. 8.

Racial Group	Total
Not stated	49
Asiatic (mainly Syrian)	236
European	2,480
Chinese	3,567
Portuguese	8,543
Mixed	37,685
Amerindian	16,322
African Descent	143,385
East Indian	163,434
Total Population	375,701

Mittelholzer was of course familiar with the novel's primary setting. During the 1930s as his close friend Lionel Luckhoo testifies, he made regular trips from his New Amsterdam home to the library in Georgetown.³⁸ Once there he would spend hours on the advice of publishers studying the classics and the style of successful authors while becoming, in the process, extremely well read.³⁹ In March 1941 he moved to Georgetown and remained there until his departure for Trinidad in December of that year. It was during this nine-month sojourn in Georgetown that Mittelholzer seems to have developed his close friendship with Sylvia, a young woman he first met in New Amsterdam and upon whom the novel is partially based.⁴⁰ According to a letter Mittelholzer wrote on 24 March 1941 Sylvia was a good friend who had encountered many problems with her family and business affairs.⁴¹

In Georgetown Mittelholzer fraternised with people across all class divides: developing an interest in, and empathy for, the lower classes and the less artificial life-style they led. This would have been radical for someone of

³⁸ Luckhoo, L. "Lionel Luckhoo's Viewpoint: Edgar M – a giant" in *Sunday Chronicle* (Georgetown: 25 November 1979) p. 10.

³⁹ This importantly contradicts Birbalsingh's view that: "Apart from Clive Bell, Mittelholzer's reading consisted of the Bible, the ghost stories of M R James, tales of Buffalo Bill, Victorian penny dreadfuls about Nelson Lee and Sexton Blake and the British periodicals to which Mittelholzer submitted his earliest manuscripts". See Birbalsingh, F. "Edgar Mittelholzer" in Lindfors, B & Sander, R. (eds) *Twentieth-Century Caribbean and Black African Writers* (Brucoli Clark Layman: London, 1992) p. 246.

⁴⁰ This was first brought to my attention by Jacqueline Mittelholzer – see Mittelholzer, J. *The Idyll and the Warrior: Recollections of Edgar Mittelholzer* (unpublished and in the possession of Mrs J. Ives) p. 65, and corroborated by Ruth Wilkinson in interview.

⁴¹ See letter dated 24 March 1941 in Ruth Wilkinson's private collection: Letters from Mittelholzer to Ruth Wilkinson (circa March 1941 – 15th June 1962).

Mittelholzer's background. As he explains in *A Swarthy Boy*, his class – “people of coloured admixture but of fair or olive complexions” – were snobs: they “looked down upon East Indian labourers”, derogatorily calling them “coolies”; considered Portuguese to be their “social inferiors”; treated the Chinese “with condescension”; viewed “negroes” simply as “serving people”, and even maintained a certain “aloofness” towards English overseers whom they considered “white riff-raff”.⁴² It was only ‘pure’ whites that, according to Mittelholzer, were in a position to adversely discriminate against the coloured middle class and even then “it would have been very awkward for them if they had tried to do so, for they were too heavily dependent upon all the other social elements beneath them”.⁴³

Mittelholzer's attitude reflected his Romantic inclinations and the belief that inherent goodness was to be found in those who (like Beena and Kattree, the East Indian peasants in *Corentyne Thunder*) had not been exposed to the corrupting influences of civilisation. As he was to tell a friend about his move to Georgetown: “I am seeing people and events in the crude state, without any of the pretence and varnish of polite, civilised middle-class society. The middle-class – our middle-class – sicken me as I've never been sickened before.”⁴⁴ Reflecting this standpoint in the poem, “For Me – The Back-Yard”, he writes – “Assuredly for me – the naive back-yard / Where bajak ants, without hypocrisy, troop by / And no gentlemen politely smile and lie”.⁴⁵ As Guckian has observed, his life became Bohemian in character: “he went jacketless, tieless and hatless, [openly admitting] that he was not one of the respectable folk.”⁴⁶ Indeed according to one anecdote, Mittelholzer, when teased by his middle-class counterparts for not having a girlfriend, rebutted this with the claim that he would be taking his girlfriend to the cinema if anyone cared to meet her. Those

⁴² Op. Cit., Mittelholzer, E. *A Swarthy Boy* p. 155.

⁴³ Ibid: p. 156.

⁴⁴ See Ruth Wilkinson's private collection: Letters from Mittelholzer to Ruth Wilkinson (circa March 1941 – 15th June 1962). This particular letter was undated but given its contents was written sometime in April 1941.

⁴⁵ Mittelholzer, E. “For Me – The Back-Yard” in *Kyk-Over-Al* (Vol. 3, December 1946) p. 8.

⁴⁶ Guckhian, P. *Failure in Exile: A Critical Study of the Works of Edgar Mittelholzer* (University of West Indies: Barbados, 1970) p. 39.

who took him up on his word were scandalised and shocked to discover that his companion was a well-known prostitute from the area.⁴⁷

Though Mittelholzer secured a variety of odd jobs – including one as a typist for The Elmhurst Contracting Company (the builders of US Army bases on the Demerara River) – it is clear he lived off a small income: supplementing his often meagre diet of peanuts and chocolate with a cocktail of vitamins, whilst living in “a cubicle, triangular in shape, the mere screened-off section of a room for which [he] paid three dollars a week”.⁴⁸ He is said by, F E Brassington, one of the author’s Elmhurst colleagues, to have attempted suicide during 1941 by drinking corrosive fluid as a result of his grinding poverty.⁴⁹ It appears to have been this lived experience of poverty that led him to question key aspects of Romantic thought. This is reflected not only by the turn of events in the latter half of *Sylvia* but also in *Corentyne Thunder*, where Stymphy’s conception of the ‘noble savage’ is challenged and in *Shadows Move Among Them*, where the author attempts to find a balance between his Romantic and Realist impulses⁵⁰ in his representation of a self-sustaining, free from hypocrisy but ‘culturally-refined’, utopian commune in the jungle of Berbice.

Having unconventionally traversed class-boundaries Mittelholzer was able to appreciate and portray the broad complexity of life that is represented in *Sylvia*. Indeed it was his belief that: “...an artist can only achieve greatness when he is capable of standing by and portraying with sympathy and understanding the feelings of all humanity – king, Fascist, Communist, Liberal, bourgeois and beggar.”⁵¹ Mittelholzer’s broader tendency to focus on the outlook of the middle classes appears to have been a ‘backlash’ response to nationalism and the

⁴⁷ My thanks to Mark Adamson, whose family knew Mittelholzer, for this anecdote.

⁴⁸ Mittelholzer, E. “A Pleasant Career” in Ives, J. *The Idyll and the Warrior: Recollections of Edgar Mittelholzer* (unpublished and in the possession of Mrs J. Ives) p. 82.

⁴⁹ Brassington, F. E. “Mittelholzer as I Knew Him” in *Trinidad Guardian* (Port of Spain: 6th May 1965) p. 6.

⁵⁰ Mittelholzer determined to resist the loaded connotations of fixed concepts, described his dual impulses in terms of the Idyll and the Warrior, but the relation between this and Romanticism/Realism is readily discernible.

⁵¹ Mittelholzer, E. “Appreciation of Pictures” in *Trinidad Guardian* (Port of Spain: 19th March 1946) p. 4.

growing marginalisation of middle-class *cultural* values (which to a large extent mirrored that of their European colonisers) as influential intellectuals sought to recover the denigrated culture of the downtrodden masses. *A Tale of Three Places* (1957) explicitly addresses these concerns and importantly signposts the author's growing despondency and sense of alienation - note the drunken protest of the character, Cuddy Stimson - "...the people don't consist only of the workers. [...] Your own class don't count as human beings, na? We middle class not people - that's what you want to tell us, na?"⁵² This was the plea of the Creole nationalist, whose call for cultural hybridity was at odds with the growing movement toward African-centred nationalism.⁵³ Mittelholzer had articulated aligned views in Trinidad as early as 1946 when he stated: "There is a group of local intellectuals which believes that all art must have a political or sociological bias, that no work of art is of any value unless it treats of proletarian subjects and expresses the spirit of the 'masses'." He went on to implore: "Let him [i.e., the artist] paint the common man by all means, but let him also remember that there are other people that go to make up a community".⁵⁴ Mittelholzer's pleas have at last found support in Edmonson's *Caribbean Middlebrow* (2009): in arguing the case for middlebrow culture, she persuasively demonstrates how it too is authentically Caribbean.⁵⁵

In *Sylvia* Mittelholzer offers the reader an extraordinary cast of characters who while only playing passing roles, are brought vividly to life: Mr Grainger, a black magistrate; Mary Pimento and Frances Harris, light-skinned friends of Jeanne de Groot; Clothilde Pumba, a Portuguese prostitute with a husky voice; Eustace Frank, a Syrian who smells of lavender water; Boodhoo, the Russell family's East Indian gardener with a kind face; Bam, a lanky coloured-fellow; Cora Barclay, a sophisticated dark-complexioned girl with artificially straightened-hair and Gerald Tai Fook, a Chinese ex-Queen's College student who

⁵² Mittelholzer, E. *A Tale of Three Places* (Secker & Warburg: London, 1957) p. 42.

⁵³ For a discussion on the split in the class-based nationalist movement in Guyana see Hintzen, P. C. "Creoleness and Nationalism in Guyanese Anticolonial and Postcolonial Formation" in *Small Axe* 15 (Vol. 8, No.1: March 2004) pp. 106-122.

⁵⁴ Op. Cit., Mittelholzer, E. "Appreciation of Pictures" p. 4.

⁵⁵ Edmonson, B. *Caribbean Middlebrow* (Cornell University Press: Ithaca and London, 2009).

is looking for a civil service job. The naming of these characters, alongside brief physical descriptions, creates a sense of the complex, racially-diverse, vibrant society and offers an affirmation of the individual humanity of its members, in contrast to Grantley Russell's sociological description of Guianese society with its hint of the absurdity of these categorisations:

Positively astounding how life goes on at all. There are whites in an exclusive little corner of their own. Then the high-coloured coloured in various little compartments, according to good, better and best families, with money and quality of hair and shade of complexion playing no small part in the general scheme of grading. [...] the East Indians in another cluster, with a hierarchy of their own ranging from rice-miller to barrister-at-law and doctor then down to bus-driver, chauffeur, provision-shop-keeper and sugar-estate coolie. [...] the Chinese, either shopkeeper or business man. [...] the Portuguese, split up into rum-shop-pawn-shop class and professional-man class and big-business man class. /.../ [Whilst black men range from] Shovel-man-scamper. Schoolteacher. Policeman, fireman. Newspaper-reporter-lawyer's-clerk-bank-messenger-office-boy ambitious type who hopes to become an editor or lawyer or get into the Government service.⁵⁶

Mittelholzer includes amongst his cameo figures, the names of real people – A J Seymour⁵⁷ (described as the “one poet of any substance”) and Jocelyn Hubbard⁵⁸ (a prominent Marxist trade unionist)⁵⁹ – that are both, by virtue of their presence, paid homage for their contributions to the development of Guiana.

The stuffy artificiality of the middle class is skilfully contrasted with the working class who are portrayed as energetic, natural and full of character. This coincides with Mittelholzer's belief: “that educated people aren't necessarily fine specimens of humanity. It's sometimes the simple ignorant people who have all

⁵⁶ Op. Cit., Mittelholzer, E. *The Life and Death of Sylvia* p. 35.

⁵⁷ Ibid; p. 252.

⁵⁸ Ibid; pp. 92 & 174.

⁵⁹ H J M Hubbard is recorded as being the Assistant Secretary of the Clerk's Association in 1939, becoming Field Secretary in 1940/41 and later President. The records of this organisation were destroyed in the great fire of 1945. For further information ref: Chase, A. *A History of Trade Unionism: 1901-1961* (New Guyana Company Ltd: Ruimveldt, 1964), pp. 92-93.

the goodness of nature and the real poetry in their souls.”⁶⁰ At Mrs Gournal’s wake for example bottles of rum, salt-fish, green-plantain and black pudding set the background. The women meantime sprinkle cologne on the dressed corpse and the men play Suck-the-well and Biskra (instead of Bridge and poker; typically middle class games), whilst arguing over who can handle their drink:

“Who say I had too much to drink? Which man here can drink wid me? If you t’ink so bring de rum, Basil! Bring de rum! I can put ten like you under de table and walk a chalk line! [...]”

“We not talking about rum. We discussing de ess o’ clubs—“

“Ssh! Ssh! Not so much noise!” [...] “You-all don’t know a dead in de house?”⁶¹

Thus whilst the middle class are portrayed as educationally, culturally and occupationally accomplished – Beryl’s fifteen-year old sister can, for instance, play pieces by Beethoven and Mozart – we are prompted by the eponymous protagonist to share her appreciation of the working classes:

...she was more inclined to sympathize with Naomi and her crowd than with these artificial people. ...somehow, they seemed sounder at heart.⁶²

This careful recording of the complex and diverse population is mirrored by diverse representations of place which make up the Guianese actuality: from the Seawall, where lovers rendezvous; the Botanical Gardens of Kissing Bridge and manatee renown; the bustling Stabroek Market; the legendary Bishop’s High School; the sleepy town of New Amsterdam; to Village 63 on the Corentyne Coast where newly-weds honeymoon and the ill go to recuperate.

Climate and topography add to the atmosphere of *Sylvia*, whilst building upon the evocative ways in which landscape is portrayed in *Corentyne Thunder*. Take for instance this vivid description of a new day dawning:

⁶⁰ See letter dated 15 April 1941 in Ruth Wilkinson Collection (private ownership): Letters from Mittelholzer to Ruth Wilkinson (circa March 1941 – 15th June 1962).

⁶¹ Op. Cit., Mittelholzer, E. *The Life and Death of Sylvia* p. 18.

⁶² Ibid; p. 132.

The cabbage palms stood out stern, jet-black, against the clouds, but the shorter trees seemed to absorb some of the colour of the dawn; their leaves glistened; they acquired a misty-mauve aura along the ragged outline of their foliage. The house-tops, too, glistened, the galvanised iron cool-looking and wet in the drizzly air. The rain was visible as flimsy threads... /.../Everything grew pinker and more singly resplendent as the seconds passed. The clouds split and spawned deeper reds and new yellows that shot up fanwise so that even the cabbage palms exchanged their jet-black for a soft greenness.⁶³

This scene, viewed from a window in the middle-class environs of the High Street, captures – in stark contrast to the vast rural landscape that is depicted in *Corentyne Thunder* – the restrictive way that nature is accessed in an urban milieu. The experience is no less enriching however for the subtly changing colours of the sky, the clouds and trees paint a moving, expressionist image in the reader's mind as they like Sylvia partake in the experience.

Appeals to the senses play an important role in the various ways environment is depicted in *Sylvia*. The following scene encapsulates the crowded vitality; the smells and sounds that one would expect to encounter in the poor slum areas of Georgetown:

Ill-clad black people moved about between buckets and barrels of water, and tubs that rested on old soap boxes. The ground was muddy. Chickens pecked here and there, and smoke rose in thin puffs from a detached kitchen-shed out of which, also, came the smell of cooking rice and something frying – something oily and oniony. Now and then a raucous laugh would curl up through the damp air. Rain had fallen heavily not two hours ago, and you could smell the wet earth and grass. The sounds of the city seeped muffled and as though filmy with grime past grey walls and rusty corrugated iron roofs – car-tooting, the crowing of cocks, the tinkle of bicycle bells.⁶⁴

⁶³ Op. Cit., Mittelholzer, E. *The Life and Death of Sylvia* pp. 121-122.

⁶⁴ Ibid; p. 72.

Sylvia, from the perspective of a Romanticizing middle-class child, sees nothing repellent in the “dirt or shoddiness” of the scene and instead experiences “a deep peace”. She is so moved by the Guianese landscape that she believes it “ought not to be taken for granted or simply appreciated and forgotten”.⁶⁵ Here Mittelholzer is inviting West Indian readers to see their world afresh, challenging the middle-class distaste for scenes of working-class life, while proclaiming that his Guianese milieu is worthy of the most serious literary investment. These representations are offset later on in the novel by reminders of the harsh realities faced by ‘simple’ peasants/proletariats, for when Sylvia loses her financial security she like Beena in Mittelholzer’s first novel, *Corentyne Thunder*, suffers the gnawing pangs of hunger.⁶⁶

Though a self-described Romantic, Sylvia’s personality is, like everything else in the novel, framed in a distinctly West Indian way. When troubled by conflicting emotions she imagines she is taunted by Brown Jumbies who live in the fronds of palm trees and swoop down around her. This recourse to folk culture is repeated in the tales that are passed down to Sylvia. The tooting of an owl is said by Aunt Clarice to mean someone must be in the family way, whilst a “Sick-mamma” is said by Rachel (the cook) to be a supernatural being that can “ketch de groaning” of a sick person, and when heard is a sure sign of death. Grantley Russell’s interracial marriage, meantime, draws the widespread gossip that his wife must, with the help of her godmother, have worked obeah by putting a “stay-at-home” in his food. *Sylvia* thus captures with remarkable skill, from the general ambience to the more specific nuances of race, colour, class, and culture, the spirit of its 1930s and early 1940s Guianese locale.

This novel does not, however, function merely as a pleasurable read. As Gilkes⁶⁷ and Seymour⁶⁸ have concluded it functions as an indictment of

⁶⁵ Op. Cit., Mittelholzer, E. *The Life and Death of Sylvia* p. 122.

⁶⁶ In the short story, *Sorrow Dam and Mr Millbank*, the eponymous character chooses to live as a peasant keeping cows rather than carry on his life as a middle class accountant precisely because life would be hard. The implication is that it would make him feel more alive.

⁶⁷ Gilkes, M.A. *The Caribbean Syzygy: A Study of the novels of Edgar Mittelholzer and Wilson Harris* (1973-74 A8j Ph.D., Kent, 24-332).

Georgetown society: most importantly, on the theme of gender relations. The opening scene of *Sylvia* takes place in a Hotel that most of Mittelholzer's Guianese readership would have recognised. The fictional Viceroy Hotel is unmistakably based on the now defunct Regent's Hotel, a popular night-spot described in *With A Carib Eye* as follows:

"The Regent swarmed with some of the most attractive specimens [prostitutes from Tiger Bay] who did a brisk business among the seamen off ships in port as well as among the middle-class bloods of the city".⁶⁹

Whilst in the "Overture" *Sylvia's* readers are made aware of the lascivious drunken behaviour of the middle-class men and the laughter of prostitutes who accompany them, the atmosphere is so jovial that it initially diverts attention from the degraded reality of the women involved. However, as the novel unfolds, so too does the ugly reality of their lives. These prostitutes, several of whom are friends of Sylvia's mother, are impoverished, vulnerable to disease – syphilis, pneumonia and tuberculosis – and living in despair:

In her own words [i.e., Janie Pollard's], she was "breaking up"; her laughter was brave and defiant, but the ring of despair could be detected like a grim, reaching shadow behind her tissue gaiety.⁷⁰

Thus when Sylvia is forced to contemplate the life of a sex-worker, she is fully aware of its sordidness:

...she was in a dingy bedroom in a lodging house in Hincks Street or Regent Street . . . Rooms to let. Two shillings – short time. From odd bits overheard at various times from her mother's friends, she could picture the whole business . . . Perhaps the bed had been used by a couple only a few minutes before. The sheet was disarranged, the pillows dented – and there were grey, wet patches here and there. A frowsy smell permeated the room. On a wooden basis-stand was

⁶⁸ Seymour, A. "Edgar Mittelholzer: The Man and His Works" in *The 1967 Edgar Mittelholzer Memorial Lectures – First Series* (Georgetown, National History and Arts Council, 1968).

⁶⁹ Op. Cit., Mittelholzer, E. *With a Carib Eye* p. 177.

⁷⁰ Op. Cit., Mittelholzer, E. *The Life and Death of Sylvia* p. 120.

an enamelware basin with water – dirty water; though sometimes it would be clean. The room would be lit by a ten-watt bulb. And there she stood undressing...⁷¹

The vulnerability of working class women is repeatedly highlighted in *Sylvia*. Bertie Dowden, a Customs Officer from a well-known family, forces himself on Naomi Herreira, a 16-year old girl; and with her mother's approval marries her against her will.

Sylvia is under threat of similar exploitation by the crooked businessman, Frank Knight.⁷² Knight, aside from eating Grantley Russell's promissory note, hopes that Sylvia's impoverishment will eventually force her to become his mistress. When she attempts to better her situation by getting a job, her boss's brother, Mr Dikran, sexually assaults her. But Sylvia is trapped between two poles of middle-class colonial sexual mores – between the male readiness to exploit the vulnerable, and the corresponding hypocrisy of demanding virginity from their wives to be. Sylvia desires her boyfriend, Benson, and wants an equal sexual relationship with him but is repulsed by his prudish awkwardness. In focusing on the interconnected issues of female impoverishment and sexual vulnerability and addressing taboo subjects such as incest, sado-masochism, prostitution, adultery, and sexual harassment, Mittelholzer was being shocking, progressive and radical.

But he was also representing reality. Unmarried coloured middle class women, unlike their male counterparts, had few avenues of financial independence. Most like Sylvia depended on their families for financial support or would have worked as shop assistants in large department stores or at the telephone exchange. As their jobs were generally obtained through family connections and because of their light-skinned complexions, most retained their

⁷¹ Ibid; p. 153.

⁷² Since Frank Knight is represented as a successful businessman and said to have been mayor of Georgetown twice, he is most likely based upon the real-life personage, Percy C Wight. This information comes courtesy of Mark Adamson and was corroborated by Ian Wishart; both recall hearing stories about Percy C Wight, allegedly eating promissory notes. This suggests that Mittelholzer's surreptitious aim was to name and shame.

class status. Had they been judged according to the pittance they were paid and their actual living conditions, they would have been categorised as urban working class.⁷³ In times of severe financial crisis, they like their working-class counterparts became vulnerable to sexual exploitation. In a letter to a close friend about the real life Sylvia and a female widow whose life story resembles that of the character, Naomi Herreira, Mittelholzer wrote:

Oh girl, if you could only know the stories behind their lives. True Story magazine would look sick and tame beside their life-stories. Like myself, you see, they have suffered intensely and so know how to be casual about things which your and my people would consider as shocking.⁷⁴

He was thus, in the novel, giving voice to the marginalised and oppressed women of 1930s Georgetown.

Though many including Mittelholzer's second wife, Jacqueline, have argued that the author did not like being labelled a "West Indian novelist"⁷⁵, pointing out the British Guiana was geographically located in South America this stance clearly only applied to the latter stages of his life and was born as suggested in Chapter Two, out of bitterness. Mittelholzer states, as late as 1959 that the background of British Guiana was: "extremely close to that of the Caribbean islands, and it has never bothered me that I have been classed a West Indian writer."⁷⁶ It is important to recognise that prior to the late 1950s the author had felt a strong affinity with the region and was conscious of the important role he played as a West Indian literary ambassador. A close reading of *Sylvia* provides exemplification of this, while paradoxically also indicating why Mittelholzer felt compelled to 'escape' from Guiana.

RADICAL BILDUNGSROMAN

⁷³ Op. Cit., Jeffrey, H. B., & Baber, C. *Guyana: Politics, Economics and Society* p. 43.

⁷⁴ See Ruth Wilkinson private collection: Letters from Mittelholzer to Ruth Wilkinson (circa March 1941 – 15th June 1962). This particular letter was undated but given its contents was written sometime in April 1941.

⁷⁵ Op. Cit., Ives, J. *The Idyll and the Warrior* p. 35.

⁷⁶ Mittelholzer, E. "Color, Class and Letters" in *The Nation* (New York: 17 January 1959) p. 56.

Sylvia is in some key respects a Bildungsroman. As the eponymous heroine passes from childhood into adulthood, she discovers much about herself and the world around her. When her father is murdered, she has to face, whilst dealing with the pain of her loss, a sudden unforeseen change in circumstances that threatens her middle class status. This is followed by a long and difficult phase involving a conflict between her idealism and the harsh realities of the society. In a traditional bildungsroman, these conflicts would be resolved by the end of the novel with the protagonist's assimilation of, or acquiescence to, the norms of society and a re-evaluation of her role within it. *Sylvia*, on the contrary, continues on her downward spiral and refuses to fight for her life when ill with pneumonia because she is unwilling, despite destitution, to live as a prostitute or the mistress of Frank Knight. While *Sylvia* suffers the loss of her physical life as a consequence of her non-conformity, she nevertheless achieves a kind of immortality and victory over society through the nine-page letter she writes to Milton Copps – and of course through the novel's publication.⁷⁷ Whilst it is clear that what she writes (in "swiftly scrawled worlds") has no pretensions to art – we never see what she writes – the letter and the novel itself are clearly metaphors for each other. Her non-conformity in life is echoed in the novel's structure; the author's subversion of the traditional bildungsroman and its hegemonic premise that the individual should conform to society.

The introduction of Milton Copps, a thinly disguised self-portrait of the author, in part five of the novel is used as a device to indicate how the novel, *Sylvia*, came into existence:

⁷⁷A bookmark found in Mittelholzer's personal copy of *The Life and Death of Sylvia* contains the word of Clarence Day: "The world of books is the most remarkable creation of man. Nothing else that he builds ever lasts. Monuments fall, nations perish, civilizations grow old and die out; and, after an era of darkness, new races build others. But in the world of books are volumes that have seen this happen again and again, and yet live on, still young, still as fresh as the day they were written, still telling men's hearts of the hearts of men centuries dead."

He [i.e., Milton] gave her [i.e., Sylvia] the scientific-specimen look. "You've told me about your childhood, but you haven't yet given me a picture of the past few years."⁷⁸

In a friendship developed primarily through letters, Milton advises her to fight against the forces that conspire against her, only to realise that this is beyond Sylvia's capacity. Anticipating death, Sylvia feels ashamed about the futility of her life and the thwarting of her inner desires. When the goal of giving herself in love to Benson is denied, she is consoled by the act of writing a long letter to Milton:

She must write and tell Milton of this night. Describe it to him in detail. It would be a consolation doing that. The sublimation of the written word.⁷⁹

In the attempt to define, and explain herself through writing, Sylvia's life is given meaning. It also prevents her death from being pointless.

Sylvia's presumed story, as the meta-narrative emphasises, is not the whole story for whilst Milton is writing about Sylvia, he adds his own imagination to it. Their symbiotic identity and their difference is revealed in this scene:

He listened [to Sylvia] with grunts and nods, and frowned often. But he did not interrupt her once. He looked like a gaunt cloud settled there in a chair, his legs crossed, long and slim and gauche in his ill-fitting clothes, his deep-set eyes alert yet tinged with troublous dreaminess so that *she knew he was absorbing everything she said but at the same time weaving his own colours and incense around it.*⁸⁰[my italics]

Their shared identity is in the first place social:

⁷⁸ Op. Cit., Mittelholzer, E. *The Life and Death of Sylvia* p. 246.

⁷⁹ Op. Cit., Mittelholzer, E. *The Life and Death of Sylvia* p. 309.

⁸⁰ Ibid; p. 250.

The instability of both their lives created a sympathy of desperateness between them which, at the same time, precluded any yielding to sentiment. The feeling of being hunted down, of being cornered, was too strong in them. It shut out soft passages.⁸¹

But they also both share an inner romanticised affinity with the landscape that is echoed in their names. When Grantley Russell suggests that his daughter be called Cynthia Anne, her mother mistakenly hears “Sylvia Anne” and the name sticks. When conflated Sylvia Anne’s name becomes ‘sylvan’, whilst her surname alludes to the onomatopoeic ‘rustle’ of leaves. This idyllic metaphor connoting Sylvia also connects to Mittelholzer’s self-perception as supported by a passage taken from his autobiography, *A Swarthy Boy* (1963):

Two elements have always lived within me, side by side and in restless harmony... The Idyll Element dreamed of a peaceful, *sylvan* situation...with rain, thunder and lightning, sunshine and the *rustling of trees*... The Warrior Element listened always to the sound of the Conflict ... perpetually ready to resist, to repulse, to do battle to the death with any foe that might appear. Greensleeves weaving through the Sword motif from The Ring. [my italics]⁸²

Milton Copps’s name embodies this duality: “Milton” arguably being an allusion to the 17th century poet of *Paradise Lost*, John Milton⁸³ (and perhaps to the harsh masculine urban image of the mill town⁸⁴), and Copps, to the idyll, as “copse”, a thicket of small trees. Their names signify their similarities, and their differences: whilst Sylvia has a non-aggressive, peaceful personality, Milton has a steely will power and fighting spirit that (like his poetic namesake) is determined to overcome any obstacles:

⁸¹ Ibid; pp. 275-276.

⁸² Mittelholzer, E. *A Swarthy Boy* (Putnam: London, 1963) p. 126.

⁸³ The poet, John Milton is associated with inner power. He invented his own system of Protestantism and philosophical logic. Importantly Milton also believed that God was the composer of the epic poem *Paradise Lost* and that he had merely been the conduit. See Phillips, P. E. *John Milton’s Epic Invocations* (Peter Lang Publishing: New York, 2000) p. 119. As Milton’s first name John can be associated with the spirit-Jen motif, it seems plausible that Mittelholzer saw himself as being like Milton, divinely inspired.

⁸⁴ Perhaps associated in the author’s mind with the steel producing Mill Town of Lancashire where his maternal grandmother’s family were from.

"The bourgeoisie are close on my heels, Sylvia. They'd like to see me rolling defeated in the dust. But they'll never get me. /.../ I'll lick 'em yet!"⁸⁵

The duality is further embedded in the metaphorical, punning association of the sylvan **idyll** with Sylvia's unconscious creative potential, or in Freudian terms the id and the two associated components that constitute the novel's basic themes or 'drives': Sex (eros/love/sex/procreation/creativity/life) and Death (thanatos/aggression/death instinct).⁸⁶

The meta-narrative also highlights a duality in the way that Milton views Sylvia, not just as a young woman whose story needs to be told, but also as a specimen through whom it is possible to explore, with his detached "scientific specimen look", the role of environment and heredity:

"Let's revert to our specimen under examination, Sylvia Anne Russell – may the Lord, if not ourselves, have mercy on her sensitive feelings!"⁸⁷

But if Milton's language (and we need to remember that Milton for all the autobiographical elements is no less an imaginatively constructed character than Sylvia) suggests scientific rigour, the naming of the episodes that mark Sylvia's biological creation and her extinction ("Overture with Loud Trumpets" and "Finale with Cymbals and Low Drums") suggests quite another kind of framing – the metaphor of symphonic composition that is discussed later in this chapter. Milton is thus both rationalist and romantic novelist of tragic feelings.

THE TRAGIC MULATTO

Some earlier criticism has placed this novel in the literary tradition of the tragic mulatto.⁸⁸ It should however be viewed more accurately as a

⁸⁵ Op. Cit., Mittelholzer, E. *The Life and Death of Sylvia* p. 273.

⁸⁶ For discussions on the dual impulses (Eros and Death) of the human mind see Freud, S. *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (Broadview Editions: London, 2011).

⁸⁷ Op. Cit., Mittelholzer, E. *The Life and Death of Sylvia* pp. 278 & 279.

sophisticated response to, and subversion of, that tradition. Literary representations of the tragic mulatto appear to have originated in two short stories written by Lydia Maria Child: *The Quadroons* (1842) and *Slavery's Pleasant Home* (1843).⁸⁹ The beautiful well-mannered protagonist is in both stories the progeny of a white slave master and black female slave. In the former she grows up believing she is white until, following the death of her father, her true identity is revealed. After her white lover forsakes her, she is remanded into slavery, and soon dies from the hardships she faced. Over the next one hundred years literary portrayals of the tragic mulatto placed great emphasis on her pathologies: "self-hatred, depression, alcoholism, sexual perversion, and suicide attempts being the most common".⁹⁰ Sterling Brown was in the 1930s the first to argue that these literary portrayals had been influenced by the pronouncements of early nineteenth century abolitionists:

The mulatto is a victim of a divided inheritance; from his white blood comes his intellectual strivings, his unwillingness to be a slave; from his Negro blood comes his baser emotional urges, his indolence, his savagery.⁹¹

The tragic mulatto's dilemma was ultimately believed to arise out of the "warring blood" that coursed through her veins.⁹² Her fate was deemed to be so severe that she was destined to "go down, accompanied by slow music, to a tragic end."⁹³ This theme was heavily criticised by Brown in the 1930s and '40s for its clichéd, unrealistic portrayals, lack of psychological depth and its failure to recognise the more serious social factors that impacted on the lives of mulattos.

⁸⁸ See for instance Hernandez-Ramdwar, C. "Multiracial Identities in Trinidad and Guyana: Exaltation and Ambiguity" in *Latin American Issues [On-line]* (Vol. 13(4), 1997) Available at: http://webpub.allegheeny.edu/group/LAS/LatinAmIssues/Articles/LAI_vol_13_section_IV.html.

⁸⁹ See Thorp, J "The Tragic Mulatto Myth" in Pilgrim, D (ed) *Jim Crow Museum of Racist Memorabilia [On-line]* (Ferris State University: November 2000) Available at: <http://www.ferris.edu/htmls/news/jimcrow/menu.htm>.

⁹⁰ Ibid; <http://www.ferris.edu/htmls/news/jimcrow/menu.htm>.

⁹¹ Cited in Sollors, W. *Neither Black nor White Yet Both: Thematic Exploration of Interracial Literature* (Harvard University Press: London, 1999) p. 224.

⁹² Ibid; p. 224.

⁹³ Ibid; p. 224.

Whilst there is as yet no concrete evidence that Mittelholzer was aware of Brown's critical evaluations, it is known that he read – around the time of writing *Sylvia* – Lillian Smith's *Strange Fruit* (1945).⁹⁴ Set in the segregationist south of North America in the early twentieth century, the story centres round the doomed love affair that takes place between Nonnie Anderson, a young 'negro' woman of "egg-shell white" complexion and Tracey Deen, a young white man. Ed Anderson (Nonnie's brother) kills Deen on discovering that he has made her pregnant and paid his black servant (Henry McIntosh) to marry her. The white community revenges Deen's death by falsely accusing and lynching Henry McIntosh. As a white preacher had reminded Deen, blacks have to be kept in their place:

[...] you have to keep pushing them back across that nigger line. Keep pushing! That's right. Kind of like it is with a dog. You have a dog, seems right human. More sense than most men. And you a lot rather be around that dog than anybody you ever knew. But he's still a dog. You don't forget that.⁹⁵

It is possible to speculate that *Strange Fruit* inspired Mittelholzer to explore the racial stratification of Guianese society: to give thought to the similarities as well as the radical differences with the American South. The gusto with which the father of a coloured girl at the Telephone Exchange refers to Grantley Russell as a "damned English rat" and "cheap, dragged-up Cockney", whilst threatening to disinherit his daughter if she married him, is in stark contrast to the 'race' dynamics of the American South and appears to be for the benefit of Mittelholzer's European/American readership.

The authority of 'race' science nevertheless created insecurities in Mittelholzer, a victim himself of colour prejudice. As he records in his autobiography, *A Swarthy Boy*, his fair-skinned Negrophobe father seemingly

⁹⁴ See letter dated 29th January 1946 from Mittelholzer to Collymore held in the Frank Collymore Collection at the Department of Archives, Barbados. When Mittelholzer's agent describes his representations of *Sylvia* as "uninhibited", Mittelholzer notes: "I had to smile, for I remembered Joyce's *Ulysses*, and [L. Smith's] *Strange Fruit* and [J. S. Pennell's] *The History of* *Rome Hanks*."

⁹⁵ Smith, L. *Strange Fruit* (The Cresset Press: London, 1945) p. 72.

believed that his “dark skin” was an index of doubtful “intelligence” and was unable to conceal his lifelong “resentment” towards him: “I was the Dark One at whom he was always frowning and barking”.⁹⁶ These personal attacks, cushioned by the equally absurd but redemptive assurances that his German blood made him different from everyone else, led Mittelholzer to express an acute interest in, and sensitivity toward, prevailing representations of race, whether literary or otherwise. It is within this context he was almost certainly aware of the so-called pathologies of the tragic mulatto. In dramatising the different ways that Sylvia and Milton confront their mulatto identity, Mittelholzer finds a means of examining his own biographical issues with “race” and heredity. It is an imaginative strategy very much within the Romantic tradition of doubles as a means of understanding the conflict/dynamics between the inner and the social self.

Racial Constructs of the Social Self

One of the achievements of *Sylvia* is the skilful representation of Sylvia’s shifting attitudes towards race, colour and class in the colonial world: “into which, without asking, she had been thrown”.⁹⁷ The complexity of that world is built up as the novel progresses. Although Sylvia does not come from a ‘good’ family, she is eventually accepted into the coloured middle class because her father is an “English man of means” and she is light enough in complexion. As a child she attends the private school in Camp Street, run by a liberal Trinidadian lady for white and coloured children yet Sylvia is the only one of her peers not invited to Myra Bertrand’s birthday party on account of her ‘dubious’ family background. Her childhood friend – who later rejects her ‘inferior’ company – goes on to attend a Catholic convent school from which Sylvia was barred: her complexion “just a trifle on the wrong side”.

From the beginning Sylvia’s family situation and class background is the source of ambivalence. Her most disturbing perceptions, directed towards her

⁹⁶ Op. Cit., Mittelholzer, E. *A Swarthy Boy* p. 28.

⁹⁷ Op. Cit., Mittelholzer, E. *The Life and Death of Sylvia* p. 263.

black/Amerindian mother, are initially informed by the views her white father expresses:

...DaDDy says its because Mother is too Inferioour thats why she behaves like that and hes right, Im learning plenty things from Daddy...⁹⁸

These feelings are certainly not helped by the class prejudices she has internalised or by the fact that Charlotte (her mother) brutally punished her during early childhood:

Her mother was, she felt, in some way inferior to her father. Mother was no lady. She spoke and behaved differently from Miss Jenkins and Mrs. De Groot. Jeanne's mother and Miss Jenkins did not shout and wave their hands and suck their teeth, and say words like "Jesus God!" and "shit" and "move you' ass!" She did not respect her mother. For her she had only fear and dread.⁹⁹

By the time Sylvia is a teenager, her negative view of her mother is expressed in racial terms:

Her dark negro-Indian face looked really stupid. /.../ Stupid and weak. No character at all.¹⁰⁰

Instead of attributing Charlotte's behaviour to a lack of education or the cultural differences that exist between her and Grantley Russell, Sylvia unconsciously views her mother's manners and behaviour as being biologically determined and thus worries about becoming like her: "She must remain noble – not degenerate into a poor specimen like Mother." Shortly afterwards, however, she discovers "how very little more capable than her mother she was." Indeed, Sylvia's tragic flaw relates directly to this self-conception of her genetic weakness, to her capitulation to her social self and the idea that she lacks the will to fight for the type of life her "deeper" self wants to lead.

⁹⁸ Ibid; p. 54.

⁹⁹ Ibid; p. 41.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid; p. 140 & 141.

Sylvia's view of "race"¹⁰¹ – inextricably embedded in the middle class preoccupations with phenotype, hair texture and complexion – changes along with her situation. Her observation of a gathering of the coloured middle class denotes both a sense of the absurdity of such distinctions and her inability to place herself outside them:

In the Town Hall, she felt as good as any of the coloured people present. Beryl did not seem any better (besides, Beryl's hair had small waves: it was not as good as her own). Nor did the Dowdens or the Baynes who sat in the row behind; the Dowdens were dark-complexioned, and the Baynes, though sallow-complexioned, had definitely bad hair; the two Bayne girls had had to use a hot comb to straighten theirs.¹⁰²

The pernicious nature of these preoccupations is further highlighted by Sylvia's shifting view of Jack Sampson, the young black radical who she initially finds appealing:

Jack Sampson was a pure-blooded negro, slim and strong, with large teeth widely spaced so that when he laughed you could see the darkness at the back of his mouth. It was an attractive laugh. Sylvia liked him. She liked all the people she met at Naomi's. They were so varied and interesting. So vital. So easy and informal.¹⁰³

Later in the novel, at a point where she feels unable to ignore the asset of her skin, she assesses her relationship with Jack through the prism of race:

¹⁰¹ As Denis Williams notes: "To the Old World 'pure' races the spectre of miscegenation is the spectre of the loss of pedigree, the corruption of the thoroughbred, the destruction of the ancestor and the emergence of the mongrel." See Williams, D. "Image and Idea in the Arts of Guyana" in *The 1969 Edgar Mittelholzer Memorial Lectures - Second Series* (Georgetown: National History and Arts Council, 1969) pg 7. Whilst Mittelholzer was conscious of the prevailing notions of race and drew upon them in his novels, it is clear that his self-perception transcended pseudo-scientific notions of race – see Chapter Six - and that for the most part he embraced his 'mixed ancestry' as positive.

¹⁰² Op. Cit., Mittelholzer, E. *The Life and Death of Sylvia* p. 106.

¹⁰³ Ibid; p. 76.

She danced with him, but all the while she was aware of his shining dark-brown face and his close-cropped woolly head. She realized that her attitude was undergoing a change; she was becoming conscious of race and class differences/.../Jack Sampson was black and kinky haired of no family; she liked him as a human being true, but she knew in years ahead she would have to exclude him from her society. It would be impossible for her to be a success with the coloured middle-class if she kept the company of black people like Jack.¹⁰⁴

The narrator here appears to be challenging Sylvia's views on race. Whilst her mother is black and weak, there are many exceptions to the rule. Charlotte's personality is countered by the presence of dignified, strong and intelligent black characters that, like Mrs Gournal, do not suffer from an inferiority complex. If there is a hero in the novel it is the very person that Sylvia's upbringing has taught her to keep at a distance, Jack Sampson. Indeed at a private level, Jack's name is linked onomastically to Mittelholzer's 'dreadful' Jen, an apostle (like the Biblical John) of uncomfortable Truths.¹⁰⁵ Originally from the same sort of background as Mr and Mrs Gournal, Jack's meteoric rise in status - he eventually becomes a Town Councillor - matches Sylvia's decline and fall. In coming out with comments like "Rule Britannia me backside!" he is portrayed as a disciple of the subversive trade unionist, Jocelyn Hubbard. He is anti-British, anti-monarchy, anti-capitalist, and communist. When he hears that Sylvia is only being paid \$15 a month, he advises her to join the Clerk's Union but discovers to his disgust that she is satisfied with the poor level of pay:

You see dat! Same old story! Passivity! Indifference! Look, Sylvie, you know why we in dis colony can't develop all de jungle-country we got? You know why over eighty thousand square miles of dis land lying fallow and untouched? It's because we mesmerized. It's because we walking about in a dream. And dat's why we'll always be kicked around and exploited by dose imperious sons of bitches in de Colonial Office in London.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁴ Ibid; pp. 115-116.

¹⁰⁵ Reference the discussion in Chapter Three.

¹⁰⁶ Op. Cit., Mittelholzer, E. *The Life and Death of Sylvia* p. 174.

Sylvia's lack of active interest in the trade unions and politics mirrors the political sidelining of the coloured middle class, whilst Gregory Brandt's views stand for the less conservative, non-conformist few who began to lend their support to grass roots activists:

[Jack Sampson] mightn't be well educated, but he's got spirit [this supports the speculation that he is one of Mittelholzer's Jens] and determination, and what's more, I feel he honestly has the welfare of the working man at heart. At first, I was suspicious of all his ranting about Revolution and the capitalists, but of late I'm beginning to feel convinced of his sincerity.¹⁰⁷

Jack Sampson, like Mr Gournal ("Municipal politics" was his favourite subject), importantly reflects with social realism the emerging grass root politics of the period and burgeoning trade union activities whose communist rhetoric pervades the language of the apolitical Milton Copps, when he proclaims that he detests "bourgeois society".¹⁰⁸ Jack Sampson's fighting spirit and unwillingness to accept the status quo importantly stands in stark contrast to the passivity of both Charlotte and Sylvia.

But whilst Sylvia's mixed blood, angst-ridden psyche and premature death has drawn some critics, like Hernandez-Ramdwar, to read her in the

¹⁰⁷ Op. Cit., Mittelholzer, E. *The Life and Death of Sylvia* (John Day: New York, 1954) p. 256. CLR James made the observation in 1961 that: "[The Caribbean middle classes] have no trace of political tradition. Until twenty years ago they had no experience of political parties or government. Their last foray in that sphere was a hundred and thirty years ago when they threatened the planters with rebellion of themselves and the slaves if they were not permitted to exercise the rights of citizens. Since then they have been quiet as mice." James, C. L. R. "The West Indian Middle Classes" in *Spheres of Existence* (Allison and Busby: London, 1980) pp. 132-133.

¹⁰⁸ Op. Cit., Mittelholzer, E. *The Life and Death of Sylvia* p. 248. Mittelholzer notably called himself a communist/Marxist during the early 1940s. Later on in his life, he developed an anti-communist stance in response to the atrocities that had been and were taking place in Russia as well as to the restrictions they placed on art and creative writing: "all the talk of equality and brotherhood of man could not win me over to Communism so long as I know that I would have to live under a state of things where a Party is going to try to dictate to me what I should think and say, and put me under arrest when I deviate." Mittelholzer, E. *At Forty-Three – A Personal View of the World* (Unpublished typed manuscript in the possession of Lucille Mittelholzer – version two of two) p. 11. In *The Mad MacMullocks* one of the characters notes: "there is quite a good bit in basic Communism that is excellent [...] But, like Christianity, look what men have done with Communism!" - See Austin Woodsley, H. *The Mad MacMullocks* (Peter Owen Ltd: London, 1959) p. 52 - This is clearly the voice of an older, more disillusioned Mittelholzer.

literary tradition of the tragic mulatto, her predicament cannot be related, in any simplistic way to the 'warring black (inferior) - white (superior) blood' motif. The conversations between Milton and Gregory offer a much broader analysis: one that takes into account issues not just of heredity, but also environment, past experience and upbringing as well as the defects of will that are particular to Sylvia's psychological make-up. Even here Sylvia's response to their discussion reminds us that she is not just a specimen to be talked about in such a dispassionate a way, but a very particular individual engaged in a concrete struggle for survival:

...Milton and Gregory seemed futile, absurd pendants. . . . The human will, heredity, sum of past experiences. . . . Words. High-flown words cleverly strung together. . . . What concerned her at the moment was what she was going to tell Mr. Ralph in a few days from now [in order to get some financial assistance].¹⁰⁹

As Kenneth Ramchand recognised, Sylvia's destiny is rooted in the "spirit of her time" and "not in the fact of her mixed blood".¹¹⁰ She, indeed, expresses weariness with the terms of the debate:

It will be so peaceful knowing that all my miseries will be disappearing behind me. All the plaguing problems we've talked about. The purpose in my being alive and if it's heredity or environment that has made me what I am – all that will be going behind me into blankness.¹¹¹

Mittelholzer ultimately subverts the literary tradition of the tragic mulatto through the contrast he creates between Sylvia and Milton; in particular the latter's fighting spirit, willpower and creative skill as the fictive composer of *Sylvia*.

The Theme of Sex: A Freudian Metaphor

¹⁰⁹ Ibid; p. 270.

¹¹⁰ Ramchand, K. *The West Indian Novel and Its Background* (Ian Randle Publishers: Kingston, 2004) p. 27.

¹¹¹ Op. Cit., Mittelholzer, E. *The Life and Death of Sylvia* p. 314.

Even with respect to the connection the novel makes between Sylvia's angst and her fears that her sexuality is perverted – this would appear to place it at the heart of the tragic mulatto tradition – Mittelholzer's position is altogether more complex. As a Romantic her incestuous impulses are in keeping with the literary archetype, thereby subverting the racist contention that sexual perversions are a mulatto-specific plight.¹¹² The universal nature of her Oedipal impulses is given further credence by the sensible Freudian reassurance that she is offered:

...it's quite the accepted thing for children to be strongly attached to the parent of the opposite sex during the early years. With you I daresay it's gone on longer than it should, but the circumstances of your upbringing have been unusual.¹¹³

Here, the author uses one field of Western thinking (psychology) to invalidate the other (pseudo-scientific racism). Since Freud's Oedipal complex was rooted in the theory that the *male*-child sexually desired his mother and resentfully viewed his father as a competitor; Mittelholzer's gender transformation of Freud's theory suggests other purposes.¹¹⁴ Sylvia is, here, a metonym for Guiana's coloured middle class that had, since its origins as the progeny of black and white under slavery, tended to assimilate to European culture and continued in the early years of the twentieth century to believe in the superiority of the whites (as long as they had the right class credentials) and the inferiority of the blacks. In this context, the portrayal of Sylvia as having an Oedipal complex becomes a social metaphor rather than an index of sexual pathology.

¹¹² Lord Byron, often seen as the Romantic archetype, had an incestuous love affair with his half-sister and similarly wrote about incest in his verse-drama, *Manfred* (1917). See Heath, D. & Boreham, J. *Introducing Romanticism* (Icon Books Ltd: Cambridge, 2005) p. 121 and Butler, M. *Romantics, Rebels & Reactionaries* (Oxford University Press: Oxford, 1981) p. 2.

¹¹³ Op. Cit., Mittelholzer, E. *The Life and Death of Sylvia* p. 103.

¹¹⁴ For an explanation of Freud's Oedipal Complex refer to Billig, M. "Oedipal Desires and Oedipal Parents" in *Freudian Repression* (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 1999) pp.104-140.

While Sylvia's father has enabled her to learn "many ways of speaking and of looking at the world"¹¹⁵, it is not a good thing as Naomi highlights, that she unthinkingly repeats everything he says:

Everything you say you have to quote him. That isn't wise.¹¹⁶

This viewpoint is further reinforced when Jack Sampson tells Sylvia that the coloured middle class are pawns of their British colonisers:

Look at you and your upper middle-class! All you-all strive to do is to be cultured and polished – cultured and polished like de English. I don't say culture and refinement isn't a good thing. But de English people clever. They encourage you-all coloured people to be cultured and refined – to be cultured and refined like *dem*! Because de more English culture you imbibe de more loyal you will be to de British throne! Yes! Dat's where they got you by de balls!¹¹⁷

Since sex (or libido) can in Freudian terms be extended to include creative potential, Sylvia's relationships and those close to her take on metaphorical significance.¹¹⁸ In order for her to reach full creative potential she must overcome her Oedipal attachment to her 'white father' (the white coloniser). Though Grantley Russell has some positive qualities, he is still, as he admits, an expatriate whose role stands in the way of Guianese independence and nationhood.

Later in bed, in Tiger Bay, he told her [i.e., Teresa] that he had come to British Guiana to build a bridge for the government. Your local engineers could have built it on their own, but they're coloured, and your damned silly government

¹¹⁵ Op. Cit., Mittelholzer, E. *The Life and Death of Sylvia* p. 210.

¹¹⁶ Ibid; p. 163.

¹¹⁷ Ibid; p. 175.

¹¹⁸ Freud explains that: "Sublimation is a process that concerns object-libido and consists in the instinct directing itself towards an aim other than, and remote from, that of sexual satisfaction." See Sandler, J., Fonagy, P., Person, E., Freud's "On Narcissism: An Introduction" (Karnack Books Ltd: London, 2012) p. 24. In another essay he notes that sexual desire can be "diverted (sublimated) in the direction of art". See Gemes, K. "Freud and Nietzsche on Sublimation" in *The Journal of Nietzsche Studies* (Penn State University, No. 38, Autumn 2009) p. 40.

felt that it was the proper thing to send out to England and get an Englishman to be in charge.¹¹⁹

This reality is metaphorically reflected in the author's characterisation of Grantley as a sexual predator; one whose adulterous philandering (with Delly Simpson, Jessie and Mrs Daphne Teller) is destroying sexual relationships and the creative potential of local people. It is he, not Sylvia's mother, who must be literally killed off and left to repent at leisure in Le Repentir, the local cemetery.

But if Sylvia has been in thrall to her English father, she can derive no positive model from her Guianese mother. As Grantley notes of his attempts to "cultivate" Charlotte and her contemptuous treatment of his cultural gifts of books and records:

I can't *make* you into a somebody if you won't try to be somebody. I've brought you books, I've brought you a Victrola and records. You give the books to David to destroy. You let Sylvia smash up half a dozen records a week or two ago.¹²⁰

Whilst she does have redeeming features (e.g., she is generous with her friends and a skilled dressmaker) Charlotte is essentially a caricature: literally and symbolically underdeveloped. She is generally represented as languishing at home, gossiping with friends, moaning about the ingratitude of others and feeling sorry for herself. Her feelings, when she expresses them, are presented as inauthentic and melodramatically self-serving:

As soon as Uncle had announced the death Charlotte had exclaimed as though not even aware that God-mother had been ill. Then she has shrieked. Clapped her hands together. Tore at her hair. Collapsed on the floor with a whimper then, without warning, rose to another penetrating shriek.¹²¹

¹¹⁹ Op. Cit., Mittelholzer, E. *The Life and Death of Sylvia* p. 3.

¹²⁰ Ibid; p. 21.

¹²¹ Ibid; p. 17.

When during a bout of malaria, Charlotte breaks into a song of double entendres, Mittelholzer highlights how crude and limited her creativity is:

“Oh, madam, I hear that cocks do crow-w-w-w! Do *crow-w-w-w*!

“Oh, madam, I hear that cocks do crow-w-w-w!

“Around your cunt . . . ree-ee-ee garden!”¹²²

This is a criticism of the fact that Charlotte (in contrast to Naomi) never seizes the opportunity presented by her educationally superior husband to expand her knowledge.

Without any positive relationship to Charlotte, and following Grantley’s death, Sylvia is portrayed as thinking she has incestuous feelings for her light-skinned brother, a further suggestion that she is still inordinately entranced by all things white. This time her affliction is attributed to her overactive romantic imagination, as her friend Naomi tells her:

“Sylvie, it’s only your imagination, child. Look, take it from me, you’re as normal as anybody can be normal.” // “[Indeed] you’re the last person anybody could accuse of being a pervert.”¹²³

The opportunity for Sylvia’s sexual development and creative potential to be normalised and realized, is represented by her love-interest Benson. When she reflects on her first close encounter with Benson (she cannot dispel the memory of his voice, handsome face or muscular shoulders) it stimulates her imagination in unsettling ways that connect her to the imagery of the Guianese landscapes of her “deeper” self:

It made her stare from her bedroom window into the fronds of the cabbage palms that showed above the roof of the Hammond’s house across the street, and *weave into being* the Brown Jumbie-men. Small, cynical fellows who dwelled

¹²² Ibid; p. 180 NB: This passage was censored by Secker and Warburg, and does not appear in any UK editions of *Sylvia*.

¹²³ Ibid; p. 164.

amid the dense shadows of the fronds of the cabbage palms. At first, she heard them chortling, but without warning they swooped down to argue with her, lurking invisibly about her. [my italics]¹²⁴

It is not long, however, before she discovers that Benson cannot relate to the romantic/imaginative side of her personality. On describing an old plantation house as “sad and tragic”, he looks at her as though she might have said it was “alligator”:

She might have been in a foreign land and he was a stranger who had offered to show her around. He did not understand her language very well so she must repeat whatever she said and try to explain her meaning.¹²⁵

On another occasion she realises “he [has] no poetry in him” and is filled with an immense sense of loneliness. Since Benson, a metonym perhaps for Guiana, was unable to understand Sylvia’s creative impulses their relationship was in many ways, destined to fail. The ultimate tragedy meanwhile for Sylvia is that far from being a sexual pervert, she remains a virgin (creatively unfulfilled) and though a romantic, she is not within the context of Guiana, “even capable of loving”.

The Sex-Sea Leitmotif

The centrality of the connection between sexuality and creativity is reinforced through the romantic leitmotif of the sea. In scenes where sexual activity is taking place, reference is nearly always made to the sea (or words associated with the sea). In making the link between sex and the sea, Mittelholzer offers a particularly Guianese metaphor: the Seawall being where couples in Georgetown go for “a little bit of sex”. In terms of its visual connotation, waves rhythmically simulate the sexual act whilst playing on the auditory senses (i.e., crashing surf) as orgasmic image. Sylvia’s sexual tension is symbolised in just this way:

¹²⁴ Ibid; p. 104.

¹²⁵ Ibid; p. 228.

...she trembled in her frustration.

She listened to the roar of the waves, and tried to let the sound – it had a dramatic grandeur – distract her senses from the physical.¹²⁶

When Benson asks Sylvia to join him by the *canal* in Plantation Ruimveldt instead of spending time by the sea, he signals his dull, shallow sexuality. Her quick exit from the canal – she is timid swimmer – is similarly symbolic of her inability to seduce Benson, and it is no coincidence that her final failed attempt to give herself to Benson takes place at the aptly named Brickdam. In contrast, when reference is made to the ‘nigger-yard’ (in Sussex Street) where none of the residents suffer from the sexual inhibitions¹²⁷ generally attributed to the coloured middle class, the sea-sex leitmotif is present, albeit implicitly, in jazz songs. Jazz songs such as *Red Sails in the Sunset* or *Moon over Miami*, played over the wireless provide background music akin to the soundtrack in films; act as an accompaniment to the unfolding drama and hint at off screen passions. The lyrics for these jazz songs, though not quoted in the novel, intertextually highlight the link between love, sex and the sea that already exists as a local Guianese (as well as international) cultural phenomenon:

Red sails in the sunset, way out on the sea / Oh, carry my loved one home safely to me” and “Moon over Miami / Shine on my love and me / So we can stroll beside the roll / Of the rolling sea.¹²⁸

In selecting well-known songs from the 1930s, the author successfully creates a ‘short-cut’ device, which emphasises how normal and ever-present sex is without expressly needing to say so.¹²⁹

¹²⁶ Ibid; p. 240.

¹²⁷ In *With A Carib Eye* (Secker and Warburg, 1958), Mittelholzer notes: “South of the Stabroek Market is Lombard Street [a road which intersects with Sussex Street] ... /.../ It was the one district of Victorian Georgetown where nobody, not even the best families, could doubt the existence of Sex.” p. 179.

¹²⁸ The lyrics of these popular jazz songs can be ‘Googled’ or listened to on ‘You Tube’.

¹²⁹ All of the songs in *Sylvia* are readily accessible on the internet and for those interested in immersing themselves into the 1930s atmosphere of the novel, are worth looking up and listening to.

Music & Death: Sylvia's Georgetown Symphony

The notion that the mulatto's tragic demise would be heralded by the sound of slow music is creatively developed in *Sylvia* and results in the production of a Georgetown symphony: one that fully articulates Sylvia's inner creative self, while providing an organic integration for the novel as a whole:

She listened to Georgetown. All the sounds that had impregnated her deep, deep self.¹³⁰

The auditory imagination of *Sylvia's* readers is stimulated by references to contemporary songs that would have been popular in Guiana during the 1930s and 40s: *Lullaby of the Leaves*, *Stormy Weather*, *Red Sails in the Sunset*, *Moon over Miami*, *The Music goes Round and Round*, *Love is the Sweetest Thing*, *Thanks a Million*, *A Pretty Girl is like a Melody*, *Thanks for the Memories*, *Oh Daddy*, *When I Grow too Old to Dream* as well as old music hall pieces (e.g., "Daisy! Daisy! Give me your answer true!"), hymns (e.g., "Oh Happy Band of Pilgrims"), and calypsos (e.g., "Advantage will never done, Mussolini, you know you wrong") which are "heard" being played on the gramophones or wirelesses of local residents. With their generally upbeat tempo, these musical pieces tend to divert our attention from the 'death' theme and add to the vivid sights, sounds, and smells of the general milieu.

In addition to the songs, virtually every object that appears in the narrative is viewed symbolically as an acoustic instrument with its own unique tone and sound-details. For instance:

The tin sauce-pan went clink-clink as Janie lifted the lid to see how the rice was getting on.¹³¹

¹³⁰ Op. Cit., Mittelholzer, E. *The Life and Death of Sylvia* p. 294.

¹³¹ Ibid; p. 262.

When brought together, these instruments become an orchestra¹³², collectively making chords and rhythmic accompaniments to the unfolding drama:

Poultry sounds came up from the back-yard. Duck-quacking and the squawk of a hen, the throaty gurgle of a rooster. Far off a dog was barking, the jerky gruffness of the sound blending with the low rumble of symphonic music being played next door on the Hammonds' gramophone.¹³³

These musical 'chords' are repeated with sufficient variation and at long enough intervals to prevent the reader from consciously registering similarities in text (this would presumably have the effect of tiring the reader), whilst becoming aware of a pattern of inherent musicality in Georgetown:

She heard dogs barking, pigeons moaning, roosters sending yearning coils of sound through the half-gloom of a back-yard. From a large white house came piano music. Frail and tinselly Chopin.¹³⁴

The author importantly presents three distinct types of instrument: those with a 'voice' (the people and animals); those which only make sounds when other forces come into play (e.g., the rustling of leaves brought on by wind); and those like stars which, in maintaining their distance from earth, appear forever silent.

These silent musical 'instruments' are as important to the narrative as the acoustic 'instruments':

She watched the stars again. They looked so passive. Cool-blue and aloof. Like the earth and its waterish smells, and the leaves unmoving in the night. Like cabbage palms and breadfruit trees, the star-apple trees. Like long purple clouds at sunset. Silently intelligent. Always *silently*.¹³⁵

¹³² Ibid; p. 66 The intertextual reference to Maurice Chevalier – i.e., "[Sylvia] always enjoyed Maurice Chevalier" – hints at a possible influence on Mittelholzer's 'musical representations'. In Chevalier's film, *Love Me Tonight* (1932) everyday items are represented as instruments that collectively sound and function as part of the film's soundtrack.

¹³³ Ibid; p. 40.

¹³⁴ Ibid; p. 65.

¹³⁵ Ibid; p. 289.

This particular passage appropriately marks the end of section 8 in Part 5 as circumstances close in on Sylvia. The narrator's repeated use of the word 'silently', and alliterative use of 's'-words compels readers (as they 'hear' the 'shushing' sound) to partake in a moment of silence.

Music as Metaphor

Music is more than just an atmospheric accompaniment to the narrative. As highlighted in the episode of the crude song that Charlotte sings, it is used to add depth to the information we have already been given about the novel's characters: their level of education, their differences in taste, personality as well as class. It helps to reveal how they are feeling, without the need of further elaboration. This point is worth illustrating. When Grantley tells Sylvia about the 'widow-fleecing' habits of his untrustworthy friend (Mr Knight), she keeps her private thoughts to herself. We are able however as readers to glean how she is feeling as a result of the accompanying soundtrack:

Now it was *Stormy weather*. And Mrs France was playing *Oh, happy band of pilgrims* – and a car in High Street streaked it all out with a long blare on its horn. Two kiskadees were fighting in the star-apple tree – or it might be a little sex they were after. She heard Henry Madhoo and his friend shouting.¹³⁶

The cacophonous dissonance produced by the simultaneous rendition of a sad jazz song, a happy religious song, the high-pitched blare of a car horn, squawking birds and shouting people, conveys a sense of her perturbation.

The reference in the quotation to the fighting birds and sex (whose purpose in nature is creation) is a tardy reminder that discord is, whilst sometimes an unpleasant aspect of life, in keeping with the laws of nature, and absolutely vital to our creativity. This 'out of discord comes creativity' theme reappears elsewhere in Mittelholzer's work. As Hendricke states in *Children of*

¹³⁶ Ibid; p. 56.

Kaywana: “Every living thing has been brought into being through friction and struggle; one has only to look around to observe this...”¹³⁷ The same point is made in the author’s early poem, ‘In the Beginning – Now – and Then’:

...and the Spirit urged
subordination of Matter
and sounded the first drone of strife:
sad, but needed, friction,
for without strife, without friction,
ice would have remained ice,
rock rock, silence silence.¹³⁸

It is his capacity to deal with the discordant that is the most crucial difference between Sylvia and Milton. He tells her:

The louder and more thunderous [the music], the weirder and more dissonant,
the better I like it.¹³⁹

And while Sylvia is attracted to the sound of soothing music, Milton is not: “...Music for me, Sylvia, must be strong and passionate – flaming.”¹⁴⁰ This remark can be read as authorial defiance, locating creativity in resistance to a reactionary society. It thus becomes clear that the notion of duality in the novel is not specific to the “tragic mulatto” but part of the human condition. Sylvia never reaches Milton’s state of self-awareness, but she does see the absurdity of rigidly divided dualities:

In such moments she saw herself as two beings – one ugly and deformed, the other lovely and striving to be good and clean. Then invariably she would remember Fredric March in *Doctor Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, and laughter would

¹³⁷ Mittelholzer, E. *Children of Kaywana* (Secker and Warburg: London, 1960 [1952]) p. 202.

¹³⁸ Mittelholzer, E. “In the Beginning – Now – And Then” in *BIM* (Vol. 4, No. 13; December 1950) p. 75.

¹³⁹ Op. Cit., Mittelholzer, E. *The Life and Death of Sylvia* p. 246.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid; p. 246.

spread like a gold cloud over her, and she would see herself as an absurd romantic trying to make herself into an ogress.

In the novel as a whole, duality is dialectical – a unity of opposites: e.g., black and white, social realism and romanticism, rural and urban, heredity and environment, Eros and Thanatos, individual and society, good and bad, popular music and classical. This idea is further echoed in *A Swarthy Boy* when Mittelholzer notes: “Two elements have always lived within me, side by side and in *restless harmony* [my italics]”.¹⁴¹ It is life and the new that is created out of these tensions. Thus whilst Sylvia does die to the sound of music (“A lovely piece, that. Can you hear it? The Militia Band is playing it. . . . On the Sea Wall. . . . I can hear a kiskadee. . . .”¹⁴²), music becomes a signifier of the complexity of life – its harmonies and discords. Above all, in the particularity and vividness of the novel’s soundtrack, Mittelholzer returns an abstract cliché to being live metaphor. And it is in this metaphorical thread that Mittelholzer again points to Milton as the “assumed” composer of Sylvia (with its *Overture with Loud Trumpets* and *Finale with Cymbals and Low Drum*), when Milton says, “The drums and cymbals are my favourite instruments. And I rave about trumpets.”¹⁴³

Music as a Structuring Device

This thread of musical imagery is not the only use that Mittelholzer makes of music in *Sylvia*. The naming of the novel’s beginning (where the drunk Bertie Dowden muses on death while his peers cavort with the local prostitutes) as “overture” and its ending (when Sylvia dies) as “finale” points to the musical structure of the novel. The following account of how musical structure works in ‘Part One’ reveals the method applied to the novel as a whole. In keeping with the format of a symphony, the first part of *Sylvia* is analogous to a sonata. This genre of music is essentially made up of components – exposition, development,

¹⁴¹ Op. Cit., Mittelholzer, E. *A Swarthy Boy* p. 126.

¹⁴² Op. Cit., Mittelholzer, E. *The Life and Death of Sylvia* p. 316.

¹⁴³ Ibid; p. 246.

recapitulation and optional coda – that perform different functions in what is often termed the “musical argument”.¹⁴⁴

In section 1.1 three key events take place: Mrs Gournal talks to her god-daughter, Charlotte, about Grantley’s extra-marital indiscretions; Mrs Gournal dies from jaundice and Sylvia’s brother, David, is born. The two themes that were central to the overture (death and sex) are thus reintroduced and set the tone of the novel. This expositional section, taking into account David’s birth, is also intended to introduce a sub-theme on the cycle of life.

In the development section of a sonata the harmonic possibilities of the exposition are explored, elaborated and contrasted. This stage of the argument is represented in sections 1.2 through to 1.5 as the occasions in life when problems are positively or negatively resolved and when the unexpected happens. Section 1.2 for example opens with Charlotte’s violent treatment of Sylvia and ends with her being persuaded to treat her kindly. Section 1.3, in contrast, opens with Naomi tearfully telling Charlotte she doesn’t love Bertie Dowden and ends unhappily with her marriage to him. In Section 1.4 another negative situation occurs when Sylvia discovers her request for a birthday party is turned down. The unexpected moments in life are meanwhile represented when, in Section 1.5, Sylvia receives a surprise present; gets taken on a trip to the Botanical Garden; and invited to a picnic on the East Coast. The various emotions created by these events are extended metaphors for the consonance (harmony) and dissonance (discord) present in music.

Sections 1.6 to 1.8 represent the recapitulation component of the sonata; it offers a completion of the ‘musical’ argument and issues (or keys) that remain to be raised (or sounded), are brought to the surface. There is also, in keeping with the recapitulation format, a return to the sex-death theme, although this time the sex theme is seemingly more insistent (louder) with Teresa’s

¹⁴⁴ See Pogue, D. & Speck, S. “How to Spot a Sonata” in *Classical Music for Dummies* (Wiley Publishing Inc: Hoboken, 1997) pp. 93-110 for an accessible description of the Sonata and its function. Also useful is Holst, I. “Sonata Form” in *Oxford ABC of Music* (Oxford University Press: Oxford, 2003) pp. 138-141.

contraction of syphilis; Grantley and Sylvia's conversation about sex; Grantley's growing promiscuity, and in the final sentence (or cadence) of section 1.6: "Two people, a man and a lady, on their way to Dixie. For a little sex."¹⁴⁵ Sections 1.7 and 1.8 importantly prepare the ground for two events to occur later on in the novel: firstly, Grantley alludes to Mr Knight's habit of fleecing widows, whilst secondly Sylvia becomes aware of her father's reputation as a "bloody rake". The death theme re-surfaces, taking centre stage, with the respective death of Bertie Dowden (by suicide) and the prophetic death, in Sylvia's dream, of her father. The final sentence of Section 1.8 appropriately picks up on the purpose of the recapitulation section and the life-cycle theme of the novel by concluding (in reference to a popular Jazz song): "The wireless was playing *The music goes round* . . ."¹⁴⁶

Section 1.9 acts as the sonata's coda or, in other words, a conclusion that goes beyond the recapitulation segment played out in Section 1.8. During a visit to New Amsterdam, Sylvia comes across three photographs in the pocket of her father's suit: all are of women; one of which is naked. The shock of this discovery - a growing awareness of her own sexuality and Oedipal feelings for her father - concludes with Sylvia crying herself to sleep. This coda - and there is a similar passage in all the closing sections of each Part (or movement) in the novel - is used to highlight a new stage in Sylvia's troubled sexual development. In the final section of Part 2, Sylvia - distressed over the recent death of her beloved father - is shocked to find her best friend's partner in bed with another woman. Part 3 ends when her brother, for whom she has developed incestuous feelings, reveals his plan to travel overseas. Again, though increasingly inured to the adversities of life, Sylvia expresses dismay when at the end of Part 4 she hears that her boyfriend, Benson has secured passage on a Canadian cargo ship. At the end of Part 5, she fails to make love to Benson as intended. Each of these codas feeds into the novel's 'Finale with Cymbals and Low Drum', which offers 'death' as the resolution to her life's futile struggles.

¹⁴⁵ Op. Cit., Mittelholzer, E. *The Life and Death of Sylvia* p. 53.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid; p. 77.

By virtue of being the opening word of the overture and the closing theme of the finale, death represents the tonic (or dominant) key of the composition and acts, whilst threading its way melodically through *Sylvia* in its various forms, as a constant reminder of the fate awaiting us all:

Age sidled in slyly upon you all the time. It pulled down your breasts, made gutters in your cheeks, sucked the brown and the black from your hair, dimmed the gleam in your eyes. Death was always on the way.¹⁴⁷

Sylvia's death is significantly only one of many. Aside from her father's murder, several other characters die from developing jaundice, tuberculosis, pneumonia; from having a stroke, drowning and in the case of Bertie Dowden, committing suicide. In conjunction with sex (the secondary key) it draws attention to death and sex as twin actualities in an impoverished colonial society where frequent, early and unnecessary death still stalks the land but where at least among the working-class sex is a force of life.¹⁴⁸

Beyond this realism, the sex-death melody echoes the Freudian¹⁴⁹ battle that takes place between the two human drives: Eros (the sex drive/creativity) and Thanatos (death instinct), by starting and concluding in the same way:

If we accept as an observation without exception that every living being dies for *internal* reasons, returning to the inorganic, then we can only say that *the goal of all life is death*, and, looking backwards, that *the nonliving existed before the living*.¹⁵⁰

The "real-life" Sylvia (on whom the fictional character was partially based) in fact married, so the novel's "negative" rather than "positive" conclusion might

¹⁴⁷ Ibid; p. 260.

¹⁴⁸ Despite the high rates of death, rates of birth were also high and the population in fact increased from 301,000 in 1931 to 318,000 in 1938. See Brereton, B. (ed.) *General History of the Caribbean: Volume V – The Caribbean in the Twentieth Century* (Unesco Publishing: London, 2004) p. 48.

¹⁴⁹ Grantley Russell notably makes direct reference to Freud on pg 103 of the 1954 John Day edition of *Sylvia*.

¹⁵⁰ Freud, S. *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (Broadview Editions: London, 2011) p. 77.

also be read as indicative of Mittelholzer's well-publicised view that to remain in colonial Guiana was to become creatively dead. As Michael Gilkes observed:

The stifling of the creative urge was, to Mittelholzer, the most pernicious of the evils of the colonial condition.¹⁵¹

Mittelholzer may well have toyed with the idea that when a society's creativity becomes stifled, the death-wish instinct is activated and if given the opportunity to dominate results in the creative stagnation of the individual / society. But this is not the final position that *Sylvia* reaches, for whilst the novel is an indictment of colonial society, it maintains a positive centre by highlighting (e.g., through the sex-sea leitmotiv and the "Georgetown Symphony") the creative potential of Guiana. Indeed without Guiana, *Sylvia* would never have been created.

Philosophy of Death

Various viewpoints are expressed on the subject of death in the novel and act as a challenge to the notions that, the mulatto is destined to die tragically and that death is a bad thing. It is probable that Mittelholzer's favourite philosopher Nietzsche would have considered Sylvia's death, "a good death". In the chapter, "Of Voluntary Death", in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, the concepts of both a "consummating" and "voluntary death" are celebrated.

I commend to you my sort of death, voluntary death that comes to me because I wish it. And when shall I wish it? - He who has a goal and an heir wants death at the time most favourable to his goal and heir. And out of reverence for his goal and his heir he will hang up no more withered wreaths in the sanctuary of life.¹⁵²

Sylvia's death is certainly voluntary: had she wanted to survive she could have relinquished her ideals and become the materially comfortable mistress of Frank

¹⁵¹ Gilkes, M. *Racial Identity and Individual Consciousness in the Caribbean Novel* (The Edgar Mittelholzer Memorial Lectures – Fifth Series: Georgetown, 1974) p. 24.

¹⁵² Nietzsche, F. *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (Penguin Books: London, 2003) p. 97.

Knight. Timing as suggested by the statement: “And when should I wish it?” becomes critical. In Sylvia’s case, death had to correspond with the moment her financial independence and therefore autonomy drew to an end. It can also be seen as a consummating death in that the story of her life and death bring together her life’s lessons.

By choosing death as a key theme, Mittelholzer also demonstrates that Sylvia’s fate is no different from anyone else’s. We are all destined to die in accordance with the laws of nature. This point is conveyed following the death of Mr Gournal:

It made no difference to the traffic or the muted voices. The silence in this room did not respond to the fact that another human had ceased to breathe [...]. Somehow, felt Sylvia, it should have. Wasn’t death a big thing? A terrible thing?¹⁵³

This rhetorical observation is in keeping with the Romantic tradition, since it is an example of the author seeking and finding a ‘Larger Truth’ in nature. In other words, if nature responded dispassionately to death, then death clearly was not anything to be mourned, even if, for humans, death was the source of fear and pain. Elements of this Romantic ‘weltanschauung’ or worldview are expressed in Bertie Dowden’s drunken spiel:

“[...] When I ponder [on the thousands of downcast people] I wish I could speak to them – every one of them. [...] I’d say to them: ‘Why are you unhappy? [...] Don’t you know of the cool blue night waiting at the end of your travail?’ Hip!”¹⁵⁴

From a twenty-first century standpoint Mittelholzer’s preoccupation with death may seem uncomfortably morbid and macabre. However, it is worth noting that as far as nineteenth century Romantics were concerned, death was to be embraced and viewed as a peaceful transcendent ending to physical pain and

¹⁵³ Op. Cit., Mittelholzer, E. *The Life and Death of Sylvia* p. 99.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid; pp. 2-3.

mental suffering. A musical example of this romantic motif can be found in the work of Schubert - one of Grantley Russell's favoured composers – in particular, *Der Tod und das Mädchen* (Death and the Maiden).

But what matters is how we live. Sylvia, in contradistinction to Grantley Russell, for instance, tried her best to be true to herself and remained noble to the end. Her principles are interestingly echoed by yet another female heroine in *The Aloneness of Mrs Chatham* (1965), published just prior to Mittelholzer's death:

I'm determined to be myself. I'm determined to know myself, realise myself, feel that I'm alive in a living, positive way.¹⁵⁵

And lest Sylvia's attitude to death be seen merely as defeat, or an instance of the mulatto's so-called tragic pathology, we see that the robust Milton also embraces the idea of death:

We should all look forward to death, my dear girl. It's the one dream that once having come true – and it always comes true – will cause none of us any disillusionment. The final emptiness. The final cessation of all pain and striving and back-biting and anxiety. What greater heaven could one desire! *I live for death!* [my italics]¹⁵⁶

Nevertheless, for Milton Copps the contemplation of death creates not the consummation of Sylvia's quiet repose, whatever its integrity, but a recognition of the urgency of life, an impulse for energy: the importance of using our time wisely, of living life to the full:

My creed is simple: I believe in Destiny – and myself. *Work like the deuce* on my own schemes, and leave the rest to Destiny. [my italics]¹⁵⁷

¹⁵⁵ Mittelholzer, E. *The Aloneness of Mrs. Chatham* (Library 33: London, 1965) p. 1.

¹⁵⁶ Op. Cit., Mittelholzer, E. *The Life and Death of Sylvia* p. 253.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid; p. 248.

Death as something to contemplate, meditate on and look forward to is also in keeping with Mittelholzer's belief in 'oriental occultism': a broad eclectic interpretation of Hindu and Buddhist sacred texts found in the works of writers like Yogi Ramacharaka. The function of this is to help us recognise how precious and short life is so that we can live it, like Milton Copps, to the full. By familiarising ourselves with death, we also help to remove fear of death. But as the following chapter will demonstrate, Mittelholzer did not feel able to give full expression to his occultist views until some six years after the publication of *Sylvia*.

He, like Sylvia, is known to have suffered from bouts of depression and was, prior to the publication of *Corentyne Thunder* plagued by the idea that his efforts would amount to nothing. Sylvia's wish no doubt expresses something in Mittelholzer himself:

She would have given anything to have been clairvoyant, to have been able to view the panorama of the future now so that she could know whether it would be worth putting up a struggle in its cause. She would hate to struggle and not win, to go through the welter of agony and then fade out like tints in a sunset sky.¹⁵⁸

In the dynamics of the relationship between Sylvia Russell and Milton Copps, two sides no doubt of Mittelholzer's promptings, there is no preaching, only the dramatisation of the most lively and engaging fiction.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid; p. 182.

CHAPTER FIVE

RELIGION & SEX

“All this sounds like preaching – and, believe me, it is preaching. I mean to preach to you.”¹

“Let the Divine energy work through you, and express itself fully in your work.”²

INTRODUCTION

A J Seymour, in a 1952 pen portrait of Mittelholzer, stated the author had declared his key themes were ‘sex and religion’: “he holds strong views on them and in everything he writes, they will be there, as a main emphasis or as background accompaniment.”³ For Seymour, Mittelholzer’s ‘religion’ could be defined as an interest in the supernatural, psychological states of mind involving the presence of “doppies [sic]” and spiritual visitations. Sex, he asserted was represented “as the force that makes the world go round”.⁴ Any sense of how the two themes might be interlinked was not, however, explored.

In order to appreciate the full significance of religion and sex in Mittelholzer’s novels, this chapter will begin with an examination of his religious background, followed by an exploration of its direct links to the theme of sex. The function of intertextual references will also be explored in relation to the author’s literary themes, whilst the final section will demonstrate how an appreciation of Mittelholzer’s unorthodox beliefs can increase the readers’ understanding of his themes and objectives as a writer. In so doing it will highlight where critics like Guckian, despite the many insightful aspects of their work, misinterpreted the function of the author’s themes as exemplified in the

¹ See letter dated 8 June 1941 in Ruth Wilkinson Collection (private ownership): Letters from Mittelholzer to Ruth Wilkinson (circa March 1941 – 15th June 1962).

² Ramacharaka, Y. *Advanced Course in Yogi Philosophy and Oriental Occultism* (L N Fowler: Ludgate Circus, 1917) p. 23.

³ Seymour, A. J. “West Indian Pen Portrait: Edgar Mittelholzer” in *Kyk-Over-Al* (Vol. 5 No. 15, 1952) p. 16.

⁴ Seymour, A. J. “Edgar Mittelholzer” in A. J. Seymour (ed) *Kyk-Over-Al* (Vol. 5, No. 15; Year-end 1952) p. 17.

statement: "Mittelholzer, one feels, is never attacking Christianity as such, but is satirising the people who blasphemously append the name of Christ to their iniquitous conduct."⁵

MITTELHOLZER'S 'RELIGIOUS' BACKGROUND

Christian Childhood

Religion was to play an enduring role in Mittelholzer's interpretation of the world. As a young child he attended the Sunday school at the Lutheran Church in New Amsterdam from "half-past two to four": there, Bible stories his grandmother had often related to him, were repeated and reinforced in his consciousness.⁶ In 1922 Mittelholzer was confirmed into the Anglican Church and soon after became an altar-server. The importance of this event is patent:

At home and at school, one was made to feel that one was inadequate, even a little good-for-nothing runt. But here was the Rector singling one out as first-class material, choosing one to be an altar-server! It was a revolution in values. I agreed with solemn enthusiasm to do my best.⁷

Apart from representing a space in Mittelholzer's life where he could feel "really safe and significant", it was also a space imbued with romance. Notions of being "washed of all sin" by the Holy Spirit, through the Lord's intermediary, the bishop; his "laying on of hands" and the resultant transmission of the "divine spark", all charged and nurtured Mittelholzer's creative imagination. It also afforded Mittelholzer the opportunity of witnessing life beyond the confines of Coburg Street for as an altar server he occasionally accompanied the rector on car journeys to the small country churches in Deutichem or Sandvoort.

Occult entities in Guianese Folklore

⁵ Guckhian, P. *Failure in Exile: A Critical Study of the Works of Edgar Mittelholzer* (University of West Indies: Barbados, 1970) p. 40.

⁶ Mittelholzer had been sent to the Lutheran Sunday School, as the Anglican Sunday School run by 'Negro' teachers, was considered unsuitable. See Mittelholzer, E. *A Swarthy Boy: A Childhood in British Guiana* (Putnam: London, 1963) p. 47.

⁷ Ibid; p. 83.

Mittelholzer's formal Christian upbringing was not his only source of instruction on matters metaphysical. As he reveals in *With A Carib Eye* his nurse - or Nana as he called her - entertained him with tales from Guianese folklore: many involving occult entities⁸ like the Water People, Bush Dai Dai, Jumbie, Massacurraman, Skwee-Skwees, Old Higue, Baccoo and Moon Gazer. As Roy Heath (fellow countryman and writer) asserted:

It is difficult for those living in a spiritually impoverished society to grasp the significance of myths to people steeped in them.⁹

It helps however to appreciate that these myths are reflections of Guiana's bitter history, distressing past and challenging environment. As Mittelholzer was to note about his Coburg Street residence:

You [could] feel the mystery of unknown tracts of land simply by staring east towards the Canje Creek. There it is all bush where once plantations flourished.¹⁰

The artist, Denis Williams similarly contended the ordinary everyday Guianese person was different from the rest of the Caribbean because they bore an awareness of a dense jungle interior looming behind them.¹¹ Others like the poet, Martin Carter, felt the interior was a "ghostly premise".¹² This sentiment finds exemplification in Mittelholzer's *My Bones and My Flute* when Rayburn comments that the people who lived up river: "were always seeing some jumbie or hearing a kanaima": "an evil spirit of the jungle which sometimes lodges itself

⁸ See Mittelholzer, E. *With a Carib Eye* (Secker & Warburg: London, 1958) p. 141-142. Mittelholzer explicitly remarks in his travel journal to his nurse and the many folktales she told him including the story of the Water People. He again refers to his nurse's storytelling abilities in *A Swarthy Boy* and also in a short article, "Masquerades" in Seymour (ed), *My Lovely Native Land*.

⁹ Heath, R. "The Function of Myth" in Salkey, A. (ed) *Caribbean Essays: An Anthology* (Evans Brothers Ltd: London, 1973) p. 90.

¹⁰ Mittelholzer, E. "New Amsterdam" in A. J. & E. Seymour (eds.) *My Lovely Native Land* (Longman Caribbean: London, 1971) p. 39.

¹¹ See Dance, D. *New World Adams: Conversations with Contemporary West Indian Writers* (Peepal Tree: Yorkshire, 1992) p. 47.

¹² Ibid; p. 47.

in the body of a human being, turning the individual so possessed into a homicidal fiend..."¹³

The vastness of the Guianese jungle and the constant battle to halt its encroachment also led Mittelholzer to question the premise that man was the privileged recipient of God's special care and superior to all he surveyed. But did Mittelholzer believe in the actual existence of these supernatural entities? As a quotation in Chapter 3 – "It seems as though some *jinnee* dwells on my shoulder"¹⁴ – suggests, Mittelholzer's sense of otherworldliness extended at the least to that nagging suspicion a mischievous *jinnee* (notably akin in character to the Amerindian Kanaima) might have precipitated his spates of bad luck. While bearing in mind the need to be cautious about taking his words too literally, he also interestingly talks of the compelling impulse to write in terms of being spiritually driven:

For the past two weeks I have had your name down with about six or seven others on my list of people to write, but this terrible demon that drives me to work on any novel I tackle just made it impossible for me to write anyone.¹⁵

Years later, he confessed to having seen "many a robust ghost" at his parents' first home in Robb Street, Georgetown.¹⁶ Even his father an arch-sceptic is said to have been party to a ghostly manifestation: his mother, though never seeing it, remained nervous about living there. The existence of occult entities (based on what one senses) certainly appears in time to have proven more convincing to Mittelholzer than the presence of a Christian God.

The Appeal of Switching Faiths

¹³ Mittelholzer, E. *My Bones and My Flute* (New English Library: London, 1974 [1955]) p. 98.

¹⁴ Op. cit., Ruth Wilkinson Collection - letter dated 15th September 1941.

¹⁵ See Carl Van Vechten Correspondence - 10 unpublished letters between Mittelholzer and Van Vechten) in Beinecke Rare Books & Manuscript Library (Yale University) letter dated 20th July 1953.

¹⁶ Op. cit., Mittelholzer, E. *A Swarthy Boy* p. 20.

Mittelholzer alludes in *A Swarthy Boy* (1963) to a rejection of orthodox Christianity and adoption of Yoga and Oriental Occultism, but perhaps because his autobiography only covers the period 1909 to 1928, the details of this conversion are not elucidated. Two versions of a recently discovered article, *At Forty-Three: A Personal View of the World*¹⁷ clarify this: he had been introduced to Oriental Occultism at the age of 19, and had for nine months, practiced being a committed Yogi. Though he never explains what the term Oriental Occultism means, his yogic practices involved dieting, rhythmical breathing, contemplation, physical posturing, and abstinence from smoking, alcohol and “fleshy pleasures”; the objective of which was to conquer “the Flesh so that the Spirit might finally be released from mortal rebirth, from mortal pain and suffering”.¹⁸ Perhaps key to Mittelholzer’s rejection of orthodox Christianity was, as implied by the quote, a deep sense of suffering. His autobiography reveals a far from happy childhood: his mother frequently brutalised him with a whip she called “Tickle Toby” and his father, although physically affectionate to his siblings tended to ignore him. As an adult ambitiously aiming to become a writer the problems in his life merely intensified. Writing in 1941 he disclosed:

Life has given my heart a pretty rough time [...]. If disappointments used to leave tangible physical scars on one’s heart, my heart would be found to be nothing but one great blurred tough mass of calloused flesh.¹⁹

Christian prayer had presumably done little to change the painful circumstances of his upbringing or his frequent bouts of melancholy. Writing in 1954 for the *Barbados Advocate* on a similar theme, Mittelholzer stated:

Isn’t it inevitable that as the child develops and discovers for itself what life is really like, bitterness and disillusion must result? How soon doesn’t the poor

¹⁷ One version was sent to Carl van Vechten in 1953 and is now held in the Beinecke Rare Books and Manuscript Library; the other was sent to Mittelholzer’s youngest brother, before being inherited by his surviving sister, Lucille Mittelholzer. There are slight differences between both manuscripts but the essence of his message is essentially the same.

¹⁸ Mittelholzer, E. *At Forty-Three – A Personal View of the World* (Typed manuscript, ref: 108, held in Beinecke Rare Books & Manuscript Library at Yale University) p. 2.

¹⁹ Op. cit., Ruth Wilkinson Collection - Letter dated 29 May 1941.

creature realise that “Gentle Jesus” doesn’t protect him from starvation or the stalking sex-maniac in the park!²⁰

Perhaps too, he had never felt particularly loyal to a single tradition. Whilst his paternal grandfather had been a Lutheran Pastor, his Uncle John became a Roman Catholic and his father, an Anglican. His maternal grandmother with whom his family lived was a Congregationalist. Within this family set-up, no monolithic interpretation of the Bible was agreed upon. Perhaps too, his occultist beliefs chimed with his Weltanschauung: it allowed him to take solace in the mysteries of the natural world and concepts that seemingly synthesised with his Romantic inclinations.

Oriental Occultist Adulthood

Mittelholzer gave up Yogic practice because of unwelcome pillorying he received from the wider community of New Amsterdam: it was not considered “normal” or “civilised”, indeed it merely added to the reason why many (including his family) called him “mad”. But Mittelholzer also admits: “...(please don’t fail to note the honesty) that the pleasures of the world were not so bad as I aesthetically wanted to think”.²¹ While he strived thereafter to be “if not...normal, at least an individual civilized being”, Oriental Occultism remained a source of inspiration and constant study.

Mittelholzer’s conception of Oriental Occultism can be discerned from a variety of sources. The book reviews he wrote for the *Barbados Advocate’s* Sunday paper in the 1950s had, for instance, a tendency of revealing more about Mittelholzer’s opinions and beliefs, than about the books under consideration. Thus in a review of a book about Winston Churchill, Mittelholzer proclaims that “Oriental beliefs” were more acceptable to him than those “advanced by Occidental Theologians”. He furthermore supports the idea that all living

²⁰ Mittelholzer, E. “The Cure for Corruption” in *Sunday Advocate* (Barbados: 4 April 1954) p. 8.

²¹ Mittelholzer, E. *At Forty-Three – A Personal View of the World* (Typed manuscript, ref: 108, held in Beinecke Rare Books & Manuscript Library at Yale University) p. 2.

humans owe their present existence to a focus, in previous lives, on worldly material matters:

We are each of us here, say the Oriental sages, to live out our *karma* (or predestined fate) and, provided that we die still obsessed with the loves and hates and the schemes and machinations of this earth, must inevitably be re-born again and again in order to be schooled in that knowledge of life which is necessary if we are to be purged of gross material interests. It is these earthly interests that, according to the *Bhagavad Gita*, shackle us to our physical bodies and keep the spirit [like the Arabic Jinnee] in bondage. Eradicate all mundane ambitions and urges, and we shall, on dying, find ourselves in a condition where we could avert the compulsion that brings us back to this earthy scene to re-enact the painful travail of physical existence.²²

Mittelholzer attributes Churchill's greatness to the accumulated experience of previous lives and speculates that he may be an incarnation of Richelieu, Voltaire, or Charlemagne:

What manner of man could this be upon whom the Fates decided so haphazardly to bestow so many virtues of character? Could it merely be the result [...] of a change arrangement of chromosomes? Or could the Orientals be right in that he is a being who lived before and who has merely returned, bringing all the attributes of his past selves, to carry on where he left off?²³

Mittelholzer's thesis is dual-pronged in that he also takes enjoyment in attacking as "childish" the theological arguments of the Occident and their notion of an eternal heaven or hell as a reward or punishment for good or bad behaviour.

In another article, "The Spiritual Beyond", Mittelholzer's criticises Joseph Rinn's book, *Searchlight on Psychic Research* (1954), for its sceptical, one-sided denunciation of spiritual mediums.²⁴ He highlights that the author fails to

²² Mittelholzer, E. "Churchill Through a Kaleidoscope" in *Sunday Advocate* (Barbados: 10 January 1954) p. 6.

²³ Ibid; p. 6.

²⁴ Mittelholzer, E. "The Spiritual Beyond" in *Sunday Advocate* (Barbados: 14 March 1954) p. 8.

mention the Borley Rectory case, the activities of Elliot O'Donnell or the two books in support of psychical phenomenon by Harry Price. Then, on the topic of a book entitled *The Incredible Father Divine* (by Sarah Harris), Mittelholzer remarks:

It is a book that helped to heighten my deep respect for the Orientals and their beliefs. How chaotic and childish western people appear when contrasted with the calm and detachment of the truly noble men of the East. How much more credible and satisfying – and peaceful – is the Nirvana of Buddhism than the vulgar “heavens” of the Occident – and I make it plural, for, so far as I can see, no two Christians have coincided in their definitions of heaven.²⁵

Taken as a whole Mittelholzer's *Barbados Advocate* reviews indicate that Mittelholzer's notion of Oriental Occultism (reincarnation, astral projection, karma, nirvana) was primarily based on the Indian religious teachings of Buddhism and Hinduism.

Mittelholzer may have favoured the term 'Oriental' Occultism in order to distinguish his objectives from European practitioners of occultism such as Aleister Crowley. The latter, notoriously dubbed the “Wickedest Man in the World” was primarily interested in magical aspects of occultism and ritualistic sexual debauchery: Mittelholzer, more sincerely, sought to understand the esoteric mysteries of life. This latter conjecture is largely drawn from a reading of the Mittelholzer canon. In *The Wounded and The Worried*, for example, Tom Dellow (another Mittelholzer proxy) attempts to share his experience of astral projection with fellow residents of Ravensdene Country House. When Gwendolin Wellings reveals: “I don't know much about these things, but I have read something about a man called Crowley – was it Alastair or Alison Crowley? He practiced Black Magic. Are you like him?”²⁶ Tom retorts he is not. Nor does he hold séances or attend Spiritualist gatherings. He instead claims that his interest in occultism arose when he found a book on astral projection, some six or more years after his first, bewildering out-of-body experience. The book

²⁵ Mittelholzer, E. “God on Earth” in *Sunday Advocate* (Barbados: 8 August 1954) p. 8.

²⁶ Mittelholzer, E. *The Wounded and the Worried* (Putnam: London, 1962) p. 136.

helped him to understand the phenomenon. Thereafter he was able to practice projecting “the Real Me” consciously and at will.

It is unsurprising given Mittelholzer’s background that religion was to become one of the central themes of his novels: during his primary socialisation at least four key figures with a talent for ‘storytelling’ expressed a keen interest in the transcendental. In *A Swarthy Boy* the Reverend Mr Ernest Jones, the Englishman who initiated him into the Anglican church is described as: “a man of imagination — and a raconteur”²⁷, a description that Mittelholzer similarly extended to his religiously “perfevid” grandmother, Rebecca Downer.²⁸ Though he never speaks of his Nana in the same terms it is clear that she too must have been a skilled storyteller for her tales of the supernatural are said to have given Mittelholzer a “terrifying thrill”. The rhetorical prowess of the unnamed man who introduced him to Yoga and Oriental Occultism is similarly evident:

He was the first human being who gave me a feeling of genuine awe – awe of mankind. Outwardly himself no impressive specimen – he was careless in dress and habits – he nevertheless, was highly intelligent and intensely sincere. To listen to him logically and earnestly rending to bits orthodox beliefs and conventions was, to me, a feat to marvel at.²⁹

But what is the relationship for Mittelholzer between sex and religion given his alleged predilection (to use Sparer’s words) for “sextravaganzas”, and/or self-indulgent “adolescent-like fantasizing”.³⁰

Sex: normal physical function versus the demands of religion

²⁷ Op. cit., Mittelholzer, E. *A Swarthy Boy* p. 81.

²⁸ Ibid; p. 47.

²⁹ Mittelholzer, E. *At Forty-Three – A Personal View of the World* (Unpublished, typed manuscript, ref: 108, held in Beinecke Rare Books & Manuscript Library at Yale University – version one of two) p. 2.

³⁰ Sparer, J. “Attitudes to Race in Guyanese Literature” in *Caribbean Studies* (Vol. 8: No. 2, 1968) p. 25.

The first point to be made is that the 'sex' theme in Mittelholzer's novels is underpinned by a tension between three influential spheres of his life: his Orthodox Christian family and coloured middle class milieu; household servants and school friends of African descent; and his Oriental Occultist mentor. In *A Swarthy Boy* Mittelholzer comments on the "ramparts of Victorian respectability that rigidly protected [his mother] and her sisters from the faintest rumour of sex"³¹ and while he does not connect the socio-cultural context here to a religious one, it is clear elsewhere (in his fiction as well as non-fictional writings) that he perceived Christianity as the root cause of sexual ignorance and repression. In *A Morning at the Office*, Kathleen Henery, a coloured middle class typist, constantly worries that her private obsession with sex prevents her from adhering to a "set code of morals". Her church going Catholic parents are said to have inculcated the belief that: "fornication and adultery were grave sins..."³² Mittelholzer makes the connection between religion and sex explicit when writing for the *Sunday Advocate*, about Rattray Taylor's book, *Sex in History*. Quoting Taylor, he states: "'The Christian code was based, quite simply upon the proposition that the sexual act was to be avoided like the plague [Mittelholzer's emphasis], except for the bare minimum necessary to keep the race in existence. Even when performed for this purpose it remained a regrettable necessity.' Exactly what I have been trying to point out in all my writings! How often have I not emphasized that it is religion which has made sex the dirty thing it is to-day!"³³

The psychological impact of morally repressive sexual codes preoccupied Mittelholzer's thinking on various levels (religious and social) for the whole of his life. In one version of "At Forty Three: A Personal View of the World" Mittelholzer expounds:

"There are two things ... for which I cannot forgive mankind, no matter in what liberal mood I find myself. They are sex and religion. Men have taken sex, a natural function, and, by attitude of mind, converted it into something

³¹ Op. cit., Mittelholzer, E. *A Swarthy Boy* p. 29.

³² Mittelholzer, E. *A Morning at the Office* (Peepal Tree Press: Leeds, 2010) p. 68.

³³ Mittelholzer, E. "Sex and the Church" in *Sunday Advocate* (Barbados: 6 June 1954) p. 8.

obscene.”// “It seems to me feasible that sex should by now have come to be regarded as a normal, healthy bodily function and treated as such. Instead, despite [...] indications of “advancement” and “progress”, sex is still being whispered about, is still a subject for shame. Newspapers and magazines are still forbidden to print words or pictures that are “too frank”. Sex is still a subject for “off-colour” stories. The authorities lay down set rules – in the name of “public morals” – as to what can and cannot be exhibited or spoken on radio, television, stage and screen!”³⁴

Mittelholzer’s progressive attitude to sex was almost certainly shaped by interaction with Guianese from other sections of the race, colour and class hierarchy. In *With A Carib Eye*, Mittelholzer records the instances when he and his sister would eavesdrop on “Rabelaisian adventures of Bill and Burroo Tiger and Burroo Goat” that Francis (a young ‘Negro’ servant) would relate to their Nana: “No out-and-out obscene language left Francis’s lips, but from the frequent splutterings and smothered giggles [...] we knew that the tale held subtleties of indecency [...]”.³⁵

The term Rabelaisian is extended in *A Swarthy Boy* to the black boys who, like Mittelholzer, attended the free school (run by Mr P A Cummings). They, he writes: “exposed themselves, comparing size and power of virility – sometimes taking measurements with rulers”³⁶; talked of the “beddable qualities” of girls and made “lewd drawings”. It was by them Mittelholzer claims to have been “initiated into the intricacies of sex”.³⁷ Whilst some may conclude Mittelholzer’s choice of the word Rabelaisian suggests he felt their antics to be at the other end of the sexual spectrum – overly licentious - it also suggests an awareness that such behaviour is not race-specific: the word Rabelaisian being coined from a bawdy French Renaissance writer and monk, Francois Rabelais. Indeed in some respects one of Mittelholzer’s objectives would appear to be the subversion and reapplication of racist stereotypes that Europeans normally attached to naked

³⁴ Mittelholzer, E. *At Forty-Three – A Personal View of the World* (Unpublished, typed manuscript, ref: 108, held in Beinecke Rare Books & Manuscript Library at Yale University – version one of two) pp. 3-4 & 10.

³⁵ Mittelholzer, E. *With A Carib Eye* (Secker & Warburg: London, 1958) p. 142.

³⁶ Op. cit., Mittelholzer, E. *A Swarthy Boy* p. 79.

³⁷ Ibid; p. 79.

‘African savages’. This is exemplified in *A Tale of Three Places* by Alfie Desseau’s reflections on the Naturist Club he had been introduced to:

Here, he told himself, was a violently fresh side of England – and a side he welcomed, for it seemed to bear out his view that, despite their reputation for prudery, the English could be quite civilised. [...] Only savages erected taboos against sex and deemed it obscene to reveal the human body in its natural state.³⁸

In this passage the narrator is subtly inferring that it is the prudish members of English society who are the savages.

The author’s liberal stance toward sex and nudity – he was a practising naturist – appears to come into conflict with the teachings of Oriental Occultism and Yoga. If a Yogi’s objective is to rise above the physical demands of the flesh, as suggested by Mittelholzer’s opinion of his Yogi mentor, how can sex be treated as a natural everyday function?

Here, I told myself, was a big intellect, the human spirit – lo and behold! – at its highest. Here was a real instance of *the triumph of Spirit over Flesh* [my italics].³⁹

It is questions of this sort that will be addressed later on in this chapter.

The ultimate point here is that without the benefit of insight into Mittelholzer’s religious background, his acclaimed interest in sex – Ivan van Sertima viewed it as “menacing”⁴⁰ – can be readily misunderstood. Guckian, importantly recognised that one of Mittelholzer’s thematic aims was to challenge sexual prudery and “remove the element of shame from sex”.⁴¹ His arguments failed to be picked up by later critics presumably because without a good

³⁸ Mittelholzer, E. *A Tale of Three Places* (Secker & Warburg: London, 1957) p. 244.

³⁹ Mittelholzer, E. *At Forty-Three – A Personal View of the World* (Typed manuscript, ref: 108, held in Beinecke Rare Books & Manuscript Library at Yale University) p. 2.

⁴⁰ Cited in Guckian, P. “The Balance of Colour: A Reassessment of the Work of Edgar Mittelholzer” in *Jamaican Journal* Vol. 4 (March 1970) p. 38.

⁴¹ Op. cit., Guckian, P. *Failure in Exile* p. 38.

understanding of the complex interrelationship between sex and Mittelholzer's unorthodox religious beliefs, his thesis remained unconvincing.

Whilst no single individual can claim to be party to the author's private thoughts or experiences, the words of Mittelholzer's close friend, P H Daly (in the *Daily Chronicle* on 15 May 1965) supports the need for a more critical text-based analysis of the author's interconnected themes:

For those who never knew Mittelholzer in the flesh and who will attempt a later assessment of the man and his works, there might be the temptation to conclude, and particularly because he is a West Indian, that the recurring theme of sex is a projection of the author's real self. That would be a falsification of Mittelholzer's character and a misunderstanding of his work. It would be a blasphemy on the man who had such a complete...control over his senses and his will.⁴²

An examination of the Spirit-Flesh dialectic will be preceded by an analysis of the religious elements that collectively underpin his literary themes.

MITTELHOLZER: THE PREACHER MAN

Intertextual Signposts

As regards his Oriental Occultist beliefs, the author struggled with conflicting emotions: fear of ridicule on the one hand, and the compulsion to proselytise while imaginatively exploring the creative potential of Oriental Occultism on the other. Like his key protagonist Milton Woodsley, in *My Bones and My Flute*, he was reluctant to put occultist experiences into print because of modern day attitudes to phenomena that could not be scientifically measured.⁴³ A letter Mittelholzer wrote to A J Seymour in 1959 supports this assertion:

My new novel, A TINKLING IN THE TWILIGHT, appears in the summer. [...] In this new book I take up the *religious-sex theme again*, but deal with it in an entirely new way. It is the first time that I've cared to bring so clearly into the

⁴² Cited in Guckhian, P. *Failure in Exile* p. 59.

⁴³ See Mittelholzer, E. *My Bones and My Flute* (New English Library: London, 1974 [1955]) p. 149.

open my strong attachment to Oriental occultism and Yoga. I've held these beliefs since I was 19, but in my writings have never liked to reveal them because I know perfectly well I can prove nothing I say on the basis of plain logic (and unfortunately, the Western World can only be convinced by "rational" arguments). Belief in the teachings of the Orientals, I realise, must come from within. If you can't feel them deep in yourself, it's just no good.⁴⁴

Like Esmeralda of *The Weather Family*⁴⁵ and the Oriental Occultist and ex-Church of England priest, Tom Dellow, in *The Wounded and The Worried* the author's desire to share his beliefs became overwhelming:

I won't be completely happy until I get you all to believe in what I believe. If I could even get you to a point where you won't sneer, you won't be sceptical, won't tell me I'm mad, I'd be content. [...] That's what makes we want to fly from this earth, Stella. The sneers, the sceptical smirks, of people who are supposed to be intelligent, enlightened. It gives me a terrible feeling of despair – an exasperation and frustration beyond all endurance – when I'm sneered at for what I know to be the truth. Yes, for what I *know*. I *know*! Not what I've guessed at, but I *know*.⁴⁶

He nevertheless remained worried about being scoffed at and as such tended to portray his characters as "a little nutty" believing this would excuse views readers considered extraordinary⁴⁷: the neurotic key protagonist, Brian Liddard of the satirical novel, *A Tinkling in the Twilight*, exemplifies this point. Mittelholzer's fears were not unwarranted for many of his reviews were disparaging: e.g., "...I wish Mr. Mittelholzer would come off his astral plane".⁴⁸

⁴⁴ See letter addressed to A J Seymour dated 20th January 1959 in A J Seymour Collection – unpublished letters between Seymour and Mittelholzer held at the University of Guyana.

⁴⁵ See Mittelholzer, E. *The Weather Family* (Secker & Warburg: London, 1958) p. 316 where Esmeralda states: "I shall die happy if I can feel that I have succeeded in convincing one mortal – even one – of the truth of these teachings [i.e., Oriental Occultism]..."

⁴⁶ Mittelholzer, E. *The Wounded and the Worried* (Putnam: London, 1962) p. 75.

⁴⁷ See Ives, J. *The Idyll and the Warrior: Recollections of Edgar Mittelholzer* (unpublished version in the possession of Mrs J. Ives). p. 34.

⁴⁸ See *Daily Telegraph* article dated 31 July 1959 by Peter Green "Recent Fiction: Dilemmas of an Irishman" in Edgar Mittelholzer's *Newspaper Cuttings Scrap Book* (in private possession of Michael Gilkes).

For all of Mittelholzer's desire to be open, *A Tinkling in the Twilight* - the story of a bookseller whose sexual abstinence of five years prompts erotic fantasies, unexpected encounters with prostitutes and thoughts of suicide - added to the confusion of Mittelholzer's reviewers. Concluding a review in the *Observer*, John Davenport concedes: "What Mr Mittelholzer is up to it is impossible to say."⁴⁹ Somewhat ironically this novel provides the first comprehensive list of Oriental Occultist texts that Mittelholzer had, like his character, Margaret Beaver, undoubtedly read and absorbed: namely, "*Fourteen Lessons in Yogi Philosophy and Oriental Occultism. . . Hatha Yoga. . . The Bhagavad Gita. . . Advance Course in Yogi Philosophy and Oriental Occultism. . . Science of Breath.*"⁵⁰ Given that the first version of *The Aloneness of Mrs Chatham* (1965) was penned in 1953 - around the same time he was sharing his Oriental Occultist views in the *Barbados Advocate* - and contains the same list of books (all authored or edited by Yogi Ramacharaka⁵¹), it is probable he had considered revealing these sources of religious inspiration even earlier than 1959. It is these texts that, (when used in conjunction with knowledge of the author's socio-religious upbringing and non-fictional writings) anchor meaning in Mittelholzer's novels and provide the basis upon which they should be analysed.

There is no God

In *Children of Kaywana* (1952) - a novel that predates *Corentyne Thunder* (1941) in terms of its conception, Christianity is constantly challenged. When Hendrickje van Groenwegel is shot and fighting for her life, a surgeon tells the grandchildren that her survival is in God's hands. This angers Pedro who dismisses God: "To hell with God! There is no God. What you mean is that you can't do anymore for her..."⁵² Other characters express bewilderment at the

⁴⁹ See *Observer* article dated 26 July 1959 by John Davenport "A Tinkling in the Twilight" in Edgar Mittelholzer's *Newspaper Cuttings Scrap Book* (in private possession of Michael Gilkes).

⁵⁰ Mittelholzer, E. *A Tinkling in the Twilight* (Secker and Warburg: London, 1959) pp. 118-119.

⁵¹ Ramacharaka is almost certainly a pseudonym for the "new age" American writer William Walker Atkinson (1862-1932). As Atkinson has only recently been identified as the writer of Ramacharaka's Oriental Occultists texts, Mittelholzer would have been ignorant of his true identity. Whether Atkinson's non-Indian roots would have affected Mittelholzer's belief in his brand of Oriental Occultism is open to debate.

⁵² Mittelholzer, E. *Children of Kaywana* (Secker & Warburg: London, 1960 [1952]) p. 351.

haphazardness of human existence. When Hendrickje's father's best friend, Hendrick Rol dies, he wonders:

Why of all people Hendrik? Why should Fate be so haphazard? A useful man like Hendrik. A jovial, big-hearted human being. Look what he has done for the place. He's rebuilt the colony. /.../ Everybody loved him. Yet, of all people, Fate must slash him down.⁵³

The inference here is that God, if there is one, has no interest in the affairs of earth, nor does he do anything to protect the good. This notion is re-emphasised by Hendrickje's mother, Katrina on the death of Karl by dysentery:

I don't believe in any Christian God, Laurens. The Predicant and his Bible talk – I don't like him. He tells us about God's love and God's wrath, but he can't explain why God should want to kill off our little Karl who has harmed no one.⁵⁴

Lauren concurs religion "is a hoax" and that the best policy is to forget about it whilst living a good decent life by trying to be generous and "considerate of others".⁵⁵

These basic attitudes: that there is no God, that life is harsh, that we should all strive to better ourselves, are present throughout the Mittelholzer canon, and more usually attributed to the author's long-established interest in Nietzsche. Indeed it is the author who leads readers to this conclusion for characters like Grantley Russell in *Sylvia* proclaim:

Darwin and Nietzsche knew a few sound truths. They may not be palatable, they may not conform with Christian teaching, but the truth is the truth.⁵⁶

As any reader of Mittelholzer's work will have noted, the author references, or quotes from, a wide range of texts and authors (e.g., Clive Bell, T S Eliot, Omar

⁵³ Ibid; p. 139.

⁵⁴ Ibid; p. 157.

⁵⁵ Ibid; p. 157.

⁵⁶ Mittelholzer, E. *Sylvia* (Four Square Books: London, 1963 [1953]) p. 208.

Khayyam, Baruch Spinoza, Arthur Schopenhauer, William Shakespeare, Sigmund Freud, Charles Dickens and Richard Wagner). On closer inspection many like Nietzsche, express ideas that correspond at least to some extent, with those of Oriental Occultism. It should be explained that Mittelholzer believed like Ramacharaka that 'Truths' (albeit partial or inadequately explicated) appeared in the works of some Western writers, even "the writer [who] may not fully understand what he has written", courtesy of "Divine Inspiration".⁵⁷ Ramacharaka observed that internationally recognised Western thinkers could be cited as a means of helping the more spiritually conscious reader absorb Oriental thought and this (as will be illustrated) appears to have been Mittelholzer's *modus operandi*.⁵⁸

The Laws of Nature

Though rejecting the orthodox Christian notion of God - "When asked if I believe in God my answer is always a prompt "No." [...] Emphatically no"⁵⁹ - Mittelholzer did believe in the existence of an all-pervading spiritual power: variously described by Ramacharaka as 'The Absolute'⁶⁰, Nature⁶¹, God, the Divine, and by Buddhists as the Supreme Buddha. Mittelholzer's conception of 'The Absolute' is explored in his novels and becomes less obscure over the course of his career. For instance, in *Corentyne Thunder* (1941) when Beena is doubled up in pain and her father forlorn, the narrator observes nature's response while pointing to his application of Oriental Occultism through his subtle choice of words:

But the savannah remained still and grey-green, quiet and immobile in its *philosophy*. And the sky, too, would do nothing to aid him. Pale purple in the

⁵⁷ Ramacharaka, Y. *Advanced Course in Yogi Philosophy and Oriental Occultism* (L N Fowler: Ludgate Circus, 1917) p. 78.

⁵⁸ *Ibid*; p. 320.

⁵⁹ Mittelholzer, E. *At Forty-Three – A Personal View of the World* (Unpublished, typed manuscript, ref: 108, held in Beinecke Rare Books & Manuscript Library at Yale University – version one of two) p. 7.

⁶⁰ *Op. cit.*, Ramacharaka, Y. *Advanced Course in Yogi Philosophy and Oriental Occultism* p. 164.

⁶¹ *Ibid*; p. 159.

failing light and streaked with feathery brown and yellow clouds, the sky watched like a statue of *Buddha*. [my italics]⁶²

What the author implies is that God, assuming he exists, is akin to an Oriental Occultist's Buddha in attitude: indifferent to the everyday material concerns of man. In a much later novel, *The Wounded and the Worried* (1962), Tom Dellow tells Gwen Wellings that, "God is Law", not "love", as orthodox Christianity asserts:

"The law that controls human destiny is a neutral law. It leaves us free to use it either for good or for evil."

"But what about God? Isn't God love?"

"God is the Law."⁶³

Both of these passages become easier to understand when we appreciate Ramacharaka teaches that Nature (in which God is manifest) provides the principles upon which human lives should be based:

Hatha Yoga is first, nature; second, *nature*, and last NATURE. When confronted with a choice of methods, plans, theories, etc., apply to them the touchstone: "Which is the natural way?" and always choose that which seems to confirm the nearest to nature.⁶⁴

Modern civilized races, Ramacharaka asserts had forgotten the existence of nature in their "rush towards externals" and were by implication on the wrong path.⁶⁵ In other words, human practices that did not "square with nature" needed to be discarded.⁶⁶ He importantly advises his followers to establish the verity of Oriental Occultism for themselves: "Do not be a bigoted follower of teachers – listen to what they say – but apply the test of your own soul to all of it. Do not be a blind follower. Be an individual. Your soul is as good a judge as any

⁶² Mittelholzer, E. *Corentyne Thunder* (Heinemann: London, 1970 [1941]) p. 11.

⁶³ Mittelholzer, E. *The Wounded and the Worried* (Putnam: London, 1962) p. 119.

⁶⁴ Ramacharaka, Y. *Hatha Yoga* (L N Fowler: London, no date [c. 1960]) p. 10. Hatha Yoga is a branch of Oriental Occultism that addresses the physical wellbeing of adherents.

⁶⁵ Ibid; p. 9.

⁶⁶ Ibid; p. 11.

other soul – better, for you, in fact. [...] Heed the voice of the Something Within. [...] Look within – for there is the spark from the Divine Flame.”⁶⁷

Divine inspiration (or intuition) and Nature (in the role of teacher) were central to the author’s reasoning; his means of understanding the universe and how humans ought to live within it. When in *Corentyne Thunder* Ramgolall eventually dies the narrator reflects once again on nature, this time with the presumed intent of establishing how death should be responded to:

Ramgolall was dead. [...] A frog squeaked somewhere behind the mudhouse. [...] No, nothing had changed at all. Surely the savannah must know that Ramgolall was dead and that there were pebbles and pieces of dried mud lying scattered on the floor of the mud-house. It looked so untroubled, the same as they had been yesterday and all the days before: the sky blue, the wind cool, the sun red because it was low in the west. // Ramgolall was dead, but the whole Corentyne remained just the same.⁶⁸

In later novels like *Sylvia* (see Chapter 4) and in the macabre novel, *Eltonsbrody* the author demonstrates an assuredness that death is not to be feared, evoke the human emotion of catastrophe or be marked by elaborate forms of mourning:

Death, Death! The one luscious adventure we can every one of us look forward to without any fear of disappointment. Isn’t it satisfying to contemplate on, my boy?⁶⁹

Though it may not have been obvious *Sylvia* was in many respects an Oriental Occultist’s meditation on death, some clue to this is proffered in Grantley’s Russell’s esoteric choice of words:

This business of living can be a barren affair. Pleasure, Goo-Goo, without an *oriented* outlook, affords no satisfaction. *That may be above your head*, but never mind. I like saying profound things to you. [my italics]⁷⁰

⁶⁷ Op. cit., Ramacharaka, Y. *Advanced Course in Yogi Philosophy and Oriental Occultism* p. 59.

⁶⁸ Mittelholzer, E. *Corentyne Thunder* (Heinemann: London, 1970 [1941]) p. 229.

⁶⁹ Mittelholzer, E. *Eltonsbrody* (Secker and Warburg: London, 1960) pp. 181-182.

Esotericism is an inherent aspect of Oriental Occultism. As Ramacharaka explains: “the fundamental theory of Yogi Philosophy [is] that all souls are growing souls – souls in different stages of growth and advancement along The Path [of spiritual consciousness]”⁷¹, with students only being “able to extract meaning suited to [their] stage of development”.⁷² Absolute knowledge or Truth it should be clarified is not deemed by Oriental Occultism to “run contrary to reason – but it transcends Intellect – [going beyond and perceiving] that which the Intellect cannot grasp”.⁷³

Life is Brutal

Corentyne Thunder and *Sylvia* are like many of Mittelholzer’s other novels an attempt to delve beneath surface appearance for deeper esoteric ‘Truths’. In the former novel, Stymphy’s romantic conceptualisation of nature prevents him from recognising the real hardships of country living until he is exposed to the frowsy smell of Ramgolall’s hut. In *Sylvia*, the eponymous heroine is forced to change her idyllic view of the working-class society when her own economic downfall becomes a struggle for survival. Though Jacques van Groenwegel of *Children of Kaywana* was instinctively drawn like Mittelholzer to romanticise over nature - “If only...life could be just a soft, cool breeze at night-time and the fragrance of dry-weather plants”⁷⁴ – he too soon comes to “the depressing truth that it takes strength to make a secure world”⁷⁵ and eventually learns to cultivate the ‘warrior’ side of his personality. This, though the uninitiated reader will not know it, is in keeping with Oriental Occultist teachings: ““Look for the warrior, and let him fight in thee.” Look for him; believe in him; trust him; recognise him – and let him fight the battle for you.”⁷⁶

⁷⁰ Mittelholzer, E. *The Life and Death of Sylvia* (Secker and Warburg: London, 1953) p. 55.

⁷¹ Op. cit., Ramacharaka, Y. *Advanced Course in Yogi Philosophy and Oriental Occultism* p. 222.

⁷² Ibid; p. 10.

⁷³ Ibid; p. 264.

⁷⁴ Op. cit., Mittelholzer, E. *Children of Kaywana* p. 508.

⁷⁵ Ibid; p. 507.

⁷⁶ Op. cit., Ramacharaka, Y. *Advanced Course in Yogi Philosophy and Oriental Occultism* p. 111.

Jacques' grandmother, Hendrickje, is in her ruthless adherence to the family tradition viewed as the ultimate paragon of fighter blood: "No van Groenwegel must ever run from an enemy. We stay and fight."⁷⁷ It is through her actions that the author's theme of the strong versus the weak is pushed to an extreme:

No one who thinks and observes what goes on around us can believe in such a myth as God or the teachings of the Church. Life is brutal, Adrian. *The stronger survive, and the weaker get crushed.* It isn't pleasant to think of it, but it's the truth, and one must not avoid the truth. Deluding ourselves with soothing myths won't help us to solve the mysteries of existence – and the problems that persistently assail us. [my italics]⁷⁸

The 'strong versus the weak' / 'victory or death' theme that Gilkes et al rightly identify as Nietzschean is more importantly a concept that is central to the teachings of the *Bhagavad Gita*. This text is a standalone episode that appears in the Hindu epic, the *Mahabharata* and revolves around a royal family divided over the sovereignty of Hastinapura into two warring factions: the Kurus and Pandus.

In the *Bhagavad Gita* Arjuna, one of the Pandu Princes and Krishna, the Supreme Spirit position themselves in a area overlooking both sides of the unfolding battle.⁷⁹ Overcome with grief, Arjuna expresses the desire to die rather than defend himself against one of his kinsmen: "Better were it for me to eat even the dry and tasteless crust of the ragged beggar, than to be the instrument of death to these most noble and worshipful men, who were my preceptors and teachers!"⁸⁰ Krishna responds by telling him his "utterances" contain the seeds of outer wisdom but reveal a lack of knowledge about the inner

⁷⁷ Op. cit., Mittelholzer, E. *Children of Kaywana* p. 70.

⁷⁸ Ibid; p. 246.

⁷⁹ In the original version of the *Bhagavad Gita* both of these characters are given different titles and names at different stages of the narrative: all are different projections of themselves but nevertheless confusing from the point of view of the Western Reader.

⁸⁰ Ramacharaka, Y. *The Bhagavad Gita or The Message of the Master* (The Yogi Publication Society: Chicago, 1911) p. 26.

doctrines of the wise. A brave man, he is told, should not fear life or death. As a member of the warrior caste it is his duty to put aside “childish grief”, pursue victory and “fight well”:

If thou chance to be slain in the battle, the warrior’s heaven wilt be thy reward; if victorious thou emergeth from the fray, the joys of earth await thee. Therefore, O Prince of Pandu, arise and fight! being willing to take whatever betideth thee – be it pain or pleasure; loss or gain; *victory or defeat*; thine only concern being whether thou has done thy best [...]. That is your plain Duty! [my italics]⁸¹

The story ends with Arjuna’s mind being clear of confusion and a complete understanding of the role he must play. The *Bhagavad Gita* thus views strength, courage and willpower as serving an esoteric purpose: one which less spiritually developed individuals may be unable to comprehend.

Mittelholzer found additional support for his personal mantra, Sieg Oder Tod⁸² (Victory or Death) in more mainstream cultural texts and embedded these in his own novels as a way of introducing Oriental Occultist ideas to his readers. In *Shadows Move Among Them* the author’s perennial battle cry is present not only in the heroic actions of Reverend Harmston’s daughter, Olivia – “I’ve held out like Verdun, and I’ve triumphed over my weakness”⁸³ - but also in her desire to play “See the conquering hero comes”⁸⁴ on the arrival to Berkelhoost of her war weary cousin and via her musings: “Into the valley of death [...] rode the six hundred”.⁸⁵ The former quote is taken from the lyrics to Handel’s *Judas Maccabaeus* in which we are also told: “And, conquering or conquer’d, claim the prize / of happy earth, or far more happy skies.”⁸⁶ The latter importantly references the famous Tennyson poem: “The Charge of Light Brigade” which memorialises the Battle of Balaclava (1854-56) in which over six hundred troops

⁸¹ Ibid; p. 33.

⁸² Op. cit., Mittelholzer, E. *A Swarthy Boy* p. 151.

⁸³ Mittelholzer, E. *Shadows Move Among Them* (Peepal Tree Press: Leeds, 2010) p. 37.

⁸⁴ Ibid; p. 33.

⁸⁵ Ibid; p. 36.

⁸⁶ See Handel, G. F. “Judas Maccabaeus [1747]” in Neff, L., *Public-Domain Opera Libretti and Other Vocal Texts*

Available at: <http://opera.stanford.edu/iu/libretti/judas.htm> (posted 2000; site visited 27 November 2012).

valiantly fought: "Their's not to reason why / Their's but to do and die: / Into the valley of Death / Rode the six hundred."⁸⁷

Eternal Man

It should be explained that the first intertextual reference to the *Bhagavad-Gita* appears in *My Bones and My Flute* (1955) - "It is true that, at twenty-three, I [i.e., Milton Woodsley] was fairly well informed and widely read, but an elementary knowledge of Yoga and the fact of having perused and minutely digested the *Bhagavad Gita* do not make one an authority on the mysteries of necromancy".⁸⁸ – and the second, *In a Tale of Three Places* (1957):

What I believe in is a sort of vital force that permeates all things, animate and inanimate – the Bhagavad Gita conception, more or less.⁸⁹

Whilst the initiated will be aware that Oriental Occultist beliefs are being explored in both novels, neither reference was arguably explicit enough to prompt further enquiry on the part of the ordinary reader. The lack of perception on the part of reviewers, critics and readers appears to have precipitated Mittelholzer's increasing tendency to preach as typified in *The Weather Family* (1958) when a third reference to the *Bhagavad-Gita* includes extensive quotes from the actual text. The flow of the story (which skilfully interweaves descriptions of Barbados's 1955 Hurricane Janet⁹⁰ around the life of David Harbin, the three women that are attracted to him and the turmoil of emotions expressed) is interrupted by the sudden introduction from Chapter 43 onwards of an gun-wielding, far from plausible, Oriental Occultist called Princess Esmeralda. Esmeralda talks to an audience of three characters about her belief in Astral Worlds, the After-life, the body as a vehicle for the Real-Self and

⁸⁷ See Tennyson, A. "The Charge of the Light Brigade" in Ferguson, M., Slater, M. J. & Stallworthy, J. *The Norton Anthology of Poetry: Fourth Edition* (W. W. Norton & Company: New York & London, 1996) Lines 14-17 p. 908

⁸⁸ Op. cit., Mittelholzer, E. *My Bones and My Flute* p. 104.

⁸⁹ Op. cit., Mittelholzer, E. *A Tale of Three Places* p. 59.

⁹⁰ A story about Hurricane Janet would have appealed to Mittelholzer because its name and inherent characteristics are suggestive of a powerful Jen/spirit.

reincarnation. She gives Eva Cranwell (a character who readily converts to Oriental Occultism) a book:

This is the Bhagavad Gita. It is a good translation – the best. Do not bother with Isherwood's. This is the best. It is by Yogi Ramacharaka.⁹¹

Quoting extensively from the *Bhagavad Gita*, Esmeralda then draws Eva's attention to page twenty-nine. The temptation, as a critic, to follow up on these references is made easier and more attractive in the context of today's Internet world.

Page twenty-nine of Ramacharaka's *Bhagavad Gita* leads the inquisitive reader onto passages that are particularly enlightening with regard to the author's view of **Jenetics** (spiritual inheritance), death, crime and punishment.

“How can a man who knoweth the truth – that the Real Man is eternal, indestructible, superior to time, change and accident, commit the folly of thinking that he can either kill; cause to be killed; or be killed himself? // “As a man throweth away his old garments, replace them with new and brighter ones, even so the Dweller of the body, having quitted its old mortal frame, entereth into others which are new and freshly prepared for it. // [...] // “Or if, perchance, thou believeth not these things and liveth in the illusion of belief in birth and death as realities – even so, asketh thee, why should thou lament and grieve? For, if this last be true, then as certain as it is that all men have been born, so it is certain that all men must die; therefore why grieve and fret thyself over the inevitable and unavoidable?⁹²

In earlier novels like *The Weather in Middenshot* (1952) the seemingly mad protagonist Mr Herbert Jarrow, has no sympathy for criminals and mocks those who attempt to find excuses for their behaviour:

⁹¹ Mittelholzer, E. *The Weather Family* (Secker & Warburg: London, 1958) p. 315.

⁹² Op. cit., Ramacharaka, Y. *The Bhagavad Gita* pp. 30-31.

An old lady sitting in a train at night and whonk! Down comes the cosh, and down again! And kick, kick her in the face, kick her in the rump, kick her in the stomach. Grab her purse and leave her crumpled and nearly dead. Off, my lads! What a lark! No one will hurt you – no one will flog you – no corporal punishment. Poor lads! *Blame society for your brutal thieving pranks. Blame environment – not your filthy heredity.* [...] Put them in approved schools so they can escape and cosh and kick more old ladies... [my italics]⁹³

Mittelholzer believing firmly in reincarnation based on just deserts, viewed genetic inheritance as the means through which our Karma is manifested. In keeping with this the Yogi, Herbert Lessier of *The Aloneness of Mrs Chatham* notes: “Everyone of us is what we are because of our actions in our past lives on earth.”⁹⁴ Importantly Mittelholzer also believed in “Dharma”⁹⁵ (or Right Action): that it is the individual’s task to strive for personal and communal betterment⁹⁶, to face and battle with inner demons and thereby secure access to a higher realm after death. The *Bhagavad Gita* similarly asserts that it is the responsibility of the spiritually developed and undeveloped to labour hard: the former being required to do so for the good of the common cause and in accordance with universal laws.

Those whose behaviour went contrary to the good of the majority evidently provoked Mittelholzer’s wrath. Echoing the attitude of the author, Hyacinth Withers of *The Weather in Middenshot*, notes that left to her the country would be rid of criminals and maniacs. When Mr Holmes asks her what she means, she replies:

“Kill them off. Not cruelly, but quietly, with some sort of sleeping drug – she forgot the name of it. Mor-something. Morphia? Yes, morphia, that was it. [...] Wasn’t it sensible to kill off criminals and lunatics rather than let them go

⁹³ Mittelholzer, E. *The Weather in Middenshot* (The John Day Company: New York, 1953 [1952]) p. 83.

⁹⁴ Mittelholzer, E. *The Aloneness of Mrs Chatham* (Library 33: London, 1965) p. 71.

⁹⁵ Op. cit., Ramacharaka, Y. *Advanced Course in Yogi Philosophy and Oriental Occultism* pp. 254-255 on the issue of crime and “restraint”.

⁹⁶ This thinking is also in line with the Nietzschean ‘super (or over) man’.

around maiming and murdering other people who were normal and unoffending?"⁹⁷

In *Shadows Move Among Them* characters that repeatedly commit crimes, are quietly put to death by snakebite on the instruction of Mr Harmston, the leader of the small Berkelhoost community. Since Mittelholzer's belief is that death is merely a transformation of the never dying spirit into another realm, these ideas become more understandable, although for most people no less disturbing. The point here is that his attitudes were not rooted in right-wing fascist politics but rather in his understanding of Oriental Occultism.

A Quite Explicit Fuhrer?

Wagner in a review of the novels Mittelholzer had published up to 1961 argues that in *Shadows Moves Among Them* every "element of the Fascist state in embryo is represented at Berkelhoost" with Mr Harmston portrayed as "a quite explicit Fuhrer".⁹⁸ Wagner's most severe indictment is that the Kaywana Trilogy peddles racist stereotypes with the same vehemence as the Nazi newspaper, *Der Stuermer*.⁹⁹ It should be highlighted that Collymore posted a copy of Wagner's review to Mittelholzer prior to its publication and sought his opinion of it: the author had replied that Wagner was entitled to his views and agreed to its publication in BIM.¹⁰⁰ The novel, *A Piling of the Clouds* (1961), seemingly attempts to respond to these accusations. Thus while Peter Elmfold (of *A Piling of the Clouds*) owns a gun and threatens to use it if necessary against "human vermin": criminals, teddy boys, spivs and undisciplined hooligans that wreak havoc, his friend Charles reassures his wife that there is no real cause for alarm: "You must remember...it's only an idiosyncrasy."¹⁰¹

⁹⁷ Mittelholzer, E. *The Weather in Middenshot* (The John Day Company: New York, 1953 [1952]) p. 106.

⁹⁸ Wagner, G. "Edgar Mittelholzer: Symptoms and Shadows" in *BIM* (Vol. 9, No. 33; July-Dec. 1961) p. 32.

⁹⁹ Ibid; p. 34.

¹⁰⁰ Op. cit., Guckhian, P. *Failure in Exile* p. 172.

¹⁰¹ Mittelholzer, E. *The Piling of the Clouds* (Putnam: London, 1961) p. 45.

Another of the novel's characters, Lillian notes that Peter is not as cruel as he espouses to be; after all he saved a bird's life, despite his acclaimed dislike of molly-coddling animals. Peter also defensively observes he has been branded an "outright Nazi" because of the blunt views he expresses. His wife Sally concurs: "you say things too pungently and angrily – and people misunderstand you and feel you're a bigger bad wolf than you are."¹⁰² Indeed Peter, when a friend kills his daughter, has neither the courage nor inclination to retaliate. This stands in sharp contrast to his liberal wife, Sally, who seeks revenge. In an earlier novel, *The Harrowing of Hubertus* (1954), the author's fear of being misunderstood is arguably expressed through the words of Faustina, the eponymous protagonist's mistress:

Take no notice of him, my dear child. His words mean nothing. It is always his actions you must judge him by. Remember that, and you will understand him: forget it, and you will deem him a despicable soul.¹⁰³

The protestations of Mittelholzer's characters do not appear to have been sufficiently convincing since critics have continued to view the author as both fascist and extremist on the subjects of death, sex and criminality.

This is perhaps not surprising: even friends and colleagues were not sure how closely his dominant literary themes mirrored the impulses of his real self. Henry Swanzy of the BBC's *Caribbean Voices* programme provides exemplification of this. Writing in 1952 Swanzy informed Mittelholzer about Gordon Woolford, a fellow Guianese writer who had "just come out of a mental home in Surrey, after a minor breakdown"¹⁰⁴: asking if he would help, Swanzy observes it "...is possibly opposed to your Nietzsche [sic] theories to help someone who is reduced as poor Gordon is, but I believe that beneath your forbidding exterior there beats a very kind heart."¹⁰⁵ Mittelholzer "very grieved"

¹⁰² Ibid; p. 153.

¹⁰³ Mittelholzer, E. *The Harrowing of Hubertus* (Secker & Warburg: London, 1954) p. 160.

¹⁰⁴ See letter dated 4th June 1952 in Henry Swanzy (Caribbean Voices) Collection (Ref: Box 1: MS42 1945-1952) held at the University of Birmingham.

¹⁰⁵ See Henry Swanzy (Caribbean Voices) Collection (Ref: Box 1: MS42 1945-1952) held at the University of Birmingham.

to hear of Gordon's situation retorted: "As you guessed, I'm not so "Nietzschen" [sic] at heart that I wouldn't like to help him if I could."¹⁰⁶

Given the author's brutal view of the world one might also be tempted to deduce, for instance, that he would behave in accordance with *Corentyne Thunder's* Geoffry. This 'mixed-race' character, often viewed as one of Mittelholzer's self-portraits, refers to the unborn child of his girlfriend as a "contemptible little foetus" and encourages her to abort it without reflecting on her needs. We know from a letter he wrote about a woman he had met, that he was far from ruthless or insensitive:

I am determined that nothing "serious" must happen between us... You know what I mean? I wouldn't like to get her in trouble, because my situation being so uncertain, I don't know when I'd be able to get married, and nothing would give me greater pain than to know I was the cause of her having to go through any suffering.¹⁰⁷

Extensive research into the author's life, correspondence and deliberate use of intertextual references clearly helps to establish the religious basis of the author's views and importantly highlights the dangers of drawing uninformed correspondences between autobiography and fiction.

Beyond Psychology: Psychic Projections/Phenomenon

A large number of Mittelholzer's characters do nevertheless share some of his traits and do articulate aspects of his complex belief system. In *The Jilkington Drama*, for instance, the key protagonist, Garvin expresses a mystical affinity with all weather, which Mittelholzer as an Oriental occultist and amateur meteorologist shared:

¹⁰⁶ Ibid; See letter dated 6 June 1952.

¹⁰⁷ See Ruth Wilkinson private collection: Letters from Mittelholzer to Ruth Wilkinson (circa March 1941 – 15th June 1962).

‘Do you sometimes feel yourself a *projection* of the weather?’ said Garvin. ‘As if you might be an emanation of rain falling, or sunshine in the trees? Or fog? Or even thunder and lightning? ... / ... that’s how I feel sometimes. ... Perhaps it’s something *mystical* in my make-up.’

[...] And God is in the weather – as in everything else. Well, it’s the weather that acts as my link with God. I feel I have a kinship with every kind of weather.’ [my italics]¹⁰⁸

The notion of psychic projection takes various forms in the Mittelholzer canon and will have been influenced by Ramacharaka’s *Fourteen Lessons in Yogi Philosophy and Oriental Occultism*: the topics of which include “Human Aura”, “Thought Dynamics”, “Telepathy, Clairvoyance”, “Human Magnetism”, “Psychic Influence” and “The Astral World”.

Notions of psychic projection may also have been influenced by the doctrines of *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, which according to Mittelholzer’s eldest daughter was a book he read and took seriously. The Tibetan text asserts that when an individual enters “bardo” (the time period between death and reincarnation or enlightenment) they will be faced with terrifying self-projections: how they respond is critical to their final destiny. This interval, if enlightenment is not attained, determines which of the six realms they will be reborn into and in what form. Those hoping to attain liberation from rebirth need to explore the contents of their “unconscious” minds¹⁰⁹: the contention being that individuals who learn to face and overcome their fear of psychic projections will be prepared for the moment of bardo. One of the mantras that is to be recited in the moment following death appears to have captured Mittelholzer’s imagination:

Now when the bardo of dharmata dawns upon me,
I will abandon all thoughts of fear and terror,
I will recognise whatever appears as my projection
and know it to be a vision of the bardo;

¹⁰⁸ Mittelholzer, E. *The Jilkington Drama* (Corgi Books: London, 1966) p. 30.

¹⁰⁹ Rinponche, G. *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* (Shambhala: Boston & London, 1992) p. 77.

now that I have reached this crucial point
I will not fear the peaceful and wrathful
ones, my own projections.¹¹⁰

The essence of this mantra, present in Arthur Lamby's allegorical story of "The Jen" in *A Morning at the Office*, is more fully explored in *My Bones and My Flute*. In the latter novel, the adventure that takes Milton Woodsley and the Nevinson Family beyond Goed de Vries into a jungle interior can be construed as a metaphorical journey into the unconscious or a story about the supernatural. The manifestations (good and bad) that the characters face are projections of the Dutchman, Jan Pieter Voorman; his restless spirit seeking release from a life of purgatory. The diary entry of the dead Dutchman explains:

It is I myself who plague myself in several forms projected and created by my errant will. These presences bear the essence of me Jan Pieter Voorman. When they call it is I would severally call. The evil I have created calls at the good in me. There are no demons but the demons our own wills evoke. [...] Holy candles and clean flames they shudder and shrink from, shriek and writhe before, and thunder tumultuously, they of the Dark, who are me and who attempt to conquer the good me.¹¹¹

The story of *Jan Pieter Voorman* alludes to the story of "The Jen" and the inner demons that we all have to face and also to an Oriental Occultist belief that:

... those who pursue the descending path [i.e., practice black magic] meet with a terrible punishment by reason of their own acts, and are often compelled to labour for ages before [finding] their way back to the Path upon which the sun of the Spirit shines brightly.¹¹²

As a musical inventor, Jan Pieter Voorman had called "to those of the Dark"¹¹³ in a bid to add three more keys to the flute and suffered the Karmic consequences.

¹¹⁰ Ibid; p. 94.

¹¹¹ Mittelholzer, E. *My Bones and My Flute* (New English Library: London, 1974 [1955]) p. 174.

¹¹² Op. cit., Ramacharaka, Y. *Advanced Course in Yogi Philosophy and Oriental Occultism* p. 48.

¹¹³ Op. cit., Mittelholzer, E. *My Bones and My Flute* p. 172.

The notion of bad Karma and astral beings (inhabiting other planes of existence) is similarly alluded to in *Shadows Move Among Them*. Believing in psychic phenomenon, Mr Harmston tells Gregory about the legacy of the 1763 Berbice Slave Rebellion:

Berbice was a flourishing colony. But the Dutch were cruel masters. [...] Two or three thousand slaves took charge of affairs practically overnight and the few hundred whites were slaughtered... [...] Later on when the Government gained control again, the rebel leaders were burnt at the stake and broken on the wheel. *Berkelhoost teams with passionate, cruel spirits.* The whole neighbourhood bristles with *the residual effluvia of past violence.* [my italics]¹¹⁴

The author presents a different but related scenario in *Morning at the Office*. Sitting at her desk fantasising about a paramour, Miss Henery suddenly feels rough, calloused hands rubbing her thighs: hands of the dead carpenter who made her desk¹¹⁵ and this was “no daydream”. As Gilkes recognised this scenario reflected: “Mittelholzer’s [...] belief in the interpenetration of ... material and spiritual worlds”.¹¹⁶ It did not however, given Mittelholzer’s esoteric beliefs serve “to illustrate the unpredictable terrifying aspect of the suppressed, libidinal self”.¹¹⁷ This assertion is substantiated in *My Bones and My Flute* (1955). When Mrs Nevinson insists her nightmare felt real, Milton Woodsley counters that Freud only explained dreams “as being symbolic of the functionings of the subconscious mind; he never tried to suggest that [it] might be connected with a supernatural event.”¹¹⁸ Milton is crucially rebuffed by Mr Nevinson who asks why they “should not be justified in entertaining the belief that [her nightmare] might actually be connected in some way with the events of actuality”¹¹⁹ simply because it was scientifically inexplicable.¹²⁰ Mittelholzer’s

¹¹⁴ Mittelholzer, E. *Shadows Move Among Them* (Peter Nevill: London, 1951) p. 67.

¹¹⁵ The psychic vision or sensation that is opened up by contact between a material object and living person is termed ‘psychometry’. Ramacharaka, Y. *Fourteen Lessons in Yogi Philosophy and Oriental Occultism* (The Yoga Publication Society: Chicago, 1903) p. 110.

¹¹⁶ Gilkes, M. “The Spirit in the Bottle: A Reading of Mittelholzer’s A Morning At The Office” in *Caribbean Quarterly* (Vol. 21: No. 4, 1975) p. 9.

¹¹⁷ Ibid; p. 9.

¹¹⁸ Mittelholzer, E. *My Bones and My Flute* (New English Library: London, 1974 [1955]) p. 92.

¹¹⁹ Ibid; p. 92.

belief in Karma and the reality of a non-material psychic world explains his well-established contempt for psychology¹²¹ and the notion that genetics plays as lesser role than social environment in the formation of an individual's character.

THE SPIRIT – FLESH DIALECTIC

The Pair of Opposites

Gilkes has argued that Mittelholzer's novels are preoccupied with "two-ness"¹²², the divided psyche of his characters and binary themes: rural versus urban, hereditary versus environment, strong versus weak, spirit versus flesh and so forth. On one level Gilkes' assertions are correct. However, it is important to recognise that Mittelholzer's themes, rooted in the teachings of the *Bhagavad Gita* are about the need to transcend these conceptual limitations. As Krishna tells Arjuna most people fail to seek unity, nurturing instead their 'otherness':

*Blinded by the pair of opposites, O Prince their eyes filled with the smoke of illusion – seeking instead of Unity, the opposing forms of like and dislike; men walk in the field of the Universe, deluded, all. Nay, not all – for there be a few who have freed themselves from the pair of opposites – who have discarded attachment – who have cleared their eyes of the smoke of illusion; such as these, O Prince, know Me to be the One – the All – and hold to me, steadfast and constant, in their love and devotion. [my italics]*¹²³

In *The Weather Family* Esmeralda's conflict is between the desire for spiritual enlightenment and the demands of the flesh. Described by her lover, John Branton as "schizo" and "split": she wants on some occasions to renounce sex and promote Oriental Occultism, and on others, to entice Branton into bed. Her

¹²⁰ See Ramacharaka, Y. *Fourteen Lessons in Yogi Philosophy and Oriental Occultism* (The Yoga Publication Society: Chicago, 1903) p. 18 for his similar view of the inadequacy of Western intellectual studies.

¹²¹ Op. cit., Mittelholzer, E. *A Swarthy Boy* p. 30 & p. 62.

¹²² See Gilkes, M.A. *The Caribbean Syzygy: A Study of the novels of Edgar Mittelholzer and Wilson Harris* (1973-74 A8j Ph.D., Kent, 24-332).

¹²³ Op. cit., Ramacharaka, Y. *The Bhagavad Gita* p. 86.

conflicts, as a passage she reads from the *Bhagavad Gita* reveals, are related to her stage of spiritual development:

The three great Gunas¹²⁴, or Principles of Nature [...] are known by these names, O Prince: Sattvas or Truth: Rajas, or Passion; and Tamas, or Indifference [...]. And each, and all, tend to bind the Soul within the Body – the Universal Soul within Nature. As Above so Below, the three serve to bind and hold the higher to the lower. But the binding differeth in its nature, O Prince, thou all are bonds. Thus *Sattvas*, or Truth, being pure and stainless, bindeth the soul by attachment to Wisdom and Harmony, and bringeth it back to rebirth because of the bonds of Knowledge and Understanding. And *Rajas*, or Passion, is of the nature of burning Desire, and doth bind the soul by attachment to Action, and Things and Objects, and doth bring it back to re-birth because of the bonds of Worldly Hunger and Thirst for Having and Doing. And *Tamas*, or Indifference, is of an ignorant, dark, stupid and heavy nature, and bindeth the soul by attachment to Sloth, and Idleness, and Folly and Indolence, bringing it back to re-birth because of the bonds of Ignorance, Stupidity, Heedlessness – ¹²⁵

As an occultist Esmeralda's objective is to overcome her attachment to the 'Rajas' (or passions) that bind her spirit to her physical body. But Mittelholzer as always only took from texts what appeared to him, on examination, to be true. Though aware that some Hindus and Yogis aspired to and/or achieved a life of celibacy in their pursuit of the 'Real Self' – this exemplified in *Autobiography of a Yogi* by Paramhansa¹²⁶ Yogananda, which Mittelholzer had read – it is evident

¹²⁴ It should be noted that Ramacharaka, despite his belief in the 'Oneness of All', established a connection between 'race' evolution and spiritual development: asserting in at least one of his texts that 'the Bushman', "scarcely more than a brute", had little of what can be called a spiritual consciousness. See Ramacharaka, Y. *Fourteen Lessons in Yogi Philosophy and Oriental Occultism* (The Yoga Publication Society: Chicago, 1903) pp. 29-30. This aspect of Ramacharaka's writing could have added to Mittelholzer's racial ambivalence. Given the historical context it would not have been surprising if he had perceived a pseudo-correlation between the three 'Gunas' and hierarchies of race, colour and class in Guiana, with the White European elite being bound to Sattvas, the Coloured middle-class to Rajas (or a combination of all three) and those of African descent to Tamas. Mittelholzer's choice of an all white cast variously tied to Sattvas, Rajas and Tamas in his novel, *The Wounded and the Worried* 1962 importantly, suggests otherwise.

¹²⁵ Mittelholzer, E. *The Weather Family* (Secker & Warburg: London, 1958) p. 315.

¹²⁶ See Mittelholzer, E. *A Tinkling in the Twilight* (Secker & Warburg: London, 1959) p. 120 in which Margaret tells Brian Liddard about a book she saw advertised about "the life of Paramhansa", the "Yogi" and later bought.

that he did not personally advocate complete celibacy and instead sought a life of balance.

Achieving Balance

In *The Wounded and the Worried* (1962) Fanny Newbold (metonymically representing “namby pamby” liberal Britain) decides to open up her Ravensdene home to survivors of suicide. Her “cases” include: Gwendolin Wellings, a retired woman whose life is drab; Stella Burges, a young American whose first husband killed himself in a shooting accident whilst drunk; and Hilary Thomas Barrington-Dellow (otherwise known as Tom) who was an ex-priest and mystic. Although Fanny sets out to care for all three of her patients, she is assailed with doubts and insecurities. Believing in nothing, she feels empty and is according to Tom plagued by Tamas: “indifference, lethargy and cowardliness”.

Tom, aware Fanny secretly reads his black diary, writes that people need to be believe in something but that something should not be rooted in materialism: in the produce of farmers or factories, the finance of the banking industry, in the words of the media or politicians and least of all in the teachings of Christian parsons or scientists. What humans should aim to discover is the eternal “Flame” that exists in all of us.¹²⁷ Although Tom believes that the teachings of the church are “mumbo-jumbo”, he continues to value their rituals (the music, vestments and candles). Tom thus takes Fanny to a Sung Eucharist at a Norman church in the hope that it will uplift her spirits. The church’s stain glass window that depicts St George slaying the dragon appears symbolic of the power of Old England and Fanny’s need to reclaim this aspect of her historical past.

Tom similarly takes responsibility for the care of Stella. The two develop a close bond: they feel comfortable talking openly about their suicides and are physically attracted to each other. When they discuss sex, Stella admits that she had been disgusted by sex with her husband because he was always drunk. Tom

¹²⁷ Op. cit., Mittelholzer, E. *The Wounded and the Worried* p. 32.

telling her about the *Bhagavad Gita* suggests that she (representing America) is shackled by Rajas: “sensual pleasure, greed and other not highly commendable things”.¹²⁸ She admits being drawn to sex but clarifies that she wanted it to be “earthy” rather than “filthy”. Tom in turn admits he had indulged in sex before and after his priesthood. He had wanted to experience everything in his journey towards “self-realization” but it was his belief that sexual cravings could be overcome through willpower: the “Intellectual Mind” could take control of the “Instinctive Mind”.¹²⁹ One reason he had wanted to put an end to his life was the absence of these concepts in the field of psychology. Tom is initially hesitant about having sex with Stella because he is concerned about the sensibilities of Fanny and Gwen. When they do eventually make love, Stella feels completely satisfied: he did not “babble crap”, “breath liquor” in her face, or spit out “four-letter words”; he didn’t “fumble about” or “fire off after two or three minutes”.¹³⁰ Apart from satisfying a deep need in Stella, Tom Dellow achieves the balance that he personally seeks, the balance between sex as a biological function and sex as subordinate to the needs of the spirit:

Stated in the simplest terms, we can’t do without eating, no matter how academically we view the subject. And the same more or less applies to sex. We develop nervous tension when we try to do without it. [...] But what I’m trying to impress on you really is this. We can be masters of both eating and sex if we let our Intellectual Minds take precedence over our Instinctive Minds. In certain books on Eastern philosophy you read of the Intellectual Mind and the Instinctive Mind. The one controls the more refined part of us – the spirit side, if I may so put it; the other sees after the functions of the body. Through our own wills we decide which of the two should have the greater say.¹³¹

Gwenolyn Wellings seemingly represents Britain of Old. Portrayed as strong even in defeat, the narrator describes her as being akin to “the World’s Great Ash Tree from which one day, during a violent thunderstorm, the spear of

¹²⁸ Ibid; p. 111.

¹²⁹ This is in keeping with the teachings of Ramacharaka. See Ramacharaka, Y. *Fourteen Lessons in Yogi Philosophy and Oriental Occultism* (The Yoga Publication Society: Chicago, 1903).

¹³⁰ Op. cit., Mittelholzer, E. *The Wounded and the Worried* p. 75.

¹³¹ Ibid; p. 67.

god would be hewn".¹³² She is shackled by Satvas: "the best [of the three gunas] because it has to do with wisdom and truth and knowledge."¹³³; these he claims are what rule her life. In some ways he is more concerned about her prudish attitudes toward sex but conscious she does not have the capacity to understand his unorthodox beliefs. Her attitude is one of intellectual superiority: she is a "sneerer" and exudes this out of every pore in her body. On the subject of suicide Tom admits that: "Deep under the crust of my indifference I cared furiously. That was really my undoing."¹³⁴ Tom sees Gwen as a challenge and does all he can to save her from a repeat attempt at suicide. By the end of the novel, Gwen chooses life and begins to believe in the ideas that Tom has shared with her. All have been saved from the desire to commit suicide and are set on a path of self-realisation. At a metaphorical level this novel is about Mittelholzer's hope that the liberal Britain (Fanny Newbold) of the 1960s will revert to the powerful Britain of old (as represented by Gwendolin Wellings) on the proviso it overcomes its sexual pruderies. The discussions between Tom and Gwen, and Tom and Stella, suggest that sex should and can be a part of a spiritual life so long as it is not sordid.

Bound by Rajas (or Passion)

The need for balance is illustrated in other novels such as *A Tinkling in the Twilight* when the celibate and suicidal bookseller, Brian Liddard, eventually finds happiness in marriage to fellow occultist, Margaret Beaver: "I've decided to mingle the Physical with the Psychic and produce Harmony – and even children."¹³⁵ In *A Piling of the Clouds* (1961) the author takes up the theme of the Spirit-Flesh: this time considering the fate of a man whose secret desires and sexual repressions are dangerous to others. The narrative tension is created from the beginning by a celibate bachelor, Charles Pruthick: whenever near Jeannette Elmfold, the nine-year child he baby-sits, his body trembles. On

¹³² Ibid; p. 11.

¹³³ Ibid; p. 111.

¹³⁴ Ibid; p. 94.

¹³⁵ Op. cit., Mittelholzer, E. *A Tinkling in the Twilight* p. 268.

admitting that in his everyday life he “acts like mad”, the reader suspects there may be a sinister side to his personality:

Haven't we all got to act to conceal our dark, basic instincts! [...] We all do it every day – as soon as we get to a certain age, as soon as we become aware of the turgid stirrings within us.¹³⁶

During the course of the novel Sally Elmfold, Jeannette's mother attempts to seduce him. On the first occasion when he rebuffs her, he admits to having a kink. Sally, reflecting on his celibate lifestyle, realises it must be sex-related. The tension rises when Jeannette, alone with Charles, asks him to tell her stories about his childhood. It transpires Charles had on previous occasions confessed a desire for a sister and would kiss Jeannette, as an illustration of the affection he would lavish on her. Events worsen when Jeannette opens a brown envelope belonging to Charles: inside are naked photographs of girls, one of whom looks like her. Charles, aware of Jeannette's discovery, makes her promise not to reveal his secret. Peter Elmfold, Jeannette's father notices that Charles' behaviour has become unsettled but instead of finding out what might be wrong, turns his attention elsewhere.

Charles' sexual perversion is partially attributed to the repressive nature of British society: “Oh, God! This England and its pruderies! Why did I have to grow up as I did! So shut in, so encompassed by fears and petty dreads about things that, after all, are simple – simply natural urges.”¹³⁷ But Charles' kink, unlike that of Brian Liddard's (*A Tinkling in the Twilight*) or Stella Burges' (*The Wounded and the Worried*), cannot be resolved by a change in lifestyle or partner and is ultimately attributed to the genetics he was born with:

[...] the incidents of our early life don't have a quarter the impact on our characters that psychologists make out. The fact of someone hurting me terribly some time in my youth couldn't turn me into a sadist or a masochist if I hadn't

¹³⁶ Mittelholzer, E. *A Piling of the Clouds* (Putnam: London, 1961) p. 25.

¹³⁷ Ibid; p. 134.

been born with a strong proclivity that way. It couldn't shape my character to the extent of turning me into a criminal or pervert of some sort---¹³⁸

When Charles eventually succumbs to Sally's flirting, he asks her to walk around his bedroom naked while he watches. Sally attempts to reassure him that he is not human vermin for whilst he may have a voyeuristic kink he does not, like a criminal, harm women and children. But this merely enrages him: "Hasn't it struck you that I cover up every time you mention my 'kinks', as you call them! Can't you see that it's hellish for me to contemplate – yes, just to contemplate – on what's wrong with me, let alone for me to discuss it with anyone! [...] Look I'll tell you frankly. If I revealed to you what was wrong with me I'd have to take my life."¹³⁹

Disaster is inevitable when Charles realises Jeannette will eventually tell her parents about his collection of photographs. This was a moment he had long foreseen:

[...] A piling of the clouds. I saw them like mere rags on the horizon. But they grew darker and larger. [...] Now they're angry and dangerous. At any instant lightning may strike...¹⁴⁰

When alone with Jeannette, Charles agrees to comply with her request for a bedtime story. The story echoes the tale of "The Jen" in *A Morning at the Office* but in this retelling the little girl is the Jen (or Jinnee) and Charles, the tall, lonely man who contrary to outward appearance, is truly dreadful:

Once upon a time, in the country, on a fine summer's day, a man wandered along a path, searching, searching...[...] for a little girl to keep him company. A lonely, tall man who had never had a sister. She would be a lovely sweet creature who would let him rest his head on her breast, who would let him caress her cheek and tell her of his loneliness... [...] And he would tell her of the troubles that

¹³⁸ Ibid; pp. 168-169.

¹³⁹ Ibid; pp. 204-205.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid; p. 246.

burdened him, of the terrible passions that tortured him in the night--- [...] Terrible tortures. I'd tell her of the nightmares dreamt while wide awake. Of a car entering a park and a man sitting like a spectre in the deep twilight waiting for little girls to pass. Of the fears of terrible events. Of something turning red and then black in his head and a little girl squealing in his arms. Of despair and disgust spreading through his soul---¹⁴¹

Charles tells Jeannette to go upstairs to bed realising he is a danger to her. When she refuses they begin a tickling game with her in the role of his sister. As the game gets out of control, Jeannette screams and Charles kills her. Sally and Peter arrive home to discover that "Jeannie" has been assaulted. They find Charles in his dining room where he has just finished writing a letter of explanation to the police. Charles realises Peter does not have the will to kill him despite the extreme right wing views he claims to hold. Grabbing Peter's revolver, Charles shoots himself. In this novel Mittelholzer is at a subtextual level exploring his character's fate, not just in terms of the gunas (Charles is shackled by rajas) but also in terms of his Karmic/spiritual inheritance. Charles' decision to commit suicide is thus represented by the author (presumably believing that he was in danger of repeating the crime on release from prison) as the best solution for society as a whole. It also suggests that Mittelholzer's interpretation of spirit was more akin to that of the Muslim jinn: having the potential to be bad, good or a blend of the two.¹⁴² In *Oriental Occultism* the concept of "Spirit" notably transcends the human conception of morality.

It should be noted the events of this novel take place during Whitsuntide. This is itself an important intertextual clue as to the novel's meaning. For those unaware Pentecost, which commemorates the descent of the Holy Spirit in the form of flames upon the Apostles, was known in England until 1967 as Whitsun. Filled with the Spirit of Truth, the Apostle Peter is said to have preached a

¹⁴¹ Ibid; p. 249.

¹⁴² This aspect of Mittelholzer's thinking can be attributed in part to his upbringing. As far as his grandmother was concerned, and based on her experience, "There were no intermediary shades in her scheme of morality. People were either good or bad, wicked or righteous." Op. Cit., Mittelholzer, E. *A Swarthy Boy* p. 47.

sermon resulting in the conversion of 3,000 people to Christianity. In the Authorised King James Version, Acts 2: 2-4 we are told:

²And suddenly there came a sound from heaven as of a rushing mighty wind, and it filled all the house where they were sitting. ³And there appeared unto them cloven tongues like as of fire, and it sat upon each of them. ⁴And they were all filled with the Holy Ghost, and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance.¹⁴³

It is no coincidence that the novel is set during Whitsuntide or that the key protagonist Peter Elmford shares the Apostle's name. Always convinced everything is going to be okay the novel's Peter fails to foresee impending disaster. It is conversely his wife, Sally who senses something is wrong: "It's simply...I don't know what it is, but today after speaking to Mother I had a peculiar feeling. About the Whitsun week-end. Perhaps it's the Scottish blood in me or something. The Scots are supposed to have second sight, they say. I just had a feeling that something is going to go wrong on our outing at Whitsuntide."¹⁴⁴ The intent here is perhaps to ridicule the redundant teachings of the Bible or more specifically, the teachings and persona of the disciple, Peter.

Materialist, Romanticist, Crusader or Dilettante

In many respects *The Aloneness of Mrs Chatham* (1965) appears to have been written by Mittelholzer as a desire to be understood. When Sheila notes that Harpo is a materialist, Herbert advises her not to let that word lead her astray:

He may tell you he is a materialist – but in actuality, he's much more than that. He's a romanticist as well, and also a crusader, which means that the spiritual comes into it [...]. His is not merely a selfish craving for success in creative pursuits. He has a dream. Or shall I say a mystique? It doesn't matter. But what

¹⁴³ Carroll, R. & Prickett, S. (Intro) *The Bible: Authorized Kings James Version* (Oxford University Press: Oxford, 1997) p. 148.

¹⁴⁴ Op. cit., Mittelholzer, E. *The Piling of the Clouds* p. 14.

I mean is he wants sincerely to improve mankind. There's a typescript upstairs – it's just been returned for the third time by a publishers – and in it he writes like a man inspired...¹⁴⁵

Mittelholzer had observed in 1949 during his time at the Books Department of the British Council that virtually every book he read could be “neatly classified” and seemed replete with “stereotyped sameness”:

Why can't somebody, I feel, get out of the rut and do something fresh, something with a new twist—something that can't be slickly pigeon-holed by critics. And why has every writer got to get known for one kind of novel and only one kind? And why, above all, must one observe set rules in order to pander to the critics and the public?¹⁴⁶

Birbalsingh once commented that Mittelholzer's novels were uniquely imaginative because he had dared to mix racist or fascist theories with transcendentalism, occultism, eroticism and sado-masochism. Whilst he recognised the author's desire to be different (experimental and unique), his description of Mittelholzer's work is based on a misunderstanding of some of his themes and belief-system. Mittelholzer's bitterness, like Harpo's, arguably came about because reviewers, critics and intellectuals failed to take his literature seriously: “Pity he wasn't content to be a dilettante. He [i.e., Harpo] hasn't got enough creative talent to be a success as an active dabbler.”¹⁴⁷ It is telling too, in *A Piling of the Clouds*, that Charles Pruthick entrusted with and responsible for the care of Jeannette, ultimately kills her. Peter's “Jeannie” (or Jinnee) is here, a private metaphor for Mittelholzer's novels; the literary creations he produced under the guidance of his ‘Spirit’. Charles, the essentially celibate (a metaphor for the absence of creative potential) tax *inspector* should evidently have been nurturing Peter's creation, particularly given “Jeannie's” young age. Importantly Religion and Sex, Spirit and Flesh (Flesh is sex, desire and creativity), had found unity in Mittelholzer's conception of the Jinn-“Jeannie”.

¹⁴⁵ Mittelholzer, E. *The Aloneness of Mrs Chatham* (Library 33: London, 1965) p. 102.

¹⁴⁶ Mittelholzer, E. Letter to Leonard Woolf dated 20th December 1949 (See Leonard Woolf Archives (Ref: LWP Part III General Correspondence / M) held at the University of Sussex).

¹⁴⁷ Op. cit., Mittelholzer, E. *The Aloneness of Mrs Chatham* p. 100.

But what if Mittelholzer's creative-spirit was somehow corrupted, bad or flawed? As his second wife, Jacqueline, recalls he "could never tolerate anything – inside or outside himself – which seemed wrong"¹⁴⁸, detesting as he often remarked, "imperfection". The fears this may have created in Mittelholzer seem to be represented in *Thunder Returning*, when the key protagonist Richard Lehrer alludes to a German version of the Guianese 'Water People' story. A surprise meeting with his German ex-mistress, Lindy, stirs up "old yearnings" in him: "Wish-fulfilments unfulfilled expect in my night-time dreams, many I can't even remember coherently when I'm awake."¹⁴⁹; and most he claims not to understand. But later on in the narrative, Richard admits: "Oh, God! I understand it all right, but I mustn't even speak it aloud in the silence of myself. I must merely hear it out of the corner of my ear, so to speak and smile and nod. Ich weiss nicht... [i.e., I don't know] But *I* know, *I* know. . . Ein Märchen aus alten Zeiten... [i.e., a tale from ancient times]].¹⁵⁰ This final sentence appears to refer to a poem, "Die Lore-Ley" by the German Romantic poet, Heinrich Heine, the first stanza of which is:

Ich weiss nicht, was sol les bedeuten,
Des ich so traurig bin;
Ein Märchen aus alten Zeiten, [my italics]
Das Kommt mir nicht aus dem Sinn.¹⁵¹

This has been loosely translated as follows:

I know not what it should imply,
That I am so forlorn;
A tale from times so long gone by
From my thoughts will not be torn.¹⁵²

¹⁴⁸ Ives, J. *The Idyll and the Warrior: Recollections of Edgar Mittelholzer* (unpublished and in the possession of Mrs J. Ives) p. 49.

¹⁴⁹ Mittelholzer, E. *Thunder Returning* (Secker and Warburg: London, 1961) pp. 64-65.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid; p. 67.

¹⁵¹ Heine, H. "Die Lore-Ley" in Department of German (University of California: site visited 25 December 2011, <http://german.berkeley.edu/poetry/loreley.php>).

The German tale that Heine goes on to relate is that of a beautiful sea-maiden with the tail of a fish and golden hair that she brushes with a golden comb. As she sings her mesmerising songs she lures men to their deaths on the rocky outcrops of the Lore-ley (or Lorelei) within the river Rhine. It is possible to speculate that this reflects Richard Lehrer's (and the author's) fear of her German 'flesh': the by-products of a sexual encounter with her and likelihood that it will ultimately lead to death. Sexual infidelity in *Thunder Returning* was the catalyst to disaster: the suicide of Richard's wife, Lydia, and dissolution of his German ex-mistress's marriage to Tommy. Sexual infidelity here presumably refers on a metaphorical level to Mittelholzer's literary engagement with the products of German culture (Nietzsche, Wagner, alleged fascism, etc).

As Richard's worries are never explicitly articulated, the above analysis remains speculative. As he tells Lindy, "there are things under the surface" that he is aware of but does not choose to analyse:

These shadow-things concern myself only – the deep, unrevealed part of me. The part of me I'm afraid of and hardly even like to face up to myself. I curtain it off from myself – but I know what's behind the curtain. Oh, I know only too well. It's no mystery to *me*.¹⁵³

The intertextual reference to Heine's "Die Lory-Ley", given its 'Sex-Death' theme, is linked to Mittelholzer's first novel and this re-emphasised by the intra-canonical link between the titles: *Thunder Returning* and *Corentyne Thunder*. Perhaps the circumstances leading up to the publication (outlined in Chapter 2) of *Corentyne Thunder* in fact relates to Richard Lehrer's abstruse reference to a tale from ancient times. In that novel the character Geoffry has an affair with his Indian half-aunt, Kattree. Ramgolall's disapproval of their relationship leads Geoffry to assume he is seen as an awful villain and roué. Talking to Kattree's jumbie [another spirit associated with a Jinnee] he remarks:

¹⁵² Heine, H. "Die Lore-Ley" in Department of German (University of California: site visited 25 December 2011, <http://german.berkeley.edu/poetry/loreley.php>).

¹⁵³ Op. cit., Mittelholzer, E. *Thunder Returning* p. 216.

There are so many things one would like to root oneself away from but just can't. Where sex is concerned especially, I can't help myself when it comes to sex. *I'm like a piece of wood moving towards the centre of a whirl-pool.* [...] In a way, the thought of sex irritates me. It seems so petty and contemptible. And yet it attracts me such a terrific lot that I can't do without it. *That's what makes me want to commit suicide sometimes, you see.* [my italics]¹⁵⁴

Whilst Geoffry aims to restrain himself by effort of will he senses something inevitable about his sexual drive, and notes later on in the novel that if he were to commit suicide it will be because of the compulsive nature of his sex drive. The meaning ultimately appears to be rooted in the 'Sex (creativity) or Death' motif that is played out in *Sylvia*, while the compulsive nature of Mittelholzer's creativity is made evident in this excerpt from an unpublished poem, 'Poet Creating':¹⁵⁵

Why must I create and create?
What Lernian Hydra¹⁵⁶ with unresting mania
Impels my pen, compels my mind
To feed and feed and sate
Its many mouths— its all-hungry yearning bellies?
[...]

And no peace, no peace for me—
No cooling wind, no shade of tamarind tree
To give me respite from this surging thing;
No wizard-wand from out the burning day
To touch my spirit and wake me free.

In the two *Thunder* novels, Richard Lehrer and Geoffry Weldon are notably drawn to morally unacceptable forms of sexual (i.e., creative) activity: adultery

¹⁵⁴ Mittelholzer, E. *Corentyne Thunder* (Heinemann: London, 1970 [1941]) p. 196.

¹⁵⁵ Dated 15th March 1941, this poem is part of the Ruth Wilkinson Collection (private ownership): Letters from Mittelholzer to Ruth Wilkinson (circa March 1941 – 15th June 1962).

¹⁵⁶ A Lernian [or Lernaean] Hydra, from Greek mythology, was a monstrous serpent with numerous heads that attacked with poisonous venom. As one of its head was immortal it was, ultimately, indestructible.

and incest. If 'sexual perversion' is accepted as a metaphor for Mittelholzer's unconventional, experimental and readily disparaged literary creations (influenced by German and Indian thought), then it appears he feared the consequences of being compelled to write in accordance with his 'Real (spiritual) Self': the possibility of being viewed as a literary hack, and of having an untimely death. His lack of popularity might also lead to the re-enslavement of his literary spirit or **genius** and/or the non-publication of his literary works: a possibility he could not countenance. Like the eponymous character Sylvia he must have wanted to be clairvoyant: "to have been able to view the...future...so that she could know whether it would be worth putting up a struggle in its cause. She would hate to struggle and not win, to go through the welter of agony and then fade out like tints in a sunset sky."¹⁵⁷

The Death of a 'Free-Thinking' Yogi

In *The Jilkington Drama*, the widowed character, Garvin (a reader of occultist material) believes his late wife is alive in the dimension of "true reality". When Lilli, his stepsister, expresses a desire to join a convent, he threatens to commit suicide. He then, without explaining its significance, tells her:

I have a stock of fireworks in my room. I keep adding to it every week. One day – perhaps before November – you might be able to see me sending them up into the sky. I see each rocket going up into the sky as a symbol of a rising spirit. The soaring psyche. Up, up! Not down, down into the filth of the earth. No cesspits where rockets are concerned.¹⁵⁸

He remarks (at the novel's end) that he can now understand the pattern that has been developing in his mind over the years: "The Pattern. I can see it in focus now."¹⁵⁹ When Lilli declines his offer of marriage he again becomes confused: "It seems as if I'm never to escape the convolutions of this Pattern I've built up. It's like planning to find your way out of the maze at Hampton Court and

¹⁵⁷ Mittelholzer, E. *Sylvia* (Four Square Books: London, 1963 [1953]) p. 150.

¹⁵⁸ Mittelholzer, E. *The Jilkington Drama* (Corgi Books: London, 1966) p. 31.

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid*; p. 171.

knowing you'll do it, yet at the same time your secret hope is to remain wondering around in a bliss of aimlessness."¹⁶⁰ He had hoped that marriage to her would allow him to find meaning in the material world while weaving fantasies around her lovely spirit. Her negative response therefore leaves him feeling forced "to find the exit"¹⁶¹ and more determined to fulfill his "death-wish".

Later when he finds out Lilli is sullied – she had slept with his father – he feels as though he has been set free: "Now what am I fit for? Only to soar away. To ignite a light to light my way into the dark. The dark of Darkness where lies the true path to Reality".¹⁶² Lilli soon after hears the sound of something whistling through the air. Looking out of the window she realises that it is a rocket bursting out into a shower of green behind an elm tree. Mary, Garvin's daughter, rushes into the dining room and tells those present that he is letting off rockets, having told her that he wants to be left alone, to complete the "last details of the Pattern". Deciding that they ought to check on him, everyone hurries outside, only to see him standing in a "ring of fire". When they attempt rescue him he tells them to leave him alone: "Can't you see all this is planned? [...] I have my own destiny to work out..."¹⁶³ and "other dimensions to investigate".¹⁶⁴

Severely burnt, he is taken to hospital and thereafter dies. Fire is always in the Mittelholzer canon represented as a source of fascination. In *The Wounded and the Worried* (1962) the narrator's description of a log fire prophetically predicts Mittelholzer's chosen method of suicide: "The *logs* uttered breathing hisses sometimes, or sharp whip-like cries, as though *creatures were being set free by the heat from the heart of the wood*. [my italics]"¹⁶⁵ But why should the fire motif have emerged as a "Pattern" that Mittelholzer needed to fulfil?

¹⁶⁰ Ibid; p. 175.

¹⁶¹ Ibid; p. 175.

¹⁶² Ibid; p. 178.

¹⁶³ Ibid; p. 186.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid; p. 184.

¹⁶⁵ Op. cit., Mittelholzer, E. *The Wounded and the Worried* p. 33.

It can be assumed from the text that Garvin had read the *Bhagavad Gita*. As Krishna tells Arjuna it is important for a devotee to learn wisdom through study, thought, service and investigation: indeed the “offering of Wisdom” is the most important form of sacrifice that a Yogi can make. Having done this the devotee will, so Krishna explains, be released from “confusion, misunderstanding and error”. Like a pattern all will be made clear. According to the *Bhagavad Gita*:

As the flame reduceth the wood to ashes which are borne away by the wind, so shalt the fire of Truth convert into ashes the result of the evil actions which though hast committed in ignorance and error. Verily, in the world, there is no purifying agent like unto the Flame of Spiritual Truth. And he who acquireth it findeth himself purged of the dross of Personality and in time findeth the Real Self.¹⁶⁶

When Mittelholzer committed suicide in May 1965 it was the realisation of a fate he had long foreseen, but it was not the passive death the author had portrayed in *Sylvia*.

In Hinduism, suicide out of cowardice results in reincarnation to the lowest realm. A ‘warrior’ can however vow that if he does not achieve victory (or perform a certain act) within a given time, he will end his life. This act of prayopavesa is played out in the *Mahabharata* for when Arjuna’s son is killed as a result of the actions of Jayatradha, he vows to take revenge before sunset the following day and adds: “If I do not kill Jayatradha by sunset tomorrow, I will perform prayopavesa, by falling into fire.”¹⁶⁷ This mythological practice may have been given credence in Mittelholzer’s mind, when he read about the well-publicized self-immolation of the Buddhist monk, Thich Quang Duc on 16th June 1963: the latter’s act being a form of protest against religious persecution under the Diem regime. Thus reminiscent of Rose in *Kaywana Blood* and Siegfried, in

¹⁶⁶ Op. cit., Ramacharaka, Y. *The Bhagavad Gita* p. 60.

¹⁶⁷ See Anon. “Arjuna and his Vow” in *Time Management in Mahabaratha* <http://www.chennaionline.com/festivalsnreligion/Articles/epicstory41.asp> (posted date unstated: site visited 5 August 2006).

the finale of Wagner's *Götterdämmerung*¹⁶⁸, Heracles (killer of the Lernean Hydra and Stymphalian Birds in Greek Mythology¹⁶⁹) Mittelholzer's life ended in a symbolically charged, ball of flames. He shows a degree of self-awareness in *A Swarthy Boy* when he reveals myth – as he grew older – took an ever-increasingly powerful hold over his imagination. Howard thus comes close to the truth when he observes that the author's death was the result of his own "tragic vision".¹⁷⁰ But Mittelholzer, rightly or wrongly must have viewed it as the heroic freeing, or purging of his Jinn, his Real Spirit self.

¹⁶⁸ Ives records that Mittelholzer's death tied up "rather dramatically with the ending of Wagner's *Götterdämmerung*, which Edgar had been playing on the record two days previously". See Ives, J. *The Idyll and the Warrior: Recollections of Edgar Mittelholzer* (unpublished and in the possession of Mrs J. Ives) p57. It is in this context interesting to note that Milton declares: "Wagner is my composer above all others" and "Music for me...must be strong and passionate – flaming". See Mittelholzer, E. *Sylvia* (Four Square Books: London, 1963 [1953]) p. 198.

¹⁶⁹ We know Mittelholzer envisaged himself as Heracles killing off the Stymphalian Birds as this echoes his objective in *Corentyne Thunder* to kill off the Romantic ideologies of the character, Stympy.

¹⁷⁰ See Howard, W. J. "Edgar Mittelholzer's Tragic Vision" in *Caribbean Quarterly* (Vol. 16, No. 4; Dec. 1970)

CHAPTER SIX

HOO-ARE-YOO?

They heard a goatsucker hoo-you-ing amid the bamboos [...].

‘Do you hear that? A goatsucker. Amelia, you won’t ever know how much that bird means to me.

This is my terrain.’¹

“The real self is pure spirit, a spark of the divine fire.”²

INTRODUCTION

What I’m Not...

In *A Morning at the Office* (1950) Nanette Hinckson, a member of the coloured middle-class is aware that in America (quite unlike in the West Indies), she would “be called a Negro outright” but that in her opinion “was wrong”:

It was inaccurate to clump together all coloured peoples of pure and partial Negro strains and dub them Negro. Why should a person be described as Negro because he happened to have a great-grandfather or great-great-grandfather who was a pure-blooded Negro? A person one-eighth Negro and seven-eighths white – if you looked at the matter both equitably and logically – should have more right to call himself white than black. ‘Coloured’ was the correct designation for such a person, for it indicated that while he was not white neither was he black.³

Richard Lehrer, the key protagonist of *Latticed Echoes* (1960), makes this same point when asked if he was willing to be interviewed for a black magazine, “Carbon”. He acknowledges his “Negro blood” but refuses to be interviewed on the grounds he does not identify with “the Negro race”: “How can I remember my

¹ Mittelholzer, E. *Children of Kaywana* (Secker & Warburg: London, 1960 [1952]) p. 494.

² Ramacharaka, Y. *Fourteen Lessons in Yogi Philosophy and Oriental Occultism* (The Yoga Publication Society: Chicago, 1903) p. 5.

³ Mittelholzer, E. *A Morning at the Office* (Penguin Books: Harmondsworth, 1964 [1950]) p. 143.

German and English ancestors, stare at my [European-looking] reflection in the mirror and dare call myself a Negro?"⁴ The North American practice of defining as Negro anyone with Negro blood (e.g., like Nonnie Anderson of *Strange Fruit* with her egg-shell white complexion) was the source of life-long irritation to Mittelholzer. In an unpublished article written in 1953, he expresses the same sentiments as *A Morning at the Office's*, Nanette Hinckson, and then concludes:

I cannot hold myself responsible for the childish fallacies of the North American continent. If I took these seriously I should have to look upon half the population of southern Europe as negro [sic]. For where did the swarthy French Provençals, Spaniards, Italians and Portuguese acquire their swarthinness but from Africa?⁵

Mittelholzer sarcastically points out the day may come when (assuming Americans carry out adequate research) Alexander Pushkin would be referred to as the Negro poet who wrote in Russian and Alexandre Dumas as the Negro writer of *The Three Musketeers*. As of 1953 they were "by the grace of North America" still known respectively as a Russian poet and a French novelist.

Shape-shifting: Tragic Mulatto, Human Mongrel or Swarthy Boy?

So what was Mittelholzer racial identity? When filling out forms Mittelholzer would write "Mixed" under "Race".⁶ A declaration he made circa 1953 offers further clarification on this:

I prefer to think of myself as a member of the world's human community rather than as a native or national of any particular country. Officially I am British, but within me I think of myself as belonging to no race or nation.⁷

⁴ Mittelholzer, E. *Latticed Echoes* (Secker & Warburg: London, 1960) p. 219.

⁵ Mittelholzer, E. *At Forty-Three – A Personal View of the World* (Typed manuscript, ref: 108, held in Beinecke Rare Books & Manuscript Library at Yale University) p. 14.

⁶ Ibid; p. 14.

⁷ Mittelholzer, E. *At Forty-Three – A Personal View of the World* (Typed manuscript, ref: 108, held in Beinecke Rare Books & Manuscript Library at Yale University) p. 13.

Mittelholzer notably turned down an invitation to a function at the Waldorf-Astoria Hotel that was being held by a Swiss society in America on the grounds he had never visited the country: Switzerland was as foreign to him as “Siberia or Togoland”. He (like the aforementioned Richard Lehrer) declined an invitation to write for *Ebony* magazine as a “Negro author” because he did not consider himself a Negro. After years of self-examination Mittelholzer concluded that he was, “by accident of birth, a human mongrel”. This “mongrel”⁸ identity, he confidently went on to say, did not confer a sense of “disgrace”: he had “faced it”, “forgotten it” and it had long “ceased to bother [him]”.⁹ But could the issue of ‘race’ be forgotten when, as W E B du Bois had declared in *The Souls of Black Folk*: “the problem of the Twentieth century is the problem of the color line”?¹⁰

It is significant that Mittelholzer chose the title *With A Carib Eye* (1958) for the travel journal he wrote as an indigenous authority on the West Indies. Some members of the coloured middle class have notably expressed a connectedness with the whole of the region on account of their (actual or imagined) Carib/Amerindian ancestry.¹¹ The fact that Carib Indians frequently choose to commit suicide¹² rather than be enslaved by European aggressors was in keeping with Mittelholzer’s philosophy of “Victory or Death”. The subtextual inference is that he wanted to distance himself from all that was typically associated with the term ‘Caribbean’. The desire to distance himself from labels that did not represent his sense of self – “I’m a born warrior”¹³ - is discernible in the remarks he made during a BBC Caribbean Voice’s discussion on Sam Selvon’s *Ways of Sunlight* in February 1958.

⁸ Alfred P Schultz’s *Race or Mongrel* (Arno Press: New York, 1977[1908]) provides interesting insights into dominant Western discourse on the subject of miscegenation. Schultz asserts that the degree of difference between the word mongrel and hybrid is only a matter of degrees - the latter word, deriving from the Greek means “an insult or outrage, an outrage on nature, a mongrel.” (p. 1). In this virulently racist text black blood is viewed as a contaminant while the hope of the world rests on the thorough bred European.

⁹ Op. Cit., Mittelholzer, E. *At Forty-Three – A Personal View of the World* p. 14.

¹⁰ Du Bois, W. E. B. *The Souls of Black Folk* (Arc Manor: Maryland, 2008 [1903]) p. 9.

¹¹ Jan Carew is a point in case when he notes that his ability to relate to the whole of the Caribbean can be attributed to his “Carib blood”. See Dance, D. *New World Adams: Conversations with Contemporary West Indian Writers* (Peepal Tree: Yorkshire, 1992) p. 39.

¹² Thompson, A. *The Haunting Past: Politics, Economics and Race in Caribbean Life* (Ian Randle Publishers: Kingston, 1997) p. 187.

¹³ Mittelholzer, E. *Uncle Paul* (Macdonald: London, 1963) p. 166.

[...] it is a sad thing to relate that the public in this country is being schooled into expecting [West Indian's to write stories] that treat only of crude, loud-mouthed, uninhibited characters all of whom are dubbed West Indians (though many people are inclined to call West Indians Jamaicans, as though they all originated in Jamaica). This attitude is encouraged by the newspapers and magazine publishers as well as by television people, and it is fast becoming the popular thing to depict West Indians as loose, pleasure-loving individuals, absolutely feckless, as the Irish and Welsh are supposed to be. And, of course, it must be amply shown how fond they are of calypsos and steel-bands and of cutting ridiculous figures wherever they venture, whether in a bus or in Hyde Park or in Oxford Street. *The writer who tries to depict his West Indians as a normal, decent, well-be-haved* [sic] person will eventually starve, for editors won't be interested in his creations. [my italics]¹⁴

This quote also demonstrates that Mittelholzer's sense of identity was intimately linked to his career as a professional novelist (in that he used it as a form of counter-discursive self-representation).¹⁵ It, as importantly, reflected his increasing sensitivity to 'race' politics in late 1950s Britain¹⁶ and the growing atmosphere of widespread 'race' prejudice that presaged the Notting Hill riots of August/September 1958.¹⁷

When Mittelholzer turned his back on the Caribbean in the late 1950s/early 1960s – as outlined in Chapter Two - his sense of 'racial' identity similarly shifted. A letter that he wrote to his publishers about his autobiography is particularly revealing.¹⁸ His reference to Richard Wright's *Native Boy* demonstrates that he had thought carefully about the title for his autobiography and his insistence that it be called *A Swarthy Boy* indicates his desire to be seen

¹⁴ See Caribbean Voices collection – Vo. 22, Nos 1299-1303 (2nd February 1958).

¹⁵ Language shapes our identity but, as the theorist Lacan argues, since it is "given to us from the outside" we are left "constitutively alienated". See Rivkin, J. & Ryan, M. (eds.) *Literary Theory: An Anthology, Second Edition* (Blackwell Publishing: Oxford, 2004) p. 393. Thus while Mittelholzer attempts to create his own 'genuine' identity through a complex blend of narrowcast codes, they are so obscure that readers of his work almost inevitably misinterpret them.

¹⁶ He had moved back to Britain (after a three year stay in Barbados) in 1956.

¹⁷ For a comprehensive overview of the riots and the attitude of white Britons to black immigration see Fryer, P. *Staying Power* (Pluto Press: London, 1984).

¹⁸ See Mittelholzer's letter to John Huntingdon of Putnam & Co Ltd dated 9 May 1962 in Boodley Head & Hogarth Press Archives (Ref: MS2606, 1961-64) – 43 unpublished letters between Mittelholzer and his publishers held at Reading University.

perhaps as no different in racial make-up from the swarthy French, Spanish, Portuguese and Italian Europeans he had referred to in his unpublished article, *At Forty-Three: A Personal View of the World*¹⁹, but ultimately and more importantly as a individual (note the inclusion of the article, “A”). Perhaps too, on a private level, he was drawn to the ‘war’ – connoting his warrior-self – that was embedded in the word, ‘swarthy’. While Mittelholzer’s novels inevitably engaged with the social reality of his times and the historical legacy of slavery, the underlying desire to free himself from the delimiting notions of race are expressed in his novels.

MITTELHOLZER’S NOVELS: CONSTRUCTING AN IDENTITY

A Morning at the Office (1950)

The character Arthur Lamby in *A Morning at the Office* (1950) is proud of his mixed heritage and presents a positive self-image. To Edna Bisnauth he was:

[...] the best man in existence; the different bloods of which he was composed meant nothing to her. Once he had told her: ‘But do you realize I have English, French, German, Chinese and Negro blood in me? I’m a regular U.N. Council.’²⁰

However, the desirability of distancing oneself from a Negro identity (in the American ‘one-drop rule’ sense of the word) was rooted in the socially constructed benefits that arose from doing so. As Mrs Hinckson notes elite and venerated members of the coloured middle class in the West Indies such as “Sir Lennox O’Reilly and the late Sir Edward Davson and the Colonel Sir Ivan Davson”²¹ would be debarred from public amenities (reserved for ‘pure’ whites) in places like Georgia and Louisiana. The ability to ‘pass for white’ opened up socio-economic opportunities that were ordinarily unavailable to people with ‘Negro’ blood. The reality of this fictional scenario was soon after the novel’s publication shown to be true when the reference to these elite families became

¹⁹ Op. Cit., Mittelholzer, E. *At Forty-Three – A Personal View of the World* p. 14.

²⁰ Mittelholzer, E. *A Morning at the Office* (Penguin Books: Harmondsworth, 1964 [1950])) p. 75.

²¹ Mittelholzer, E. *A Morning at the Office* (Peepal Tree Press: Leeds, 2010 [1950]) p. 141.

the source of genuine anguish for the wife of the real Sir Edward Rae Davson, (1st Baronet of Berbice, British Guiana).²² Lady Margot Davson until the publication of *A Morning at the Office* was unaware of her husband's mixed African/European ancestry. Her letter to Mittelholzer usefully illustrates how issues of 'race' had the power to define one's status in life. In response to a letter of protest from her Solicitors, Lawrance, Messer & Co, Mittelholzer wrote:

I am very sorry that you are upset because of the statement in my book concerning your late husband and his brother. I am also, however, very much astonished to learn that you were unaware of your husband's coloured blood. I can assure you in all good faith that I wrote what I did in the honest belief that it was no secret to anyone who knows your husband's family (especially in British Guiana) – much less yourself – that the Davsons were coloured... [...] ...the purpose of [the] passage, apart from its contextual significance, was indirectly intended to bring home to northern readers unacquainted with the West Indian scene the fact that there are among the coloured people of these colonies families of real distinction and gentility. English people and Americans are so inclined to feel that in the tropics all "natives" are mere inferior, half-civilised folk who could not possibly lay claim to a cultured and genteel mode of life. I was determined to do everything in my power to debunk this idea.²³

Mittelholzer later posted, as evidence of Sir Edward Rae Davson's coloured blood, copies of his birth certificate.

Although unable to refute the evidence, Lady Davson went on to request the removal of Sir Davson's name from later editions of the novel. The reasons for this were made self-evident in her letter:

The evidence which we have leaves no doubt in our minds and I can only ask you again for the sake of my family (who, in the course of sugar affairs might conceivably have to spend time, say, in Natal, or the U.S.A, where, as things are at

²² This Baronetcy was created for Edward Rae Davson on 21 January 1927.

²³ See letter dated 5th July 1950 in Hogarth Press Archives (Ref: MS2750/284, 1949-54) – 18 unpublished letters between Mittelholzer, his publishers and Lady Davson held at Reading University.

present, such reference as yours might easily be prejudicial to them), to do me the courtesy of withdrawing any reference to my husband or his brother in this context.²⁴

It seems possible that this incident influenced the author's description of the eponymous Sylvia's social distancing from Jack Sampson, though it should also be noted that these attitudes were commonplace in the 1930s/40s.

My Bones and My Flute (1955)

In *My Bones and My Flute* (1955) the author/narrator is identified as Milton Woodsley (and intra-textually linked to Milton Copps of *Sylvia*, H. A. Woodsley, author of *The Mad MacMullochs* and Mr Woodsley of *Eltonsbrody*). He is said to be a member of an old coloured family and according to the people of New Amsterdam, an "eccentric crank". He has "aggressive airs", a "pomposity of manner"; does not want to work in an office but enjoys studying human beings, philosophy, art, the early history of B. G. and painting. The story is told retrospectively some twenty or more years after Milton first recorded the events that took place (circa 1930s) in his diary. Mr Nevinson while travelling onboard a steamer going to Goed de Vries explains to Woodsley how he came to inherit a manuscript - originally owned by a now dead Dutchman called Jan Pieter Voorman - from Patoir, a buffianda (Indian- Negro mixed) trader. He saw the manuscript for the first time three weeks prior to their journey (they are being accompanied by his wife, Nell and daughter, Jessie) but had known of its existence for two years prior. The manuscript was said by Patoir (now dead) to bring good fortune but only if never handled or exposed to daylight and fire. A "fairly intelligent" man, Patoir had been happy to admit that: "so far as he could see, it had brought him no especial good luck, but all the same, he wasn't going to run the risk of being harmed, so he always kept it shut up in the canister".²⁵ Mr Nevinson, not believing in superstitious stories and interested in antiquarian

²⁴ See letter dated 11th July 1950 in Hogarth Press Archives (Ref: MS2750/284, 1949-54) - 18 unpublished letters between Mittelholzer, his publishers and Lady Davson held at Reading University.

²⁵ Mittelholzer, E. *My Bones and My Flute* (New English Library: London, 1974 [1955]) p. 28.

material, had opened the canister and was as a consequence being haunted by the sound of a flute. Jessie, having inadvertently touched the manuscript whilst trying to find some stamps in her father's study, is also being haunted by the sound of a flute. Given that Oriental Occultism was an integral part of Mittelholzer's sense of identity, the novel's storyline appears to subtly mock the widespread European lack of belief in the psychic.

The contents of the manuscript echo the rage of the entrapped Jinnee in the tale of the *Arabian Nights*:

He who touches this parchment seals himself in a pact with me, Jan Pieter Voorman, to listen to my music, and later, when I beckon to join me in death. [...] I shall never rest till the day that my bones and my flute are found and interred with Christian rites. I place a curse and plague upon the person or persons who may touch this parchment. My roaming presence shall pester him or them unto death unless my wishes are carried out. [...]. To him who seeks release from this pact and would put my soul at peace, let him heed what now follows and so be led to the discovery of my bones and my flute and my musket.²⁶

The manuscript also explains that Jan has been robbed, his wife and child massacred. He too had died in an act of suicide a few days after the start of the Berbice Slave Insurrection. Fourth March 1763 is in the manuscript described as a turning point in the history of Guiana's Dutch plantocracy: a moment of defeat. The Predicant's house at Peereboom came under siege, deserted by the planters who in an act of cowardice "were in flight or skulking in the bush in hiding."²⁷ Woodsley, fascinated by this story, deliberately touches the manuscript when Nevinson is least expecting him to, and is soon, similarly plagued by the haunting sound of the flute. Woodsley – as an author type – is arguably fascinated by this story as it provides exemplification of the cowardly European, who by his actions is no different from the enslaved African that had allegedly 'acquiesced' to plantation slavery.

²⁶ Ibid; p. 29.

²⁷ Mittelholzer, E. *My Bones and My Flute* (New English Library: London, 1974 [1955]) p. 30.

As the evil manifestations intensify and threaten to harm the Nevinson family and Woodsley, Jessie suggests they ask Rayburn, the caretaker of the cottage - "a slim, alert-looking Negro of about forty"²⁸ - to sleep upstairs with them. When the Negrophobe, Mrs Nevinson states that their circumstances did not warrant sacrificing their dignity "to the extent of having a black man rubbing shoulders [with them] as though... an equal"²⁹ Woodsley is infuriated and cannot help feeling contempt for her "foolish prejudices". Had he not been a guest he would have let his "self-control go to the devil and blazed away at her in by no means polite language".³⁰ Woodsley is here against racism and has, given the historical juncture, progressive attitudes. *My Bones and My Flutes* (1955) nevertheless appears to represent the young Mittelholzer's decision to face fears about his genetic racial inheritance. The jar that Woodsley and the Nevinsons find is an obvious metaphor (given the genie in the bottle motif) for the Dutchman's body and by extension the old coloured middle class families of Guiana: it is "green and clogged with the soil of two centuries, but solid Dutch earthenware".³¹ In an act perhaps of unconscious displacement³², the jar's body mirrors that of the author - bogged down by the soil of the 'black' race after two centuries, but at his core, still firmly European. This metaphor echoes the sentiments of Mittelholzer's father: "Just one drop of that great blood. Just one drop in your veins, and it makes you different from everyone else. German blood!"³³ Placing great importance on his 'white' ancestors at the beginning of the novel, Woodsley explains that his family were able to trace their ancestors back to the eighteenth century, when they had yet to acquire "the strain of negro slave blood that [now] runs in them".³⁴ Thus while Woodsley is quick to defend Rayburn it seems he sees his identity as separate or different from him. But Woodsley whilst being a partial projection of the author, also represents a 'social type'.

²⁸ Ibid; p. 39.

²⁹ Ibid; p. 84.

³⁰ Ibid; p. 84.

³¹ Ibid; p. 169.

³² When unconscious fears are repressed they can according to Freud create what might be called a second self, "a stranger within". These repressed feelings can partially reveal themselves through the indirect means of dreams or displacement. See Rivkin, J. & Ryan (eds.) *Literary Theory: An Anthology, Second Edition* (Blackwell Publishing: Oxford, 2004) p. 389.

³³ Mittelholzer, E. *A Swarthy Boy: A Childhood in British Guiana* (Putnam: London, 1963) p. 43.

³⁴ Op. Cit., Mittelholzer, E. *My Bones and My Flute* p. 9.

A letter dated 30th July 1941 suggests that whilst Mittelholzer accepted the notion of 'Old Blood' he did not necessarily attach great significance to it. Talking about a young coloured woman that he had met in Georgetown, Mittelholzer states: "As a companion she doesn't appeal to me. To begin with, she is something of a snob. She is proud of the fact that she comes of a good family, and associates with me because I come of a good family too. And being communist, I naturally find that sort of thing too sickening."³⁵ The Dutchman's jar may thus symbolise for Mittelholzer the imprisoning myth of the racial body, old blood and racial inheritance. Certainly when at the end of the novel Woodsley and his companions smash the jar, it seems that the spirit of the troubled Jan/Jen is metaphorically released; free to transcend the delimiting boundaries of race. As in Arthur Lamby's story of the Jen, when Woodsley faces his fears, the daylight filters through the jungle and nothing of terror happened: "No warped fate hung over [them]."³⁶ The story concludes when Milton, the storyteller, notes: "Nothing would have satisfied my feeling for the dramatic and spectacular more than to have been able to state that our clothes were in ribbons. But they were not – it is just a simple fact."³⁷ Representations of the 'monstrous' Jen are thus found to be false. Indeed when the Nevinsons were fatalistically preparing to resign themselves to the forces of Jan's evil spirit, it is Woodsley who angrily shouts:

We can't stand around and do nothing! We've got to act and foil the blasted bitches. Light fires all over the cottage. Surround the place with fire. Show them we don't mean to cave in without a fight. I don't surrender. I never surrender. I fight to the last bloody ditch.³⁸

The suggestion here is that his **Jenetic** inheritance (associated with fire) somehow makes him more courageous, stronger than everyone else and this, irrespective of his heredity.

³⁵ See letter dated 30 July 1941 in Ruth Wilkinson Collection (private ownership): Letters from Mittelholzer to Ruth Wilkinson (circa March 1941 – 15th June 1962).

³⁶ Op. Cit., Mittelholzer, E. *My Bones and My Flute* p. 168.

³⁷ Ibid; p. 169.

³⁸ Ibid; p. 149.

My Bones and My Flute reflects the author's objective - while acknowledging as sources of inspiration the *Arabian Nights*³⁹ and venerated writers like M R James and Edgar Allen Poe - to surpass or at least equal in depth, length and complexity the traditional ghost story genre. Milton notably restrains the desire to laugh at Mr Nevinson's description of an apparition as "Misshapen – more beast than man . . . cloaked in a strange fur . . ." for it sounded like he had been reading too many M. R. James stories. Later on the narrator tells us:

I discovered that his mode of expression...had, indeed, been subconsciously influenced by M. R. James. The book he had been reading at the moment when the manifestation occurred was *Ghost Stories of an Antiquary*!⁴⁰

Milton, the older reflective narrator, notes that he is similarly tempted to laugh at his younger-self for he recognises just how much he used to mimic what he imagined to be the tone of "Sherlock Holmes or that character of [Edgar Allen] Poe's, Lupin".⁴¹ The influence of European texts on the narrator helps the older Woodsley to recognise the extent to which the younger Milton had been mentally 'colonised'. It invites some self-reflective amusement but is not seen as being a matter of shame since literature by its very nature functions on the basis of intertextuality⁴² and even if the young Woodsley had been deficient in some literary respects he perhaps, more importantly, was able to save the Catholic Dutchman from a life of purgatory. Jan's suicide though associated with the Berbice Slave Insurrection might also be attributed to his creative ambitions for it is clear that his wife Jannetje had failed to be supportive of him:

She places no value on my researches. What is it to her whether I add three more keys to the flute: My ambitions as an inventor of a flute of wide range

³⁹ Mr Nevinson states "I can't believe that just laying your hands on a musty old manuscript can produce a spooky flute-player. It sounds too much like *Arabian Nights*..." Ibid; p. 55.

⁴⁰ Ibid; 90

⁴¹ Ibid; pg 122

⁴² See Chandler, D. *Semiotics: The Basics, 2nd Edition* (Routledge: London, 2007) who states: "Confounding the realist agenda that 'art imitates life', intertextuality suggests that art imitates art." p. 209.

mean nothing to her. But threats of desertion will not hinder me in my purpose.
... If I have to sell my soul to Beelzebub I shall succeed.⁴³

Woodsley's act of relating Jan's story and of reproducing his flute music "note for note" in Chapter 19 of *My Bones and My Flute* is thus a response to the Dutchman's prayer: "To whom, to what, must I turn for salvation?" – the heroic Milton Woodsley of course!

The *Kaywana* Trilogy – Children of Fire

In the story of the *Fisherman and the Jinnee*, the fisherman asks of the jinnee: "But what is your history, pray, and how came you to be imprisoned in this bottle?"⁴⁴ This question arguably becomes for Mittelholzer a metaphor about the historical context or body into which he had been born without asking. The *Kaywana* Trilogy thus becomes an expression of the desire to find an answer to this question. In a document entitled 'Plans for Work' (circa 1951) that appears to be a copy of the application submitted to the Guggenheim Fellowship and now held in the archives of the Hogarth Press, Mittelholzer explains:

My intention, then, is to produce a trilogy in the form of a family chronicle, tracing the development of the colony, politically, economically and sociologically, as a background theme to the escapades and lives of the family featured. This family in itself will, generation after generation, act as a sign-post to the trend of development of the social structure of the colony – the complex intermixture of slave blood with white blood and Indian (aboriginal), Hindu, Chinese, Portuguese and other bloods resultant on the influx of immigrants.⁴⁵

He also noted – and this shows his early commitment to the region – "[for] the benefit of the Caribbean colonies no less than for that of the world at large, it is time that a history of this area were written". He proposes writing it as a piece

⁴³ Op. Cit., Mittelholzer, E. *My Bones and My Flute* p. 172.

⁴⁴ Dawood, N. J. (trans.) "The Fisherman and the Jinnee" in *Tales from the Thousand and One Nights* (Penguin Books: London, 1973) p. 80.

⁴⁵ See document labelled HP284 in Hogarth Press Archives (Ref: MS2750/284, 1949-54) held at Reading University.

of historical fiction as no market existed for the publication of a non-fictional history of British Guiana. At the time of applying for the award, the first of the trilogy *Children of Kaywana* had already been finished. The award was granted to allow him enough time to research new material held in the British Museum for the second and third parts of his trilogy. Mittelholzer's research in Guiana during the late 1930s had triggered off an interest in the events leading up to "the great slave insurrection which devastated the colony of (now county) Berbice"⁴⁶ and resulted in the publication of *Children of Kaywana* (1952). Commencing in 1611 the novel traces the history of the Groenwegel family in a backdrop that continually beckons in the song of the goatsucker: "hoo-you?"

Within this context and in light of Mittelholzer's love of word play, the *Children of Kaywana* can be read as the history of the 'Children of Fire' for whilst Kaywana is said to mean "Old Water", and alludes to the coloured middle class obsession with "Old Blood" and to Guiana (Land of Many Waters), other characters frequently allude to her 'Fire Blood'. Indeed the first chapter of the novel, "A *Jet* of Fire" [my italics] points paradigmatically to the symbolic connection between Kaywana and the Mittelholzer's idea of the Jen/Jinnee and is reinforced in the words of August Vyfuis who passionately loves her:

Yes, you have spirit. From the first day I saw you I knew you were an unusual person. A jet of fire.⁴⁷

As a "half-breed" of mixed English and Amerindian ancestry she represents for Mittelholzer the starting point of modern Guianese history. August Vyfuis her first lover importantly points out that she is different from other Amerindian girls (the subtext is that her mixed blood makes her different from them); she is clever, "everything better and different".⁴⁸ As his first name suggests, he is like Kaywana, an awe-inspiring character, impressive and someone to be respected. Though August dies in battle soon after meeting Kaywana, he leaves her pregnant with a son that she names after him. Since their son - who later

⁴⁶ Ibid; document labelled HP284.

⁴⁷ Mittelholzer, E. *Children of Kaywana* (Secker & Warburg: London, 1960 [1952]) p. 12.

⁴⁸ Ibid; p. 12.

adopted the surname of Kaywana's second lover and life-partner, Adriansen van Groenwegel - was the father of the slaves, Hannah and Katrina, Mittelholzer demonstrates how the fire-blood (or jinnee-spirit) came to be passed on to later generations.

Mittelholzer's dream that 'mulattos' would command respect and equality is reflected in the *Children of Kaywana* (1952). In this historically authentic novel mulattos are as slaves, considered property and subject to open racism. The mulatto, Hannah, is scrutinised by her 'white' blood relative, Susannah van Groenwegel:

The black blood is plain for anyone to see. Your lips are thick and your nose is wide. Katrina [Hannah's half sister, a Quadroon] is much better. She has good features - European features - and she's fair in complexion. She can almost be taken for pure white.⁴⁹

Susannah's brother, Laurens, as the owner of Hannah and her half sister, Katrina becomes sexually involved with both women without ever intending to marry either one of them. Hannah, the more determined of the two sisters is desperate to become Lauren's favourite mistress. But when Katrina falls pregnant, Laurens begins to feel closer to Katrina and notes that a wonderful thing has happened: "To-night I'm seeing things differently. Tonight I can see you as a human being. It doesn't matter how you speak - or that you wear a smock. You have broken down my pride. I see you now as a woman. You have my child in you and you are good. You have a good nature. You're kind and sympathetic, and under your glum look there is sweetness."⁵⁰

Although Willem allows his son Laurens to marry Katrina he is initially against it:

⁴⁹ Ibid; p. 70.

⁵⁰ Ibid; p. 133.

The bitterness of this day will never fade. I shall never be converted to the belief that our family has not been tainted. I shall never be reconciled to this slave blood which Laurens has seen fit to introduce into our family. Never...⁵¹

Laurens, whose name is etymologically linked to the word 'Laurel'⁵² and perhaps represents in attitude the 'idyllic' side of Mittelholzer, admits from the beginning of the novel that he has an "instinctive partiality for coloured women"⁵³. Indeed the details of a private letter would suggest that Mittelholzer approved of Laurens' actions for when the author had himself fallen in love with a young dark-skinned Portuguese girl (upon whom *Sylvia's* Naomi is based) he exclaimed:

Can you imagine the sensation if one day I suddenly announce to my people at home that I'm getting married to a Portuguese girl of Plaisance called Miss Ula Lomelino? I can just envisage the horror on mother's face – and on dad's for that matter. But, of course, it won't trouble me one bit, you can be sure.⁵⁴

Pointing to her difference in class, he notes that she is not up to his standard in education but only because of her less privileged upbringing. Laurens and Willem are therefore on opposite sides of the tainted blood debate and appear in a Freudian sense to reflect the author's conflicting views.⁵⁵ But while Willem shares many of the author's 'warrior' characteristics, his obsession with blood – "They consider me a bore because I keep stressing the importance of blood"⁵⁶ - mirrors that of Mittelholzer's Negrophobe father, William and the similarity in name is presumably deliberate. Willem's attitude to race is not fixed. As he acknowledges he was "a somersaulter in [his] sentiments"⁵⁷ and thus when his wife, Griselda objects to having dinner with Katrina, Willem states:

⁵¹ Ibid; p. 137.

⁵² A Laurel is a type of tree. It also suggests the word, 'laurels', in that Lauren should be given kudos for overcoming his prejudice.

⁵³ Op. Cit., Mittelholzer, E. *Children of Kaywana* p. 98.

⁵⁴ See letter dated 15 April 1945 in the Ruth Wilkinson Collection (private ownership): Letters from Mittelholzer to Ruth Wilkinson (circa March 1941 – 15th June 1962).

⁵⁵ Freud asserts that 'splitting' is a "way of dealing with anxiety by dividing the object of anxiety in two, one bearing all the negative feelings while the other embodies all the positive feelings". See Rivkin, J. & Ryan, M. (eds.) *Literary Theory: An Anthology, Second Edition* (Blackwell Publishing: Oxford, 2004) p. 390.

⁵⁶ Op. Cit., Mittelholzer, E. *Children of Kaywana* p. 96.

⁵⁷ Ibid; p. 138.

I have decided that she shall sit with us. That's enough. You and a cyclone together won't alter my resolve. She's a slave. Very well. I haven't forgotten, nor have I forgiven Laurens for marrying her, but by God, he's my son, and she's my daughter-in-law – twist it whichever way you will. I can't hate them. I can't keep up this hostility any longer.⁵⁸

In ultimately representing the mainstream attitudes of the plantocracy, Willem's change of heart appears to be a 'wish fulfilment' metaphor: a reflection of the author's inner desire to be integrated at a macro-level into the European family-fold and at the micro-level by his Negrophobe father.⁵⁹ In a similar vein, it is of private significance to the author, that when Hannah's love for Lauren's goes unrequited, she commits suicide. The issue of acceptance and familial inclusion was for her a question of 'Victory or Death'. But as though to deflect from this deep desire, it is also significant that when Griselda, Lauren's German mother, maintains her prejudices against Katrina, she is dismissed by her children as pathetic.

It should be noted that in the *Children of Kaywana* the narrator attempts to demonstrate that white blood is not necessarily an index for strength of character. Griselda van Groenwegel, wife of Willem, is 'pure' German and described as bearing a soft streak. Willem is a mixture of Amerindian, Dutch and English ancestry. Their similarly weak son Reinald marries a Flemish woman, Juliana, whilst studying to be a doctor in Europe and in turn have their own son, Ignatius. The latter turns out to be as weak-willed as his mother and as creatively effeminate as his German maternal great-grandfather. Hendrickje, who has inherited her mother, Katrina's black blood, chooses to marry her cousin, Ignatius, falsely believing it will help to retain the family's 'fire-blood'. But Ignatius, a mix of Carib and European, turns out to be a weak character, whose artistic talents are of no use in the "wilds" of Berbice. Ignatius's ineffectual personality provokes the wrath of Hendrickje who feeling the need to

⁵⁸ Ibid; p. 138.

⁵⁹ According to Freud, literary texts, like dreams express unconscious desires that cannot be fulfilled in waking life because they are at odds with the ego and the larger society. See Rivkin, J. & Ryan, M. (eds.) *Literary Theory: An Anthology, Second Edition* (Blackwell Publishing: Oxford, 2004) p. 390.

hurt “all soft and weak things” crushes his will to live. The point here is that the author recognises that the genetic inheritance of each individual cannot and should not be neatly compartmentalised into racial stereotypes: i.e., white equals strong, good, superior / black equals weak, bad inferior. As he points out in *A Swarthy Boy*:

We are each of us a mass of inherited contradictions and inconsistencies. There is no set “behaviour pattern”. This is my firm belief.⁶⁰

These sentiments are again expressed via the character Mr Holmes in *The Weather in Middenshot* (1952):

...you must never take people for granted, or dump them into broad types or categories and expect them to behave according to pattern. People were individuals, each with his or her own set of ideas and quirks and fancies.⁶¹

Both statements arguably suggest that whilst Mittelholzer clearly had a middle class Anglo-centric view of African culture, he did not subscribe to the pseudo-scientific notion that black people were biologically inferior to white.⁶²

Hendrickje’s two children by Ignatius are depicted as twisted human beings as a direct result of her treatment of them: Cornelis is gay, while Adrian eventually becomes mentally disturbed and in an act of presumed suicide, dies by falling out of a window. Before dying Adrian notably did everything he could to counteract Hendrickje’s obsession with family blood and fathered several illegitimate children with the black slaves - “Why should we consider ourselves better than other people? It’s not right.”⁶³ As time progresses Hendrickje becomes fond of Adrian’s two illegitimate mulatto sons, Ziddy and Janny. The latter grandchild, Janny, is another of Mittelholzer’s Jen’s for as Hendrickje notes:

⁶⁰ Mittelholzer, E. *A Swarthy Boy: A Childhood in British Guiana* (Putnam: London, 1963) p. 30.

⁶¹ Mittelholzer, E. *The Weather in Middenshot* (The John Day Company: New York, 1953 [1952]) p. 108.

⁶² It is a little known fact that even Darwin believed: “savage races throughout the world” would “at some future period” be exterminated and replaced by the so-called “civilised races of man”. See Lively, A. *Masks: Blackness, Race and the Imagination* (Vintage: London, 1999) p. 111.

⁶³ Op. Cit., Mittelholzer, E. *Children of Kaywana* p. 258.

“So much *spirit*. The old blood. It must come out. Never mind the black taint [my italics].”⁶⁴ Hendrickje’s racism is representative of her historical juncture and intended to highlight the stupidity of those who view race in terms of the ‘white-superior/black-inferior’ binary: she herself had black blood though apparently blinkered to that truth.

The hypocrisy and irrationality of European attitudes is repeated in subsequent passages. Another mulatto Jen-figure is for instance presented in the form of Jan Broer. He bravely travels to Peereboom during the Berbice Slave Insurrection to inform the whites about the cowardice of the Burgher Militia: they having ran away from the black rebels in Mon Repos. The Predicant Ramring similarly notes that he had heard stories of them “whining like a pack of frightened puppies” before remarking that: “Sometimes one is really ashamed of one’s white blood.”⁶⁵ The narrator is here enjoying a ‘dig’ at the white plantocracy. As a letter to his brother in 1953 on the subject of a play he was writing suggests, Mittelholzer saw Westerners as a valid target of criticism: “It is entitled SÉANCE IN GUIANA and is a satire on the new Communist government in B.G., with many digs at the English and Americans.”⁶⁶

Indeed another Jen-figure, Jacques van Greonwegel, who functions as “an objective observer”⁶⁷ is careful to highlight the evil of plantation slavery: “Yesterday, the Fouries, up-creek, hacked off the hand of an old slave and plunged the bleeding stump into a pot of boiling tar. Can you credit such barbarity?”⁶⁸ When his lover Amelia George, captured during the Slave Insurrection of 1763, refers to the black rebels as beasts Jacques notes that they have acted no worse than the plantocracy. Indeed when Jacques asks Cuffy to treat Amelia with decency, Cuffy’s response is full of pointed irony: “You expect

⁶⁴ Ibid; p. 393.

⁶⁵ Ibid; p. 431.

⁶⁶ See Lucille Mittelholzer Collection (private ownership): 1 letter dated 28th June from Edgar Mittelholzer to his brother, Arthur.

⁶⁷ Gilkes, M.A. *The Caribbean Syzygy: A Study of the novels of Edgar Mittelholzer and Wilson Harris* (1973-74 A8j Ph.D., Kent, 24-332) p. 67.

⁶⁸ Op. Cit., Mittelholzer, E. *Children of Kaywana* p. 367.

me to have decency! You look on me a black man, van Groenwegel, and talk about decency! Where I could get decency from?"⁶⁹

When in *Kaywana Blood* (1958) – this is the third of the trilogy – Hubertus van Groenwegel owner of Plantation Kaywana dies he is survived by his mistress Sarah Hubert (a freed slave) and his illegitimate daughter, Rose. His estate is bequeathed to Edward van Groenwegel who then takes responsibility for securing Rose's future. Since he lives in Demerary where Hubertus was well known it would be too awkward for her to be adopted by his family. He therefore asks his brother, Storm and sister-in-law, Elizabeth (who live in Berbice) to find a coloured family of good social standing willing to adopt her. Edward's interest in Rose's welfare is explained as follows:

[...] she may be tainted, it is true, with black blood, but she is Cousin Hubertus's flesh and blood, and for this reason I think we should do something better for her than leave her to be brought up as the daughter of a peddler.⁷⁰

Storm and Elizabeth do as requested and Rose becomes the adopted daughter of Mrs Kathleen Clarke, a coloured midwife. The family meantime acknowledge that Sarah Hubert was "a surprisingly fine woman, and, though black, ... one of Nature's ladies"⁷¹ and are similarly satisfied that Mrs Clarke is a "born lady". As Storm and Elizabeth promise to look after Rose's education and welfare she is schooled alongside their children, Dirk and Graham.

It is obvious from an early age that Rose has fire-blood. When in teenage banter with Dirk, the narrator notes: "Her slim body trembled as though it were the fuel around which the flame of her laughter curled and flickered."⁷² Drawn to strength she falls in love with Dirk⁷³, a spirited young man with "iron in his soul".

⁶⁹ Ibid; p. 450.

⁷⁰ Mittelholzer, E. *Kaywana Blood* (Secker & Warburg: London, 1958) p. 53.

⁷¹ Ibid; p. 54.

⁷² Ibid; p. 134.

⁷³ This name may have appealed to Mittelholzer because 'Dirk' denotes a dagger and connotes battle. Dirk could also be associated with a conflated Dunkirk. The 'Dunkirk spirit' signifies the strength of the British people in times of adversity and dates back to the 1940 Battle of Dunkirk, when the Britain carried out a successful evacuation of its troops.

But Dirk, in keeping with the mainstream attitudes of the early 19th century plantocracy, is a confirmed Negrophobe. This is exemplified by Dirk's response to Graham's belief that slaves are human and should be taught about Christianity:

Those black baboons! What can they want to know about Christ and God! They came from the jungle of Africa. They're heathens. It's bad enough the English want to abolish the slave trade, but what will happen if we begin to teach these slaves about Christ? They'll soon feel they're our equals, by God.⁷⁴

Though Dirk will not publically admit it Rose remains the only female capable of relating to him "with entire freedom and easy friendship". He admires her guts and iron-will, but renounces the opportunity to develop an intimate relationship with her on account of her black blood. While conscious that racism pains her, he more optimistically observes that she will survive despite it: "This world won't beat you down."⁷⁵ Rose notes that he is right and then retorts:

I don't know yet how I'll do it, Dirk, but I'll show you what I can do – despite the black blood in me. You're going to live to look upon me as a full equal. I swear you will.⁷⁶

In keeping with the socio-historical context of the early 19th century her deep inner desire to be considered an equal is ultimately thwarted.

Graham (being viewed as the name connotes a 'grey', gloomy, ineffectual ham-performer) represents everything that is the opposite of his brother, Dirk. He is an effeminate, 'namby-pamby' bi-sexual liberal: qualities that Rose does not find particularly admirable. When Graham falls in love with her, she nevertheless agrees to marry him. Dirk is against this union and tells her she is not allowed to visit his parents' home while Graham is still there. To prevent their marriage he falsely accuses her of having slept with him. Rose is not

⁷⁴ Op. Cit., Mittelholzer, E. *Kaywana Blood* p. 61.

⁷⁵ Ibid; p. 150.

⁷⁶ Ibid; p. 151.

however intimidated by him. When she hears from Clara Hartfield that he has been spreading false rumours about her, she defiantly visits the van Groenwegels's home. Addressing him, she rebukes:

And I thought you were changing. Getting more human. You're no different from the cruel, stupid, cold-blooded little reptile you used to be in your earlier years. The family! A curse on your family! I have your blood in me too, haven't I? You've drummed that into me yourself, have you forgotten? Cousin Hubertus – isn't he the one you hold up as a god? Well, he was my father, wasn't he? I have as much of the Old Blood in me as you have, so why should I feel so infinitely inferior to you! Why should I cringe before you, and know my place! Simply because my mother was black? *I'm not ashamed of the black blood in me.* I don't remember it. If I marry Graham I shall do so as an equal. He won't be doing me a favour. It won't be an honour. Not in my eyes. I shall be as much at home in the house at Kaywana as any white wife he may have chosen – perhaps more so. [my italics]⁷⁷

After she leaves the house, Dirk is gently mocked by his wife for being distraught about the “taint” of black blood that Rose has seemingly brought into the family. Echoing the ‘Genie in the Bottle’ trope, she notes that it was a pity the canister of family letters had been brought to his attention: “But for those letters and the obsession they have generated in you, it may have been you instead of Graham who would be insisting on marrying Rose.”⁷⁸ Dirk thus exemplifies how inherited concepts of race, family and blood blighted the happiness of many.

The Groenwegel family (with the exception of Elfrieda, Pelham's wife) are initially appalled by the marriage of Graham and Rose, whose one concession was to change their name to Greenfield. With time however Rose is eventually accepted into the family and it is from this vantage point that readers are able to witness her secret delight at the foolish contradictions of slavery. When for instance some slaves misinterpreted the significance of the Court of Policy ordinance prohibiting the whipping of female slaves, it was decided that the

⁷⁷ Ibid; p. 227.

⁷⁸ Ibid; p. 229.

details should be published: “everyone [could] read it and the slaves learn exactly what it’s all about”.⁷⁹ Rose responds by asking (in mock naivety): “But slaves can’t read, can they?” She does not pursue the question but finds the situation privately amusing as it exposes as a lie conventional representations of the ‘dumb’ slave.

By the time Graham and Rose have produced two children, Ernestine and Reginald, it is clear that their marriage is destined to fail. Graham, because of his Christian zealotry, increasingly irritates Rose. In a moment of frustration she shouts: “God, God, God! I’m tired of hearing you utter God’s name”; and admits that she had offered herself to Dirk only to be rebuffed.⁸⁰ From this point onwards their marriage falters: Graham turns to Albert Laver, the manager of a timber grant, for love and Rose, to Pelham (a married cousin of Graham and Dirk’s) for physical intimacy. Eight years after Rose’s argument with Dirk, the two characters reconcile and Rose, following one night of passion, falls pregnant. Rose’s moment of happiness comes to an end when her baby dies during a breech birth. When Dirk firmly indicates that he is not willing to repeat an act of adultery, she resumes her affair with Pelham and turns to drink. The latter are still in bed when a fire starting in Newtown spreads to their house. Whilst Pelham chooses to escape, Rose refuses to leave. As the years pass her death becomes the source of mythology, with members of the family later claiming she had exclaimed: “I’m happy! I want to die here!” and that the flames had not hurt her as “she had given herself to them”. Rose’s fate is intimately linked with Mittelholzer’s creativity motif for her failure to create a child with Dirk, a symbol of courage and strength, is responsible for triggering off her “death-wish”. This motif is thus intimately interlinked with Mittelholzer’s conscious desires. Like Horace, the son of a freed Roman slave and famous poet, Mittelholzer needs to be creatively productive: to be published in order to assert his equality and stave off his death instinct.

⁷⁹ Ibid; p. 255.

⁸⁰ Ibid; p. 238.

The second of the trilogy, initially entitled *The Harrowing of Hubertus* (1954) - later republished more simply as *Hubertus* and then *Kaywana Stock* - digresses from the central themes of *Children of Kaywana* (1952) and *Kaywana Blood* (1958). The central character Hubertus van Groenwegel is the half brother of the aforementioned Jacques. Though there is nothing in his name to indicate that he too is a Jen figure, his relationship to Jacques (of *Children of Kaywana*) suggests otherwise; so too the revelation that he “possessed another self over which he had no control”.⁸¹ Although he has an English wife, Rosalind, her surname Maybury, suggests that he might want to divorce her in favour of his mistress, Faustina (the widowed wife of Jacques). Set in the late 18th century, the central theme of the novel focuses on Mittelholzer’s interest in the relationship between ‘Spirit and Flesh’ and picks up too, on sex in relation to his creativity motif. This novel which was written by Mittelholzer while in Montreal, not long after he left England, may be influenced by his unhappy experience of the literary world in Britain (ref. Chapter Two), particularly given the novel’s ‘creativity’ motif and his mixed emotions about Rosalind and Faustina (respectively symbols of English and German culture). As he explained to A J Seymour, *the Harrowing of Hubertus* is a “quiet book devoted chiefly to a study of the character of Hubertus van Groenwegel – deeply intellectual, bookish but tries to be religious as well [...]. ...he is a projection of a facet of my own personality.”⁸² Critics, like Seymour⁸³ and Wilson-Tagoe⁸⁴, have assumed that Mittelholzer had written the *Kaywana* Trilogy from the perspective of the white slave-owning plantocracy because of his familial connection to them on both sides of his family. His revelations about self-projection would no doubt have added credence to their assumptions. The reality, as close analysis of the Trilogy reveals, is a lot more complex. While many characters clearly express facets of Mittelholzer’s personality – a practice of literary self-projection that was influenced by his attraction to Romanticism and Oriental Occultism (see Chapter

⁸¹ Mittelholzer, E. *The Harrowing of Hubertus* (Secker & Warburg: London, 1954) p. 17.

⁸² Seymour, A. “Edgar Mittelholzer: The Man and His Works” in *The 1967 Edgar Mittelholzer Memorial Lectures – First Series* (Georgetown, National History and Arts Council, 1968) p. 15.

⁸³ See Seymour, A. “Edgar Mittelholzer: The Man and His Works” in *The 1967 Edgar Mittelholzer Memorial Lectures – First Series* (Georgetown, National History and Arts Council, 1968).

⁸⁴ See Wilson-Tagoe, N. “The Novel as History” in *Historical Thought and Literary Representation in West Indian Literature* (James Currey: Oxford, 1998) pp. 39-53.

Five) - his real concern lies with the fate of the mixed-race characters and a desire to create a myth, which allowed them not only to transcend the imprisoning myths of race, but also to live and die as heroes/heroines.

CHOOSING SIDES

Mittelholzer's mixed-race characters have no natural desire to express loyalty to any particular race or nation. The key protagonist of *A Tale of Three Places* notably argues: "A truly civilised man should embrace the culture of every part of the world and claim it as part of his own. He should be able to see all men as brothers in the vast nation of human beings. That's the only thing that will bring peace on this planet – a pooling of cultural and national ideas."⁸⁵ The eponymous Hubertus similarly asserts: "From youth I have believed that one should be loyal to no one group – to no one nationality. My loyalty has always been to humankind – not to a nation. [...] I believe in the brotherhood of men on earth – not in the brotherhood of separate nations."⁸⁶ He goes on to explain that this way of thinking was intimately linked to the history of Guiana: a territory that witnessed the influx of different ethnic groups and had been under the control of different European nationalities. This global sense of belonging is echoed by a character called Foster in Sam Selvon's, *An Island is a World* (1955):

Hitherto I have always been a little proud that in Trinidad we never felt very strongly about belonging to the island. (Or so it appeared to me.) Mixing with so many other nationalities, we have to start a sort of carefree national philosophy: this is a place to eat and sleep and work and get some fun out of life, and that's all. [...] But when you leave the country of your birth, it isn't like that at all. Other people belong. They are not human beings, they are Englishmen and Frenchmen and Americans, and you've got to have something to fall back on too, you can't just go up and say, 'Hello, fellow being, I'm new here, and I'm looking for a job.' Or you can't go to the United Nations and say, 'Look, I don't belong to any country, I have no ties of any sort to any particular nation. [...] So I feel now, that all those idealistic arguments we used to have at home don't mean a thing.

⁸⁵ Mittelholzer, E. *A Tale of Three Places* (Secker & Warburg: London, 1957) p. 291

⁸⁶ Op. Cit., Mittelholzer, E. *Kaywana Blood* p. 226.

You can't belong to the world, because the world won't have you. The world is made up of different nations, and you've got to belong to one of them, and to hell with the others.⁸⁷

What the passage from Selvon appears to suggest is that the sense of conflicting loyalties that many West Indies have faced is rooted in the pressure they face from without rather than from within: from society's insistence on difference and its desire to categorise and label human groups. Thus while some of Mittelholzer's characters insist on the brotherhood of men, others reveal a strong affinity with European culture or are burdened, as Gilkes has noted, by a "conflict of loyalties".⁸⁸ The latter assertion will be explored in the section entitled "Tragic Manque".

In *Children of Kaywana* the narrator attempts to explain where the allegiance of the coloured middle class was laid and indeed, why. When Jacques talks about his powerful and brutal grandmother, Hendrickje – representative of the plantocracy and the European Motherland – he acknowledges that she commands his awe but not his admiration: "She's a colossus, but a hollow colossus. I love and respect her *because of long and close association*, but I'm not fooled. She has a warped mind... She's an *evil* genius. [my italics]".⁸⁹ The words of Jacques's father, Adrian when interpreted metaphorically expresses similar sentiments:

It's she who made me what I am. [...] Your mother was a real mother to you. But mine was a fiend. We never had any affection from her. [...] All we had from her were shouts and thumps and lectures about the family traditions and tales of our ancestors. Power. The van Groenwegels never run. Power and glory. Empty, absurd doctrines of superiority.⁹⁰

⁸⁷ This passage from Sam Selvon's *An Island is a World* is cited in Naipaul, V. S. "Caribbean Voices" in Nasta, S. (ed.) *Critical Perspectives on Sam Selvon* (Three Continents Press: Washington, D. C, 1988) pp. 111-112.

⁸⁸ Gilkes, M. *The West Indian Novel* (Twayne Publishers: Boston, 1981) p. 41.

⁸⁹ Op. Cit., Mittelholzer, E. *Children of Kaywana* p. 380.

⁹⁰ Ibid; p. 291.

Interestingly some of the characters in *Children of Kaywana* become masochistic in their relationship to Hendrickje. As her weak husband, Ignatius, observes there were many moments when she seemed like a monster:

Yet, curiously, he loved her all the more for her cruelty. At times he would have been glad if she had struck him, if she had snatched up her hide-whip and slashed him across his back as she did to the slaves. When she snapped at him or ordered him around he pretended to be aggrieved, but, in actuality, he was secretly thrilled. He felt a cringing, fearful, aching pleasure.⁹¹

Mittelholzer seems to have been similarly locked in an unhealthy, self-destructive relationship to Britain. Tom Dellow's need in the *Wounded and the Worried* to rescue Gwendolin Wellings (another symbol of old Britannia) from suicide is within this context telling. Despite the fact that she rejects all that he stands for, it is evident that he is dependent on her for his own survival and it is only when she begins to accept who he is that his "death-wish" subsides.

When compelled to choose sides, it would appear that Mittelholzer comes out in support of his 'European' family. In *Children of Kaywana* when black insurrectionists attack Jacques's family, he chooses to side with them despite that fact that fighting is in many respects contrary to his nature. He explains: "the issue at stake is loyalty to the group – and the traditions of the group. [...] Don't blame me [...]. In a manner of speaking, it's a matter outside of me. It was the way I was brought up. It comes all the way down from old Willem."⁹² It is notable too in *A Piling of the Clouds* that after Mittelholzer's proxy, Peter Elmfold, states - "I'm against anti-Semitism and racial and religious intolerance. [...] I don't feel all coloured people are saints, and white people depraved no-goods. This is what has been happening of late..."⁹³ – he comes out in defence of the "Terrible White Man". This leads him to make one of the most controversial and odious statements in the Mittelholzer canon: "But for them, Africans would

⁹¹ Ibid; p. 187.

⁹² Ibid; p. 505.

⁹³ Mittelholzer, E. *The Piling of the Clouds* (Putnam: London, 1961) p. 208.

still be running savage in the bush and killing and eating each other.”⁹⁴ His defence of the Boers (in sharp contrast to Jannee’s killing of Boorharry) appears rooted in their similarity to the white West Indian adventurers who for all the horrors that can be attributed to them, are viewed by Mittelholzer as the pioneers and builders of Guianese society.⁹⁵

Mittelholzer appears to have been unable to connect on any significant level with the African side of his ancestry. In *Sylvia* Charlotte Russell represents the African/Amerindian community and the crude level of cultural development that he ascribes to them. Her surname is (as already established in Chapter Three) associated with the term “rustle” and becomes at a deeper level a metaphor for her degree of creativity. This interpretation is incidentally deduced from the contextual use of the word “rustle” in Mittelholzer’s *With a Carib Eye*. In the chapter “The Trees Seldom Rustle”, Mittelholzer focuses on a description of the “jungle beyond the southern limits” of New Amsterdam. The only people who inhabit this “untamed” terrain are Amerindians, “Negros” and the admixtures of both (known in Mittelholzer’s day as “Buffiandas”). They according to the author live simply in small clearings where they erected huts (benabs) under which one could see hammocks and a “crude stool or two”.⁹⁶ It is thus possible to conclude that *Sylvia*’s Charlotte is in the narrator’s mind the antithesis of her sophisticated husband, as reflected by his name, Grantley Russell (i.e., grandly rustle). This postulation is further supported by the attitudes of Richard Lehrer in *Latticed Echoes*. He claims not to have a “low opinion of the negro race” but acknowledges that he does have “a low opinion of

⁹⁴ Ibid; p. 208.

⁹⁵ Having never been to Africa, Mittelholzer’s changing attitudes were heavily influenced by Anglo-centric representations of Africa in the press and in the books he read. It is clear for instance based on a reading of his articles in the *Barbados Advocate* that he had been following news reports about the ‘atrocious’ activities of the Mau Mau in Kenya and had read Ione Leigh’s *In the Shadow of the Mau Mau* (1955). His ambivalence appears to be linked to his fear of social conflict/uprisings and his belief that complacency had resulted in “such disasters as Fuchs, Pontecorvo and Nunn May [and] also ...Mau Mau uprisings in Kenya.” See Mittelholzer, E. “Liberal Moralists” in *Sunday Advocate* (Barbados: 1 & 2 January 1958) p. 8. It is ironic that Britain is only now (as at May 2013) acknowledging its role in torturing the Mau Mau freedom fighters.

⁹⁶ Mittelholzer, E. *With A Carib Eye* (Secker & Warburg: London, 1958) p. 162.

[their] past achievements..."⁹⁷ All that he is capable of seeing in their past, is a "tradition of barbarism and enslavement":

I see no great music, no great buildings, no great poetry, no great statesmen, no great conquering soldiers. All I can see are nude shining black bodies in chains, cannibalism, juju, barbarous rituals and practices.⁹⁸

Charlotte's lack of interest in self-development importantly differs from Naomi Herreira, a character of Portuguese and East Indian descent. She despite coming from a working-class background aspires to improve her situation through constant self-education. She takes full advantage of her marriage to Bertie Dowden and her "first hand contact with the cream of the middle-class" to become (despite her Tiger Bay background), a lady in speech and manners.⁹⁹ This is a character that the narrator clearly approves of. It would thus appear that while Mittelholzer had not imbibed the snobbish attitudes of the middle class in that he was happy to cross class lines, his conception of self-development had been shaped by his British education. While Mittelholzer can in no way be accused of being a 'Mimic Man', he was influenced at least to some extent, and in common with C L R James, by Matthew Arnold's high (Victorian) cultural agenda.¹⁰⁰ In *Cultural and Anarchy*, Arnold defined culture as "the best that has been thought and said in the world" but more importantly stressed that this knowledge could turn: "a stream of fresh and free thought upon our stock notions and habits, which we now follow staunchly but mechanically".¹⁰¹ These tenets would have appealed to Mittelholzer's intellectually subversive mind-set for it notably inferred that received wisdom needed to be challenged. His wish was that the world could be changed by the force of the pen at the preclusion of the sword.

⁹⁷ Mittelholzer, E. *Latticed Echoes* (Secker & Warburg: London, 1960) p. 228.

⁹⁸ Ibid; p. 221-222.

⁹⁹ Mittelholzer, E. *The Life and Death of Sylvia* (The John Day Company: New York, 1954) pp. 66 & 67.

¹⁰⁰ See Gikandi, S. *Writing in Limbo: Modernism and Caribbean Literature* (Cornell University Press: Ithaca and London, 1992) p. 52.

¹⁰¹ Arnold, M. "Culture and Anarchy" in John Storey (ed.) *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture* (Pearson Education Ltd: Harlow, 1998) p. 7.

The Black Race: Creating a New Future

Richard Lehrer of *Latticed Echoes* tells an African-American journalist, "Slavery is shameful" and "Better battle to the death of every man, woman and child – better complete annihilation – than enslavement."¹⁰² He goes on to state:

You can even quote me as saying that I think the negro race should strive to live down its shameful past and create something within the next few centuries worth living *up* to. In the interim they should be as silent as possible, remembering that their civilised history had only just begun.¹⁰³

Seymour, a close friend of Mittelholzer, notes in his review of *Latticed Echoes* that Richard was a "type of the author" and implies that these distasteful views are his.¹⁰⁴ His views, albeit expressed bluntly, were not particularly unusual within the context of his historical junction. Denis Williams in an interview with Dance admitted that whilst he felt the need to reject the "white ancestor", and turn to Africa for inspiration he was left with the dichotomy that everything he considered of value had come from the West.¹⁰⁵ These views given the virtual absence of written research into African culture and the overwhelming body of Anglo-centric material that had been written by, and about, the West, is not particularly surprising. The pompous and self-applauding tone of Winston Churchill's foreword in a book on British Guiana was typical of the times and left many in awe of Britain's 'great' achievements and conscious of the White Man's Burden/Self-Martyrdom:

Not since the days of the Roman Empire has a single nation carried so great a responsibility for the lives of men and women born outside her shores as Great Britain does today. Within her forty or so dependent territories dwell eighty million people for whose welfare and enlightenment Britain is, to a great or

¹⁰² Mittelholzer, E. *Latticed Echoes* (Secker & Warburg: London, 1960) p. 229

¹⁰³ Ibid; p. 228.

¹⁰⁴ Seymour, A. J. "Review: Latticed Echoes by Edgar Mittelholzer" in *Kyk-Over-Al* (Vol. 9, No. 27; Dec 1960) p. 136.

¹⁰⁵ Dance, D. *New World Adams: Conversations with Contemporary West Indian Writers* (Peepal Tree: Yorkshire, 1992) pp. 55-56.

lesser degree, answerable. // There has been no lack of critics [but] the record confounds them. Look where you will, you will find that the British have ended wars, put a stop to savage customs, opened churches, schools and hospitals, built railways, roads and harbours, and developed the natural resources of the countries so as to mitigate the almost universal, desperate poverty.¹⁰⁶

But given Mittelholzer's belief in 'f(r)iction' as the root of creativity, his provocative remarks were not without purpose. As he explained to Collymore in a letter dated 22nd February 1946:

[I]t is time that readers in this part of the world [the Caribbean] were "repelled" by things they read. Too much goody-goody sickly-sweet literature is going around.¹⁰⁷

Though Mittelholzer believed that the Coloured and Black people of Guiana were culturally civilised, he evidently felt that their lives were stagnant: "the negroes and the coloured people struggled along in their soap bubble of tradition [...]."¹⁰⁸ It seems likely that he hoped Richard Lehrer's remarks would spark off a desire within the black community to refute his comments in the same creative way that his own canon was being used to subvert the false and prejudiced assumptions of West Indian inferiority. Note the echoes of this provocative technique in the author's poem, "Pitch-Walk Mood". While looking at the curved belly of a pregnant girl, the poet ponders on the purpose of life and: "the naivety of this olive tot / with dusky cheek and tender hand – / another fool, perhaps, who knows?" before stating, "Or will he, in twenty years, with pen or voice contumely hurl / upon his fellows now mewling, too, and *slash awake a thousand fears to quicken the leaven of his native land?* – "[my italics].¹⁰⁹

That aside Mittelholzer's novels contain many positive representations of black people including: Jack Sampson of *Sylvia*, Dr Scarfe of *Eltonsbrody*, Dr

¹⁰⁶ Swan, M. *British Guiana: The Land of Six Peoples* (Her Majesty's Stationery Office, London, 1957) p. vii.

¹⁰⁷ See letter dated 22nd February 1946 in Frank Collymore Collection (Ref: Letters from Mittelholzer to Collymore) held in the Department of Archives, Barbados.

¹⁰⁸ Mittelholzer, E. *With A Carib Eye* (Secker & Warburg: London, 1958) p. 22.

¹⁰⁹ Mittelholzer, E. "Pitch-Walk Mood" in *BIM* Vol.2, No. 7 (1946) pp. 52-53.

Drencher of *Of Trees and the Sea*, Rayburn of *My Bones and My Flute* and Horace Xavier of *A Morning at the Office* whilst one of his protagonists, Harry Hynes in *A Tale of Three Places* (1957) points to the author's *modus operandi*. As the first black director of the Port of Spain Cultural Institute Harry represents an older, well-educated and more confident character than Horace Xavier:

[The] only negro in the room [at Sonny's Party], uncompromisingly dark-brown, his kinky black hair cut close to the skull [...]. Harry suffered from no inferiority feelings whatever because of his race. He looked much younger than his forty-two years, and behaved with the confidence of a white man, and the whites, as a result, respected him.¹¹⁰

The suggestion here is that some black people were being held back by an inferiority complex and needed to develop their self-confidence. This view mirrors the assertions that Mittelholzer made in an article he wrote for the *Barbados Advocate*:

Let a man who feels himself inferior suddenly generate enough courage to behave as an equal towards those who he considers to be his "superiors" and let him sustain such an attitude with sincerity and integrity, and see how quickly his "superiors" will climb down from their artificially created heights and recognise him as an equal.¹¹¹

Mittelholzer goes on to state that while history, economics and centuries of oppression had affected black self-esteem, this could be counterbalanced by the courage and tenacity of individuals, for it is they who: "dictate the shape of the world" and influence the future of "the masses". This conviction may be attributable to the teachings of Yogi Ramacharaka, who (like the author in "Pitch-Walk Mood") speaks of individuals having the power to act as leaven for the masses:

¹¹⁰ Mittelholzer, E. *A Tale of Three Places* (Secker and Warburg: London, 1957) p. 30.

¹¹¹ Mittelholzer, E. "Black, White and Coloured" in *Sunday Advocate* (Barbados Advocate: 11 April 1954) p. 8

If one removes to a sleepy, “dead” community, his activities will become deaden and he will gradually sink to the level of the town. Of course, the man or woman who has built up a strong, positive individuality will not be affected so easily as the one of opposite characteristics, and, in fact, he may even act as a leaven for the mass.¹¹²

There seems little doubt that when Mittelholzer set out to be a novelist he also saw himself in the role of a strong, tenacious individual whose work would have a positive influence on the future of the West Indian people.

Mittelholzer’s attempt to find a harmonious solution to the ‘race problem’ in the interim is represented in novels like *The Mad Macullochs* (1959) and *Shadows Move Among Them* (1951). The setting in the former novel is a mysteriously gated-community, the MacMulloch plantation, in Barbados while the latter is set in Berkelhoost, an imaginary settlement in the interior of Guiana. The racially diverse inhabitants of both of these communities live in relative harmony under a system that rejects the conventions of Western society, they are nevertheless under the direction of ‘benevolent’ authoritarian characters (Reverend Gerald Harmston in *Shadows Move Among Them* and MacMulloch senior in *The Mad MacMulloch’s*) whose origins are British. This suggests that whilst Mittelholzer wanted the exploitative aspects of the political system to change, he did not believe that the Caribbean region was ready for full independence.

German to the Middle of his Soul

While the influence of Mittelholzer’s German ancestry is present in Mittelholzer’s novels from the beginning (whether it be references to Hitler, Nietzsche or Wagner), it is only given free expression in later novels like *Latticed Echoes* and *Thunder Returning* - both being part of a planned but abandoned Leitmotiv trilogy. In *Thunder Returning* Guianese key protagonist, Richard Lehrer, makes his English wife, Lydia and his German mistress, Lindy, pregnant.

¹¹² Ramacharaka, Y. *Fourteen Lessons in Yogi Philosophy and Oriental Occultism* (The Yoga Publication Society: Chicago, 1903) p. 82.

Lindy's English husband, Tommy Rowleyson had failed to tell his wife he was impotent before marrying her. Aware that she had been desperate for a child, he willingly forgives her infidelity. But Tommy's sense of emasculation is worsened by the knowledge the child is not his. He turns to rum as a way of escaping from the truth but this makes him behave like an out-of-control drunk and appear increasingly unattractive to his wife. Richard's wife, Lydia, is similarly prepared to overlook his affair with Lindy as long as he does not see her again.

As the Rowleyson's remain resident in New Amsterdam and the Lehrer's move to Kitty (on the outskirts of Georgetown) it seems as though both couples might be able to re-establish their lives. But when Lydia realises that the Rowleysons are staying at the Crawford's boarding house during a brief visit to Georgetown she cannot resist inviting Lindy to tea. Lydia is convinced that while she will give birth to a "dwarf daughter", Lindy is going to give birth to a "super-baby": a German "Siegfried" son, and thereby usurp her husband's affections. When Lindy accepts her invitation to tea, Lydia attempts to kick her in the stomach but instead hurts herself. As anticipated Lindy gives birth to a boy and she, Lydia, a girl. As the tension in the novel develops, references are increasingly made to "thunder returning": a motif for impending disaster. Then on the occasion of Frederick Lehrer's funeral (i.e., Richard Lehrer's grandfather) Tommy's aggressive drunken behaviour results in Lindy's son being taken to hospital with a head injury. Though not badly hurt it results in the end of the Rowleyson's marriage: she cannot trust him with her child. In the meantime, Lydia commits suicide by throwing herself out of a window.

In this novel the 'mixed European/African' character, Richard Lehrer is portrayed as being virile in complete contrast to Tommy (an name that was perhaps chosen for its ironic allusions to the generic name for British soldiers in the First World War). On a metaphorical level the implication is that Richard's German blood makes him superior in everyway to Tommy; that he is capable of creating something new out of all of his relationships (whether German or English) but that it is his intimate liaison with Lindy, that results in the creation

of a Nietzschean 'super-baby'. Given that Lindy's name is short for Woglinde (alluding to one of the three Rhinemaidens, water nymphs, in Wagner's opera cycle, *Der Ring des Nibelungen*), and Mittelholzer's use of Wagnerian 'Leitmotifs', the storyline is on a metaphorical level pointing, self-reflexively, to the 'genius' of *Thunder Returning*. There are no limits to what Richard Lehrer can achieve.

Like his grandfather, Frederick Lehrer, Richard disregards his Negro blood and feels "German to the middle of his soul."¹¹³ His aunt Emily explains that she used to think he went out of his way to express his Germanness simply because he was racially mixed and of British nationality but then realises that he was actually born with a "hankering" to be German. Richard talking about his self-identity, unpatriotically declares:

My spirit is not in this country. It never has been. At heart I'm a European. It was one of Fate's nasty little jokes – my being born in this country [of Guiana].¹¹⁴

In the same breath, Richard dismisses a poem by Sir Walter Scott, "Breathes there the Man" when he snaps: "To hell with Scott!"¹¹⁵, this presumably because Scott's poem insists on the inherent correctness of patriotism and nationalism.

Both *Latticed Echoes* (1960) and *Thunder Returning* (1961) implicitly indicate, that Mittelholzer, if we accept Richard Lehrer is his proxy, was increasingly inclined to reject his Guianese heritage. Much of this appears to be linked to the change in the political atmosphere of the day. Richard Lehrer, for instance, notes about a newspaper he is reading:

This social page sickens me. Every damned coolie or puntman who gets married has his picture stuck in the paper. It's nothing but this Jagan brand of Communism that's responsible. // This Left-wing business can be taken too far.¹¹⁶

¹¹³ Mittelholzer, E. *Thunder Returning* (Secker and Warburg: London, 1961) p. 92.

¹¹⁴ Ibid; p. 32.

¹¹⁵ Ibid; p. 32.

¹¹⁶ Ibid; p. 30.

Richard Lehrer's stance was not untypical of Guianese with a middle-class Creole background. According to Hintzen a split occurred in the class-based nationalism of British Guiana around 1955. It was inevitably racial given the colour-class pattern of social stratification and "presaged the development of a [notably anti-communist] Creole nationalist alliance against what came to be perceived as an Asian Indian takeover of the state."¹¹⁷ It is worth remarking that nationalism is underpinned by the concept of national (racial) unity. Given the heterogeneous nature of Guianese society it was almost inevitable, so Shalini Puri has argued, that hybridisation (with all of its polysemous and multivalent options) would not be achieved.¹¹⁸ Given the limitations of nationalism, sections of the community were destined – or so it seems – to feel and be marginalised. So while Mittelholzer was against the British colonial domination of Guiana, he appears also to have been against a political outcome that would place power into the hands of the Indo-Guianese community at the apparent exclusion of others. The conspicuous growth of Mittelholzer's pro-German, anti-Guianese identity was arguably an emotional response to his sense of alienation and inability to control the cultural/socio-political direction of Guiana.

THE TRAGIC 'MANQUE'

In *Uncle Paul* (1963) Mittelholzer returns to a book-length examination of a tragic mulatto albeit in the guise of Paul Mankay, his part German, part Jewish key protagonist. Whilst the author was able in *Sylvia* to engage with, and challenge, the literary tradition of the tragic mulatto with a degree of authorial distance and confidence, the opposite is true of *Uncle Paul*. Paul's thoroughness and discipline, love of Wagner, thunder, lightning and intermittent use of the German language, are enough to indicate he is a Mittelholzer-self-portrait. As the author explains in a letter to Seymour, the hero is "really an intensive

¹¹⁷ Hintzen, P. "Creoleness and Nationalism in Guyanese Anticolonialism and Postcolonial Formation" in *Small Axe* 15 (March 2004) p. 114.

¹¹⁸ Shalini Puri's contentions are outlined in Hintzen's article. Ibid; pp. 114-115.

character study of myself – though only I will know that. I’ve disguised the character too well for readers who are strangers to suspect.”¹¹⁹

While the novel offers readers ‘in the know’ interesting insights into Mittelholzer’s embattled mind-set, those who are not, will find the plot disappointing. As Gilkes has observed, it is in some ways reminiscent of the sensationalist ‘penny-dreadfuls’ of Mittelholzer’s youth: the Buffalo Bill, Nelson Lee, Sexton Blake and Dr Wang Fu¹²⁰ adventure stories.¹²¹ Indeed when compared with the plot, depth and metaphorical richness of *Sylvia*, *Uncle Paul* represents a marked decline in the quality of Mittelholzer’s writing, his loss of confidence as a writer and talented man. This, the given termination of his relationship with his publishers, Secker and Warburg in 1961 and the increasingly poor reception of his novels – *A Tinkling in the Twilight* (1959), *The Mad MacMullocks* (1959), *Latticed Echoes* (1960), *Eltonsbrody* (1960), *Thunder Returning* (1961), *The Piling of the Clouds* (1961), and *The Wounded and the Worried* (1962) – is not surprising.¹²² *Uncle Paul* further indicates that Mittelholzer’s psychological angst was linked to the historical juncture within which he was writing and to the political atmosphere of late 1950s/early 1960s Britain.

The novel opens with Paul Mankay’s arrival at the home (in Hampshire) of the Oakworths, i.e., his sister, Freya; his brother-in-law, John; and their two children, Martin and Teresa. He is on the run and seeking refuge from Hackleton, the psychopathic leader of a fascist party called the Nordic Loyalists - perhaps another hackle-raising ‘Boorharry’ figure. Paul reveals that he had joined this organisation with the “express purpose of damaging them.” On 12th August 1962, while his fascist counterparts held a meeting in the East End of

¹¹⁹ Seymour, A. “Edgar Mittelholzer: The Man and His Works” in *The 1967 Edgar Mittelholzer Memorial Lectures – First Series* (Georgetown, National History and Arts Council, 1968) p. 17.

¹²⁰ Not to be confused with Sax Rohmer’s character, Dr Fu Manchu, although Mittelholzer may well have read stories about him as well.

¹²¹ Gilkes, M.A. *The Caribbean Syzygy: A Study of the novels of Edgar Mittelholzer and Wilson Harris* (1973-74 A8j Ph.D., Kent, 24-332) p. 217-218.

¹²² Chapter Two, subsection “A Darkening Cloud of Opprobrium” foregrounds the many problems that were going on in the author’s life during this period.

London, he smashed up their headquarters in Maida Vale. Convinced that Hackleton will track him down, Paul remains on the alert.

While at the Oakworths, Paul spends time with Freya's children and their friends: Darcy, Edwina and Valerie. The latter, a young adolescent girl, hero-worships Paul; he reminds her of the James Bond figure in the book, *Live and Let Die*. Valerie, aware of the threats he is facing, sets out to protect him by scouting the area for Hackleton and his cronies. During this period, Paul receives a surprise visit from his mistress, Delia Lowther. She, on returning to London, discovers that her property has been broken into: presumably by the fascists. Paul promises to rejoin Delia but not before spending some time with Valerie in the turret. He soon becomes aware that Hackleton and an accomplice are listening to them. A gunfight ensues and both men are shot dead by Paul. Valerie is in the meantime shot by a stray bullet (fired by one of the fascists) but dies happy.

While the story appears to have been influenced by the real events of July/August 1962 when anti-fascist rioters broke up Sir Oswald Mosley's Union Movement¹²³ meetings in East London, there is no evidence (thus far) to suggest that Mittelholzer was an active participant. It is known however that he lived at 22 Randolph Crescent in Maida Vale in the late 1950s and was presumably aware that Mosley lived in a near-by flat at Cliveden Court. Since Mosley is today more widely known for his Anti-Semitism, it is worth highlighting that Mosley also campaigned against 'coloured' immigration and was invited by the residents of North Kensington in 1959 – including the areas affected by the previous years race riots – to stand for election to Parliament. The activities of the Union Movement received wide newspaper coverage and as Mittelholzer was an avid reader, and often inspired by events reported in newspapers, we can assume that this was the primary source of his inspiration.

The political response of Britain to its resident coloured population changed dramatically between 1948 when Mittelholzer first travelled to Britain

¹²³ They were formerly known as the British Union of Fascists.

and 1963 when *Uncle Paul* was published. Back in 1948 Britain had been short of labour and needed help to rebuild its post-war economy. British colonial subjects were granted UK citizenship with the passing of the 1948 Nationality Act, whilst newspapers, like the London *Evening Standard*, ran stories that welcomed West Indians arriving in Britain on board the *Empire Windrush*. Whilst two-thirds of Britain's white population held, according to Fryer, a low opinion of black people, seeing them as uncivilised, inferior "heathens who practiced head-hunting, cannibalism, infanticide, polygamy and black magic", the build up in racial tension and overt animosity was accumulative and did not lead to legislative changes until 1962 when the first Commonwealth Immigrants Bill became law.¹²⁴ This law, a turning point in the politics of race relations, made it clear that black people were undesirable immigrants and second-class citizens. Mittelholzer's response to the change in legislation most likely paralleled that of E R Braithwaite, a fellow Guianese novelist:

...any contribution I might make or wish to make, or any feeling of identity I might entertain towards Britain and the British, I – like all other colored persons in Britain – am considered 'immigrant'. Although this term indicates that we have secured entry into Britain, it describes a continuing condition in which we have no real hope of ever enjoying the desired transition to full responsible citizenship.¹²⁵

The Mittelholzer/Milton, who in *Sylvia* was full of hope and in a tearing hurry to become successful, had thus by 1963 been reduced to a despairing neurotic.

Indeed Paul Mankay has more in common with Milton's alter ego, Sylvia. Like her, but in a gender reversal, Paul admits to having had incestuous feeling for his sister, Freya: "I did have a whale of a big crush on you from sixteen to my early twenties."¹²⁶ He also shares her "over-ripe imagination". Other parallels appear to exist between the two novels. Valerie and Sylvia appear for instance to be kindred spirits. Both experience Oedipal-type emotions that are misplaced:

¹²⁴ Fryer, P. *Staying Power* (Pluto Press: London, 1984) p. 374.

¹²⁵ Cited in Fryer, P. "Surrender to Racism" in *Staying Power* (Pluto Press: London, 1984) p. 382.

¹²⁶ Mittelholzer, E. *Uncle Paul* (Macdonald: London, 1963) p. 15.

Sylvia for her flawed father (i.e., Grantley Russell) and Valerie for 'Uncle' Paul, the failure. Both female protagonists die as virgins having failed to consummate their love. But whilst Sylvia's life ends with her quiet embrace of death and to the sound of a kiskadee, Valerie dies valiantly to the tune of the Hapless Valsungs (from Wagner's *The Ring Cycle*). It is possible to extrapolate from this that Mittelholzer wished his 'feminine' side were more like Valerie in nature, than Sylvia. Given Mittelholzer's love of Wagner, the name Valerie was almost certainly chosen for its homophonic similarity to 'Valkyrie' – one of a host of female goddesses in Norse mythology who died in battle.

Paul's name is as significant here as Milton Copps's was in *Sylvia*. His ancestral surname name of Mandelbaum (German for Almond Tree) was changed to Mankay when the family moved to England. Gilkes's suggestion that Mankay alludes to the French word 'Manque' (denoting a deficiency or failure) is supported by Paul's self-image. He tells Delia that:

Some people are born with harmony in their blood – others dissonance. The first lot can go far, but more often end up as mediocrities. Too much harmony can be deadly. The second lot are either catastrophic failures [of which he is one] or scintillating successes.¹²⁷

The metaphorical meaning of this passage is that people with 'pure' harmonic blood lean toward mediocrity whilst those with 'mixed' dissonant blood have the power to become great successes or failures. Paul here considers himself a catastrophic failure but the implication is that this is somehow (given his name change) related to his exile in England. Within this context his name, Paul Mankay, becomes a homophonic pun - 'Poor Monkey' - and seemingly represents the internalisation of Boorharry's jibes in *Corentyne Thunder*: "Jannee-pannee-chimpanzee".¹²⁸

¹²⁷ Mittelholzer, E. *Uncle Paul* (Macdonald: London, 1963) p. 121.

¹²⁸ This is what Boorharry called Jannee whenever he wanted to taunt him. See Mittelholzer, E. *Corentyne Thunder* (Heinemann: London, 1970) p. 38.

Though Paul seems insecure and depressed he is in terms of his Oriental Occultist beliefs on the right path. When he states: "I've found the parts that are me, but my job now is to fit them together and make them stick"¹²⁹, he is arguably drawing upon the teachings of the *Bhagavad Gita*. These teachings implore that we become aware of all our projections and recognise the unity in them. Thus whilst Gilkes convincingly argues that this novel is evidence of the author's fragmented consciousness and psychic disintegration, it might also be an indication that he has freed himself from the 'pair of opposites' that as the *Bhagavad Gita* asserts, blind men from Truth.

Was Mittelholzer a Racist?

It should be acknowledged at this stage that Mittelholzer's critics have been variously divided on the subject of his attitude toward race. Some like Guckian fervently insist that he does not share the racist views of his protagonists and argues that Mittelholzer's work:

...is not only innocent of the charges of racial prejudice, but dependent for its excellence on his treatment of racial tensions and other colonial residues extant in society. It is not intended to suggest that because no racial prejudice is found in his books, that they are, for that reason, good, but to dispel the fixation about racial attitudes would remove an obstacle to a sound assessment of his work.¹³⁰

Others like Sparer, Williams and Wilson-Tagoe represent the other end of the spectrum in that they all believe he viewed the mixing of bloods as a degenerate force. The truth is perhaps alluded to through the words of Alfie Desseau in *A Tale of Three Places* (1957). When asked by an English Colonel to describe life in Trinidad: "Alfie took pains to sketch a clear, unsmeared picture. It would have been in bad taste, he felt, to reveal to a stranger the panorama of his personal attitudes and prejudices"¹³¹: these, as he was aware, were the outcome of being

¹²⁹ Op. Cit., Mittelholzer, E. *Uncle Paul* p. 50.

¹³⁰ Guckian, P. "The Balance of Colour: A Reassessment of the Work of Edgar Mittelholzer" in *Jamaican Journal* (Vol. 4: March 1970) p. 40.

¹³¹ Mittelholzer, E. *A Tale of Three Places* (Secker & Warburg: London, 1957) p. 165.

born into a particular historical juncture. Indeed Mittelholzer was keenly aware of his historical juncture and its power to shape, as well as be shaped by, the people who live in it. Mittelholzer's comments on the subject of his father's response to his birth in December 1909, support this assertion:

Always a confirmed negrophobe, he must have felt it deeply that December morning. He has my empathy. It requires the minimum of effort for me to put myself in his place. In a community like that, at that time, he would have had to be superhuman not to be disappointed.¹³²

Unlike many of the planter class in the *Kaywana* Trilogy he appears at a deep level to have been aware that genetic heritage could not and should not be conceptualised in the simplistic terms of a 'racial' type. It seems clear, however, that contemporary notions of civilisation did affect the way he viewed black culture.

His middle class upbringing (based on a Western education) had led to an affinity with Europe that could not be broken despite changes in the historical moment whether it be the call for West Indian nationalism or the attitude of the British to "swarms" of black people migrating to Britain. There can be little doubt that his father's Negrophobia had blighted his life but it is this that made him acutely aware of the pernicious force of race, and had instilled in him, the desire to subvert socially constructed ideologies. While he did retain a belief in what today might be called 'ethnic' types (i.e., characteristics that are shared amongst population sub-groups), he was also conscious that in the long history of mankind these could not be used to measure or predict the capabilities of any individual humans. Note the scene that unfolds in *A Piling of the Clouds* when Peter Elmfold's "strange mix of cold realism and romanticism" is attributed to his Viking blood, whilst his wife's 'mercurial' moddiness is said to be the result of her Scottish, Welsh and Saxon blood. His friend, Charles meanwhile suggests that all humans are genetically unique:

¹³² Mittelholzer, E. *A Swarthy Boy: A Childhood in British Guiana* (Putnam: London, 1963) p. 17.

There's no consistency in human nature, my dear. Haven't I said that before?
We're none of us made exactly to a set pattern. [my italics]¹³³

Milton's assertion that he embraces dissonance (the more the better) and Paul Mankay's belief that harmony equals mediocrity both suggest that, for most of the time, Mittelholzer embraced his mixed genetic inheritance. Indeed given his development of "The Jen" fable, he also appears to have conceived of his blood as the elevated fire blood of a 'genius', god-like and capable of great feats. As he confided in a letter to a close friend (circa April 1941): "My will and my spirit are like towers looming above the Himalayas."¹³⁴

Mittelholzer's anxiety given his religious beliefs and preoccupation with the 'genie (enslaved) in the bottle' motif is arguably rooted in fears about his Karma: his genetic inheritance, and the history of slavery. In *Uncle Paul*, the eponymous hero makes it clear that he wants to embrace both sides of his ancestry but that it is ultimately the issue of slavery that makes him ashamed of his Jewish (ergo African) blood:

Do you know what galls me, what burns in me most? It's when I remember what happened in Germany. Not just Hitler's beastliness. Oh, no. It's not as simple as that [...]. It's the Jews. The way they caved in. The way they let themselves be led off into those camps. Docilely, ignominiously. Oh, my God! *That* burns me! *That* makes me ashamed of the Jew in my blood.¹³⁵

Paul Mankay goes on to note that had he been in their position, he ("with [his] fire") would have gone down fighting:

I can't admire meekness, Valerie. I can't admire cowardice. I'm a born warrior. I fight. I fight always – and every inch of the way. I never surrender. I shall never be a slave. [...] Always battle! For I believe that is how the universe functions.

¹³³ Mittelholzer, E. *A Piling of the Clouds* (Putnam: London, 1961) p. 45.

¹³⁴ See undated letter – circa April 1941 – in Ruth Wilkinson's private collection: Letters from Mittelholzer to Ruth Wilkinson (circa March 1941 – 15th June 1962).

¹³⁵ Op. Cit., Mittelholzer, E. *Uncle Paul* p. 165.

Conflict. Always conflict. Fight and win – or be defeated. Victory or Death. But never passivity. Never meek surrender. Therein lies a greater evil than death.¹³⁶

As demonstrated in Chapter 5, Mittelholzer finds support for these beliefs not only in the Darwinian ‘survival of the fittest’ but also in teachings of the *Bhagavad-Gita*. Importantly notions of strength and willpower had also been part of his primary socialisation. One need only think of the British patriotic song “Rule Britannia!” - one of the most powerful conceptual expressions of the British Empire from the 1730s onwards – and its refrain: “Britons never never never shall be slaves”, or the more modern Fascist slogan of 1930s Italy: “Better one day as a lion than a hundred days as a sheep” to understand why slavery becomes in Mittelholzer’s imagination the internalised source of shame.

Mittelholzer importantly perceived a contradiction between his right-wing attitudes, his esoteric mythological **Jenetic** heroes and his own personal reality. In *Children of Kaywana*, the Mittelholzer-proxy and objective observer, Jacques van Groenwegel notes: “I wasn’t born to be a hero. Heroes are strong. I’m one of the weak who have discovered the depressing truth that it takes strength to make a secure world.”¹³⁷ In a similar vein, Ronald Barkley confesses that

...he was as soft as pap. Sometimes it frightened him, this soft core: made him feel vulnerable, unprotected. It was a kind of Achilles heel that he must conceal from his enemies. His scowling and bravado constituted his special protective armour plating.¹³⁸

It is Brian Liddard of *A Tinkling in the Twilight* who perhaps reveals the crux of Mittelholzer’s personal conflicts: “At heart he is a Siegfried – but a pseudo-Siegfried. He is no hero. It is perverse stubbornness on his part that he will not yield up to the ring of his accursed vanity and egotism – even in the face of unromantic and thoroughly rational arguments. He is doomed because of his

¹³⁶ Ibid; p. 166.

¹³⁷ Mittelholzer, E. *Children of Kaywana* (Secker & Warburg: London, 1960) p. 507.

¹³⁸ Austin Woodsley, H. *The Mad MacMullocks* (Peter Owen Ltd: London, 1959) p. 185.

own personal myth – a myth that is at entire variance with the circumstances of his birth and upbringing.”¹³⁹ Whilst the issue of Mittelholzer’s identity is complex (clearly reflective of his socio-historical juncture) the most important aspect of his canon is the sub-textual aspiration to release himself, his characters and his Caribbean counterparts from ‘mental slavery’.

¹³⁹ Mittelholzer, E. *A Twinkling in the Twilight* (Secker & Warburg: London, 1959) p. 254.

CHAPTER SEVEN

CONCLUSION

"He possesses a strange detachment, that little fellow – but I wouldn't say he's cold in temperament. There is a fire in him – but it is of the latent kind. It appears to need a spark, if I express myself clearly, to set it free." And his wife nodded and murmured: "I understand what you mean. And I should wish fervently that such a spark will never touch him. It would be a terrible fire, Storm. My instincts tell me so."¹

The combined methodology of biography, book history, intertextuality and close reading has revealed that Mittelholzer's novels are complex: making full use of a wide range of literary techniques (including metaphor, word association, intertextuality, genre-subversion and musical analogy) to communicate to readers on a number of different levels. His books can be read as forms of superficial entertain but are also the source intrigue and fascination for those who enjoy close reading. More importantly close reading reveals a subversive underbelly that runs throughout all of Mittelholzer's literature. As an author he was extraordinarily radical. His use of 'metatexts' are shown to be an effective way of talking back to Empire, and of subverting negative representations of race. But in some respects Mittelholzer's techniques were so complex and abstruse that it is not surprising to discover most reviewers and indeed later critics have failed to recognise the multilayered depth of his novels. Perhaps he believed, given his interest in Oriental Occultism and the esoteric, that his work would be discernible to those who were at a similar level of spiritual development. Whatever the case he almost certainly over-estimated his Western readership, for they, given the context of racism would not have expected a colonial to write novels of such complexity.

Mittelholzer no doubt enjoyed the irony that Western literature was the source of his subversive impulses. His representations of Horace Xavier (and his

¹ A reference to Dirk van Groeneweg. See Mittelholzer, E. *Kaywana Blood* (Secker & Warburg: London, 1958) p. 45.

association with Horace, the son of a freed slave) and his reference to Dicken's *A Tale of Two Cities* are clearly being used to demonstrate the value of Western literature and the ways in which it can be manipulated to suit the needs of the Caribbean. Romanticism in its privileging of the author as hero was also of key importance to Mittelholzer. The idea that he could create personal heroes without censor must have been liberating, particularly given the prevalence of racist ideologies during the twentieth century, and his reliance on Europe and America for the publication of his novels.

Mittelholzer's radical transformation of the Arabian Jinn from a spirit, and child of fire, into a personal code that signified the nobility and strength of his mixed race protagonists is ingenious. It clearly demonstrates that he was unwilling to accept hegemonic notions of the mulatto as tainted. Thus whilst his novels had to be historically accurate – and reflect the prevalence of racist ideologies, the presence of these subtextual codes, becomes a metaphor for ideological battle that Mittelholzer was engaged in. The Jen myth offered Mittelholzer a reprieve from the world and satisfied his desire to transcend petty concerns in favour of more spiritual objectives. The Romantic notion that the writer-dreamer could stage his own revolution is here being sought as a cerebral means through which to dismantle colonialism.

The underlying premise of Romanticism that there are no imperatives to be followed other than 'artistic' truth, may partially explain Mittelholzer's experimental temperament.² His desire to be viewed as an individual becomes a symbol of his desire not to be constrained by external forces or socially constructed parameters. Romanticism's privileging of the idea that creative images are not born of the world but rather from within the author complemented the Oriental Occultist belief in the "divine" nature of creativity.³ It is important to recognise that from the perspective of an Oriental Occultist,

² Butler, M. *Romantics, Rebels & Reactionaries* (Oxford University Press: Oxford, 1981) pp. 6-7.

³ Butler talking about M. H. Abrams book *The Mirror and Lamp* (1953) notes the latter's view that a Romantic's work is like a "lamp", one that "throws out images not originating in the world but in the poet. Art becomes subjective rather than objective, and intuitive rather than rationally planned." Ibid; p. 7. See also Ramacharaka, Y. *Advanced Course in Yogi Philosophy and Oriental Occultism* (L N Fowler: Ludgate Circus, 1917) p. 22 regarding the divine nature of creativity.

psychic projection is (spiritual) 'reality' and not as Freud suggests a function of the unconscious.⁴ That Mittelholzer was willing to challenge and dismiss psychology as a science is surely ample evidence he did not view himself as a 'colonial inferior' dependent on the West for knowledge.

Mittelholzer's obsession with the changes in British society and its increasingly liberal politics can again be attributed to his belief in Eastern philosophies and its emphasis on Right Action, Duty and Strength. Sparer's claim that Mittelholzer suffered from 'white-ancestor worship' becomes in this context, questionable. The fact that his primary sources of inspiration are rooted in Eastern philosophies (which the ex-indentured Hindu population of Guyana share) helps to suggest that the Mittelholzer should not be viewed in such a reductionist manner. Mittelholzer's creative adaption of the Jinnee motif – given that it is rooted in Arabic/Muslim culture – as well as his rejection of the British imperialist's biggest "civilising" export (i.e., Christianity), similarly erode the validity of Sparer's suppositions.

It is true that Mittelholzer was attached to Nietzschean philosophy but this thesis helps to clarify that the author references him largely because his ideas are in keeping with that of Oriental Occultism. The notion that representations of sex in this novel are the result of erotic fantasies has patently been shown to be untrue. It is clear that sex is in most instances a metaphor for degrees of creativity or types of creativity. Within this context it becomes possible to add a further layer of meaning to Joseph's thesis on *The Treatment of Sex in the Novels of Edgar Austin Mittelholzer*. Her claim that some perverse characters are depicted as unrestrained and willing to bear the consequences of their actions can now be interpreted as a metaphor for the author's own approach to literature. True to his word the author suffered the consequences

⁴ For a discussion on the difference between the Oriental Occultist's view of the human mind and that of Western psychologists see Ramacharaka, Y. *Fourteen Lessons in Yogi Philosophy and Oriental Occultism* (The Yoga Publication Society: Chicago, 1903) pp. 16-18. All of Ramacharaka's books indicate in one way or another that the Western Intellectual tradition is good but nevertheless a reflection of their incomplete understanding of the world and their need for further spiritual development.

of his own 'perverse' creations: a form of f(r)iction⁵ that merged Rationalist, Romantic and Oriental Occultist thought with the themes of race, religion, sex and death.

The findings of this thesis are in support of Alison Donnell's call to reassess texts that had been viewed as Pro-Empire, contentious or marginalised for "the crime of colonial 'mimicry'".⁶ It is clear in this instance that Mittelholzer's adoption of Western literary models did not imply imitation. Indeed influence appears to be a poor index of the author's place in the Pro-Europe/Anti-Europe debate. The study of intertexts has been key to exposing the deeper undercurrents and tensions in the Mittelholzer canon. The thesis also offers key insights into the politics of self-representation and demonstrates that the relationship of the coloured middle class to the Western World may have been a lot more complex than previously recognised.⁷

Areas for further research

Numerous areas of research remain particularly on the subject of music in the author's novels. The intertextual references in *Corentyne Thunder* indicate that music had for Mittelholzer a spiritual quality that was in keeping with the teaching of Buddhism while in *Sylvia* it is metaphorically employed to demonstrate that the Absolute flows through all things. No attempt has been made here however to explore the deeper significance of Wagner's *The Ring Cycle* or to consider the layers of meaning that are evidently contained in Mittelholzer's highly innovative novels, *Latticed Echoes* and *Thunder Returning*. As an innovative technique it seems worthy of closer attention. It may be beneficial too to extend the multifarious approach that is used in *Sylvia* to the remainder of the Mittelholzer canon.

⁵ See Woodsley, H. A., *The Mad MacMullocks* (Peter Owen Ltd: London, 1959) p. 51 - "It's friction that creates everything in life". It can be convincingly argued and deduced that Mittelholzer sought to create his own genre of fiction: i.e., 'f(r)iction'.

⁶ Donnell, A. *Twentieth Century Caribbean Literature* (Routledge: London, 2006) p. 52.

⁷ This thesis notably supports Belinda Edmonson's assertions about the Caribbean middle class and the 'brown aesthetic' in *Caribbean Middlebrow: Leisure, Culture and The Middle Class* (Cornell University Press: Ithaca, 2009).

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Ruth Wilkinson (childhood friend)

Sheila Mittelholzer (cousin)

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APPENDICES

Appendix 1

CREOLE CHIP NO. 9

Soon after Cousin John had arrived back from Nickerie, the residents of St. Ann Street, New Amsterdam, began to hear strange wailing sounds proceeding from the residence of the Benjamins. These sounds only made themselves heard in the still of the night, and neighbours wagged their heads and told each other that they “thought so”. Ha! That man eh? They had always known that he dealt with bacoos [sic]. This proved it beyond any doubt.

Good gracious! Hear how the thing wailed at nights! The evil in this world, eh? And he a professing Christian.

Mrs. Singer was of the opinion that he didn’t feed it on raw beef, that was why it wailed.

But Mrs. Tawker thought that it was because it had got out of his control. “Ha! You can’t go dabbling in the Dark and get off scot-free, my dear.”

Mrs. Whistknot held the theory that he kept it in the kitchen and the rats disturbed it. “You have to know how to treat these creatures,” she said wisely. “You can’t make fun with them. Huh!”

Two days later the Benjamins’ cook had received a livid brand on her bare arm. Who had branded her? Nobody knew.

But Mrs Singer said to Mrs Tawker: “Ha! You see that, my dear. What did I tell you? I knew it was coming. I knew. Ha! You can’t play with baccoo and get off.”

Appendix 2

MITTELHOLZER AND MUSIC

Transcript of handwritten letter from Mittelholzer to Macmillan's

Collection Ref: LWP Part III Gen Cor – Mittelholzer: MacMillan 147/43

Held at the University of Sussex

Messrs Macmillan & Co, Ltd,
St, Martin's Street,
WC2

Coburg Street,
New Amsterdam,
Berbice,
British Guiana,
South America

24th July 1933

Dear Sirs,

Enclosed is a MS., entitled "Symphony Fantastique [sic]", which I submit for your consideration.

Please allow me to apologize for its hand-written condition, but unfortunately, there are no typewriting agencies in these parts and I do not possess a machine. Extremely great neatness, however, has been observed and every word is not only legibly, but clearly and easily readable. I ask you as a special favour to give it a careful perusal.

The story is one which has been treated in an unusual and novel manner and (for reasons which will be apparent on perusal), I ask you to request your readers to go over the MS. in its entirety before forming a decision. This is very important. The following will give you some idea of the general treatment:-

The first movement (Andante) is slow in action, with much dialogue of somewhat philosophical nature and vivid character painting. The general atmosphere is prosaic and lightly realistic. There are occasional variations; breaks (cantabile and maestoso assai), with certain "cadences" (crescendo and decrecendo). Toward the end the action quickens (più mosso) and the dialogue becomes of a light nature.

The second movement (Allegretto) is rather quick in action with light dialogue, varied at intervals by brief passages of an impressive and sweet, simple style, respectively, (Pesante and con dolce). Toward the end there is a regularity of movement very interesting to note, almost unique; a form of repetition.

The third movement is very fast and animated (Presto agitato), with an air of unreality and melodrama. The plot develops. This is a brief movement.

The fourth movement (Allegretto) progresses rather quickly. There is an air of suspense throughout leading up to a weird and highly unusual climax.

Edgar A. Mittelhölzer

Appendix 3

Publication History: Novels & Non-Fiction Books

Setting: Guyana / Trinidad / Barbados / England / Mixed Locality

TITLE (1 st Published by: Location)	1 st PUBLISHED
<i>Creole Chips</i> (The Lutheran Press: Berbice)	1937
<i>Corentyne Thunder</i> (Eyre & Spottiswoode: London)	1941
<i>A Morning at the Office</i> (Hogarth Press: London) <u>Also as:</u> <i>A Morning in Trinidad</i> (Doubleday: New York)	1950
<i>Shadows Move Among Them</i> (Peter Nevill: London & New York) (J B Lippincott: Philadelphia)	1951
<i>Children of Kaywana</i> (Peter Nevill: London & New York) (John Day: New York) <u>Also as:</u> <i>Kaywana Heritage</i>¹ (Peter Nevill: London & New York) <i>Savage Destiny</i> (A Dell Book: New York, 1965)	1952
<i>The Weather in Middenshot</i> (Secker & Warburg: London) (John Day: New York)	1952
<i>The Life and Death of Sylvia</i> (Secker & Warburg: London) (John Day: New York) <u>Also as:</u> <i>Sylvia</i> (Four Square: London, 1963)	1953
<i>The Adding Machine</i> (Pioneer Press: Kingston)	1954

¹ The first edition of *Children of Kaywana* appears to have been printed in two parts: the first covering the chapters entitled: 'A Jet of Fire' through to 'Oedipus' and the second, under the book title of *Kaywana Heritage* featuring chapters 'Rosaria' through to 'Finale: Like Kaywana'. The two books were later conflated under the first title, *Children of Kaywana* and widely circulated under the Secker & Warburg imprint in 1960.

Publication History: Novels & Non-Fiction Books (cont...)

Setting: Guyana / Trinidad / Barbados / England / Mixed Locality	
<i>The Harrowing of Hubertus</i> (Secker & Warburg: London) <u>Also as:</u> <i>Hubertus</i> (John Day: New York, 1955) <i>Kaywana Stock</i> (Secker & Warburg: London, 1959)	1954
<i>My Bones and My Flute</i> (Secker & Warburg: London)	1955
<i>Of Trees & The Sea</i> (Secker & Warburg: London)	1956
<i>A Tale of Three Places</i> [i.e., Trinidad, England, St Lucia] (Secker & Warburg: London)	1957
<i>With A Carib Eye</i> (Secker & Warburg: London)	1958
<i>Kaywana Blood</i> (Secker & Warburg: London) <u>Also as:</u> <i>The Old Blood</i> (Doubleday: New York, 1958)	1958
<i>The Weather Family</i> (Secker & Warburg: London)	1958
<i>A Tinkling in the Twilight</i> (Secker & Warburg: London)	1959
<i>The Mad MacMullocks</i> [under the pseudonym: H Austin Woodsley] (Peter Owen: London)	1959
<i>Latticed Echoes</i> (Secker & Warburg: London)	1960
<i>Eltonsbrody</i> (Secker & Warburg: London)	1960
<i>Thunder Returning</i> (Secker & Warburg: London)	1961
<i>The Piling of the Clouds</i> (Putnam: London)	1961
<i>The Wounded & the Worried</i> (Putnam: London)	1962
<i>A Swarthy Boy</i> (Putnam: London)	1963
<i>Uncle Paul</i> (Macdonald: London) (Dell: New York, 1965)	1963
<i>The Aloneness of Mrs Chatham</i> (Library 33: London)	1965
<i>The Jilkington Drama</i> (Abelard-Schuman: London & New York)	1965