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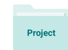


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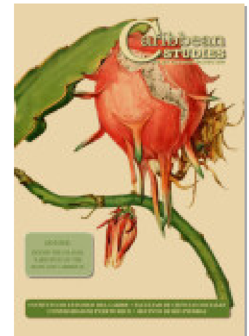
Margaret Shrimpton Masson



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# FORGOTTEN POPULATIONS IN BELIZE'S LITERARY LANDSCAPE: DISMANTLING THE NATIONAL NARRATIVE FROM THE BORDERS*

*Margaret Shrimpton Masson*

*Abstract*

The national-regional tensions facing Caribbean spaces such as the Yucatán (México), Belize (Central America) and Guyana (South America), give rise to island imaginaries, where these territories are represented as isolated, different, far away, not fitting in, while at the same time considered icons of regional identity. I argue that it is precisely the trope of "islandness" within our landlocked spaces of the Caribbean that opens up important issues concerning identity, language, and regional connectivity. Working from the mainland Caribbean, I approach Belizean creative writing from a non-Anglophone, regional context that seeks to reveal the complexities of Belize's position as an English speaking Caribbean "island" in Central America. Through my reading of novelist Zee Edgell, I aim first to dismantle the Belizean national narrative so as to visualize the multiple voices and untold stories at the fluid edges of the nation; and second, to reveal the complexity of the narratives on Belizean national identity when observed from a transinsular (cross border) perspective.

**Keywords:** Mainland Caribbean, Islands, Belize, Zee Edgell, Fluid Borders

*Resumen*

Las tensiones nacional-regionales que enfrentan espacios caribeños como Yucatán (México), Belice (Centroamérica) y Guyana (Sudamérica), dan lugar a imaginarios insulares, donde estos territorios se representan como aislados, diferentes, lejanos, no encajados; mientras que al mismo tiempo se consideran íconos de identidad regional. Sostengo que es precisamente el tropo de la "isla" dentro de nuestros espacios sin litoral del Caribe lo que abre cuestiones importantes sobre la identidad, el idioma y la conectividad regional. Trabajando desde el

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Caribe continental, me acerco a la escritura creativa beliceña desde un contexto regional no anglófono que busca revelar las complejidades de la posición de Belice como una "isla" caribeña de habla inglesa en América Central. A través de mi lectura del novelista Zee Edgell, mi primer objetivo es desmantelar la narrativa nacional de Belice para visualizar las múltiples voces y las historias no contadas en los bordes fluidos de la nación; y, en segundo lugar, revelar la complejidad de las narrativas sobre la identidad nacional de Belice cuando se observa desde una perspectiva transinsular (transfronteriza).

**Palabras clave:** Caribe continental, islas, Belice, Zee Edgell, fronteras fluidas

### *Résumé*

Les tensions nationales-régionales auxquelles sont confrontés les espaces caribéens tels que le Yucatán (Mexique), le Belize (Amérique centrale) et la Guyane (Amérique du Sud), donnent lieu à des imaginaires insulaires, où ces territoires sont représentés comme isolés, différents, distants, non encastrés; tout en étant en même temps considéré comme des icônes de l'identité régionale. Je soutiens que c'est précisément le trope «insulaire» dans nos espaces enclavés dans les Caraïbes qui soulève d'importantes questions sur l'identité, la langue et la connectivité régionale. Travaillant depuis les Caraïbes continentales, j'aborde l'écriture créative bélizienne à partir d'un contexte régional non anglophone qui cherche à révéler les complexités de la position du Belize en tant «île» des Caraïbes anglophone en Amérique centrale. À travers ma lecture du romancier Zee Edgell, mon premier objectif est de démanteler le récit national du Belize pour visualiser les voix multiples et les histoires inédites sur les bords fluides de la nation; et deuxièmement, révéler la complexité des récits sur l'identité nationale du Belize dans une perspective trans-insulaire (transfrontalière).

**Mots-clés :** Caraïbes continentales, îles, Belize, Zee Edgell, frontières fluides

*It is easy to get lost in a conversation about the Caribbean because of so many moving parts […] The process that we had to undergo to reach the book (Landings) speaks to the textures of identity and a new way of not just looking, but working.*

(Yasser Musa 2014a)

## Introduction

The national-regional tensions facing Caribbean spaces such as Yucatán (México,) Belize (Central America) and Guyana (South America,) give rise to island imaginaries, where these territories are represented as isolated, different, far away, not fitting in, while at the same time considered icons of regional identity—Caribbean outposts, if you will.[1] While not being islands in a physical sense, the imaginaries that come into play concerning isolation/connectivity and the complex (colonial) history linking these regions to the insular Caribbean, locate these mainland-islands as a fascinating border space. In this article, I argue that it is precisely the trope of "islandness" within our mainland Caribbean spaces that opens up important issues concerning identity, language, and regional connectivity.[2] Focusing on Belizean literature, and specifically on the work of Zee Edgell, I attempt to visualize different threads in the discourses on national identity: a narrative that has tended to privilege a desired and harmonious, ethnic plurality, but one that is built upon an erroneous legacy of benign slavery, of Creole (elite) majority culture,[3] on the English language, and of closed borders,

[1] A recent conversation with Romola Lucas, founding director of *The Timehri Film Festival* in Guyana, confirms the problematical relationship of the mainland Caribbean "non-island" spaces: "Guyana in itself, both in the Caribbean and South American context, is a study in isolation and connectivity. […] Guyanese generally know very little about the other countries in SA. And, while we're more connected to our Caribbean neighbors, our "Caribbeaness" is always questioned, as we are not an island" (Lucas, personal communication, email, February 2019).

[2] This study of the island trope considers a body of academic work on the Mainland Caribbean, in Spanish as well as in English, that draws on Colombian scholarship (Abello 2017; Vidal 2014), and some of my previous work (Shrimpton 2015; Shrimpton and Can 2017); and also on scholars in the field of Island Studies, debating fluid versus fixed boundaries (Cubero 2011 and 2017), relationality of island and non-island spaces (Pugh 2013, 2016, and 2018; Chandler and Pugh 2018).

[3] Due to changing demographics, it is important to stress, that whereas there was indeed a Creole majority in the years leading up to Independence (at the

holding Belize isolated from her Spanish-speaking, Central American neighbours.

Conceptually, two ideas support my readings of Belizean literature. First, Stuart Hall's explanation of identity constructed as a narrative discourse within our societies—it is always someone's story to tell: "questions of identity are always questions about representation […] They are always exercises in selective memory and they almost always involve the silencing of something in order to allow something else to speak" (Hall 1995:5). Second, abyssal thinking, grounded in the work of Boaventura de Sousa Santos (2007), leading to asymmetrical cartographies that orchestrate a hierarchical organization of knowledge, persons, and space. By questioning the cultural, linguistic and spatial landscape of Belize, my aim is to offer a reading of Belizean novelist, Zee Edgell, from the borders or marginal spaces of Belize's national narrative: that is, not from outside the nation, but from the silenced, forgotten or under-represented voices at its fluid edges.

As I will discuss below, the complex independence processes in Belize centred on the repositioning of the urban, elite, Creole population who inherited much of the administrative control of the newly independent country. Independent Belize remained officially an English speaking country, and up until the end of the 1980s, had a majority Creole population nationwide, and particularly in Belize City (Belize District), where the political Creole elites are mostly located. The national discourse on identity post-independence, has leaned towards an acknowledgment of the six principle ethnic groups in the country (Creole, Mestizo, Maya Garifuna, East Indian, Mennonite[4]), while at the same time privileging elite, urban Creole ethnicity, with English as the official language (and Kriol the common language spoken across the nation). This global, ethnic organization (also neatly arranged according to the six administrative districts), tends to overlook class and spatial differences within these groups and, in the case of Creole Belize, also the differences between rural and urban populations, the intervention of tourism, transnational migrations and socio-economic conditions. This leads to different meanings of "becoming creole"[5] or being creole. Kriol populations in the rural interior, in the Sibun region, for example, are a very different social and linguistic group to the urban creole, elite

time *Beka Lamb* is set, and at the time it was published), but, as I will argue below, this ceases to be the case by the time the later novels are published.

[4] The Chinese population in Belize is also relevant.

[5] For further reading, consult Melissa Johnson's excellent monograph, *Becoming Creole: Nature and Race in Belize* (2018), whose title I refer to here.

in Belize City. Similar arguments of oversimplicity apply to the Maya population, where the three different Maya groups in Belize are from different linguistic groups, and are located in three different areas, and cannot be conveniently organized into one. Referred to as a melting-pot of cultures, where "many are one," the official stance defends ethnic pluralism, but does not encourage differentiation (Cunin 2015).[6] However, what has occurred in the decades since Independence in 1981, marks a significant demographic change, leading Yasser Musa to refer to Belize City as an island (Musa, personal interview, Belize City, 2017). Musa's comments, and his depiction of the urban island, also reference these differences within the urban/rural Belizean Creole populations.

Published between 1982 and 2007, Edgell's novels can be read as a textual landscape for the discussion of nation, identity and ethnicity in Belize. I will discuss below how the three earlier novels, *Beka Lamb* (1982), *In Times Like These* (1991) and *The Festival of San Joaquin* (1997), have contributed to the construction and consolidation of the elite Creole national identity that plays on the creation of a multi-ethnic pluralism to define the new Belize. This image crumbles to pieces in *Time and the River* (2007), the last novel to date, as Edgell[7] struggles to understand the full dimensions of the colonial period and its consequences for class and race. This final novel attempts to dismantle the "many is one" national narrative that her previous three novels sought to build up by recognizing and questioning the underlying foundational myths behind elite Creole identity. Several story lines come into question here, and working from the mainland (non-insular) Caribbean, my work approaches Belizean creative writing from a non-Anglophone, regional context, and seeks to reveal the complexities of Belize's position as an English speaking Caribbean "island" in Central America. I contend that

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[6] Cunin's (2015) work offers a detailed exposé of the language and official discourses used to refer to the Belize nation, and national identity. However, while recent government publications have made some progress towards creating a more inclusive policy document (NICH, 2016), government websites continue to folklorize and generalize, using totems that are not inclusive. For a further discussion on this, see: Shrimpton (2020, forthcoming).

[7] Zee (Zelma) Edgell was born in Belize City in 1940. She was educated at St Catherine's Academy and later at the University of the West Indies, Mona, Jamaica. She now lives in Ohio, USA. It is important to note that at the time Edgell was growing up in Belize City during the 1950s, the city—and the Creole elites there—were largely isolated from the rest of the country; Edgell's "Belizean-ness" relates to this perspective. Yasser Musa's reference to Belize City as an island—then and now—can be understood in this context, as also the position of the Creole elites, to whom Edgell relates.

re-reading the novels from this viewpoint enables us to reconfigure a Belizean literary landscape from its fluid borders.

Pointing to "the irony of the postcolonial," Christopher De Shield identifies the complexities of the prevailing colonial paradigm, not only as expressed in creative writing but also as it pertains to the building up of canonical and representative writers in the region (De Shield 2011:2). He goes on to suggest that: "It is therefore the strategic narrativisation of the nation that must be critiqued, especially in the literature of decolonisation" (2011:7). This foregrounds my own questioning of the national identity paradigm, and raises the key issues to be discussed in this article, namely: How do Edgell's novels speak to Belize's non Creole populations, and how do they speak to the rural Kriol populations? And, how are they represented in her texts? I will explore ethnic constructions across the four novels, grounding my argument from a decentred reading located at the interstices of Belizean borders to the south (Kekchi Maya), west (Mopan Maya) and north (Mestizo and Yucatec Maya). Although, I will concentrate on Edgell's work, it is indeed my reading of writers such as Yasser Musa, Lita Krohn, David Ruíz Puga, Zoila Ellis, Felicia Hernández, Amado Chan and Katie Usher, that have drawn me back to her work, and to try to understand how one body of work could almost eclipse (in the work of critics) the multiplicity of voices in Belizean writing: non-Creole voices that emerged in the decades following the publication of *Beka Lamb,* and that were largely ignored by critics and publishing houses alike. Following Yasser Musa's lead, this is, I propose, a new way of looking at and working with, the literature of Belize.

## Finding Belize: multiculturalism and fragmentation

*…this part of the world is full of chance operations*
*compromised by a terminally intransit culture…*

(Yasser Musa 1996)

*Belize City is an island.*

(Yasser Musa 2017)

Writing in 1969, some three years after the independence of Guyana, V.S Naipaul infamously denotes Belize (then British Honduras) as "the ultimate colony." He perpetuates the image (found in the literature of Empire), of an out-of-place-country, lost in a swampland, set in a colourless Caribbean, highlighting the absences and the emptiness: "There is a wall-map: this all but empty British territory—nine thousand square miles, one hundred thousand people—incongruous in Latin America […] Just beyond the garden wall is the Caribbean, not blue here, thick

with catfish, restless scavengers of the waters of this city built on swampland" (Naipaul 1969). Empty and incongruous. This is the legacy facing Belize after centuries of white colonialism. Boaventura de Santos Sousa's concept of abyssal thinking, and in territorial terms, abyssal or asymmetric cartography, provides a relevant framework to show the ways in which territories are eroded under the colonial gaze, leading to the hierarchical organization of knowledge, law, understanding, and belief systems:

> Modern abyssal thinking excels in making distinctions and in radicalizing them [...] The intensely visible distinctions structuring social reality on this side of the line are grounded on the invisibility of the distinction between this side of the line and the other side of the line [...] In its modern constitution, the colonial represents, not the legal or illegal, but rather the lawless. (De Santos Sousa 2007:46, 49)

Thus, if we look just to education, for example, this asymmetry can be seen in the deficits remaining in this field, despite notable improvements. The University of Belize began operations in 2000,[8] following the fusion of five earlier higher education sites, with the first institutions beginning in the 1950s, these only available to wealthier students in Belize City (Chan and Aldana 2005:4). Data provided by Emma Naslund-Hadley, Haydée Alonzo, and Dougal Martin (2013:6-10) shows tertiary education coverage to be below other English speaking Caribbean nations (and we could also point here to the absence of a University of the West Indies campus in Belize) but completion of tertiary level education was shown to be in line with similar rates, in comparison with mainland Caribbean and Latin American countries.[9] However, significant data pertaining to De Sousa Santos' theories of asymmetry and abyssal thinking are those that show further ethnic differentiations within the country regarding access to education, where Maya students are frequently marginalized:

> At all education levels, attendance of Mayan children (Yucatec, Mopan, and Ketchi) is lower than children from other ethnic groups. The gap is particularly pronounced at the secondary level, where approximately

[8] According to the *University of Belize Student Handbook* (2018): "In 2004, the main campus was officially moved to the City of Belmopan. UB now offers programs from its main campus in Belmopan, from three campus locations in Belize City, from its Central Farm campus, and from its southern campus in Punta Gorda. UB also owns and manages two marine field stations at Calabash and Hunting Cayes." Available at: <https://www.ub.edu.bz/download/ub-student-handbook/>.

[9] The data offered by Naslund-Hadley, E., Alonzo, H., and Martin, D., shows a rate of completion for Belize at 15.4%, and Argentina (12%), Chile (19.4%), El Salvador (9%), México (18.7%), and Panamá (23.1%) (2013:10).

> 40 percent of Mestizo, Maya, and Garifuna children attend school, compared to 57 percent of Creole children. Similarly, the tertiary level attendance rate of Garifuna and Creole students is more than double the rate of Mayan students, which is reported at 8.4 percent. (Naslund-Hadley et al. 2013:7)

In the following argument I will use this framework to unravel the Belizean myths of nationhood,[10] centred first on colonial history and then on these structures inherited by the urban creole elites (Judd 1992) which in turn have led to an asymmetry of being, to an asymmetrical place of production and lived experience for colonial subjects, and to forgotten voices, and ignored histories.

The location of Belize with respect to its borders—both maritime and mainland—can shed light on my reading of mainland Caribbean spaces as "Continental islands." An English speaking country set within Spanish speaking Central America, Belize can be seen as an island paradigm, shifting between porous frontiers and multiple epistemologies. Cunin and Hoffman recognize not only the multiple and overlapping dimensions of Belize, but also highlight what it means to be "out of tune" with their neighbouring countries, in terms of language, colonization and decolonization processes, and ethnicity (Cunin and Hoffman 2013:35). Cunin and Hoffman draw attention to the enduring image of a place not quite "fitting in": an image of contemporary Belize as being somehow still incomplete. In a later article, Cunin (2015) cites Government and Tourist Board online descriptions of contemporary Belize, both highlighting cultural and ethnic diversity, but repeatedly referring to "[t]he country is a melting pot of many races" and "[a] blending of cultures has resulted in one of the happiest and most peaceful countries in the region" (Cunin 2015:3).[11] An image of all is one, with no distinctions at all. The easy route, it seems, is for Belize to remain "an amalgam" (Duran 2007). However, this static image of a harmonious melting-pot

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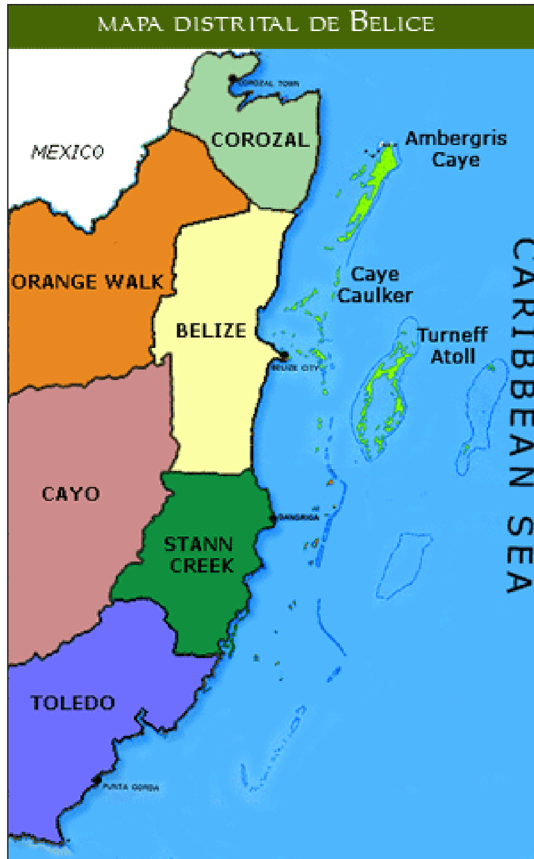
[10] Among these, for instance, are the stories of the Baymen, St Georges Caye Day (10th September), the design of the national flag and the national anthem, which as Judd (1992) points out: "While Belizeans thus give voice to an identity as descendants of the Baymen [Arise ye sons of the Baymen's Clan], for most Belizeans, the Maya, the Garifuna, the mestizos, they are descendants only symbolically" (1992:45). This is discussed further in Shrimpton (2020).

[11] Under the section "Our people" on the Belize Government website we read: "A truly harmonious melting pot society, the disparate ethnic and cultural groups in Belize **each have their own unique culture and story of how they came to settle in Belize**." The inclusion of a statement on different stories of origin is an important step forward. Accessed April 25, 2020 <https://www.belize.gov.bz/Home/OurPeople>.




**Map 1:** District Map of Belize

of cultures has little to do with the fluid demographics Belize presents. The nature of Belize's porous and contentious borders (Spanish/English conflicts during sixteenth to eighteenth centuries, the ongoing Guatemala conflict and the fluidity of the border crossing with Mexico, as well as Maya and Garifuna land claims,) enables a constant movement of population—legally and illegally—across the borders, making ethnic divisions and delimitations impossible to draw on a real level. As I discuss below, using material from interviews as well as the novels themselves, Edgell's narrative in *Time and the River* highlights the porosity of the borders, and the vulnerability surrounding all sectors involved in the logging camps (Edgell 2007).[12]

[12] Recent research into the northern border territories of Belize and into the logging camps, puts forward strong arguments regarding centuries-long encounters between different racial and class groups, where allegiances are

A brief look at some of the different approaches to reading and classifying Belize according to ethnic groups gives some insight here to the construction of the prevailing narratives and myths.

The political map of Belize after independence will show 6 districts, apparently neatly divided to spatially identify with ethnic groups: the Creole population based in Belize District (Belize City), the Mestizo population located mostly in the Corozal, Orange Walk, and Cayo districts to the north and west bordering Mexico and Guatemala; the Maya in Toledo and Garinagu in Stann Creek. As implied above, this "abyssal" cartography oversimplifies a complex situation. The classic studies of O. Nigel Bolland (1986, 2003) and Assad Shoman (2009, 2010) explore the process of nation building in Belize. Bolland's study, *Colonialism and Resistance in Belize* (1986), and Shoman's two texts *Historia de Belice. El surgimiento de una nación centroamericana* (2009),[13] and *Reflections on Ethnicity and Nation in Belize* (2010), outline the different stages of colonialism and independence, and the changing roles of different ethnic groups in these processes. Shoman details the ambiguities and discomfort between lived experience and the imaginaries that are "imposed" from above. He agrees with Bolland on the need to understand the overlapping identities shared by many people, that reduce a spatial ethnic separation—as seen in the map—to pure rhetoric: "we cannot assume that for most people national identification necessarily trumps the other identifications which they subscribe to as social actors" (Shoman 2010:36). The fluid demographics in Belize need to be read carefully in the light of prevailing interpretations by critics who, despite

not necessarily drawn on racial lines and are not always played out in the same way, and individual identities remain. There is a sense of encounter within everyday life and practices, without the "melting pot": "Belizean Creole" communities emerged through the encounter of enslaved "black" Africans and slave-owning "white" English woodcutters and an assortment of Englishmen too poor to own slaves and free "colored" and "black" men and women. These people all lived together in the swampy littoral of the Caribbean coast of Central America when this place was settled. Belize was simultaneously on the margins and integrated into global economies of timber extraction in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries" (Johnson 2018:5).

[13] It is important to note here that Shoman's *Historia de Belice. El surgimiento de una nación centroamericana* (2009) started out as a translation of his classic *Thirteen Chapters of a History of Belize* (2000). However, with the support of the Centre for research on Latin America and the Caribbean, National Autonomous University of Mexico (CIALC-UNAM), the translation grew and instead became a revised and augmented version of *Thirteen Chapters*, in Spanish, with revised data up to 2008 (Shoman 2009:25).

the changes over the last three decades, continue to promote: "[t]he model of Belizean nationalism appears, rather to be one of cultural pluralism, a model that acknowledges the value of diverse cultural heritages that constitute Belize and provide its unique national identity" (Bolland 1986:49, in Persico 2011:7). Bolland's data is, of course, correct for the 1980s, but if we continue to use this interpretation in the twenty-first century, as in this example from 2011, we will overlook and exclude the existing rhythms of diversity.

During the period of Edgell's novels production and publication from 1982 to 2007, Belizean demographics changed dramatically. According to the 2010 census, for example, 52.9% of the population considers itself to be Mestizo, and only 25.9% Creole.[14] This is a swing from 48% Creole and 33% Mestizo, in the 1980 census (Woods, Perry and Steagall 1997:64); and even by 1991 the data shows the Mestizo population had risen above the Creole (43.6% to 29.8%) (Statistical Institute of Belize, 2000, in Muñoz and Gibson 2015:6). If we also consider the demographics for each district, we find that by 2010, 66% of the population of Toledo declared themselves Maya, with 19% Mestizo. Therefore, this southernmost region of Belize becomes distinctively non-Creole, whereas Stann Creek—and not Belize District—, is registered as the most ethnically diverse region (Statistical Institute of Belize 2010:20).[15] The paradigm of Creole national identity centred on Belize City, then, faces serious challenges. Likewise, the Maya dominance in Toledo brings their historical presence a new visibility, which is still largely ignored, despite International Court of Justice rulings in their favour.

The six nation, harmonious, racial tolerance narrative in Belize, seemed to easily exclude or isolate the Maya populations in the south, and this is a narrative we will find in the early novels by Edgell. Despite research to the contrary, the official narrative pertaining to land claims, and autochthonous rights for the Maya, still claims that Belize is a country of immigrants, with no permanent original population. In this narrative, original Maya populations are acknowledged but claimed to have "disappeared" by the time the Spanish arrived in the sixteenth century. Thus, the claim to "national" identity, is narrated in the order of the newest migrants: the earliest claims are for the Baymen and their African slaves in the seventeenth century, followed by the Garifuna

[14] The same 2010 census shows 11.3% Maya population, 6.1% Garifuna, East Indian 3.9% and Asian (Japanese, Chinese, Taiwanese) 1% (2010:20). Available at: <https://sib.org.bz/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/Census_Report_2010.pdf>.

[15] Available at: <https://sib.org.bz/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/Census_Report_2010.pdf>.

migration and lastly, the two Maya migrations in the nineteenth century. Suddenly, the Mayan are newcomers in Belize:

> When the people of Belize are considered, their story usually begins with the assumption that the original inhabitants, the Maya, deserted the area long before the arrival of the British who occupied an uninhabited land. The story goes on to describe the hearty British settlers, buccaneering types, who worked alongside and earned the devotion of their slaves. (Bolland 2003:17, in Moody-Freeman 2009)

One of the factors that allowed for this interpretation is of course an understanding of a frontier as a fixed and hard border, allowing for easy and convenient assumptions that marginalized populations would stay on only one side—thus enabling the colonial government to build up the narrative that the Maya were located in the Spanish territories of Guatemala and Mexico, outside of British Honduras, later Belize. Edgell's 2007 novel is notable for challenging this myth and pointing to cross-border mobility as part of everyday life (2007). Academic research by Grant Jones as early as 1977, where he refers to the "expanding borders of Belize," by O. Nigel Bolland in 1986, updated in 2003 to consider Maya presence in Belize during the Colonial period, and more recently, in Assad Shoman's *Historia de Belice* (2009), each detail Maya presence—although reduced—throughout the Spanish and British colonial periods, disproving the theory of the Maya leaving the territory and returning as migrants, only at the end of the nineteenth century. Bolland (2003:101) refers to the work of Stephen L. Caiger—"an amateur historian and colonial apologist," writing at the time of emerging nationalism in Belize—, as enabling the colonial myths, and affirms: "the view that Maya-British relations in Belize were nonantagonistic, while convenient from the standpoint of colonial ideology, is contrary to the historical record" (102).

What emerges is not only the familiar pattern of colonial discourse eliminating discursively and, where necessary, with military means the "other" populations; but also, in the face of their failure to erase, a continued discourse of invisibility, marginalization and a spatial organization of the country that would place the Maya population in the outer confines, on the borders, and in a "no-space."[16] In nineteenth century texts cited by Shoman, the Maya are described as scavenging animals, hiding in the bushes: "*Un relato de 1839 indica que en Duck Run —cerca de San Ignacio y la frontera con Guatemala— los taladores*

[16] For a discussion of Spanish colonial erasure discourse regarding the Maya absence/presence in Yucatan, see: Cervera Molina, A. 2020. "El bucanero reformado como creador de geografías: espacio y territorio en la costa peninsular yucateca." *Historia Caribe* 37(2):23-49.

*británicos estaban sujetos a los indios salvajes en la región, quienes […] salen sorpresivamente de sus escondrijos secretos en la selva con el propósito de saquear*" (Shoman, 2009:37). Restall confirms the spatial hierarchy explaining that "Belize's Mayas lived outside the logging camps and the Baymen's single coastal town; officially, the British denied they existed at all" (Restall 2014:401). He also details that British and Spanish colonial documents used the term "indio" generically, and therefore it sometimes referred to Miskito Indians, and not only to Maya (Restall 2014:408-409). The presence of Maya and Garifuna populations in Belize and their struggles and ongoing activism to achieve autochthonous status serves as one more example of De Sousa Santos concept of abyssal epistemologies and asymmetrical cartographies, and shall be explored below, with regard to the forgotten populations in Belizean narrative, particularly in the case of Edgell.

## Fictional Belize: the literary contexts

> *The Belizean songs, poems and stories were probably responsible for my life script. […] When I was a young girl, my father also took our family to different parts of the country and across the border to Chetumal and Mérida, in Mexico, which were my first faraway places.*
>
> (Edgell/Evaristo 2003)

An overview of critical writing on Belizean literature, particularly regarding the novel, would suggest that it begins and ends with Zee Edgell: *"La novela beliceña aparece en 1982 con la publicación de Beka Lamb escrita por Zee Edgell y seguida en 1987 por* The Sinner´s Bossanova *escrita por Glen Godfrey*" (Ruíz Puga 2000). There are numerous critical essays dedicated to Edgell's work as well as many interviews (Wilentz 1994; Shea 1997; Evaristo 2003; Newson-Horst 2008; Skeete 2015; García Escobar 2017), with a tendency towards themes of ethnicity and gender. In her 2011 thesis, Melva Persico affirms that at least 24 articles on her work are listed on the MLA bibliography (2011:197). From 2011 onwards, we can update this number with at least 11 further studies by Christopher De Shield (2011), Raffaella Meriwether (2011), Alisa Braithwaite (2013), Jane Bryce (2014), Sharae Deckard (2014), Candice Pitts (2014 and 2016), Damaris Puñales Alpizar (2015), Ebere Nweze (2015a and 2015b), Britta Schneider (2017). The majority of these articles and thesis discuss *Beka Lamb* (1982), and/or women's position in Belize, as well as Edgell's position as the founding novelist of Belize, through her contribution to a "writing of the nation that incorporates marginalized subjects, and illustrates to readers that such inclusion is

absolutely central to a viable nation model" (Meriwether 2011:8). In an interview with Adele Newson-Horst (2008), Edgell states that her writing project, at one point, was devised conceptually around the six ethnic groups of the nation. By 2008, after *Time and the River*, there is a hint of a question about the feasibility of this: "At the time of Irma's article,[17] this was true. There are Mayans, East Indians, Central American immigrants. […] I try to use all ethnic backgrounds in my work because Belize is made up of so many ethnic groups. We are not separated. We live next door to each other" (Newson-Horst 2008:428).

Notably, various authors also mention the inclusion of *Beka Lamb* on school curricula not only in Belize but across the English speaking Caribbean (Wilentz 1994; Arzu 1998; Persico 2011), pointing not only to its critical success but also to the novel's influence as founding Creole identity (within a plural context). Interestingly enough, and not surprisingly, this early foundational novel cannot be read in the same way from the Maya margins of the country, or from the Mestizo borders. Filiberto Penados,[18] himself originally from the village of Succotz in Cayo District said that he recalled the book being on the school curricula, but remembered little about it, and that it did not relate to his lived experience of Belize: "*Me parecía distante la historia y claro Belize City.*" Commenting on the following citation from the novel, referring to the village of Xiacotz (which, I propose, is based on the village of Succotz, close to Xunantunich, in the western Cayo district), "a man of humble origins. […] He was born in Xiacotz a village notorious for settling disputes in ways vaguely reminiscent of the Wild West" (Edgell 1982:89). Penados continues: "*Pero imagínate lo que significaría para un niño de Succotz... el lugar de donde arreglan todo con machete. Esta representación de "back-a-bush" es la que recuerdo ir encontrando yo al moverme de Succotz a San Ignacio y Belize City*" (Personal conversation, email, 22nd February, 2019).[19]

Penados' comments challenge not only the focalization of this and

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[17] Edgell refers to Irma McClaurin's 1994 article "A Writer's Life: A Country's Transition." *Americas* (English Edition) 46(4):12-23. Available at: <https://www.questia.com/library/p435617/americas-english-edition/i2704843/vol-46-no-4-july-august>.

[18] Filiberto Penados (1971) is one of Belize's leading academics and intellectuals, and is Founding Adviser, Center for Engaged Learning Abroad (CELA-Belize) San Ignacio, Cayo District.

[19] Filiberto Penados (2019). Conversation via email, February 22, 2019, continuing on from an earlier discussion held during the Symposium: "Belize. Los hitos de su construcción nacional, siglos XVIII-XXI (I, II y III)" Annual International Conference, AMEC, Mérida, 2018.

later novels, but also the story of Belize that they tell (and who these stories are told by), and are a clear example of continued epistemological asymmetries. In her 2017 interview with José García Escobar, Edgell discusses the steep learning curve attached to writing ethnically based novels. Despite the argument of harmonious plurality, and a familiar "we all live alongside each other philosophy," non-Creole cultures needed to be "studied": "Through my reading, my knowledge about Belize has deepened. I know more about the Mayans, the Creoles, the Garifunas, Mestizos, East Indians, Mennonites, and the Central American refugees than I did when I started writing. This knowledge is reflected in my characters, since most of them reflect, in major and minor ways, the various ethnic groups in Belize" (Edgell, in García Escobar 2017). Despite, Edgell's sensitivity to change, there remains a distinct "otherness" in the language constructions employed regarding all things Belizean, which can be seen further in the description of Father Nuñez (in *Beka Lamb*), following on from the placing of Xiacotz, quoted above: "If Father Nuñez had been a little more open, a little more understanding, a little more self-confident, *a little more Belizean,* it is possible he could have performed a miracle greater than his lonely journey from Xiacotz to Rome" (Edgell 1982:89, my emphasis).

The success of *Beka Lamb* greatly outweighs that of other novels, particularly the *Festival of San Joaquin* (written about the Mestizo population of western Belize) and *In Times Like These*, a detailed political study of the main actors in the 1981 independence power struggles. *Time and the River* is receiving recent attention particularly in interviews, but Edgell herself refers to its slow momentum and critical reception in interviews with Belize Channel 5 news, in October 2016, when she relaunched the novel, some nine years later:

> When this book came out, for one reason or another, it just fell with a thud. […] Well, you know, I will be truthful, slavery in Belize is very hard to deal with. It was hard for me to deal with when I was reading it. I didn't know black people in Belize had slaves, so that was a shock to me. We try to think of slavery as one thing or another, where as it was so many things and it is emotionally overwhelming when you are trying to write about it. (Chanel 5 News, 2016)[20]

It appears that the majority of academic work on Belizean literature refers to the work of Zee Edgell, as noted above. However, other Belizean writers are of course recognized and published, but this has in several cases required developing new channels and independent publishing options, and as Schneider points out: "Overall, due to the small size and the economically marginal situation of the country, Belizean literature

[20] Available at: <http://edition.channel5belize.com/archives/136264>.

is neither well distributed nor well-funded" (Schneider 2017:109). Of course, the role Edgell has played in placing Belize on the map is very significant, and her novels have been published by international publishing houses such as Heinemann Caribbean Writers Series, and MacMillan Caribbean Writers Series, putting Belize on the map. Other than the UK publishers (Heinemann, Penguin, MacMillan—each with Caribbean Writers Series, for example), and the Government Printers, Belize prior to Independence in 1981, had only three mainstream publishing options: The Angelus Press, established in 1885, Spear Press (The Society for the Promotion of Education and Research) from 1969, and the innovative Cubola Productions that began in 1973, founded by Joan and Montserrat Durán, in Benque Viejo, Cayo District, close to the Guatemalan border.[21] Cubola has been largely responsible for publishing the main body of Belizean writing from the seventies onwards, establishing the Belizean Writers Series in 1995 (the brainchild of Michael Phillips). Phillips (1997) explains in detail the ideas behind this project (that now consists of 9 volumes), and also confirms the decisions they took then, to publish in English, therefore excluding creative work in Spanish, Garifuna, or Maya. The aim was to publish a collection of Belizean literature for Belizeans, so these exclusions are telling:

> I began formulating plans for the series in 1994, and to date three volumes have been published: *Snapshots of Belize: An Anthology of Short Fiction* in 1995; *Ping Wing Ju/c Me: Six Belizean Plays* in 1996; and *Of Words: An Anthology of Belizean Poetry* in 1997. We are planning a collection of folklore which will be the fourth volume and will contain stories in a variety of languages with facing page translations in English—this book will be published in late 1998. (Phillips 1997:56)

Phillips mentions that David Ruíz Puga had published the first (and at that time, the only) collection of stories in Spanish, *Old Benque* (Ruíz Puga, 1990),[22] but this was not included in the project. *Old Benque*,

[21] The section of this article relating to the editorial context in Belize is also discussed in Shrimpton, "Leyendo Belice. Escritores contemporáneos, entre el Caribe y Centroamérica" (2020, forthcoming).

[22] David Ruíz Puga's second book, *Got seif de Cuin!*, was published by Editorial Nueva Narrativa, Guatemala in 1995. This text, which despite its Creole title and ironic irreverence to Britain, is written in Spanish and published in Guatemala, is a particularly interesting translingual and trans-border edition, cited in Victor Manuel Durán's *An Anthology of Belizean Literature. English, Creole, Spanish, Garifuna*, University Press of America, Lanham, 2007. Durán gives no further information about this volume. He mentions a further volume by Ruíz Puga, *La Visita,* published in Mexico by Ediciones Pleamar, 2000. *Under the Yax'ché tree: on legends, tales and apparitions in Western Belize*, Benque Viejo del Carmen, Belize Poustinia Foundation

however, was re-edited (in Spanish) in 2016 as Volume 7 of the Belizean Writers Series, a welcome detour from the original project.

Cubola's publication catalogue is an extremely valuable index of Belizean literature, covering not only the now seven volumes in the Belizean Writers Series (from 1995), *Shots from the Heart. Three Young Belizean Poets* by Yasser Musa, Kiren Shoman and Simone Waight (1991) and, *On heroes, Lizards and Passions. Seven Belizean Short Stories,* by Zoila Ellis (1991), but also developing the Belize Literary Prize Series from 2013 onwards, and a recent focus on children's literature (2016). Cubola has made a major contribution to developing Belizean poets and fiction writers, in English. The editorial's dominance of the market for fiction and poetry changed during the following decades as, on the one hand, they further developed their educational projects, and on the other, faced competition from the Image Factory Art Foundation and Factory Books, founded by Yasser Musa[23] in 1995, and continuing today (2019). Musa's project is innovative, irreverent, committed to change, eclectic and always on the move. The Factory combines visual art, poetry, writing, performance, digital arts. Musa explains the central role played also by the media and digital platforms for Image Factory: "Prior to 1995 there was little material available on the visual arts. So it became our priority with INtransit and FactoryBOOKS (the publishing arm of the foundation) to ensure that our programs and activities would be documented."[24] On the Image Factory website, constantly changing itself, I read in 2013: "Art is not about beauty, it is not about putting something on the wall—it is about being a warrior, being a fighter, being an activist, art is a social action—it is a political action. But it's the mind, the power of ideas that will transform your society."[25]

Commemorating the first 20 years, in 2015, Musa refers to: "over two hundred books and publications that we have done" and to "the over five hundred artists that we have worked with."[26] One of the major contributions of the Factory Books publishing project is the inclusivity,

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Project was published in 2010, in English and reprinted, 2012.

23 Yasser Musa (Belize City, 1970) is son of Said Musa, former Belizean Prime Minister. The Musa family, originally of Palestinian origin, migrated first to Benque Viejo, Cayo District on the Guatemala-Belize border, before moving to Belize City, where Said Musa was closely involved with the independence movement.

24 See: <https://www.imagefactorybelize.com/uploads/3/4/7/0/3470758/if_book.pdf>.

25 2013. See: <http://www.7newsbelize.com/printstory.php?func=print&nid=26495>.

26 See: <http://edition.channel5belize.com/archives/115342>.

with a broader group of artists publishing under this innovative editorial. On the Factory Books list, we find, for example poetry collections from José Sanchez, Leroy "the Grandmaster" Young, Frank García, Lita Krohn, Amado Chan and many others. Gay Wilentz, who herself edits an important poetry anthology for Factory Books, called *She* (2001), writes in the prologue to Amado Chan's *Speak to Me/Háblame* (1999), that the volume: "Uncovers mother tongues and cultures hidden by the colonial legacy and exposes the mystical ancestral stories of those who built monuments before the coming of the Europeans" (Wilentz 1999:i). The idea of the art foundation as a factory or creative laboratory is also key to the way Musa transforms ideas into actions. An early community art project involved going "to rural communities and townships and engaged teachers trying to institute the teaching of basic visual arts in the Primary School system. Parallel to that, we started the Art For the People mobile exhibit involving 70 artists in 1999 that was an introduction of sorts to people outside the Factory space."[27]

In 2014, Musa, Katie Usher, Kyraan Gabourel, Briheda Haylock and Rasheed Palacio began the digital arts journal *BAFFU*. The blogs, digital platforms and websites all interact to provide a constantly changing and challenging outlook. Yasser Musa, visual artist and poet himself (*Belize City Poem* 1996; *Miami Poem* 2002; *The Girl in Black* 2014; *Tea with Trump* 2017; *61 Hours in Havana* 2018), is also a teacher of history at St Johns College where he has transformed approaches to history in Belize schools. In 2017, he was developing a project with his students on the Caste War—one of the mayor Maya uprisings in the nineteenth century, in Yucatán, from 1847 to 1901. A familiar story to anyone in Yucatán, this history rarely crosses the border into Belize, except for the mention of Belizean mercenaries supplying arms to the Maya armies, and the exodus of many families from the South of Yucatán, across to Orange Walk and Corozal. But on the Belizean side of the border, the Caste War was not taught either—it was not considered Belize's history. Yasser Musa's project looks at the Caste War from the Belizean border experience, and re-tells their national history from this viewpoint, with stories told in English, Maya, and Spanish, thus bringing a new focus to the borderlands, and sounding unheard voices and untold stories. This is not a story with Creole protagonists.

There are still very few histories of Belizean Literature. Víctor Manuel Durán published the first major anthology of Belizean literature in 2007, where he selected literature from the English, Creole, Spanish and Garifuna traditions (all presented in English translation in this

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[27] See: <https://www.imagefactorybelize.com/uploads/3/4/7/0/3470758/if_book.pdf>

volume). Duran abides by the national narrative whereby the Yucatec Maya in the north of Belize arrived as migrants in the nineteenth century with Spanish as their language, and therefore does not include Maya literature (2007:iii). He refers to the Kekchi Mayas in the south as if belonging to another country, and certainly as a place and a language apart, but does not explain why their literary heritage is not included (2008:ii). Although selective, and with a frustrating lack of detail (dates, sources, translators, etc.), the volume draws from a broad range of literature across the country, mentioning previous anthologies such as *Belizean Flavour*, 1991, published by SPEAR, *Belizean Poets* (Volumes 1, 2, 3), published by the Government Printers, circa 1965-1972, *Walagante Marcella*, published by the Belize National Garifuna Council in 1994, *Kriol and English Poems Just for You*, published by Peni Printers, Toledo, in 1998 and *The Son of Kinich*, by Jaribu Books, Dangriga, 1995 (Durán, 2007). The poetry of Yasser Musa, as well as many of the writers published by Factory Books are conspicuously absent. Further studies on Belizean literary history have been written by David Ruíz Puga,[28] notably in Spanish (2000 and 2016). Ruíz Puga is a strong voice for the inclusion of Spanish language writing and editing, and has himself contributed greatly to this end. However, he does not reference Yasser Musa's poetry nor Image Factory Art Foundation in "*El desarrollo del texto literario en Belize*" (2016) nor in his earlier "*Panorama del texto literario en Belice, de tiempos coloniales a tiempos post-coloniales*" (2000). Britta Schneider points to the invisibility of Spanish in the Belizean literary panorama—all the more notorious due to the oral dominance of Spanish across the country: "A striking aspect of Belizean language choices in literature is the invisibility of Spanish" (Schneider, 2017:110). However, while she does acknowledge Durán's *Anthology*, she also omits any mention of Ruíz Puga's work (since the 1990s) or Amado Chan's bilingual poetry.

[28] Ruíz Puga is himself the focus of an important article by Gómez Menjívar, J.C. (2016). Jennifer Gómez's research "challenges the long-standing omission of Mayan Belizean epistemologies from discussions of Central American intellectual production, through the study of a novel by David Ruíz Puga, *Got seif de cuin!* (1995), and frames code-switching and multilingualism as techniques of resistance."

## Forgotten and Remembered populations. Edgell's dilemma

> *The notes of his melodious whistle filled the night air as he waded on towards the creek that crossed through the middle of the town. There was a strange stillness in the night. The cool air that had been playing gently with the leaves had died down, and the night had turned chilly. The glow of a thousand eyes flashed through the darkness of the towering trees that embraced the banks of the Mopán. The gaze of the night creatures followed the silhouette reeling from side to side as it went a few steps and them stopped.*
>
> (Ruíz Puga 2012:84)

Reading *Time and the River* showcased a rupture in Edgell's narrative process. I had originally read the novels starting with *Beka Lamb*, and *Time and The River* at first appeared to be another piece in the ethnic, multicultural, historical-national jigsaw. Adele Newson-Horst writes, "[i]n sum, her first three novels render the complexities of the myriad cultures of Belize" (Newson-Horst 2008:424). The first novel, *Beka Lamb*, appeared to bring a multicultural, melting-pot Belize into its Independence period; the second, *In Times Like These* (1991) focused on the politics surrounding Independence, and detailed racial differences between Creole and Black Power groups, with very little mention of any other actors. The third novel, *The Festival of San Joaquin* (1997) is dedicated exclusively to the Mestizo population and set in a fictional population close to San Ignacio, in Cayo District. All three novels prior to *Time and the River*, also feature female protagonists, but whereas Beka (*Beka* Lamb) and Pavanna (*In Times Like These*) are strong Creole women and dominant voices, Luz Marina (*The Festival of San Joaquin*), is a silenced mestizo voice, victimised and damaged. As I moved through Edgell's work and considered the factors outlined above (demographic changes, autochthonous land rights, porous borders, ethnic diversity), the interviews with the author and also the voices and published work of writers and poets emerging during the 1990s, I returned to *Time and the River* (2007) and reconsidered her discussion of slavery at the end of the eighteenth century. She notably introduces new voices (Miskito and Maya Indians, African Slaves, Creole Slaves), and also reconsiders connections across borders. Ethnic purity is deconstructed in this novel, and the characters respond to the conditions imposed by the multiracial and multi-ethnic frontier activity, as well as socio-economic structures, described by Matthew Restall. A fifth book has been mentioned (but as of 2020, not published), that was to centre on the Garinagu.

In an interview with Renee Shea, in 1997, Edgell belies a stance that appears to differentiate non-Creole populations in Belize as "other," as different and relatively unknown. Edgell states that the subject matter of the novel [*The Festival of San Joaquin*] was "a continuation of some themes," while also being "about different people—people I feel I know, but from a different cultural group" (Shea 1997:574). She appears surprised at being able to write the Mestiza perspective, but also draws a clear line between herself and "them": "I suppose because I had grown up so close to mestizos all my life—through my father's business associates, living next door to them, and my godmother is a Mestiza—I seemed to fall into it quite easily" (Shea 1997:574). Towards the end of the interview Edgell also sheds light on the demographic changes in Belize, and how this re-situates the Creole population. Once more her words denote a certain sense of loss and vulnerability as she is faced with becoming a minority: "The questions I am still asking are in the novel. What would have happened if the Creoles had remained the majority in Belize? […] The Mestizos are now the majority in Belize. […] I grew up in the majority culture, but I am now a minority in **my own culture.** It's startling to think about. I call the novel "The Festival of San Joaquin" because that is the present reality." (Shea/Edgell 1997:583, emphasis mine). Despite the close relationship with her Mestizo neighbours, described above, when it comes to placing the role of David Ruíz Puga in the Belizean literary landscape, Edgell says: "the Mestizo writer David Ruíz, [who] writes about that culture in a very different way than I do" (Shea 1997:582). It is worth noting here, that Ruíz Puga (as well as Filiberto Penados and Yasser Musa) also belongs to a younger generation of Belizean writers, who have grown up within (not without) the demographic changes that Edgell acknowledges, and the way each one writes about a now intercultural Belize is necessarily different.

The opening pages of *Beka Lamb* situate Belize City as a multicultural paradise, where differences are recognised (but only tolerated). They are rendered normal and thus implicitly silenced under a veil of "everything's fine here": "it was a relatively tolerant town where at least six races with their roots in other districts of the country, in Africa, the West Indies, Central America, Europe, North America, Asia and other places, lived in a kind of harmony" (Edgell 1982:11). In these early lines of the novel the spatial and racial segregation of Belize is clearly established, despite the aim for ethnic harmony. As the novel progresses ethnic differences are always highlighted as we follow the protagonist, Beka Lamb, through her coming of age story, one that also loosely works as an allegory for the new nation, hence the significance of the discussions on ethnicity. The novel is also structured around the absence/death of Toycie, Beka's best friend who died tragically, and the novel serves to

honour her memory: in lieu of a wake, Beka tells the story of their friendship. The novel's publishing history is also significant here, as *Beka Lamb* is the title suggested by Heinemman, whereas Edgell's working title was actually "A Wake for Toycie" (Moody-Freeman 2004:30). As it stands, the absence of Toycie is more glaring. A good student, Toycie gets pregnant by her Latino/Mestizo boyfriend, Emilio Villanueva, portrayed as the seed of self-destruction, that eventually leads to Toycie's death, told in a melodramatic tale of madness and chaos during a hurricane, while in the Sibun bush (hidden away out of sight of the City). Villanueva is portrayed as the mestizo menace: in the novel's discussion of nationhood, and in the context of "the Guatemalan threats," is clearly considered a threat to the new nation. The threat to the (old) Creole position, represented by Villanueva in the novel, does not only rest on racial discrimination but also to a certain distrust of the status of the mestizo merchant class. Villanueva's family are (new) wealthy merchants, and still in the 1950s, a minority, but one that is clearly identifiable from the Creole perspective. For Toycie, the combination of poverty, undesired, early pregnancy and miscegenation, appears to exclude her from the new nation, and it is her memory, told in this cautionary tale, that allows Beka to move forward and learn.

Further examples concern the aforementioned representation of the Maya and Mestizo in "Xiactotz" and the Garifuna, referred to in the novel as "Caribs," and denoted different, distant and relegated to outlying areas: "Miss Benguche, a Carib, explained that the Caribs were descendants of African slaves who escaped from West Indian plantations by paddling their way to St Vincent… and quite a number, over the years, paddled to Stann Creek, and other towns along the Belizean coast where they established towns and villages" (Edgell 1982:68). Beka's absentee grandfather reappears briefly, and we learn only that he now lives (but is not married) "with a Maya lady out in the bush;" the encounters of Toycie and Emilio Villanueva are initially at St George's Caye, and when Beka recalls these memories later, her words are reminiscent of the colourless language of Naipaul: "The beach front was deserted. There seemed only to be grey clouds, grey island, and empty, grey sea all around" (Edgell 1982:49). These examples seem to trace codes of exclusion and belonging and a focalization from Belize City, as if synonymous to Belize as a whole. Everyone else, is an outsider to some degree.

In this context, then, *The Festival of San Joaquin*, is the outsiders' novel. Set near San Ignacio, Cayo District in Western Belize, it develops the story of Luz Marina and her struggle to regain custody of her children after she kills her husband in self-defence, herself a victim of gender abuse. Edgell adopts a first person narrative, but given her discussion of both difference and distance from "the mestizo culture,"

this is a problematic narrative choice. The first person narrative is a studied voice in the novel, and one that explains far too much, clearly writing to a non-mestizo audience, when referring to events. That is, there is an obvious need to point out all that is mestizo throughout the novel, but without establishing the narrative voice herself as mestizo; there is no rootedness. There are references, in Spanish, for example, to a culinary/agricultural vocabulary (*cilantro, milpa, rancho*), but there is very little that allows a reader to relate to everyday patterns of living in the region. As with Edgell herself, Luz Marina seems to be narrating someone else's story. As with the character of Vilanueva in the earlier novel *Beka Lamb*, here, the mestiza Luz Marina is eroded and emptied: there are multiple images of loss, of having nothing and of being nothing. While this of course refers also to the trauma of abuse, violence and imprisonment, Luz Marina actually refers to herself continually as guilty: "I forgave them all the names they called me, and everything they did to me, because it is as nothing compared with what I have done" (Edgell 1997:10).

The issue of the language and the cultural base for the novel is important to discuss further, and has also been raised by some critics when discussing *Beka Lamb*, indicating the use of "non-authentic (Standard English and heavily anglicised Creole)" (De Shield 2011:16). In *The Festival of San Joaquin*, few indicators are given to a Spanish context, beyond the name of the characters and some place names, and no references are made to the border context of the mestizo districts of Belize. Living in Cayo, in Corozal or Orange Walk, the concept of borders, the closeness both to Mexico (through Chiapas and Yucatán), and to Guatemala, the everyday presence of Spanish, the distance from Belmopan and Belize City are everyday realities, and create in themselves a specific set of issues. When in Benque Viejo in 2017, for example, the language I heard continually on the street and in small restaurants by school children was Spanish (not Kriol). When the children crossed paths with the school teacher, they all switched to English. Education in Belize reinforces patterns of diglossia in these districts, as the families speak Spanish at home, but the only language of education is English. *The Festival of San Joaquin* relates Luz Marina's story in isolation, without addressing many of the issues facing the population, taking place somewhere far away, recalling Edgell's evocation of the (Spanish-speaking) border regions of Belize as a child: "across the border to Chetumal and Mérida, in Mexico, which were my first faraway places" (Evaristo 2003). Luz Marina's struggles at home and in the community are explained in isolation, as if characterizing (again) a maligned population.

By contrast, David Ruíz Puga's work in *Under the Yax'ché* (2012) recreates oral stories from the area of Benque Viejo (about 12 km from

San Ignacio), roughly the area that Edgell uses for her novel. Ruíz Puga allows the oral traditions to root his stories within the area, whilst avoiding turning them into folkloric tales of demons. His characters are everyday folk—a bartender who gets drunk, a chicle worker who mourns the loss of a loved one, a young man caught in a lover's triangle, for example. They are flawed human beings, but they respond to everyday situations, and they belong in a specific landscape. Ruíz Puga, recreates identifiable river landscapes, characteristic of Western Belize, and markedly different from the seascapes and lowlands of Belize City and the cays. In each story, traditional Maya/mestizo beliefs are woven in, specifically with different apparitions (Cadejo, Xtabay, Diablo),[29] but in no sense are the stories reduced to this. In fact, the stories of apparitions also point to the cross-border porosity in these areas, as both Xtabay and Cadejo are familiar figures in Yucatec Maya oral traditions in the Yucatán. Likewise, Ruíz Puga highlights the border location of the Western mestizo region, discussing migrant workers from Chiapas in the chicle camps (around the beginning of the twentieth century), workers who came and went with ease. In Ruíz Puga's stories these are markers of the everyday, and the familiar, not of difference.

*Time and the River* was published in 2007, and focusses on the hidden history of slavery in the late eighteenth century, discussing the border and ethnic issues facing the landowners at the time (introducing Maya, and Miskito characters as well as slaves of African descent). Reading the previous novels with *Time and The River* as a framework and starting point (instead of the endpoint) highlights the painful self-discovery that Julie Moody-Freeman (2009) identifies, and that the author herself explains in their 2005 interview prior to the publication of the novel: "It was very painful to discover the truth [...], but I got over the pain. [...] because this myth that they told us that slavery existed only in name and all that nonsense [...] I grew up believing only white people had slaves in Belize but clearly the facts show differently" (Moody-Freeman 2009:38). Edgell refers here to the discovery of the unknown (to her) historical data regarding slavery, but also and more importantly, it is her own realization of the prevailing national myth. Surely, there must be more layers to the story and different protagonists to that national narrative that had recreated a tale of settlers and slaves fighting together to push out

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[29] Volume 4 of Cubola's Belizean Writers Series, *If Di Pin Neva Ben, Folktales and Legends of Belize* (2000), edited by Tim Hagerthy and Mary Gomez Parham, recovers tales from across Belize, and registers the presence of figures such as Xtabay, Cadejo, Diablo, Soch, Sinsimito, Duende and Conejo, found in contributions from Cayo, Corozal, Orange Walk and Ambergris. These are also common to stories across the Yucatán Peninsula.

the Spaniards in the battle of St Georges Caye, 1798. Matthew Restall (2014) affirms that: "Slave owners like Thomas Paslow thus planted the seeds of a dual myth about Belize: that slavery there was more benign than elsewhere, and that 1798 was a foundational moment of master-slave, proto-nationalist unity. The myth of benign Belizean slavery was further stimulated by the anxiety surrounding the rise of the abolition movement" (2014:397).

Edgell's novel approaches slavery from the "messy interconnectedness" (Restall 2014:385)[30] surrounding the colonial frontiers, and from the ensuing vulnerability of the slaves, whose main interest was survival, the possibility to live a life with a family: "The slaves, from different parts of Africa, and various Indian groups lived their lives between the British and the Spanish, doing their best to survive from day to day" (Edgell 2007:36). The main objective would be to achieve a piece of land of their own: "He had been certain that, after it was all over, thousands of former slaves would be free to live in town, on the offshore islands or on faraway riverbanks where they could have small plantations and live in villages with others like themselves, the way the Maya Indians did" (Edgell 2007:35). Situated from the strategic relevance of the borders, the communities in the marginal Maya villages are not discriminated as outsiders, in this novel, but are re-incorporated as a desired place and way of life. Security becomes a positive factor that re-semanticizes the non-Creole "other," and is remarkably different from the "non-Belizean" traits of Father Nuñez in *Beka Lamb*. Restall's research into the flight patterns of slaves across this region, reinforces the vision Edgell recreates, arguing that slaves fled Belize into Yucatán, the Petén (Guatemala) or Omoa (Honduras), not necessarily in search of freedom: "Slaves surely sought freedom, but they also sought shelter, sustenance, better working conditions, and the opportunity for family life, even if all that came within the confines of slave status in a Spanish colony" (Restall 2014:412).

The story Edgell tells does indeed bring to the fore the many layered history of slavery, and dismantles the colonialist versions of a benign model of slavery in British Honduras. Based closely on the archival documents she mentions, and also on the works of historians such as O. Nigel Bolland that she worked with, Edgell relates the harsh and abusive conditions on the log camps, and includes voices usually silenced, as well as highlighting the significance of the fluid boundaries where "flight by Belizean slaves was endemic and extensive. In addition to the pattern of flight into Bacalar, the Petén, and Omoa, African Belizean slaves also fled into Maya villages in the western and southern regions that today

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[30] Restall refers here to the work of Prado, "Fringes of Empires" (2012:320); quoted phrase from Cromwell, "Life on the Margins" (2009:45), (2014:385).

make up Belize" (Restall 2014:408-409). Although Will, a slave born in Africa, and Leah, a Creole slave born in British Honduras, remain the principal characters of the novel, and indeed alternate as narrative voices throughout, a much greater presence is given to non-Creoles in this novel than in previous ones, as well as Edgell maintaining, throughout, a strong questioning of the "standard wisdom" and revealing her "painful discovery." Suki, for example, not only is the daughter of a Miskito Indian, and thus unlawfully enslaved on the logwood estates in British Honduras, but she is also Leah's half-sister, occupying a space alongside the protagonist. Through Suki and Leah, Edgell discusses slave owners' abuse of slave women, unlawful labour exploitation, border confrontations, landowners' violence and their precariousness and vulnerability as marginalized colonial bodies. Despite being named executor to Leah's testament at the end of the novel, Suki has lived through numerous masters, and remains in slavery having been sold on several occasions—including being sold by Leah, who herself becomes a slaveowner through marriage to Thomas McGilvrey.

Edgell's narrative focusses on the many blurred lines arising from the precariousness of coloniality: mixed race families—as with Leah and Suki, as daughters of raped mothers, and themselves victims of abuse by their owner; slaves in the logging camps crossing the border to Spanish territories and returning, seeking whichever "master" made survival possible; the blurring of lines between slave and freed slave. Leah, the Creole protagonist, who in earlier novels would have been the undisputed "heroine," is a much more complex figure and her actions are certainly questioned here, as she chooses her freedom while sacrificing Will, as well as her siblings, Sam and Suki. Leah could be read as another victim of slave society: she marries the master, expecting her brother to be made free as part of this contract, but "Thomas McGilvrey had not freed Sam as he'd promised […] had gone back on his word to her […] She no longer trusted him as she once had done" (Edgell 2007:137). Later, when the news of the first stages towards the abolition of slavery are heard in the colony, Leah is instructed by her husband to "[m]ake sure, he said, that the women know that they are not free, not only those here in the compound, but those we rent out in the town. We don't want false rumours getting about" (Edgell 2007:144). Leah cannot now belong with the slaves, nor with the masters, even though (as Will comments) she remains faithful to the memory of McGilvrey (2007:198). By the epilogue, Leah is left only with regrets and in her final testament, frees all her slaves. She signs off however, as Leah Lawson McGilvrey, maintaining her slaveowner husband's name. She is not a victim, and she abides by the choices she made: Leah becomes a difficult figure for Belize to accept, as Edgell insists, "[t]hey didn't tell us all the complexity of slavery

that it wasn't only the white people who had slaves, even in America, but they didn't tell us that" (Edgell 2005 in Moody-Freeman 2009). The reasons why Edgell returns to slavery in this novel, still require more discussion. Information was available decades earlier (in the 1970s and 1980s), but as Edgell's comments regarding the re-launch of *Time and the River* and the "difficulties" it presents to readers demonstrate, the issue here is not the availability of the information, but rather the prevailing narrative, the dominating imaginaries, and the willingness to see.

## Conclusions

> *The term transinsular is my attempt to address a unique island experience that is in relation across multiple island spaces, goes beyond colonial geographies, is constituted through other spaces, incorporates and transverses the archipelago and presents the possibility of rethinking island on its own terms, rather than subjecting islands to a continental perspective.*
>
> (Cubero 2017)

My interest throughout this article has been twofold: first, to dismantle the Belizean national narrative, and thereby to visualize the multiple voices and untold stories at the fluid edges of the nation; and second, to reveal the complexity of the narratives on Belizean national identity when observed from a transinsular perspective. My argument draws from ethnographic evidence, an historical overview, demographic numbers, literary, critical, and publishing history, as well as literary canon, and my own observations. In this process, I have tried to explain that, despite rapid and consistently changing demographics, Belizean national identity continues to present a one nation narrative, a melting-pot of integrated cultures. From the early work of Zee Edgell to recent anthologies and publishing tendencies, the prevailing narrative starts in Belize City and looks outwards. Variations within this discourse will support new and different voices—as, could also be argued, the NICH Houses of Culture programme does; however, ethnic fragmentation within a glossy narrative of multiculturalism does not create symmetrical patterns of visibility, or of empowerment. In this context, *Time and the River* is a frank interrogation of the myths of nationhood, and allows for the visualization of a textured identity (Musa 2014a). Always going against the grain, the work of Musa and the Image Factory collective, using artistic, literary and historical discourses, are constantly demanding that we dismantle and decentre the nation, that we stand on the fluid edges of the nation. There is perhaps, a generational change: a new generation of Belizeans

standing on the thresholds of cross-culturality, wishing to have been able to participate in the referendum (April 2019), and willing to "move out of boundaries that have been a prison" (Harris, in Jaggi, 2006).

I would like to close this discussion by re-appropriating the term transinsular, proposed by Carlo Cubero, who uses this concept to overcome the dualities that dominate discussions of island spaces, seen either as icons of insularity, or sites of globalisation. Transinsularity can, thus, reveal the fluid dynamics of islands. Following my research in the Yucatan I have argued that, as a continental island space, we can observe a pattern of identity construction that depends on an articulation of rootedness that is grounded in a rhizomatic presence. It is not a debate of either insularity or globalisation, but of how both interact with each other. By re-appropriating Cubero's transinsularity for the Mainland Caribbean, and in this case, Belize, I am able to deepen our understanding of co-existing and competing discourses in these mainland Caribbean spaces.

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