

**THE FICTION OF ZEE EDGELL:
MEMORY, GENDER, AND THE
LEGACY OF TRANSATLANTIC
SLAVERY**

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ABSTRACT

This thesis critically assesses the specific ways in which the past is reworked, remembered, buried and forgotten in the Central American country of Belize through engagement with fictional texts by Belizean author, Zee Edgell.

Identifying Belize as a neglected colonial site, the project interrogates the ways in which Edgell's imaginative literature confronts the country's heavily mythologised past. The production of this mythologised past – most notably, the national “myth of origin” - is critically analysed in order to understand how it has prevailed in Belize from the colonial to the postcolonial period. Developing an interdisciplinary analytical framework that draws on memory studies, postcolonial literary theory and historical studies, the project considers how Edgell's novels challenge dominant historical narrative in Belize, whilst addressing the marginalised voices of Belizean women as a counter to dominant patriarchal nationalist discourses. Through contrasting analyses of colonial and postcolonial histories, and a detailed inquiry into the gaps and omissions present in the colonial archive, this project demonstrates the pervasive power of the origin myth and investigates the ways in which a dominant version of history has been produced and maintained. The thesis argues that Edgell's novels give voice to difficult and traumatic memories about the past, specifically those connected with the legacy of transatlantic slavery. At the same time, Edgell redresses the marginalised position of women in Belize and their absence in national cultural narratives.

The project is significant for its interdisciplinary interrogation of colonially-derived cultural memory in a hitherto neglected Caribbean site. Whilst Belize is beginning to come to terms with the less palatable aspects of its past, this engagement is relatively recent, and the origin myth which has come to define Belize's history continues to be ideologically, politically and socially powerful. This thesis makes an original contribution to knowledge through its exploration of the ‘myth of origin’ through the analysis of literature, a project which has previously been unexplored by Belizean historians and Belizean/Caribbean literary critics. The project also broadens the relatively small field of critics who have addressed Edgell's fiction,

and critically assesses Edgell's novels through the lens of memory and slavery. It is also one of the first to assess Edgell's novels as a body of work and represents an original investigation into an under researched aspect of the canon of Caribbean women's writing.

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Declaration

I declare that the research contained in this thesis, unless otherwise formally indicated within the text, is the original work of the author. The thesis has not been previously submitted to this or any other university for a degree and does not incorporate any material already submitted for a degree.

Signed

Dated 24th July 2018

Introduction

On August 1st 2016 the National Museum of Belize launched an exhibition called 'enSLAVEd', which focused on the slave trade in Belize (formerly British Honduras). In a press release, staff at the museum spoke of their desire for the exhibition to tell the story of Belize's lesser-known forest-based form of slavery, to reflect the lives of the enslaved, and to connect Belizean slavery to the Trans-Atlantic slave trade. A further, key aim was to challenge the perception that the enslaved in Belize were passive receivers of their incarceration by highlighting the rebellions, resistance and desertion that were common in the settlement during the period of slavery.¹ Zee Edgell, whose imaginative fiction is the focus of this thesis, was involved in the promotion of the exhibition. She used the moment to 're-launch' her 2007 novel, *Time and the River*, which concentrates upon the period of slavery in Belize between the years of 1798 – 1822. The re-launch of the novel was necessary, Edgell argued, because the novel's initial publication had "fallen flat,"² receiving little critical or commercial attention, both within and outside of Belize. For Belize's principal novelist, the only person to receive recognition on an international scale, the fact that *Time and the River* was largely ignored contrasts sharply with the widespread praise and attention lavished on her first novel, *Beka Lamb* (1982).³

¹ "Emancipation Day is Commemorated with Enslaved," 2016, accessed 5/5/18, <http://edition.channel5belize.com/archives/132836> (Channel 5 News).

² "Author Zee Edgell re-launches "Time and the River"," 2016, accessed 18/7/17, <http://edition.channel5belize.com/archives/136264>.

³ Zee Edgell, *Beka Lamb* (Harlow: Heinemann, 1982).

Further investigation into the ways in which slavery is remembered in Belize reveals that the reception given to *Time and the River*, far from being surprising, falls broadly in line with the lack of consideration given to slavery in Belize's official narratives and cultural memory. The 2016 enSLAVEd exhibition instead represents a shift in the way slavery has been remembered in Belize, where scant attention has previously been paid to the experiences of the enslaved. Rather, colonial narratives historically promoted a narrative of benevolence on the part of Belizean slave owners and suggested that master and slave worked side-by-side in harmony. This narrative has remained powerful since its production, and has been strengthened and consolidated by a powerful national "myth of origin" that developed around a key military engagement: The Battle of St George's Caye, which took place in 1798. This battle represents the moment when British settlers claimed the land of Belize after decades of protracted dispute with Spain. Following this battle, and over the following centuries, a perception has developed which celebrates the relationship between Belize and Britain, the cordial relationships between the enslaved and their masters, and promotes a rhetoric of benign bondage, where the enslaved inhabited their position in name alone. Although postcolonial historians have sought to restore the balance, the mythology surrounding the Battle of St George's Caye has remained strong. In fact, until the launch of the 'enSLAVEd' exhibition, there was

a relative lag in Belize's engagement with this element of its history, compared to other locations in the Anglo-Caribbean.⁴

This thesis takes the novels of Zee Edgell as its focus and interrogates the ways in which her fiction explores the memory of slavery in Belize. It argues that a pervasive, mythologised version of colonial history has muted and misrepresented the experiences of the enslaved. By promoting slavery in Belize as a kinder form of bondage, and the subsequent replication of this perspective in colonial histories, the cruelties of the forest-based system and the barbaric treatment of enslaved women has been muted. From this historical set of circumstances, a cultural memory has developed which focuses upon the heroic aspects of the Battle of St George's Caye, and celebrates the comradeship between the settlers and the enslaved. Closer analysis of the omissions in important colonial texts, such as the *Archives of British Honduras* (1931-5), a key source for this thesis, reveals an oppositional counter-narrative, which exposes the rhetoric of benevolence to be false.⁵ In line with wider unrest across the Caribbean region, instances of rebellion, resistance, desertion and poor treatment in Belize provide a compelling and alternative narrative of struggle,

⁴Vivian Nun Halloran, *Exhibiting Slavery: The Caribbean Post-modern Novel as Museum* (Charlottesville and London: University of Virginia Press, 2009). 14

See also: "Hollande Honours the Lives of Slaves at Caribbean Museum," 2015, accessed 30/7/17, <http://www.france24.com/en/20150510-france-slavery-hollande-caribbean-museum-guadeloupe>. "Materialising Slavery: Art, Artefact, Memory and Identity'," 2010, accessed 5/5/18, <http://museums-ioj.org.jm/?p=141>.

⁵ Sir. John Alder Burdon, ed., *The Archives of British Honduras*, 3 vols., vol. 1 (London: Sifton Praed and Co, 1931); Sir. John Alder Burdon, *The Archives of British Honduras*, 3 vols., vol. 2 (London: Sifton Praed and Co, 1934); Sir. John Alder Burdon, ed., *The Archives of British Honduras*, 3 vols., vol. 3 (London: Sifton Praed, 1935).

which began in the period of slavery and continued from the latter part of the nineteenth century, through the labour movements of the 1930s, the first wave of the independence movement in the 1950s, and finally full independence in the 1980s.

This thesis discusses the dual ways in which this counter-narrative is revealed by postcolonial historians and through reading the silences of the colonial archive. Additionally, the central tenet of this thesis is that this counter-narrative is strengthened through the mode of imaginative fiction, specifically the works of the Belizean author Zee Edgell, who has explored key moments in Belize's history in her novels: for example, the first independence movement of the 1950s (in *Beka Lamb*), the months leading up to full independence in 1981 (in *In Times Like These*⁶) and the chequered period of slavery between the Battle of St George's Caye in 1798 and the last slave rebellion in 1822s (in *Time and the River*.⁷) This thesis contends that by exploring important moments from Belize's past and the legacies of the colonial era, Edgell's novels strengthen the muted narrative of resistance in Belize and challenge the dominant 'myth of origin'. I propose that Edgell's novels are particularly significant for their reimagining of history from a female perspective in a country that traditionally excluded the voices of women. In addition, Edgell's re-engagement with key historical landmarks confronts a

⁶ Zee Edgell, *In Times Like These* (Portsmouth New Hampshire: Heinemann, 1991).

⁷ Zee Edgell, *Time and the River* (Harlow: Heinemann, 2007). Edgell has also published a further novel, *The Festival of Saint Joaquin* (1997). I refer to this text in the thesis, but it is not addressed in detail. This decision was taken because the novel does not engage with a key moment in Belize's historical narrative and is less concerned with reimagining the past in Belize.

colonial version of history, her novels functioning as “fictions of memory,”⁸ which seek to broaden and change the existing cultural memory in Belize.

In contrast to the literary explosion in the Caribbean region following decolonisation, Belize’s literary landscape has been slow to emerge. Other than Edgell, there are no writers from Belize who have achieved notable recognition outside of the country, although writers such as Zoila Ellis, Colville Young, and Felicia Hernandez are better known within Belize.⁹ Alan McLeod, who has tracked the development of English literature in Belize since the earliest days of the settlement, has noted the “comparatively late development of a sophisticated written literature.”¹⁰ A short anthology of Belizean literature was published in 2007, and was the first of its kind, thus representing a positive move to collectively assess Belize’s literature.¹¹ The collection is predominantly comprised of poetry, although there are some excerpts from novels and historical writing. The majority of Belize’s literature is centred around the Belizean publishing company, Cubola, which has been responsible for a number of anthologies and collections of short stories, folk-tales, poetry, and drama.¹²

⁸ Birgit Neumann, "The Literary Representations of Memory," in *Cultural Memory Studies: An International and Interdisciplinary Handbook*, ed. Astrid Erll and Ansgar Nünning in collaboration with Sara B. Young (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter GmbH & Co, 2008), 333.

⁹ For example, Zoila Ellis, *On Heroes, Lizards and Passions* (Benque Viejo del Carmen: Cubola, 1991). Felicia Hernandez, *I Don't Know You But I Love You – Write me a Letter?* (Berkley: Shameless Hussey, 1978). Colville Young, *Pataki Full* (Benque Viejo del Carmen: Cubola, 1991).

¹⁰ Alan McLeod, "The English Literature of Belize," *World Literature Today* 56, no. 3 (1982): 439.

¹¹ Victor Manuel Duran, *An Anthology of Belizean Literature: English, Creole, Spanish, Garifuna* (Lanham, Maryland: University Press of America, 2007).

¹² See <http://www.cubola.com/>.

Although a Belizean national literature is starting to develop,¹³ the country's literary canon is still small, especially when compared to other Caribbean nations. This thesis focuses upon Edgell not only because of her status as the most widely-published and successful author to come from Belize, but also because of the questions that this status raises, particularly when considering her as the public, literary 'voice' of the Belizean nation. In her literary engagement with key moments in Belizean history and her exploration of the legacies of colonialism and slavery, Edgell provides an alternative way of tracing a counter-narrative to the dominant cultural memory of the country, enabling engagement beyond history.

In line with the small number of novels published by Belizean writers, scarce critical material exists which considers Belizean literature. The majority of publications that do are focused upon Edgell: there are few critical texts or journal articles that move beyond the scope of her work. Additionally, there are no published books that focus solely upon Edgell. The critical reception of each novel is discussed in more detail in Chapters Four, Five and Six, but for now I note that of all her novels, *Beka Lamb* (1982) has received the most critical attention: it won the prestigious Fawcett Prize,¹⁴ and numerous journal articles

¹³ For example, the first writer's conference in Belize took place in April 2018. For more information, see: "International Writer's Conference Held in Benque Viejo Del Carmen," 2017, accessed 30/7/17, <http://amandala.com.bz/news/international-regional-writers-conference-held-benque-viejo-del-carmen/>.

¹⁴ The Fawcett Society Prize ran from 1982 -1997. For more information see Mary Eagleton and Emma Parker, eds., *The History of Women's Writing, 1970-Present, Volume 10* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 93.

take the novel as their focus. *Beka Lamb* is also the subject of some book chapters, mainly in the context of Caribbean writing.¹⁵ Conversely Edgell's later novels, *In Times Like These* (1991) and *Time and the River* (2007), have received much less attention – both critically and commercially - with only a handful of journal articles and reviews noted. This thesis addresses the absence of attention given to Edgell's work. Other than an article by Julie Moody-Freeman published in 2009,¹⁶ Edgell's novels have traditionally been considered in isolation. Although this thesis focuses upon each novel in turn, it also considers Edgell's work as a whole. It addresses the tensions between history and storytelling present in her writing, her relationship with Belize, and her dual location – both within a canon of Caribbean women writers, and as the most famous writer from Belize. Chapters Four, Five and Six focus upon *Beka Lamb*, *In Times Like These*, and *Time and the River* respectively. Although each novel has its own identity and historical context, my literary critical analysis in each chapter considers broader themes of gender, sites of colonial resistance, and the characters' (and Belize's) relationship to the past, specifically the period of slavery. The thesis also focuses on the representation of key historical moments, which culminates with a pointed interaction with the period of slavery in *Time and the River*.

¹⁵ See Mary Conde and Thorunn Lonsdale, eds., *Caribbean Women Writers: Fiction in English* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 1999).

¹⁶ Julie Moody-Freeman, "Zee Edgell: Novelist as historian/activist: Reimagining Nation," *African Identities* 7, no. 1 (2009).

Belize occupies a unique position in the Central American continent. It is officially part of the Central American mainland but is often aligned with the Anglophone Caribbean due to its colonial heritage. Yet despite its presence in both Central American and Caribbean narratives, it does not truly 'belong' to either region. Belize is routinely overlooked in wider debates surrounding Atlantic slavery, due in part to the differences between the plantation system and the forestry industry. In addition, the country's cultural and ethnic composition is diverse and differs considerably from both from the rest of the Central American region, which is traditionally of Spanish descent, and the British Caribbean islands which are predominantly comprised of Black Creoles. This thesis concentrates on the memory of the Black Creole group, those direct descendants of the enslaved who arrived in Belize during the British colonial period. However, it is also important to note Belize's diverse population comprises of Mestizo, Maya, and Garifuna, with smaller denominations of East Indian, Chinese, Mennonites, Lebanese, Arab and White.¹⁷

Despite this broad ethnic diversity, Belize's traditional alignment with the Anglo-Caribbean illustrates the supremacy of the Black Creole group, and hence Black Creole memory, which is rooted in the British colonial system. During the period of slavery and until the middle of the twentieth century, Black Creoles were the dominant population, in terms of both population size and power. However,

¹⁷Laurie Kroshus Medina, "History, Culture and Place-Making: 'Native' Status and Maya Identity in Belize," in *Perspectives on Las Américas: A reader in Culture, History, and Representation*, ed. Matthew and C. Gutmann (Malden, Oxford, Victoria, Berlin: Blackwell Publishing, 2003), 200.

increasing immigration from surrounding countries has led to a dramatic swing; the 2010 census reported 50% of the population as Mestizo, with only 21% Creole.¹⁸ The shift in cultural diversity and population size, although not a focus of this thesis, is important to note, particularly in the context of the Black Creole group who retain a presence in Belize's cultural landscape despite the flux in population size. The National Day which commemorates the Creole-centric Battle of St George's Caye is still celebrated alongside the actual Independence Day on 21st September, and the National Flag, although changed when Belize gained independence in 1981, to include a Black Creole and a Mestizo man, historically only featured Black Creoles. The majority of Belizean Black Creoles are concentrated in Belize City, which is the largest city in the country and was Belize's capital until a hurricane shifted the government inland to the newly built city of Belmopan in 1970. Despite this move, it is still the country's financial, historical and trading hub. Similarly, there remains a desire to preserve the historical connection with Britain; for example, the website for the Belize City House of Culture and Downtown Rejuvenation Project's objectives focuses on the preservation of Belize's "colonial heritage".¹⁹ The growth of the middle-class Creole group, often known as the 'Creole elite' is discussed further in Chapter One, but for now I note that this constituency has often claimed 'rightful' supremacy over other ethnic groups in Belize. Historically, the Creole elite worked to preserve the memory of the Battle of St George's Caye. They actively

¹⁸ "Population and Demographics ", 2012, accessed 31/7/17, <https://www.belize.com/belize-demographics>.

¹⁹ "Belize City House of Culture and Downtown Rejuvenation Project," accessed 30/7/17, <http://tourism.gov.bz/hoc-project/>.

participated in the promotion of the battle myth in order to gain social recognition and cultural mobility, rejecting the memory of slavery as traumatic and muting the voices of the Black working classes in the process. Indeed, Ralph Premdas has noted:

The part played by the Creoles in repelling the Spanish [...] attests to their loyalty to Belize as an autonomous and free entity and stands as a symbol that affirms their privileged position above all communities in the country.²⁰

Although Belize's cultural memory has historically legitimised the Black Creole claim to supremacy, it also glosses over the historical origins of this subject position as enslaved, dispossessed and produced within a wider system of colonial dominance. This history has been 'unremembered'.

The shift in the remembrance of slavery in Belize, highlighted by the 'enSLAVEd' exhibition in 2016, represents a broader shift in the way in which slavery has been remembered, both by European imperial nations, and in the Caribbean and the USA, particularly since the Bicentenary of the British Abolition of the Slave Trade in 2007. Writing in 2004, Halloran argued that the United Nations proclamation of 2004 as the 'Year to Commemorate the Struggle Against Slavery and its Abolition' has paved the way for a global consideration of how slavery is remembered.²¹ Specific attention has also been paid to the transatlantic and 'Black Atlantic' spheres. Taking inspiration from Paul Gilroy's important work of

²⁰ Ralph Premdas, "Identity and Ethnicity in a Multi-Ethnic State'," 2002, accessed 5/5/18, <http://www.open.uwi.edu/sites/default/files/bnccde/belize/conference/papers/premdas.html>.

²¹ Nun Halloran, *Exhibiting Slavery: The Caribbean Post-modern Novel as Museum*, 3.

the same name, Eckstein's study of how literature produced in the Black Atlantic remembers slavery, seeks to recognise this space as:

A unique metaphor evoking the formative historical experience of the Atlantic slave trade, a metaphor charged with the fate of those millions who suffered and lost their lives before, on and after the countless crossings between continents.²²

Similarly, a recent study by Bordin and Scacchi, published in 2015 argues for the memory of slavery to be considered as a "transnational discourse" and to recognise "the plurality of discourses about slavery, memory and national imaginations constantly emerging from the interactions of the transatlantic world."²³ Following Michel-Rolph Trouillot, who questioned why narratives of slavery from the USA have remained so ubiquitous in the cultural landscape, Bordin and Scacchi suggest that the "US-centred monopoly" is beginning to be destabilised, affording other locations greater visibility in the remembrance of slavery.²⁴ Hamilton, Hodgson and Quirk draw attention to more recent efforts to 'break the silence' around slavery, citing commemorations, programmes of remembrance, and truth and reconciliation projects in countries as diverse as Brazil, France, South Africa and Mauritius.²⁵ Following a surge of interest during the 2007 Bicentenary of the Abolition of the Slave Trade, the UK has also begun

²² Lars Eckstien, *Remembering the Black Atlantic: On the Poetics and Politics of National Memory* (Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2006), x. See also Rice Alan, *Creating Memorials, Building Identities: The Politics of Memory in the Black Atlantic* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2012).

²³ Elisa Bordin and Anna Scacchi, "Introduction:Expanding the Circle of the We," in *Transatlantic Memories of Slavery: Remembering the Past, Changing the Future*, ed. Bordin Elisa and Scacchi Anna (New York: Cambria Press, 2015), 9.

²⁴ Bordin and Scacchi, "Introduction:Expanding the Circle of the We," 11.

²⁵ Douglas Hamilton, Kate Hodgson, and Joel Quirk, "Introduction," in *Slavery, Memory, and Identity: National Representations and Global Legacies*, ed. Kate Hodgson Douglas Hamilton, and Joel Quirk (Oxon and New York: Routledge, 2006), 2.

to address the silences around slavery in popular history and memory,²⁶ including the opening of the International Slavery Museum in 2004.²⁷ Whilst the bicentenary placed the discussion of slavery onto the British agenda, generating a number of research projects and initiatives that have continued and flourished,²⁸ the process of commemorating and remembering this anniversary in the Anglo-Caribbean has been more complex.

Verene Shepherd has discussed the internal and external controversies that characterised the 2007 bicentenary in the Caribbean. In Jamaica, for example, fierce debate raged between those who sought to celebrate the revolutionaries and revolts which led to the abolition of slavery, and those who cited “Wilberforcemania”, suggesting that the anniversary was a British one, which bore no relevance to those who had continued to be enslaved until emancipation, and, indeed, beyond emancipation, despite being legally ‘free.’²⁹ Situating her discussion in the broader context of shame and trauma, Shepherd has argued:

²⁶The response to 2007 has led to an explosion of critical assessments, for example: Anthony Tibbles, "Facing Slavery's Past: The Bicentenary of the Abolition of the British Slave Trade," *Slavery and Abolition* 29, no. 2 (2008); Diana Paton, "Interpreting the Bicentenary in Britain," *Slavery and Abolition* 30, no. 2 (2009); Laurajane Smith, Geoffrey Cubitt, and Emma Waterton, "Museums and the Bicentenary of the Abolition of the British Slave Trade," *Museum and Society* 8, no. 3 (2010). James Walvin, "The Slave Trade, Abolition and Public Memory," *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society Sixth Series*, no. 19 (2009). In this article, Walvin notes a raft of commemorative events including TV and radio programmes, websites, museum exhibitions and a parliamentary debate.

²⁷ H.S. Dunn, "Slavery and Emancipation in the Caribbean: Preserving the Public Memory," in *Public Memory, Public Media and the Politics of Justice*, ed. Lee P and Thomas P.N. (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 186.

²⁸Walvin, "The Slave Trade, Abolition and Public Memory," 149.

²⁹ Verene. A Shepherd, "Slavery, Shame and Pride: Debates over the Marking of the Bicentennial of the Abolition of the British Trans-Atlantic Trade in Africans in 2007," *Caribbean Quarterly* 56, no. 1-2 (2010): 13.

Despite the fact that Caribbean historians have spent the last 50 or so years writing a more empowering history; and UNESCO has, since 1998, embarked on an elaborate project to break the silence and address the issues of shame and guilt surrounding the trans-Atlantic trade and African enslavement [...] ignorance and shame about the past persist.³⁰

Whilst projects of remembrance are becoming more common in the Caribbean, suggesting a more widespread desire to actively engage with the past, the subject of slavery has remained unspoken, despite its visible and troubling legacies. As Dunn has argued: "This racially oriented economic and political exploitation has shaped and continues to influence the psyche of Caribbean societies today, re-defining individuals, families, communities, nations, and the region."³¹ Indeed, the Caribbean response to the 2007 bi-centenary was contested; representing instead a British shift in the remembrance of slavery. Yet since 2007, the way in which the Caribbean has chosen to remember slavery has also shifted. When Shepherd wrote in 2007, she described a number of calls for reparation, which had not materialised. However in 2013, the CARICOM Reparations Commission was launched, with a Ten-Point plan following in 2014.³² A number of Caribbean nations, including Belize, signed up to this initiative, which calls for an official apology, repatriation, and cancellation of debt. Although the remembrance of slavery in the Caribbean remains complex, the development of the Reparations Commission is an important example of the shift in Caribbean nations' attitudes towards this part of their history. At the same time,

³⁰ Shepherd, "Slavery, Shame and Pride: Debates over the Marking of the Bicentennial of the Abolition of the British Trans-Atlantic Trade in Africans in 2007," 16.

³¹ Dunn, "Slavery and Emancipation in the Caribbean: Preserving the Public Memory," 185.

³² For further information about the Reparation Plan, see "Caricom Reparations Commission," 2019, accessed 30/7/17, <http://caricomreparations.org/>.

the traumatic history of the region is beginning to be activated and acknowledged. Belize's inclusion in this debate, alongside the 'enSLAVEd' exhibition, certainly marks a turning point in the country's official remembrance of the past.

To situate my discussion of how Belizean slavery is remembered and forgotten, it is necessary to discuss the broader themes that characterise current debates. Firstly, the traumatic nature of both the experiences of the enslaved and how this is remembered must be acknowledged. In his important work, *Caribbean Discourse*, Edouard Glissant described the "brutal dislocation" of the slave trade, which has ruptured Caribbean history.³³ Unlike European nations whose historic consciousness has been able to form "gradually and continuously", Caribbean history:

[c]ame together in the context of shock, contraction, painful negotiation and explosive force. This dislocation of the continuum and the inability of the collective consciousness to absorb it all, characterise what I call a non-history.³⁴

As a result, Glissant argues, the collective memory of an entire people is erased. Indeed, Berlin, Faveau and Miller have proposed that the struggle over slavery's memory has been almost as intense as the struggle over slavery itself.³⁵ Eyerman also concurs, suggesting that the way in which slavery has been

³³ Edouard Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1989), 61.

³⁴ Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse*, 62.

³⁵ Ira Berlin, Marc Favreau, and Steve. F Miller, *Remembering Slavery* (New York: New York Press, 1998), xiii.

remembered has ruptured the identity of an entire race of people, describing it as “a dramatic loss of meaning, a tear in the social fabric.”³⁶ Whilst these critics write in the context of plantation slavery, I contend that a similar trauma, although buried, exists in Belize. In addition to the traumatic way in which slavery is negotiated, particularly by the Black Creole ancestors of the enslaved, a complex set of circumstances has arisen, which renders the voices of the enslaved silent. This process has allowed a Western-focused narrative to develop and become culturally entrenched, complicating the remembrance of slavery further.

Writing about Western efforts to place slavery in the public domain, Hamilton, Hodgson and Quirk have suggested that this process is never objective and disinterested, but rather focuses upon “prevailing conceptions of national ‘honour’, understandings of ‘civilisation’ and a sense of imagined citizenship and community.”³⁷ National representations of slavery, they argue, seek to “minimise collective responsibility for enslavement, while emphasising contributions to abolitionism.”³⁸ Although slavery is remembered now more than ever, the main metropolitan centres predominantly negotiate this remembrance through two lenses: the first of “self-congratulation”, which compares the country’s record on slavery with the “ostensibly less salutary record of others” and highlights slavery as “benign” and “less oppressive” than others, and the second, which relates to

³⁶ Ron Eyerman, *Cultural Trauma and the Formation of African American Identity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 2.

³⁷ Hamilton, Hodgson, and Quirk, "Introduction," 1.

³⁸ Hamilton, Hodgson, and Quirk, "Introduction," 1.

the idea of “falling behind”, when lack of action has manifested itself as “a source of collective dishonour or a symbol of backwardness.”³⁹ This theme is visible in monuments, museums and exhibits, all of which seek to “restore credibility.”⁴⁰ Both themes also illustrate the way in which metropolitan centres have sought to distance themselves from the colonies, placing the blame for injustice upon those present in the location.⁴¹ This distancing is linked to the pervasiveness of abolitionist memory. Barnor Hesse argues that it is not the memory of slavery itself which is non-existent; rather the absence lies with the specific memory of *racial* slavery. He suggests that the on-going presence of racism disrupts “any sense of value in remembering racial slavery, since the dislocation of its institutional forms has largely been ejected from Western cultures of remembrance.”⁴² Hesse argues instead that Western cultures represent slavery through the lens of “abolitionist memory”, which focuses on the achievements of white liberators, or “curatorial memory” which is located in museums, galleries or films.⁴³ While Hesse argues that curatorial memory also encouraged the forgetting of the enslaved through “a peculiar pathos of distance”, since the bicentenary of 2007, more concerted efforts have been made to overcome the

³⁹ Ibid, 8.

⁴⁰ Ibid, 8.

⁴¹ Ibid, 10.

⁴² Barnor Hesse, "Forgotten Like a Bad Dream: Atlantic Slavery and the Ethics of Postcolonial Memory," in *Relocating Postcolonialism* ed. David Theo Goldberg and Ato Quayson (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), 144.

⁴³ Hesse, "Forgotten Like a Bad Dream: Atlantic Slavery and the Ethics of Postcolonial Memory," 155.

limits of curatorial memory and ensure that the voices of the descendants of the enslaved are acknowledged and recognised.⁴⁴

Both Hesse's framework, and that proposed by Hamilton, Hodgson and Quirk are pertinent to this thesis; indeed, the states of "self-congratulation" and "falling behind" are both recognisable in the cultural memory of slavery in Belize. As I discuss in Chapters One and Two, the dominant historical narrative of Belizean slavery is self-congratulatory, predicated on the basis of it being benign and un-oppressive, with masters and slaves working harmoniously, unlike the brutal toil of the plantation. Interestingly though, and as noted at the start of this introduction, the narrative of "falling behind" is also now making its presence felt, as the enSLAVEd exhibition in Belize City in 2016 makes clear. Although the inclusion of a museum exhibition relating to slavery is certainly significant in a country which has found little mention of the experience of the enslaved in any cultural context, it alone cannot be seen to provide a comprehensive opportunity to interrogate those "generational, emotional, social, and political relations"⁴⁵ described by Hesse. This thesis argues that Edgell's novels have greater potential to do so, unbound as they are by the structural limitations of curatorial memory.

⁴⁴ For example, see Geoffrey Cubitt, "Museums and Slavery in Britain: The Bicentenary of 1807," in *Politics of Memory: Making Slavery Visible in the Public Space*, ed. Ana Lucia Araujo (New York and London: Routledge, 2012). For a broad range of responses which address the representation of the enslaved in museums and public locations, see Ana Lucia Araujo, ed., *Public Memory of Slavery: Victims and Perpetrators in the South Atlantic* (Amehurst: Cambria Press, 2010); Laurajane Smith et al., eds., *Representing Enslavement and Abolition in Museums* (New York: Routledge, 2011).

⁴⁵ Hesse, "Forgotten Like a Bad Dream: Atlantic Slavery and the Ethics of Postcolonial Memory," 155.

In order to situate the thesis and define my methodology, Chapter One begins by discussing the key theoretical frameworks of cultural and communicative memory, using the work of Jan Assmann. Although not located within the field of Caribbean or postcolonial studies, Assmann's methodology is utilised for the way in which it foregrounds the importance of memory in relation to imagining the nation. Chapter One also critically assesses how the myth of the Battle of St George's Caye was formed and how it became cemented in Belizean culture. This analysis takes place alongside an exploration of a key colonial text: the *Archives of British Honduras* (1931-5). This text, which has been used as the basis for a number of subsequent histories of Belize, has a strong colonial bias, which centralises the heroic narrative of the Battle of St George's Caye and silences the voices of the enslaved. I situate this text alongside a broader discussion around the function of the colonial archive. Using Michel-Rolph Trouillot's important work, *Silencing the Past*, Chapter One explores the way in which a version of colonial history specific to Belize has been produced, negotiated and remembered. The chapter also historicises the development of the settlement of Belize in the years leading up to the Battle of St George's Caye in 1798. It concludes with an analysis of the years 1888 – 1920, a period when the Battle of St George's Caye became fully consolidated in culture, with a number of groups seeking to claim ownership of its narrative. Overall, Chapter One establishes how the myth became pervasive in Belize, assisted by a specific colonial archival narrative of benign slavery, comradeship and heroic endeavour.

The discussion in this chapter also sets up the historical and representational framework for my later analysis of Zee Edgell's novels.

Chapter Two takes the period of slavery in Belize as its focus and outlines the specific features of the logwood and mahogany industry. Continuing to focus on the *Archives of British Honduras* as a key colonial text which can also be read 'against the grain', the chapter contrasts the production of the myth of benign slavery with later postcolonial histories. Central to this chapter is the introduction of a counter-narrative to the 'myth of origin'. In line with a broader pattern of resistance across the Caribbean, I highlight slave rebellions, desertion, and the poor treatment of the enslaved as key elements of a counter-narrative to the battle 'myth.' The specific experiences of enslaved women are central to this critical discussion. Whilst the degree of autonomy enslaved men experienced in the forests has routinely been used to evidence the extent of good relations between master and slave, the experiences of women, who were predominantly employed in domestic roles, were markedly different. The discussion draws on key postcolonial historians in order to challenge the perception of benevolence promoted in colonial texts. Whilst the work of postcolonial historians has played a significant role in the development of an oppositional counter-narrative, the chapter argues that the representation of the Battle of St. George's Caye has been contested from the earliest moments of its establishment. This chapter, therefore, analyses the post-emancipation period in Belize and connects this analysis to the events which saw the consolidation of the battle myth at the end

of the nineteenth century, discussed in Chapter One. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the 1930s Labour movement as a key moment in the development of an oppositional narrative that paved the way for the independence movement of the 1950s. This discussion argues that a culture of resistance to colonialism can be traced in Belize over a much longer period than colonial histories would suggest. Through the process of identifying this resistance to colonialism, the discussion challenges the foundation of the dominant 'myth of origin'.

Chapter Three moves away from Belize's historical narrative and the period of slavery to focus upon literature and imaginative fiction. A central tenet of this thesis is the way in which fiction is able to transcend dominant cultural and historical narratives to re-engage with the past and re-imagine prior events. In order to situate my analysis of Edgell's novels, I return to the work of Assmann to define the function of 'cultural' and 'collective' texts. The work of Birgit Neumann is also identified, whose work on 'fictions of memory' encapsulates the specific ways that literature can be used to interrogate memory and become a force for "continual innovation and cultural self-renewal."⁴⁶ Chapter Three also considers Edgell's dual identity as both a Caribbean and a Belizean writer. I explore these identities through a discussion of the broader complexities of Caribbean identity and Creolisation discourses, and through this discussion, establish a literary and cultural framework to situate Edgell's imaginative fiction. The chapter concludes

⁴⁶ Neumann, "The Literary Representations of Memory," 341.

with a discussion of the position that Edgell currently occupies in Belize itself. Through a discussion of the place of the nation in Caribbean women's writing, I consider Edgell's relationship to Belize, particularly in the context of her representations of key historical moments. I also discuss the implications of Edgell's status as the only internationally recognised literary voice from the country, particularly in terms of the challenge she presents to a colonially-oriented version of history. An important aspect of this discussion is a key contradiction I note in Edgell's work – her desire to stay 'true to the historical record' and her (sometimes) conflicting wish to tell the unspoken stories of Belizeans.

Chapter Four addresses Edgell's first novel, *Beka Lamb* (1982). Focusing on the first wave of the independence movement in Belize, which took place in the early 1950s, the novel is an allegorical re-imagining of a period in Belizean history where the country was on the verge of sweeping political change. The novel is significant for its use of key markers of resistance to colonialism, which exhibit a strong communicative memory in action. It also reveals the way in which colonial values have been normalised and exhibits the strong hold that these values continue to exert upon the characters in the novel. This hold is particularly challenging for the female characters who struggle to contain emotion within a colonial-oriented version of femininity. Exploring the downfall of central character, Toychie, the chapter discusses the exclusion of black working-class women from society, due to their failure to conform to colonial standards of womanhood. In

addition to the strong criticism of colonial values on display in the novel, *Beka Lamb* is significant for the way its characters engage with the past. The novel explores the traumatic burden carried by many characters and the ways in which this burden is transferred between generations. Indeed, the novel ends with an implication from Edgell that the past needs to be more forcibly engaged in order for Belizeans to come to terms with their ancestry.

In Times Like These (1991) is Edgell's second novel and the focus of Chapter Five. This novel takes the months leading up to full independence in 1981 as its subject. In contrast to the hope and optimism displayed at the end of *Beka Lamb*, *In Times Like These* presents a picture of a country plagued by political strife and stagnation and characterised by an undercurrent of violent disorder. Unlike the broad tropes of Caribbean women's writing employed by Edgell in *Beka Lamb*, *In Times Like These* reflects Helen Scott's critique of the genre, which situates Caribbean women's writing in terms of class, globalisation and the failures of independence.⁴⁷ Like *Beka Lamb*, the novel is significant for the way in which its characters are unable to engage with the colonial past. Whilst the past is not explicitly vocalised, the legacies of colonialism are visible, not only in the contentious political landscape which stems from years of internal wrangling rooted in colonialism, but through the way in which the nation is imagined. *In Times like These* is an important text because of its strong focus on the role of

⁴⁷ Helen Scott, *Caribbean Women Writers and Globalisation* (Hampshire and Burlington: Ashgate, 2006).

women: the novel rewrites the period of independence in Belize from a female perspective, challenging ingrained notions of nation and destabilising Caribbean stereotypes of motherhood. Through the character of Pavana, there is a direct challenge to colonial and Black Power versions of femininity, yet, like *Beka Lamb*, the novel continues to reflect normalised colonial ways of being. In *In Times Like These*, Edgell questions whether it is possible for both Belize and Pavana to break free of these constraints.

Chapter Six focuses upon Edgell's most recent novel, *Time and the River* (2007), which describes the period of slavery and is told from the perspectives of three slaves: Leah, Will and Sukie. Taking place between the years of the Battle of St George's Caye (1798) and the last slave rebellion in Belize (1822), the novel spans a significant period in Belize's history: one which has never been imagined from the point of view of the enslaved. Indeed, the novel represents Edgell's most overt engagement with Belize's past and functions as a direct challenge to the 'myth of origin'. This chapter is an important moment for the thesis; the novel providing a sharp contrast to the colonial histories explored in the first two chapters. This chapter centralises Edgell's re-imagination of the female slave experience, exploring the violence enacted on women's bodies, which contrasts with the lack of attention this subject receives in the *Archives of British Honduras* and other colonial texts. Through the character of Leah, Edgell also explores the complex and contradictory position of enslaved women, who are unable to break free from the constraints of their gender. Finally, *Time and the River* reimagines

Belize's history from a traumatised perspective. This approach collapses the heroic narrative of the battle myth, destabilising Belize's dominant memory of slavery in the process. Indeed, Edgell's reimagining of the Battle of St George's Caye in the novel is a significant rupture in the fabric of Belize's hegemonic cultural memory.

The thesis concludes with a discussion of the ways in which Edgell's fiction intervenes in the dominant cultural and national narratives of Belize and destabilises the historical constructs of its past. This process is a significant one, made more so by Edgell's subject position as a Black Creole woman.

Note

The country of Belize was originally called the 'Bay Settlement' but was often referred to as British Honduras. It became a Crown Colony in 1862, when its name was officially changed to British Honduras. It continued to be called British Honduras until 1973, when the name was changed to Belize. For the purposes of consistency, I have used Belize throughout, except in cases where British Honduras or the Bay Settlement is explicitly named.

Chapter One - The Battle of St George's Caye: Myth-Making and Memory in Belize

On September 10th, 1798, following years of prolonged wrangling between Spain and Britain, the decisive battle for claim to the land of Belize took place. After weeks of anticipation prior to the battle itself, the British forces enacted a conclusive victory over Spain, who never contested ownership of the land again.¹ The 'Battle of St George's Caye' is a significant moment, not only for this reason, but for the tales of courage and bravery that accompany it, which have become heavily mythologised over the ensuing years. The story goes that the British forces were outnumbered and that the victory by the 'Baymen' was unprecedented.² A vital component of the myth is the loyalty of the Baymen's slaves, who fought gallantly, side-by-side with their masters to defeat the Spanish forces. Key aspects of the campaign, such as the ships and weaponry used and the quick timing of the attack itself, have entered Belizean popular consciousness, with the battle becoming legendary in its status and profoundly symbolic to Belizeans, particularly Black Creoles. Celebrated annually, it is a central part of Belize's official and national memory and a pivotal part of the country's official narrative of the past. Its presence can be observed in a number of cultural mediums including the National Anthem, which focuses on the story of the country's forefathers, the British Baymen, who "brought freedom

¹ O. Nigel Bolland, *Belize: A New Nation in Central America* (Boulder and London: Westview Press, 1986), 13.

² P.A.B Thompson, *Belize: A Concise History* (Oxford: Macmillan Caribbean, 2004), 33.

from slavery oppression's rod,"³ and the five-dollar bill. It is also recorded in newspapers, by official institutions (e.g. the library) and tourism, travel and local history websites.⁴ A common thread is the promotion of unity between master and slave, and the decisive nature of the win.

Assad Shoman has described 'myths of origin' and their significance for nations thus:

Every nation seems to need a 'myth of origin', some event in the historical past that is considered as giving birth to the entity that the people within its territory must owe allegiance to and that gives meaning and an identity to it. The myth must also provide some explanation about the nature of the nation and the people; the moral of the story will serve as a guide to behaviour and provide justification for the way the nation is structured.⁵

The Battle of St George's Caye is certainly Belize's 'myth of origin'. The story is woven throughout the historical, cultural, and popular life of Belize, and has

³ "Belize Facts and Figures," 2012, accessed 31/7/17, <http://belizeinfocenter.org/belize-facts-and-figures-the-belize-national-symbols/>.

⁴ For examples see: "Battle of St George's Caye," MyBelize.Net, accessed 18/7/17, <http://www.mybelize.net/history/battle-of-st-georges-caye/>. "Battle of St George's Caye," St George's Caye Belize, accessed 15/7/17, <http://www.stgeorgescayebelize.org/battle-of-st-georges-caye.html>. "The Battle of St George's Caye," San Pedro Sun, accessed 15/7/17, <https://www.sanpedrosun.com/old/98-362.html>; "The Battle of St George's Caye," 2016, accessed 5/5/17, <https://www.captainmorgans.com/2016/09/10/the-battle-of-st-georges-caye/>. "Belize Facts and Figures: The Significance of the Battle of St Georges Caye," Belize Information Center, 2012, accessed 5/7/17. "Belize Prepares to Celebrate the Battle Of St George's Caye," Breaking Belize News, 2016, accessed 15/7/17, <https://www.breakingbelizenews.com/2016/09/09/belize-prepares-celebrate-battle-saint-georges-caye/>. "10 Things You Need to Know about the Battle of St George's Caye," Cahalpech Blog, 2018, accessed 5/5/17, <https://www.cahalpech.com/10-things-you-need-to-know-about-the-battle-of-st-georges-caye/>.

⁵ Assad Shoman, "Reflections on Ethnicity and Nation in Belize," *Documento de Trabajo. No. 9 / Document de Travail No. 9, México: Proyecto AFRODESC / EURESCL* (2010). http://www.yassermusa.com/uploads/3/4/7/0/3470758/reflections_on_ethnicity_and_nation_in_belize.pdf.

emerged countless times in the course of my research. It is a key narrative, suffused with power and, over time, has been used in myriad ways, most notably to celebrate a 'British' way of life and to argue for a 'benign' form of slavery by the European colonial metropole, and the 'Creole elite', a group of middle class Creoles who have historically aligned themselves with Britain. The celebration of British values can be observed through an oppositional rhetoric that developed in the century following the battle and which demonised the opposing Spanish colonial power. A celebration of British values is also present through the narrative of the 'loyal' slave, who is treated kindly and fairly by civilised English men. Through the myth of St George's Caye, it is possible to observe the way in which a powerful cultural memory has been produced and maintained over two centuries, continuing until the present day. This chapter explores the national 'origin myth' conceptually and historically in relation to Belize and considers how the promotion and celebration of this myth has shaped the way in which slavery is remembered. As I discuss further in Chapter Two, a colonially-derived perception of a benign form of slavery in Belize has developed historically, with its roots in the 'myth of origin'. This chapter, therefore, establishes how the myth became popularised and cemented in Belizean culture. This exercise is a crucial one for the thesis, as it provides a context to my historical analysis of slavery in Chapter Two, and Edgell's fiction, in Chapters Four, Five, and Six.

The 'myth of origin' functions at the level of cultural memory, and this chapter therefore provides a rationale for the use of cultural memory as a methodological framework. I also consider how cultural memory intersects with history, using Caribbean critic Michel-Rolph Trouillot's influential work, *Silencing the Past*,⁶ as a key text. Trouillot's work focuses on how history is 'produced' and it is through this lens that I interrogate the colonial text of the *Archives of British Honduras* (hereafter referred to as the *Archives*), and consider the historical narrative constructed within its pages. The representation of Belizean history promoted by its author, former Belizean Governor, Sir John Burdon, has played a key role in cementing the 'myth of origin's' pervasiveness in Belizean cultural narratives and memory. I conclude this chapter by discussing the particular set of circumstances that allowed the myth to become strengthened in Belize one hundred years after the event itself. In order to contextualise this discussion, it is also necessary to document the early history of Belize. This chapter discusses the inter-imperial rivalry between Spain and Britain leading up to the Battle of St George's Caye in 1798 and the cultural perception of the 'Baymen of Belize.' This exercise is undertaken with reference to both the colonially-oriented text of the *Archives*, and later histories written in the postcolonial period, thereby illustrating the conflict between pre and postcolonial documents and offering an alternative narrative to that popularised by colonial history and memory.

⁶ Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995).

Defining Cultural Memory

This thesis is preoccupied with, and underpinned by, the inter-relationship of memory and history: it focuses on the way in which an 'official' version of the country's history has been created and preserved over time, and how this particular narrative has powerfully shaped the country's postcolonial national cultural memory. It also explores the way that this official, or 'produced', history is beginning to be destabilised and challenged by the emergence of other forms of memory, such as imaginative fiction. Since the inception of the memory studies field, history and memory have been set in opposition to each other, with Maurice Halbwachs first describing this opposition in his important work on collective memory as early as the 1950s.⁷ In 1989 in his influential text *Les Lieux De Memoire* (Sites of Memory), Pierre Nora famously declared a strict binary between history and memory. For Nora, writing in relation to France, history is "a reconstruction", "problematic", "incomplete" and "suspicious of memory", whilst memory is "life", "in permanent evolution", "affective [...] magical" and "absolute."⁸ "True memory", Nora proposes, is lacking in the contemporary moment; he laments the decline of peasant culture in France, which he describes as the "quintessential repository of collective memory", and bemoans mass culture and globalisation, which has eradicated "real environments of memory" and made "Lieux de Memoire" (sites of memory) necessary.⁹ As oral

⁷ Maurice Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*, trans. Coser Lewis A. (Chicago and London: Chicago University Press, 1992).

⁸ Pierre Nora, "Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Memoire," *Representations* 26 (1998): 8.

⁹ Nora, "Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Memoire," 7.

culture has waned in France, “spontaneous memory” has also disappeared. Instead, sites of memory – archives, monuments, celebrations and anniversaries – are created and maintained, in order that they are not subsumed within the narratives of history; indeed, Nora states, “without commemorative vigilance, history would soon sweep them away.”¹⁰

Nora’s argument is a divisive one, which has been debated by critics and historians since it was first published.¹¹ Writing in the Introduction to the *Cultural Memory Studies Handbook*, published in 2008, Astrid Erll calls the division between history and memory “a dead-end” and one of memory studies’ “Achilles heels.”¹² She argues instead that history and cultural memory represent “different modes of remembering in culture.”¹³ She goes on to suggest that because the past is constantly in flux, collective and individual memories are not fixed: “This holds true not only for *what* is remembered (facts, data), but also *how* it is remembered. As a result, there are different modes of remembering identical past events.”¹⁴ Whilst I agree that history functions as another ‘form’ of remembrance, it also possesses a certain authority which is often denied to memory, especially in national narratives. Although I recognise the limitations of Nora’s binarism, there is certainly a conflict between history

¹⁰Nora, “Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Memoire,” 7.

¹¹ Michael Rothberg, “Introduction: Between Memory and History: From Lieux de Memoire to Noeuds de Memoire,” *Yale French Studies* 118/119 (2010): 4.

¹²Astrid Erll, “Cultural Memory Studies: An Introduction,” in *Cultural Memory Studies: An International and Interdisciplinary Handbook*, ed. Astrid Erll and Ansgar Nunning in collaboration with Sara. B Young (Berlin and New York: Walter De Gruyter, 2008), 7.

¹³ Erll, “Cultural Memory Studies: An Introduction,” 16.

¹⁴ Erll, “Cultural Memory Studies: An Introduction,” 7.

and memory in Belize: between the hegemonic version of the past that is celebrated, and the alternative national memories that Edgell explores in her imaginative fiction. Ross Poole has noted the particular characteristic that history possesses:

History has an academic existence: it wears the guise of disinterested scholarship, treats the nation as just another historical contingency, and investigates other social formation (classes, mentalities, geographical areas, etc.) that have equal or greater historical interest. But it also has a public existence, in which it is at the service of various projects to transform or preserve the nation's understanding of itself: it speaks to and for our country.¹⁵

Hodgkin and Radstone have also noted the opposition between history and memory. They argue, "History has become negatively associated with the 'public' and with 'objectivity', memory has become positively associated with the embedded, with the local, the personal and the subjective."¹⁶ Returning to Erl's earlier point, there are different 'types' of memory, which function at various levels; although memories absolutely reveal themselves in the local and personal, it is also important to recognise 'official', public memories that inhabit hegemonic roles in culture. It is these memories which align more closely to the history described by Hodgkin and Radstone above.

¹⁵ Ross Poole, "Memory, History and the Claims of the Past," *Memory Studies Journal* 1, no. 2 (2008): 161.

¹⁶ Susannah Radstone and Katharine Hodgkin, "Regimes of Memory: An Introduction," in *Memory Cultures: Memory, Subjectivity and Recognition*, ed. Susannah Radstone and Katharine Hodgkin (New Brunswick and London: Transaction Publishers, 2007), 10.

Jan Assmann's theory of cultural and communicative memory provides a way of distinguishing between these nuances of memory and is therefore used as my guiding principle and definition in this thesis. Assmann's theories develop the work of Halbwachs, who argued that in contrast to personal memory, which is individual and autobiographical, collective memory relies on communication and interaction between members of a society. Assmann's theory of "communicative memory" aligns with Halbwachs' idea that memories are communally mediated and relate to members of a social group. With John Czaplicka, Assmann expands Halbwachs' argument, suggesting that these groups "conceive their unity and peculiarity through a common image of their past."¹⁷ These groups are also numerous and members "therefore entertain numerous collective self-images and memories."¹⁸ In contrast to this formulation, Assmann defines cultural memory as: a "collective concept" that exists in culture and is repeated over generations¹⁹:

Cultural memory is characterised by its distance from the everyday. [This] marks its temporal horizon. Cultural memory has its fixed point; its horizon does not change with the passing of time. These fixed points are fateful events of the past whose memory is maintained through cultural formation (texts, rites, monuments) and institutional communication (recitation, practice, observance).²⁰

Like the 'Lieux de Memoire' designated by Nora, the cultural artefacts described by Assmann present a particular view of the past, which often contrasts with

¹⁷ Jan Assmann and John Czaplicka, "Collective Memory and Cultural Identity," *New German Critique* 65 (1995): 127.

¹⁸ Assmann and Czaplicka, "Collective Memory and Cultural Identity," 127.

¹⁹ Ibid, 126.

²⁰ Ibid, 129.

individual memories or oral traditions. Unlike the communicative memory present in social groups, cultural memory is hegemonic and holds power. Aledia Assmann has taken this concept further, merging the opposing frameworks of memory and culture, and suggesting that history is a type of “active cultural memory”²¹ that is closely tied to narratives of nationhood. Viewed from this perspective, cultural memory has more in common with history and often reflects stories which are central to the historical record and represent the nation state. In contrast, communicative memory – that which is located within people and communities – provides greater opportunity for oppositional narratives to be voiced. Both terms – cultural memory and communicative memory – are used in this thesis. I identify cultural memory in the narratives of Belizean national origin, the annual St George’s Caye Day parade and the persistence of traditions descended from the colonial period following independence. In contrast, communicative memory is represented in Edgell’s novels, through the careful placement of sites of colonial resistance, the presence of a strong folk culture, and the voices of women.

Belizean Historiography and The *Archives of British Honduras*

Edgell’s fiction focuses on key moments from Belize’s past. In order to situate my analysis of her novels it is essential that Belize’s broader history, and how

²¹ Aledia Assmann, “Canon and Archive,” in *Cultural Memory Studies: An International and Interdisciplinary Handbook*, ed. Astrid Erll and Ansgar Nunning in collaboration with Sara B. Young (Berlin and New York: Walter De Gruyter, 2008), 100.

this history has been selected and constructed, is investigated. There are a relatively small number of publications written pre-1900 relating to the settlement of the area now known as Belize. In 1895, the Royal Commonwealth Institute published a text entitled *The Catalogue of the Library of the Royal Colonial Institute*, which collated the literature from all of Britain's colonies in such a way "that the works upon any special subject connected with its history, government, trade, and development may be followed from its foundation to the present time."²² The entry for British Honduras is small, noting twenty-eight texts in total. The paucity of texts relating to British Honduras becomes even more apparent when comparing the entries for Jamaica (143) and British Guinea (144). Although this analysis is relatively crude, it is an indicator of Belize's status in the broader colonial history of the Caribbean. Of the texts that were written up until 1895, the majority were collections of data and statistics.²³ The main historical account of this period was written by Archibald Gibbs and published in 1883.²⁴

Throughout the early part of the twentieth century, sparse attention continued to be paid to Belize relative to other colonial societies, although a number of

²² The Royal Commonwealth Society Library, "*Catalog of the Library of the Royal Colonial Institute*," (London: The Institute, Northumberland Avenue, 1895), iii.

²³ For example, "The Honduras Almanack", (Belize: Authority of the Legislative Assembly, 1829); Lindsay Bristowe, *The Handbook of British Honduras* (Edinburgh and London: Blackwood, 1892).

²⁴ Archibald Robertson Gibbs, *British Honduras: An Historical and Descriptive Account of the Colony from its Settlement, 1670* (London: Sampson Law, Maston, Searle and Rhyton, 1883).

historical texts were published between 1950 and 1970.²⁵ In 1977 O.Nigel Bolland, who would go on to become Belize's most prolific historian, published his first text, *The Formation of Colonial Society*.²⁶ Two further books by Bolland followed this text, in 1986 and 1988 respectively.²⁷ Alongside Bolland, Anne Macpherson, Narda Dobson, and Assad Shoman are postcolonial historians who have interrogated colonial versions of history and have addressed the development of the 'myth of origin' directly.²⁸ Whilst Dobson discusses women's roles, Macpherson is notable as the sole critic to date who has situated the main body of her research within the context of women's experiences in Belizean history.

An often-mentioned 'site of memory' is the archive, which most commonly takes the form of a repository of historical documents. Assmann, whilst noting the selectivity of such an institution, argues that archives preserve what has been forgotten:

The archive is a kind of "lost-and-found office" for what is no longer needed or immediately understood. The historical archive helps us to

²⁵ These texts include Stephen Caiger, *British Honduras: Past and Present* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1951); C.H. Grant, *The Making of Modern Belize: Politics, Society and British Colonialism in Central America* (London, New York, Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 1976); R.A. Humphreys, *The Diplomatic History of British Honduras 1638-1901* (London, New York: Oxford University Press, 1961); D.A.G Waddell, *British Honduras: A Historical and Contemporary Survey* (London, New York and Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1961).

²⁶ O.Nigel Bolland, *The Formation of a Colonial Society: Belize, From Conquest to Crown Colony* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1977).

²⁷ Bolland, *Belize: A New Nation in Central America*; O.Nigel Bolland, *Colonialism and Resistance in Belize: Essays in Historical Sociology* (Benque Viejo del Carmen: Cubola, 1988).

²⁸ Anne Macpherson, *From Colony to Nation: Women Activists and the Gendering of politics in Belize, 1912-1982* (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 2007); Narda Dobson, *The History of Belize* (London: Longman Caribbean, 1973); Shoman, "Reflections on Ethnicity and Nation in Belize."

position ourselves in time; it affords us the possibility of comparison and reflection for a retrospective historical consciousness."²⁹

Archives, then, allow present-day readers to bring understanding to information included in the collection at the point of its creation. In the early part of the twentieth century, a concerted attempt was made to draw together original sources and documents to tell the story of Belize from its earliest date. The result is the three-volume *Archives of British Honduras* published between 1931-1935.³⁰ This text is central to this thesis and is used primarily to explore the selective nature of memory in Belize and its contribution to the solidification of the 'myth of origin'. As Assmann notes above, archival sites can function as a positioning tool to enable insight into how the past is constructed.³¹ In Chapter Two, I undertake analysis of particular accounts from the *Archives* which expose the selective memory of slavery in Belize and the specific construction of memory; however, at this point it is important to examine the nature of the collection itself, and how it came to occupy a central position in Belizean historiography, particularly throughout the mid-twentieth century.

The exercise of examining the *Archives* requires interrogation of its dates of publication (between 1931-1935), its author (a former Governor of the colony) and the information it chooses to include and exclude. It is important to note that

²⁹ Assmann, "Canon and Archive," 106.

³⁰ Sir. John Alder Burdon, ed., *The Archives of British Honduras*, 3 vols., Volume. 1 (London: Sifton Praed and Co, 1931); Sir. John Alder Burdon, *The Archives of British Honduras*, 3 vols., Volume. 2 (London: Sifton Praed and Co, 1934); Sir. John Alder Burdon, ed., *The Archives of British Honduras*, 3 vols., Volume. 3 (London: Sifton Praed, 1935)

³¹ Assmann, "Canon and Archive," 106.

the *Archives* is not an archive in the strictest sense; the three volumes summarise original sources, noting the type of correspondence (e.g. letter, minutes, court record); the author and recipient, where relevant, (e.g. Superintendent to Colonial Office); and the date (day, month, year), followed by a description of the main points in each document. This process of selection and categorisation privileges certain moments and sets in motion the promotion of a powerful historical narrative: one that undoubtedly had the priorities of the Colonial Office at its heart. I also note that the original documentation is located in the National Archives at Kew, an archive that itself likely harbours its own silences and omissions. Of additional importance is the summary 'historical note' included at the start of the first volume, which functions in part as an introduction to the volumes. In this note, written by the chief editor, Major Sir John Alder Burdon, who was Governor and Commander in Chief of British Honduras between 1925 and 1932, key moments from Belize's diplomatic history are summarised. A committee of 24 colleagues, who held roles in the Colonial Office, Treasury Department and British Honduras Defence Force, also supported Burdon in the project. In the Preface to the first volume, Burdon notes that the task of compiling the texts had been voluntary, and "undertaken as a result of a very widespread desire on the part of the Government and people of British Honduras, that the history of the colony should be better known, both locally and abroad."³² Burdon is a significant character; he was responsible for the content and editorial of the *Archives*, but, crucially, was also at the centre of

³² Burdon, ed., *The Archives of British Honduras, Volume 1*, viii.

a campaign that firmly consolidated the “myth of origin” in the cultural consciousness of 1920s Belize. The importance of his role in this agitation cannot be underestimated: he was central to the success of the campaign, which sought to celebrate a colonially-oriented version of history in Belize, whilst simultaneously authoring a text which aimed to collect “everything of historical value and human interest”³³ about the colony.

As I noted above, prior to the publication of the *Archives*, there were few texts which focused upon the history of the settlement, and later, colony. The *Archives* themselves were published between 1931-5, and henceforth became a widely utilised source for future historians writing about Belize up until the 1970s. As Ashdown has argued, the *Archives*: “formed the historical substance of the whole gamut of the post-war literature on Belize.”³⁴ Writing in 1961, Waddell, whilst acknowledging the poor editing, describes the *Archives* as “The most important collection of printed source material” relating to Belize.³⁵ Similarly, Dobson utilises the *Archives* throughout her 1973 study, although like Waddell, she urges caution due to a lack of careful editing around dates and quotations.³⁶ Other historians who have utilised the *Archives* as a source include Gregg,³⁷ Humphreys,³⁸ and Fox; the last of whom suggests: “Sir John

³³ Burdon, ed., *The Archives of British Honduras, Volume 1*, iv.

³⁴ Peter Ashdown, “The Colonial Administrator as Historian: Burdon, Burns and the Battle of St George’s Caye,” *Belizean Studies* 15, no. 1 (1987): 6.

³⁵ Waddell, *British Honduras: A Historical and Contemporary Survey*, 144.

³⁶ Dobson, *The History of Belize* 340.

³⁷ A.R. Gregg, *British Honduras* (London: Her Majesty’s Stationery Office, 1968).

³⁸ Humphreys, *The Diplomatic History of British Honduras 1638-1901*.

Burdon's abstract of the Archives of British Honduras remains the most important source on the colourful history of the colony."³⁹ The most effusive supporter of the *Archives* is Stephen Caiger, whose text, *British Honduras: Past and Present*, published in 1951, uses the *Archives* as his main historical source, praising both the collection and Burdon himself. In contrast to some of the other historians cited, Caiger notes the "scrupulous references" in the collection, describing it as a "monumental treatise."⁴⁰ He also comments that he had no need to consult any of the original documents from which the *Archives* are drawn, because: "The heavy spadework of intensive research has been done once and for all."⁴¹

Writing about the collation of the volumes, Ashdown has argued that the period of time when the *Archives* was produced, was one "where the writing of history was the legitimate pursuit of any educated man,"⁴² and suggests that the act of publication itself contributed to Burdon becoming an authority:

Their books by the absence of any competition automatically became standard works and their interpretations, their facts, their arguments, their heroes, their villains, their 'turning points', their omissions, their inaccuracies, their biases and their myths became – in societies hungry for their own history – the orthodox faith.⁴³

Although postcolonial historians have since moved away from a reliance on the *Archives*, prior to the postcolonial moment, the volumes, to use Ashdown's

³⁹ David.J Fox, "Recent Work on British Honduras," *The Geographical Review* 52, no. 1 (1962).

⁴⁰ Caiger, *British Honduras: Past and Present* ii.

⁴¹ Caiger, *British Honduras: Past and Present* ii.

⁴² Ibid, 5. Caiger, *British Honduras: Past and Present* 5.

⁴³ Ibid, 6.

words, became “standard works.” As a result, they became central to the development of Belize’s cultural memory and the version of history it promotes, which reinforces the perception of benign enslavement. Additionally, the *Archives* gives certain moments extra weight, such as the extended documentation and correspondence around the Battle of St George’s Caye, including an additional narrative around the battle included in Burdon’s ‘historical note.’ As part of this process the voice of the colonial administrator is prioritised over all others and so, by the time postcolonial historians had begun to challenge the dominance of the *Archives*, the myths included in its pages were already widespread in Belizean history and cultural memory.

Although the introduction to the *Archives* professes its desire to draw together all the material previously gathered about the colony, it is widely agreed that the earliest records were subject to a range of bad luck and natural disasters which destroyed much of the original documentation. The *Archives* itself notes:

Some documents were destroyed by a hurricane in 1787 and that others were lost in the sinking of the ‘Triumvirate’ off St George’s Caye. The explanation of the latter incident was possibly the prospect of a Spanish raid, which caused the records to be placed on board the ship for safety. Finally, all records in the colonial secretary’s office were destroyed by the burning of the Public Buildings in 1918. Fortunately, the registrar general’s vaults saved the records of that office.⁴⁴

⁴⁴ Sir. John Alder Burdon, ed., *The Archives of British Honduras: Volume 1*, 3 vols., vol. 1 (London: Sifton Praed and Co, 1931), ix.

Bolland also notes the paucity of early records but attributes some of the responsibility to the early settlers, the British ‘buccaneers’, who were:

...probably mostly illiterate [and] unlike the Spanish missionaries, would not be inclined to keep accounts. Moreover, if there were any accounts, they are unlikely to have survived, as the continual Spanish harassment of the early settlement was not conducive to the security of historical records.⁴⁵

However, there was not a complete absence of record keeping. Burdon notes that the earliest original manuscript is the volume of police court records and Magistrate’s meetings for 1789-1793. These are numbered ‘13’ suggesting that a number of other volumes had existed previously.

The production of a particular version of history can be seen in action through the privileging of certain documents “of historical importance,”⁴⁶ which, Burdon notes, have been included “in full”. These documents include Burnaby’s Law – the first constitution of Belize – and documentation relating to the Battle of St George’s Caye. Although Burdon does not specify what “in full” entails, analysis of the volumes suggests that it is all available documentation on the subject, without summarisation. Others have been included as extracts and précis “in as brief a form as is compatible with the retention of human fact.”⁴⁷ Whilst the aspiration to preserve and record is a positive one, the process imposes a developmental, progressive narrative structure on the events of the colony and

⁴⁵ Bolland, *The Formation of a Colonial Society: Belize, From Conquest to Crown Colony* 23.

⁴⁶ Burdon, ed., *The Archives of British Honduras: Volume 1*, xi.

⁴⁷ Burdon, ed., *The Archives of British Honduras: Volume 1*, xi.

prioritises moments which were considered historically important at the time. In this thesis I explore the way in which the *Archives* precisely helps to secure this narrative structure and hence the colonial history and memory of slavery in Belize. It must also be noted that whilst the *Archives* is a memory document, it is also one which entails forgetting. Thus, the significance of the information that has been omitted or excluded is central to the following discussion.

The Production of History

In his study of marginalised Indian voices, Sowry has speculated that the British Empire “was more data intensive than any other in history.”⁴⁸ Similarly, in a discussion of the work of the Foreign Office in the nineteenth century, Richards has argued that the need to relentlessly categorise and file was an exercise characteristic of colonial societies, born out of necessity due to the distance from the colonies themselves:

Often [they] could do little other than collect and collate information, for any exact civil control of the kind possible in England, was out of the question. The Empire was too far away, and the bureaucrats of Empire had to be content to shuffle papers.⁴⁹

However, what can be seen as “shuffling papers” can be translated into a powerful exercise of cultural classification. Writing about the archive of the

⁴⁸ Nathan Sowry, "Silence, Accessibility, and Reading Against the Grain: Examining Voices of the Marginalized in the India Office Records," *Interactions: UCLA Journal of Education and Information Studies* 8, no. 2 (2012): 12.

⁴⁹ Thomas Richards, *The Imperial Archive: Knowledge and the Fantasy of Empire* (London and New York: Verso, 1993), 3.

Dutch West Indies, Laura Ann Stoler suggests: “Colonial administrators were prolific producers of social categories.”⁵⁰ Stoler goes on to argue: “colonial archives were both transparencies on which power relations were inscribed and intricate technologies of rule in themselves.”⁵¹ The power relationships surrounding the archive have been discussed by Michel-Rolph Trouillot, whose text *Silencing the Past*, considers the processes involved in the production of historical narratives in the Caribbean context (particularly Haiti). Trouillot’s work is particularly illuminating with respect to my reading of the *Archives* and how slavery is remembered in Belize, and the ways that Belize is located in the wider Caribbean context. Rather than view history as fact or “distinct entity”⁵², Trouillot argues that history is a production, usually created by those in power “a story about those who won.”⁵³ By considering various moments in the history of Haiti, Trouillot describes “the interplay between inequalities in the historical process and inequalities in the historical narrative.”⁵⁴ Crucially, he argues that this process occurs long before the historian comes to the scene.⁵⁵ For a historian using the *Archives* as a resource, for example, it is more important, Trouillot suggests, to consider how events were selected and who authorised their inclusion in the first place, before considering the events themselves. As a consequence, it is possible to see, more broadly, how something becomes part of a wider, ‘official’ version of events. As Trouillot writes:

⁵⁰ Laura Ann Stoler, *Along the Archival Grain: Epistemic Anxieties and Colonial Common Sense* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2009), 1.

⁵¹ Stoler, *Along the Archival Grain: Epistemic Anxieties and Colonial Common Sense*, 20.

⁵² Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History*, 7.

⁵³ Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History*, 5.

⁵⁴ *Ibid*, 45.

⁵⁵ *Ibid*, 45.

The making of archives involves a number of selective operations: selection of producers, selection of evidence, selection of themes, selection of procedures – which means at best, the differential ranking and, at worst, the exclusion of some producers, some evidence, some themes, some procedures. Power enters here both obviously and surreptitiously.⁵⁶

This process can certainly be traced in the *Archives*. Burdon and his committee of colleagues were all either former residents of the colony, or employees working in the British Government, which would indicate a predominantly British bias. As mentioned above, the administrators in charge of collating original sources did not write from the colonies but from the isolation of a government office in Britain. Finally, in contrast to Burdon's wish to include everything of historical value and human interest, the documents awarded value in 1931 would be very different to those awarded value at the time of their production, or those that would be awarded value today. Similarly, as noted above some documents are included "in full" which provides an insight into the events awarded significance at the time of production.

One pertinent example is the 'full text' relating to the aforementioned Battle of St George's Caye. Unlike the majority of entries into the *Archives*, which are short summaries of documentation, the section relating to the Battle of St George's Caye includes substantial transcripts of communication between the settlement and Britain. The transcripts begin with three verbatim accounts of the Battle

⁵⁶ Ibid, 53.

published in the *Royal Gazette* in September and November 1798.⁵⁷ It is not clear who the letters are to/from, but they each provide information about the Battle, including weaponry, the fleet, and the conduct of the Baymen and the enslaved. Additionally, a number of letters sent to the Duke of Portland from the Earl of Balcarres (Governor in Jamaica), and Lieutenant Colonel Barrow (Superintendent in the settlement), published in the *London Gazette* are included.⁵⁸ Dated between September 1798 and January 1799 this correspondence provides first-hand accounts of the battle. The inclusion of this information illustrates the importance of the engagement and the significance of the battle to the continuing success of the settlement. Although none would argue that this event was *not* important – it signified an end to decades of dispute with the Spaniards – the success of the battle and its subsequent cultural representation enabled it to be repurposed, re-appropriated and re-shaped over a number of years. Consequently, and in line with British dominance in Belize, it is this perspective which is predominantly recalled, remembered and re-enacted.

Sowry has suggested that “The majority of archival records as they presently exist in libraries, archives and historical centres do not represent those “marginal” people in society and thus do not tell the full story.”⁵⁹ In opposition to

⁵⁷ Burdon, ed., *The Archives of British Honduras: Volume 1*, 252.

⁵⁸ Burdon, ed., *The Archives of British Honduras: Volume 1*, 252.

⁵⁹ Ashdown, "The Colonial Administrator as Historian: Burdon, Burns and the Battle of St George's Caye," 5.

the attention given to the Battle of St George's Caye, the presence of the enslaved in the *Archives* is minimal. Although it is widely agreed that slaves were present in the Bay settlement as early as 1724,⁶⁰ the enslaved are not mentioned in the *Archives* for another 20 years, until 1745, where a Major Caulfield "Gives the number of men at Belize at 50 whites and 120 negroes."⁶¹ Whilst the omission of this information in the *Archives* may have been due to the natural disasters that destroyed the records of the settlement, the arrival of the enslaved from Jamaica and Bermuda is a significant moment, one which is not referred to in the *Archives* at all – in either Burdon's historical note at the start of Volume 1, or the archival documents themselves. That Bolland references Gibbs' 1883 text⁶² – a text published almost 40 years prior to the *Archives* – to discuss the arrival of the enslaved in the Bay Settlement compounds this omission further. The *Archives* contain little trace of the voices of the enslaved, who were forbidden to write. Instead, their voices are found obliquely, through encounters with the colonial system, for example: police, magistrates and missionaries. Equally, no slave narratives derive from Belize. Instead, silence surrounds the experiences of the enslaved; the historical sources that do exist are notable for what is *not* included. Other than their appearance in the narrative of the Battle, and the aforementioned encounters with the Baymen, their experiences are largely forgotten.

⁶⁰ Bolland, *Colonialism and Resistance in Belize: Essays in Historical Sociology* 52; Thompson, *Belize: A Concise History* 53; Dobson, *The History of Belize* 147.

⁶¹ Burdon, ed., *The Archives of British Honduras: Volume 1*, 73.

⁶² Gibbs, *British Honduras: An Historical and Descriptive Account of the Colony from its Settlement, 1670*.

Writing about forgetting in the context of public memory, Donnington, Hanley and Moody have argued that this process is not a passive act.⁶³ Similarly, Trouillot has argued the creators of history often choose *not* to remember:

Silences are inherent in history because any single event enters history with some of its constituting parts missing. Something is always left out while something else is recorded [...] The very mechanisms that make any historical recording possible also ensure that historical facts are not created equal.⁶⁴

The act of recording is the most significant aspect of “archival power;” which Trouillot describes as “the power to define what is and what is not a serious object of research, and, therefore, of mention.”⁶⁵ This operation of power can be seen when comparing the representation of original source material in the *Archives* and in postcolonial texts. In *The Formation of Colonial Society*, for example, Bolland quotes part of a letter sent in 1822 from a Superintendent Colonel Arthur (resident in the colony) to Earl Bathurst (Secretary of State for War and the Colonies, resident in Britain). The letter references Arthur’s perception of the free coloured in the colony in response to their lack of legal rights. The quotation reads as follows:

The people of colour, as well as the Free Black Population in the colony, although exceedingly indolent from causes which might both be explained and remedied, I must ever represent as, orderly, tractable and well-disposed, indeed nothing but their excessive submission can account for their having patiently endured the unjust Legislative and Judicial authority by

⁶³ Katie Donnington, Ryan Hanley, and Jessica Moody, "Introduction," in *Britain's History and Memory of Transatlantic Slavery: Local Nuances of a 'National Sin'*, ed. Ryan Hanley Katie Donnington, Jessica Moody (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2016), 9.

⁶⁴ Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History*, 49.

⁶⁵ Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History*, 99.

which they have been so long controlled: - in this class the main strength of the Colony consists, and they have certainly, my Lord, a proven claim upon His Majesty's Government to be protected and relieved from the unjust, partial and over reaching conduct of the generality of the White Population. (Arthur to Bathurst, 5 March 1822, CO 123/31) ⁶⁶

However, the summary of the same letter in the *Archives* excludes key information:

1822, March 5th, Lt Col Arthur to Earl Bathurst
Transmits addresses presented to him by the Inhabitants through the magistrates before the matter of the Indians arose and when he was believed to be on the eve of departure. Points out that a comparison of the address of the White Inhabitants with their present feeling confirms his previous accounts of their vacillating disposition. Draws attention to the sincere respect and gratitude contained in the universally signed address of the Free People of Colour, objects of suspicion and dread 'in every other Colony'.⁶⁷

Although the extract in the *Archives* references the indecisive nature of the settlers, it does not mention their "unjust, partial and over reaching conduct," an elision which implies an editorial desire to show the settlers in a positive light. Similarly, whilst the summary in the *Archives* refers to the "sincere respect and gratitude" the Free People of Colour extended towards Arthur, there is no mention of their "orderly, tractable and well-disposed" behaviour or the "unjust Legislative and Judicial authority" by which they are controlled. This example is just one of many which illustrates the power of selective editing in the *Archives*

⁶⁶ Arthur to Bathurst, 5 March 1822, CO 123/31, in Bolland, *The Formation of Colonial Society: Belize, From Conquest to Crown Colony*, 91-2.

⁶⁷ Sir. John Alder Burdon, *The Archives of British Honduras: Volume 2*, 3 vols., vol. 2 (London: Sifton Praed and Co, 1934), 252.

and the conflict over the representation of history in colonial texts. This process is particularly significant in the context of Belizean historiography, where the use of the *Archives* as an unchallenged, key source was widespread throughout the twentieth century.

Issues of archival selection are central to the question of how the history and cultural memory of slavery are constructed. In addressing the difficulties experienced by those who investigate how slavery is remembered, Hartman writes:

How does one tell the story of an elusive emancipation and a travestied freedom? Certainly, reconsidering the meaning of freedom entails looking critically at the production of historical narratives since the very effort to represent the situation of the subaltern reveals the provisionality of the archive as well as the interests that shape it and thereby determine the employment of history.⁶⁸

While the *Archives* can assist my exploration of the construction and representation of colonial history in Belize, the silences it harbours must also be read. Steedman describes this process thus: “Historians read for what is *not there*: the silences and the absences of the documents always speak to us [...] The nameless watchmaker’s apprentice is important *because* he is nameless.”⁶⁹ I noted above the lack of attention given by the *Archives* to the first appearance of the enslaved in the settlement, but when considering the omission in the light

⁶⁸ Sayida Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth Century America* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 10.

⁶⁹ Carolyn Steedman, *Dust: The Archive and Cultural History* (New Brunswick and New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2002), 151.

of Steedman's comments, it also illustrates the lack of importance attached to such an event.

At the start of the first volume of the *Archives*, Burdon notes his basis for undertaking the work, which comes from a "desire [...] that the history of the colony should be better known"⁷⁰ – a rationale that appears to be full of good intentions. Read from a postcolonial perspective, however, Burdon's well-intentioned rationale becomes contested. By privileging the perspective of the coloniser rather than the colonised, a one-sided view is presented. Bastian has praised the way in which postcolonial scholarship allows us to question the "dominant narratives of the coloniser's records":

Not only has [it] exposed many of the weaknesses and problems of recordkeeping, it has also offered an opportunity to conceptualise and apply a wider, more generous and more inclusive archival lens to the relationship between communities and records.⁷¹

Although there is a distinct lack of first-hand accounts by marginalised groups in the *Archives*, its silences enable a broader picture of slavery to be read. I concur with Donnington, Hanley and Moody's suggestion that 'forgetting' may be the wrong word to use when considering slavery. They propose that "organised forgetting" or "un-remembering" might be better suited for the silences that are common around slavery in national and cultural narratives.⁷²

There is a history to the public memory of slavery in Britain, but it is fragmented, warped, and partial, shaped by successive efforts to

⁷⁰ Burdon, ed., *The Archives of British Honduras: Volume 1*, ix.

⁷¹ Jeanette Bastian, in Sowry, "Silence, Accessibility, and Reading Against the Grain," 7.

⁷² Donnington, Hanley, and Moody, "Introduction," 10.

foreground abolition as a key facet of national identity construction, especially in relation to nineteenth and early twentieth century imperial aims and ambitions.⁷³

Although this statement concentrates on the memory of slavery and abolition in Britain, it is equally effective for describing the “organised forgetting” prevalent in a colonial society such as Belize. As discussed in the introduction, the narrative of slavery is not wholly absent in Belize and, over time, has become visible through the mode of “self-congratulation,” which reveals itself through colonial histories such as the *Archives*. Like the history of slavery in Britain, this narrative has become “warped” and “fragmented,” and society has “un-remember[ed]” the aspects of these stories that do not fit within the boundaries of national and cultural memory.

The Early History of Belize

I conclude this chapter by discussing how the battle myth became consolidated in Belizean culture a century after the event itself, but before moving on to this discussion, it is necessary to outline the events that occurred between the earliest days of the settlement in the 1600s and the Battle of St George’s Caye in 1798. The heroic rhetoric promoted by the ‘myth of origin’ is rooted in the earliest history of the settlement and is channelled through the persistent conflict with Spain, and the narrative of the British ‘Baymen.’ This early period saw a number of conflicts over the ownership of the land, particularly between

⁷³ Donnington, Hanley, and Moody, "Introduction," 10.

the colonial powers of Britain and Spain who claimed the territory from the indigenous Maya population. Kroshus Medina has noted that: “although Maya claims to ‘native’ or indigenous identity are not usually disputed in Mesoamerica, in Belize they have been challenged as a number of groups compete to assert native status.”⁷⁴ The country’s name ‘Belize’ enacts this conflict in microcosm.⁷⁵ The Maya, argue that the word Belize is derived from their word Bekin or Belix, which means ‘muddy water’ due to its location at the mouth of the river.⁷⁶ In contrast, the *Archives* argue that the word Belize derives from the name of one of the first British men to settle in the region: Captain Wallace.⁷⁷ Garber notes the same but argues that there is no firm evidence to corroborate this claim.⁷⁸ The Spanish dispute the British suggestion, arguing that Belize derives instead from the Spanish word ‘Balisa’ (a buoy or beacon).⁷⁹ Even today, there is no firm agreement on the origins of the country’s name, although it is widely agreed that the Maya were the first inhabitants of Belize; its “ancient existence” no longer disputed.⁸⁰ However, most British imperial histories of Belize deny responsibility for displacing the indigenous population, choosing to focus instead on the first British settlements.⁸¹ In the *Archives*, for

⁷⁴ Medina, "History, Culture and Place-Making: ‘Native’ Status and Maya Identity in Belize," 197.

⁷⁵ For a full discussion of the various claims to the naming of Belize, see James. F Garber, "The St George’s Caye Archaeology Project:Results of the 2009 Field Season," (2010). http://www.stgeorgescayebelize.org/uploads/9/6/7/0/9670208/sgc_arch_project_report_2009.pdf.

⁷⁶Garber, "The St George’s Caye Archaeology Project:Results of the 2009 Field Season," 9.

⁷⁷ Burdon, ed., *The Archives of British Honduras: Volume 1, 2-3*.

⁷⁸ Garber, "The St George’s Caye Archaeology Project:Results of the 2009 Field Season," 9.

⁷⁹ Caiger, *British Honduras: Past and Present* 31.

⁸⁰Medina, "History, Culture and Place-Making: ‘Native’ Status and Maya Identity in Belize," 195.

⁸¹Medina, "History, Culture and Place-Making: ‘Native’ Status and Maya Identity in Belize," 198.

example, Burdon suggests: "There is no record of any indigenous population and no reason to believe that any such existed, except for in the interior. There are traces of extensive Maya Indian occupation [...] but this was long before the British settlement."⁸² Stephen Forbes's memoir contradicts Burdon somewhat, suggesting that the Maya were present but that they were displaced by Spain: "Ruthlessly [the Spanish] stamped out the civilisation of the Indians who are so besotted by the long fear of ill treatment they have endured, that they know nothing of their ancestors of their own history."⁸³ In contrast, Bolland argues that the early British settlers drove out the Maya population when they settled in the seventeenth century:

The territory now known as Belize was definitely occupied by Maya who were displaced and dispossessed by the British [...] relations between the Maya and the British were generally antagonistic in nature, and [...] the rule of the British, neither mild nor chosen, was imposed upon the Maya in the Eighteenth Century by force of arms.⁸⁴

The dissonance between Bolland's research, written post-decolonisation, and the earlier works by Forbes and Burdon further illustrate the need for colonial documents to be read against the grain. Whilst it is beyond the scope of this thesis to provide a full account of the history of the Maya in Belize, the conflict over the naming and ownership of the land exemplifies the discrepancies between the *Archives* (and the colonial histories that followed it) and

⁸² Burdon, ed., *The Archives of British Honduras: Volume 1*, 4.

⁸³ E.W. Williams, ed., *The Baymen of Belize and How the Wrested British Honduras from the Spanish: Told by One of Them* (London: The Sheldon Press, n.d.).

⁸⁴ O Nigel Bolland, in Medina, "History, Culture and Place-Making: 'Native' Status and Maya Identity in Belize," 198.

postcolonial studies. Indeed, the 'myth of origin' makes no mention of the indigenous population and frames the struggle over the land solely through the lens of the conflict between Britain and Spain.

The British-Spanish conflict pre-dates the first settlement in Belize and is part of a wider narrative of inter-imperial conflict between the two nations. Bolland notes that the Spanish were active in the Caribbean a century before the British arrived, but that they never chose to settle in Belize.⁸⁵ The first recorded British contact in Belize was in 1638 when a crew of British sailors were shipwrecked off the coast.⁸⁶ A second crew arrived in 1640, captained by the aforementioned Wallace. They settled at the mouth of the Belize River, with the population growing, albeit sporadically, from this point on.⁸⁷ These privateers, many of whom became the 'Baymen' of Belize were recruited in England. They are written about extensively in colonial histories and a particular picture is painted which is characterised by bravery, exploration and adventure. Emphasis is often placed upon the Baymen's struggle for survival and their endurance and courage in the face of an omnipresent Spanish threat. Gibbs's description from 1883, at the high point of British imperialism, is typical:

The hardy, resolute Baymen faced difficulty and danger cheerfully, displayed patient endurance of toil and hardships and indomitable courage whenever the enemy attempted to drive them away.⁸⁸

⁸⁵ Bolland, *Belize: A New Nation in Central America*, 12.

⁸⁶ Grant, *The Making of Modern Belize: Politics, Society and British Colonialism in Central America*, 30.

⁸⁷ Bolland, *The Formation of a Colonial Society: Belize, From Conquest to Crown Colony* 19.

⁸⁸ Gibbs, *British Honduras: An Historical and Descriptive Account of the Colony from its Settlement, 1670*, 33.

Similarly, Caiger describes the Baymen's struggle to establish a foothold on the Spanish main "as colourful a record of adventure as any work of fiction, yet it is historic fact."⁸⁹ In contrast, later histories paint a more negative picture of the Baymen. For example, Foster's 1987 text highlights the words of a sixteenth century captain who observes that: "The wood cutters are generally a rude, drunken crew, some of which have been pirates and most of them sailors; their chief delight is in drinking,"⁹⁰ whilst Bolland's studies note the presence of the Baymen but without the heroic rhetoric.⁹¹

Throughout the early part of the eighteenth century, Britain and Spain clashed over the rights to natural resources and land ownership in Belize.⁹² Between 1739 and 1763, the chronology in the *Archives* lists two wars with Spain and notes that the Spaniards drove British settlers out of Belize on three separate occasions (1747, 1752 and 1754).⁹³ Whilst Bolland notes the same Spanish attacks on British settlers during this period, he suggests that rather than being driven out: "the Spanish never settled in Belize [...] and the British always returned to expand their trade and settlement."⁹⁴ In an attempt to quell the tension and define the limits of British involvement in the region, the British and

⁸⁹ Caiger, *British Honduras Past and Present*, 17.

⁹⁰ Cpt Nathaniel Uring, in Byron Foster, *The Baymen's Legacy: A Portrait of Belize City* (Belize City: Cubola, 1987), 12.

⁹¹ Bolland, *Colonialism and Resistance in Belize*, 43; *Belize: A New Nation in Central America*, 11

⁹² Bolland, *Belize: A New Nation in Central America*, 13.

⁹³ Burdon, ed., *The Archives of British Honduras, Volume 1*, 43-44

⁹⁴ Bolland, *Belize: A New Nation in Central America*, 13.

Spanish governments passed a number of official treaties between the years of 1670 and 1786.⁹⁵ However, despite legal interventions, the occupying Baymen paid little attention and continued to export timber resources out of Belize.⁹⁶ The *Archives'* representation of the on-going feud between Britain and Spain illustrates the text's British colonial perspective. The declaration of war by Spain on 16th June 1779, for example, celebrates the British and demonises the Spanish. This particular attack was unexpected, and it is described in the *Archives* as a "disaster"⁹⁷ for the British settlers:

It is difficult to write with restraint about this dastardly outrage. Civilians all, men, women and children, European and African, marched with cruelty and indignity for 300 miles through malignant forest and fetid swamp to languish and die in pestilential tropical dungeons!⁹⁸

In contrast to the outraged tone recorded in the *Archives*, one of the earliest texts, written by Gibbs in 1883, some fifty years prior to the publication of the *Archives*, is more measured: "The captives were manacled and marched to the country of Merida, the capital of Yucatan, back again to the coast, and shipped to the Havana where they were kept in dungeons until July 1782."⁹⁹

The war with Spain is a contributing factor in the development of the Belizean origin myth. In opposition to the hardy British Baymen, colonial texts routinely

⁹⁵ For a discussion of the detail of these treaties, see Bolland, *Colonialism and Resistance in Belize*, 19-22, 30-36, 79.

⁹⁶ Bolland, *The Formation of a Colonial Society: Belize, From Conquest to Crown Colony*, 19.31.

⁹⁷ Burdon, ed., *The Archives of British Honduras Volume 1*, 19.

⁹⁸ Burdon, ed., *The Archives of British Honduras Volume 1*, p.18.

⁹⁹ Gibbs, *British Honduras: British Honduras: An Historical and Descriptive Account of the Colony from its Settlement, 1670*, 42.

demonise and portray the Spanish in a negative manner.¹⁰⁰ Forbes's description of the victory at St George's Caye is a typical example: "Notable as this gain was, it is also memorable as the first permanent inroad in the evil rule of Spain on the continent of America."¹⁰¹ These words are part of a wider ideological battle that legitimised British colonialism by pitting the British values of improvement and decency against Spanish domination and 'plunder.' Writing in 2003, Kroshus-Medina confirms this ideology, noting the values-driven nature of the British-Spanish conflict which was aligned with particular 'types' of behaviour:

The 'Baymen' believed they had established a way of life in the settlement, which was distinct from and superior to that of the Spanish colonies, organised according to 'British values' of democracy and fairness. They cast Belize as civilised – Anglo and Anglican [...] a distinctive *kind* of place in Central America.¹⁰²

In contrast to the anti-Spanish rhetoric promoted in the *Archives*, this contemporary interpretation of the conflict highlights the way in which the battle, far from simply representing a successful military engagement, became ideologically driven, mythologising a British way of life at the expense of other perspectives (such as the slave and the Spaniard). In perpetuating ideals of 'decency' and 'fairness' in the face of the 'wicked' Spanish threat, the rhetoric of

¹⁰⁰ For further reading on the British representation of the Spanish Empire, see Juan. L. Sánchez, "Domesticating the Atlantic: British Representations of Spanish America and the Shaping of British Imperial Ideology," *The Yearbook of English Studies* 46 (2016).

¹⁰¹ Williams, ed., *The Baymen of Belize and How the Wrested British Honduras from the Spanish: Told by One of Them*, 211.

¹⁰² Medina, "History, Culture and Place-Making: 'Native' Status and Maya Identity in Belize," 201.

benevolent slavery, cordial master-slave relations, and claim to the land of Belize could all be extended.

The anti-Spanish rhetoric culminated in the Battle of St George's Caye in 1798, which ended the long-running dispute between Britain and Spain. This moment is also often used to legitimise the institution of slavery in Belize and argue for positive master-slave relations.¹⁰³ I challenge the perception of benign slavery in further detail in Chapter Two, but at this point it is important to note that the Battle of St George's Caye is one of the few times in the *Archives* where the enslaved are mentioned in detail. The assistance provided to the Baymen in the battle by the enslaved has become a central part of the myth. In the 'historical note' at the start of the *Archives*, Burdon makes reference to the role of the enslaved, whose "wonderful spirit"¹⁰⁴ is described as an integral part of the victory:

The action lasted two hours and a half, when the Spaniards fell into confusion, cut their cables and beat a precipitate retreat. Moss made the signal to chase, on which the cheering Negroes, under heavy fire from the covering ships, strained every nerve to board the enemy.¹⁰⁵

Similarly, Forbes's memoir describes the role of the enslaved in the battle thus:

"The deck grew slippery with blood and still the negroes, their fighting blood well

¹⁰³ See British Honduras Citizens, "*The Defence of the Settlers of Honduras Against the Unjust and Unfounded Representations of Colonel George Arthur, Late Superintendent of That Settlement: Principally Contained in His Correspondence Relative to the Condition and Treatment of the Slaves*," (Jamaica, London: Alex Aikman, Baldwin, Cradock and Joy, 1824), 11.

¹⁰⁴ Burdon, ed., *The Archives of British Honduras, Volume 1*, 28.

¹⁰⁵ Burdon, ed., *The Archives of British Honduras, Volume 1*, 29.

up and following their leaders, drove back the Spaniards foot by foot.”¹⁰⁶ The perception of the enslaved as fearless defendants of the colony, working shoulder to shoulder with the Baymen, underpins the perception of a benevolent form of slavery in Belize, whilst remaining a key element of the “myth of origin” story. Of equal significance is the way in which the role of the enslaved in the battle has been utilised over time: by the Creole elite, to claim rightful supremacy over other ethnic groups, and by the colonial government as proof of harmonious relationships between master and slave.

The Consolidation of the “myth of origin”.

The years leading up to the Battle of St George’s Caye were, then, characterised by a mythology which focused upon the Spanish threat and the character of the reckless but brave ‘Baymen of Belize’. These aspects, alongside the positive promotion of cordial master-slave relations evidenced by the enslaved participating in the battle, created the conditions for the myth to become omnipresent in culture. Both Macpherson and Shoman have written extensively about the development of the origin myth in Belize and the multiple groups – the British metropole, the white settlers and the Creole elite, and the black working classes – who attempted to lay claim to the National Day, for various, conflicting reasons. The ways that these groups used the Battle of St George’s Caye to agitate for specific ends in the period 1888 – 1989 is of

¹⁰⁶ Williams, ed., *The Baymen of Belize and How the Wrested British Honduras from the Spanish: Told by One of Them*, 194.

crucial importance for this study. Additionally, Governor John Burdon, author of the *Archives* was central in resurrecting the campaign around the 'myth of origin' in the 1920s. Indeed, his contribution to the project aligns with the construction of the *Archives* which sought to promote a particular version of history.

The "myth of origin" enacts Hobsbawm's idea of an "invented tradition", whereby rituals, often assumed to be steeped in history are, in fact, more recent, and are purposefully invented.¹⁰⁷ He defines invented tradition thus:

A set of practices, normally governed by overtly or tacitly accepted rules and of a ritual and symbolic nature, which seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behaviour by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with the past. In fact, where possible, they normally attempt to establish continuity with a suitable historic past."¹⁰⁸

Most significantly, history becomes "not what has actually been preserved in popular memory, but what has been selected, written, pictured, popularised and institutionalised by those whose function it is to do so."¹⁰⁹ Trouillot also draws attention to how commemorations legitimise particular narratives and allow them to 'become' historical fact:¹¹⁰

Commemorations sanitise further the messy history lived by the actors. They contribute to the continuous myth-making process that gives history its more definite shapes: they help to create, modify, or sanction the public meanings attached to historical events deemed worthy of mass celebration. As rituals that

¹⁰⁷ Eric Hobsbawm, "Introduction: Inventing Traditions," in *The Invention of Tradition*, ed. Eric Hobsbawm and Terrance Ranger (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 1.

¹⁰⁸ Hobsbawm, "Introduction: Inventing Traditions," 1.

¹⁰⁹ Hobsbawm, "Introduction: Inventing Traditions," 13.

¹¹⁰ Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History*, 114.

package history for public consumption, commemorations play the numbers game to create a past that seems both more real and more elementary.¹¹¹

That the anniversary of the battle continues to be celebrated every year, in addition to Belize's full independence from Britain, which is also celebrated annually on September 21st, confirms that the origin myth is both 'real' and 'elementary' for Belizeans, yet the process of consolidating the myth silenced the voices of those descended from the enslaved, in Trouillot's words, "sanitising" the "messy" history of incarceration, domination and oppression.¹¹²

As Shoman notes, following full emancipation in 1838, freed slaves and workers continued to be oppressed by the ruling classes, namely white, British landowners who continued to assert their dominance over the black working class, despite the abolition of slavery.¹¹³ During the post-emancipation period the 'Creole elite' group emerged, who sought to distance themselves from the black working classes. The Creole elite were comprised predominantly of those with lighter skin, or "those few who had escaped the mahogany camps and had come to occupy positions as clerks in commercial establishments or on the lower rungs of the civil service."¹¹⁴ Macpherson has made a specific link between the rise of the Creole elite and the consolidation of the myth:

¹¹¹ Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History*, 116.

¹¹² Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History*, 137.

¹¹³ Shoman, "Reflections on Ethnicity and Nation in Belize," 53.

¹¹⁴ Shoman, "Reflections on Ethnicity and Nation in Belize," 116. This process happened across the Caribbean. For further reading, see Frederick Cooper, Thomas. C Holt, and Rebecca. J Scott, *Beyond Slavery: Explorations of Race, Labour, and Citizenship in Post-Emancipation Societies*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000).

The Creole middle class [...] settled on a strategy – one they would employ long-term, of seeking legislative power within the colonial framework, rather than pursuing a nationalist alliance with the popular classes. Central to this strategy was its ritual show of allegiance to crown and empire, taking place each September 10th.¹¹⁵

Shoman concurs, arguing that “generally speaking [the Creole elite] sought to suppress their African ancestry and highlight their British connection.”¹¹⁶ In contrast, working class Black Creoles attempted to continue carving a living from the mahogany forests, whilst suffering persistent oppression at the hands of those holding the balance of power.¹¹⁷ Ashdown has commented upon the superiority of the Creole elite, arguing that this group, in collaboration with the colonial government, controlled not only politics and economics, but also “the colony’s vision of its own history.”¹¹⁸ This vision, Ashdown argues “equated the history of the Colony with the history of the development of the Creole majority, and particularly with the history of the privileged class within that group.”¹¹⁹ Belize’s cultural memory, therefore, has historically legitimised the Creole elite’s claim to supremacy, whilst ignoring the Black Creole subject position of slave. Thus, the cultural memory, which celebrates cordial master-slave relations and a rhetoric of benevolence, has developed, in part, due to some of the descendants of the enslaved themselves.

¹¹⁵ Macpherson, *From Colony to Nation: Women Activists and the Gendering of politics in Belize, 1912-1982* 1.

¹¹⁶ Shoman, “Reflections on Ethnicity and Nation in Belize,” 123.

¹¹⁷ Shoman, “Reflections on Ethnicity and Nation in Belize,” 55.

¹¹⁸ Peter Ashdown, “The Problem of Creole Historiography,” in *Readings in Belizean History*, ed. Lita Hunter Krohn (Belize City: St John's College, 1987), 142.

¹¹⁹ Ashdown, “The Problem of Creole Historiography,” 142.

The consolidation of the 'myth of origin' happened in two stages. The first took place between the period 1888-1898, which saw conflict between the settlers and the Creole elite and the black working classes over claims to the Battle of St George's Caye. The second stage took place in the 1920s, led by Governor Burdon and the white settler class. The wrangling over the rights to claim the battle, took place against a backdrop of political change following British Honduras becoming a Crown Colony in 1862. In 1870, the Legislative Assembly, which had historically represented British interests was dissolved and replaced by Crown Colony rule, which "concentrated power in the hands of the appointed governor, Executive Council and Legislative Council."¹²⁰ This process was destabilising for the settlers who had traditionally held legislative power. However, this period of rule was to last only until 1892, when the British and Scottish settler elite, often called the 'unofficial majority' won a voting majority from the Colonial Office. This group became "a primary target of the 1898 battle mythmakers,"¹²¹ particularly the black working classes.

Macpherson identifies the black working class 'People's Hall and Emancipation Jubilee' project as the first group agitating for claim to the Battle of St George's Caye. The group was comprised of those who identified themselves as

¹²⁰ Anne Macpherson, "Imagining the Colonial Nation: Gender, Race and Middle Class Politics in Belize, 1888-1898," in *Race and Nation in Modern Latin America*, ed. Anne Macpherson Nancy P. Applebaum, Karin Alejandra Rosemblatt (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003), 112.

¹²¹ Macpherson, "Imagining the Colonial Nation: Gender, Race and Middle Class Politics in Belize, 1888-1898," 112.

descendants of the enslaved.¹²² They campaigned for a commemoration of abolition and argued for the role of the black working classes in the battle to be more widely recognised, whilst also acknowledging the injustices perpetuated under slavery.¹²³ A number of the group signed a speech that described slavery as cruel, miserable, humiliating and degrading. Additionally, during 1889, the group marched through Belize town to a lot of land, which had been promised to them by the governor for a 'People's Hall': a space which would remember slavery and celebrate emancipation. However, support was withdrawn by the governor without explanation and, despite a number of protests and further efforts to secure recognition, the group were unsuccessful in this endeavour.¹²⁴ In addition to the efforts channelled through the People's Hall and Emancipation Jubilee project, the black working classes rioted in 1894 to voice their dissatisfaction with the 'unofficial majority'. Macpherson notes that this group was comprised of "women, children and woodcutters home for Christmas"¹²⁵ and that the riot took place in response to a rejection from the Governor of the colony over a petition for increased pay. The Battle of St George's Caye was again invoked, the leader of the riot describing the group as "the real inhabitants of this colony", those who toiled in the forests to produce its wealth but were "without anyone to protect their interests."¹²⁶ The riot was significant not only for being the first instance of post-emancipation black working class mobilisation,

¹²² Ibid, 114.

¹²³ Ibid, 114.

¹²⁴ Shoman, "Reflections on Ethnicity and Nation in Belize," 124.

¹²⁵ Macpherson, "Imagining the Colonial Nation: Gender, Race and Middle Class Politics in Belize, 1888-1898," 119.

¹²⁶ Macpherson, "Imagining the Colonial Nation: Gender, Race and Middle Class Politics in Belize, 1888-1898," 120.

but also because of the clear gulf it created between the black population of the colony comprising the working classes, and the Creole elite. Macpherson argues that by the end of the decade, the Creole elite had rejected both the “respectful black identity” which had been channelled via the People’s Hall and emancipation celebrations, and the “combative one of 1894”. Instead, the Creole elite firmly sought “alliance with the British authorities.”¹²⁷

A combination of the British Settler elite and the Creole elite made up the second group agitating for ownership of the myth. The settler elite were focused on reviving the Battle myth as part of the campaign for legislative power, which rejected Crown colony rule, whilst the Creole elite “felt the need to stamp an identity on the country that would help to preserve the difference between them and the vast majority of working class blacks, in order to maintain the society’s rigid class divisions.”¹²⁸ At this time, it was also agreed that the focus of the story should be the rivalry between Spain and Britain, and the “unity of slave and master”.¹²⁹ Shoman describes a scenario devised entirely to authenticate the Creole elite’s preferred version of the national story:

It was very important for the Creole elite that working class blacks accept the original myth, since this would grant them the legitimacy to become the natural successors to the white colonisers, the accepted leaders of the nation that was evolving. Another useful function of this was that it engendered hostility towards the “Spanish”, which was, by extension, applied to the significant numbers of Mestizo people in the country.¹³⁰

¹²⁷Ibid, 121.

¹²⁸Shoman, “Reflections on Ethnicity and Nation in Belize,” 55.

¹²⁹ Shoman, “Reflections on Ethnicity and Nation in Belize,” 55.

¹³⁰ Ibid, 56.

Central to this campaign was the concept of “shoulder to shoulder”, a phrase which has been consistently reused and repurposed to signify loyalty, comradeship and unity between slave and master.¹³¹ Indeed, Macpherson has argued:

By associating themselves only with their white Baymen ancestors, and by twisting “Shoulder to Shoulder” into a metaphor for black loyalty, middle class creoles hoped to convince the Colonial Office of their fitness as colonial voters and legislators.¹³²

A centenary committee was formed in 1898, which organised a parade and show to celebrate the battle, in particular, the “gallantry and true nobleness of nature displayed by the slaves.”¹³³ However despite the parade’s success, leading Creoles were not able to achieve their political goal of achieving legislative power.

The second phase of the consolidation of the myth took place in 1921, when it was revived as a “cultural counterpart”¹³⁴ to the on-going issues of constitutional

¹³¹See Monrad.S Metzgen, "Shoulder to Shoulder: The Battle of St Georges Caye 1798," (Belize: Goodrich, 1928).

<https://drive.google.com/file/d/0BxhTSw46jsthandJN1BEUkx3LU0/view>.

The ‘shoulder-to-shoulder’ motif is also frequently utilised by popular accounts of the Battle, for example: "The Battle of St George’s Caye Celebrations:Retracing its Development," *Belizean Minds*, 2012, <http://belizeanminds.blogspot.com/2012/09/St-Georges-Cay-Celebrations-Retraced.html>; "St Georges Caye Day: Yesterday and Today," *Belizean Travel Blog*, <https://belize-travel-blog.chaacreek.com/2013/09/st-georges-caye-day-yesterday-and-today/>.

¹³² Macpherson, "Imagining the Colonial Nation: Gender, Race and Middle Class Politics in Belize, 1888-1898," 126.

¹³³ Macpherson, "Imagining the Colonial Nation: Gender, Race and Middle Class Politics in Belize, 1888-1898," 122.

¹³⁴ Macpherson, *From Colony to Nation: Women Activists and the Gendering of Politics in Belize, 1912-1982*, 82.

reform, by the settler class and Creole elite. Macpherson notes that this revival was cemented organisationally with the four following elements: “a children’s essay competition, a parade [...], the address of loyalty that typically rehearsed the events of 1798, and the afternoon march of as many as four thousand schoolchildren.”¹³⁵ A group called the British Honduras Taxpayers Association (BHTA) took a central role in these celebrations, announcing plans “to encourage historical research on 1798, to educate the public “in the facts of the glorious history of our forebears” and in the “fitting and proper observation of public holidays [...] connected with the history of the colony.”¹³⁶ Yet in contrast to the endeavours of the Creole elite, the black working classes’ own projects were excluded:

None of the surviving petitions of the decade, from individuals or groups of the working class make any mention of the battle. Poor people’s appeals to and demands on government were simply not couched in term of native rights won in 1798. Nor was there widespread financial support for the 10th [...] all funding came from the colonial authorities.¹³⁷

Of particular significance to this thesis, and as highlighted earlier in the chapter, the author of the *Archives*, Governor Burdon, was central to the revival and subsequent promotion of the myth in the 1920s. Throughout this period, Burdon “personally promoted” a colonial version of the origin myth.¹³⁸ As Macpherson

¹³⁵ Macpherson, *From Colony to Nation: Women Activists and the Gendering of Politics in Belize, 1912-1982*, 83.

¹³⁶ Macpherson, *From Colony to Nation: Women Activists and the Gendering of Politics in Belize, 1912-1982*, 83.

¹³⁷ *Ibid*, 84.

¹³⁸ *Ibid*, 85.

has noted, this project was undertaken in collaboration with a white Creole civil servant named Monrad S. Metzgen (who was also Chairman of the St. George's Caye Day Celebrations Committee). In 1912, Metzgen wrote a colonial pamphlet entitled "Shoulder to Shoulder"¹³⁹ which was comprised of letters, poems, photographs and reflections on the battle. The pamphlet employed the patriotic rhetoric of master and slave working in harmony together to defeat a Spanish foe, cementing the 'shoulder to shoulder' motif in culture. To this day, Metzgen is also listed on the 'National Heroes' page of the Belize National Library Service Information System, an official government website, which praises his contributions to Belize effusively.¹⁴⁰ His inclusion on this list is a further example of the way in which the myth has been legitimised and normalised in Belizean culture and practices of remembrance. Burdon and Metzgen's project began in 1925 with a commercial directory, which was followed by a collection of essays, and concluded with the three volume *Archives* text published between 1931-5; all of which sought to confirm the 'myth of origin', promote harmonious relationships between master and slave, and erase local race and class autocracy.¹⁴¹

Following the publication of the first volume of the *Archives* in 1931, the myth was firmly consolidated in Belizean culture. Despite the presence of pockets of

¹³⁹ Metzgen, "Shoulder to Shoulder: The Battle of St Georges Caye 1798."

¹⁴⁰ *Belizean National Heroes*, (Belize National Library Service and Information System). <http://www.bnlsis.org/belizean-national-heroes/>.

¹⁴¹ Macpherson, *From Colony to Nation: Women Activists and the Gendering of Politics in Belize, 1912-1982*, 85.

resistance over time, including the labour movement in the 1930s and the independence movement in the 1950s, the Battle of St George's Caye has remained a celebrated holiday; embedded in the fabric of Belizean culture. Although Belize is ethnically and culturally diverse the constant reproduction of the 'myth of origin' has meant that a link to Britain and British values has remained strong. The Creole population has continued to promote this connection while forms of black working class memory remain silenced.

Conclusion

I began this chapter by noting the particular 'archival power' held by Burdon and the other contributors to the *Archives of British Honduras*. That Burdon had a personal stake in the promotion of a British colonial sensibility consolidates the problematic nature of the *Archives*. The *Archives* also became the primary source material for a number of later histories, who "uncritically replicated" its contents throughout the twentieth century.¹⁴² Although some historians later questioned Burdon's methods, by this point, to use Ashdown's words, "the damage was already done."¹⁴³ While postcolonial scholarship has gone on to be published which refutes much of the colonial arguments, the myth has maintained an on-going pervasive power in Belize. Shoman notes that the conflicted attitude to the remembrance of slavery in Belize continued to prevail,

¹⁴² Ashdown, "The Colonial Administrator as Historian: Burdon, Burns and the Battle of St George's Caye," 6.

¹⁴³ Ashdown, "The Colonial Administrator as Historian: Burdon, Burns and the Battle of St George's Caye," 7.

even following independence in 1981. He describes a scenario where, in 1988, a group of Belizeans argued for a celebration of the 150th anniversary of emancipation. The suggestion went unsupported: “there was very little response from the populace and a black minister of government scoffed at the proposal, saying slavery was long gone and that we should not to seek to remember it.”¹⁴⁴ This statement is emblematic of the way in which cultural memory in Belize has forgotten the realities of slavery. Despite the best efforts of the black working class ancestors of the colony, they were denied political weight and hence, slavery has been muted in national and cultural narratives, only appearing as part of the celebratory ‘myth of origin’. As Trouillot has noted:

The myth-making process does not operate evenly [...] In short, celebrations are created, and this creation is part and parcel of the process of historical production. Celebrations straddle the two sides of historicity. They impose a silence upon the events that they ignore, and they fill that silence with narratives of power about the event they celebrate.¹⁴⁵

Although the ‘myth of origin’ is not the only thing that has caused slavery to be misrepresented in cultural memory, the importance bestowed upon the date and how this connects to Belize’s ‘national story’ remains significant.

As I discussed in the Introduction to this thesis, the ‘enSlaved’ exhibition suggests that the power of the origin myth may be beginning to be destabilised. In line with this cultural shift, this thesis argues for the promotion of a counter-memory to the ‘myth of origin’. Indeed, a text like the *Archives* is as much about

¹⁴⁴ Shoman, "Reflections on Ethnicity and Nation in Belize," 55.

¹⁴⁵ Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History*, 118.

what is *not* written down, as what is. Although the 'myth of origin' has remained omnipresent in Belizean culture, a muted counter-memory is also present, which challenges official cultural memory. This oppositional narrative can be viewed through incidences of rebellion, revolt and desertion during the period of slavery and beyond, to the labour movement of the 1930s and the independence movement of the 1950s. Viewed collectively, these instances allow an oppositional memory to emerge, which contests the dominant, hegemonic memory in Belize and challenges the origin myth. It is this counter-memory which is explored in Chapter Two.

Chapter Two - Slavery in Belize: Challenging the Myth of Benevolence

The history of Belize is often viewed through the lens of the exploits of the hardy Baymen and their acrimonious relationship with Spain, which culminated in the Battle of St George's Caye in 1798. Although the Battle is situated at the heart of Belize's cultural memory, the dispute between the black working classes, the Creole elite, and the British metropole over how it came to occupy this place reveals that it is also a site of contestation: over history, remembrance and what it means to 'be' Belizean. Following the consolidation of the myth in the years 1880 – 1930, claims for ownership of the battle commemorations were also resurrected in the 1930s, which – in parallel with other countries in the Caribbean region – saw a labour movement assemble in Belize. The mobilisation of the working class and the widespread unrest in response to harsh economic conditions represents a key moment both in Belize, and in the Caribbean, and embodies the genesis of future challenges regarding the origins of the region and how dominant narratives of the past are questioned. This chapter contends that a counter narrative to the 'myth of origin' exists which can be traced through a history of labour resistance in Belize that has its roots in the period of slavery. Despite the widespread, colonially-oriented view that slavery in Belize was a kinder, more benevolent form of subjection, multiple examples of desertion and rebellion, alongside instances of violence enacted upon the bodies of the enslaved, counteract this assertion and represent instead the beginnings of black working class resistance in Belize. My analysis does not separate the period of

slavery and the period of 'freedom' and instead, suggests that a history of black working class resistance is visible, although often obliquely, from the earliest days of the settlement. A counter-narrative also becomes visible when texts such as the *Archives* are read against the grain. This narrative challenges the dominant founding myths of the country and insists on the voices of the enslaved being heard.

In *The Problem of Freedom*, Thomas Holt traces the history of emancipation and post-emancipation society in Jamaica, which began with rebellion in 1831-2, during the period of slavery, and ended with the labour rebellion of 1938.¹ Holt's text illustrates the breadth of resistance and rebellion in the wider Caribbean region and the complexity of the concept of 'freedom.' He argues that there were two forms of freedom being sought in the Caribbean: firstly the freedom of the individual (which manifested itself in the slave rebellions of the 1830s), and secondly the freedom of the nation as a whole, which revealed itself in the widespread labour movement of the 1930s. Holt argues: "The century that separated these watersheds in Britain's colonial history was one of extraordinary transformations in British ideology, in its economic and social policy, and in the fate of Jamaican freed people and their descendants."² Whilst it is beyond the scope of this thesis to provide a comparative analysis of Belizean and Jamaican

¹ Thomas.C Holt, *The Problem of Freedom : Race Labour and Politics in Jamaica and Britain, 1832-1938* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1991), xvii..

² Holt, *The Problem of Freedom : Race Labour and Politics in Jamaica and Britain, 1832-1938* xviii.

resistance movements, I foreground Holt's text to situate Belize within a wider movement of rebellion. Although the intervening years are not documented here in significant detail, it is important to recognise what Holt describes as the "symmetry" of these events, the thread of resistance to colonialism that can be traced throughout this period, and the sweeping changes that took place both in the colonies and in Britain.

In the previous chapter, I outlined a rationale for my use of the *Archives of British Honduras* as a set of colonial documents, which can be read against the grain. In doing so, the way in which a particular version of history – one that centres around the pervasive "myth of origin" and celebration of the Battle of St George's Caye – is exposed as an 'invented tradition,' which excludes the less palatable aspects of the colonial past, and, in particular, the institution of slavery. I continue to use the *Archives* in this chapter to further illustrate the way that the text produces a selective colonial narrative and to show how specific silences and omissions can be read against the grain. That the "myth of origin" has become so widely accepted as the historical basis for the founding of Belize itself can be linked to the *Archives'* centrality in establishing and solidifying this moment; in particular through the integral role played by the collection's author, John Burdon. This chapter draws on postcolonial histories to offer an alternative account of the period of slavery in Belize and redresses the representation of this period found in the *Archives* and other colonial histories. The chapter also interrogates the experiences of enslaved women, who had a markedly different existence to male

woodcutters. This chapter notes the key differences between the logwood and mahogany forests and plantation slavery and interrogates the ways in which these differences have enabled a particular cultural memory to develop in Belize, one that has shaped a colonial inflected representation of slave relations. This chapter also traces a counter-narrative to the origin myth from the period of slavery and post-emancipation, through to the Labour movement in the 1930s. Critical analysis of the *Archives* and other colonial texts enables an oppositional memory to be revealed, thus challenging the hegemony of the origin myth.

Slavery in Belize

It is not possible to identify the exact date that the enslaved were first introduced in Belize, although it is thought to be around 1720. Dobson notes that: “A Spanish missionary stated in 1724 that the community consisted of about 300 Englishmen and some Negroes who had recently been introduced from Jamaica and Bermuda.”³ Thompson cites the same Spanish missionary’s observation, but suggests that it was made two years earlier, in 1722.⁴ The enslaved are not mentioned in the *Archives* until 1745. The enslaved were introduced in the settlement to work with the Baymen and advance the new industries of logwood and mahogany cutting in a cheap and effective way.⁵ They were sent out into the forests in small groups, often working in relative isolation, and were furnished

³ Narda Dobson, *A History of Belize* (Trinidad and Jamaica: Longman Caribbean, 1973), 147.

⁴ P.A.B Thompson, *Belize: A Concise History* (Oxford: Macmillan Caribbean, 2004), 53.

⁵ Thompson, *Belize: A Concise History* 55.

with machetes and other weapons to assist them with woodcutting. The work itself was manual and labour intensive; women, children and the elderly almost always remained at the main settlement, employed in domestic roles.

Slavery in Belize was notably different to the plantations in the Caribbean, a factor which is often used to support the notion that it was more benevolent, but the experience of the enslaved was not easy: life in the forests had its own set of risks and difficulties. As Anderson has noted:

A glancing saw blade or a wayward log could easily kill or maim an inattentive worker. Woodcutters also faced ever-present dangers from poisonous snakes and insects, heat stroke, dehydration and infectious diseases.⁶

Despite these risks, both Bolland and Anderson have noted that conditions in the forest were advantageous compared to those of the plantation.⁷ Anderson suggests that despite the difficulties and danger to be found in the forest, “it offered some opportunities as well, thanks to the frontier setting that necessitated a relatively flexible form of bondage.”⁸ Bolland has also noted the favourable rations received by British Honduran slaves, especially when viewed comparatively: “the comments on provisions for the slaves are unanimous in stressing their adequacy, especially when compared to those made available to slaves elsewhere.”⁹ The nature of the work was heavy, manual labour, but the enslaved worked in small groups and were possessed with a relative degree of

⁶ Jennifer Anderson, *Mahogany* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012), 165.

⁷ O Nigel Bolland, *The Formation of Colonial Society: Belize, From Conquest to Crown Colony* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1977), 69; Anderson, *Mahogany*, 157.

⁸ Anderson, *Mahogany*, 57.

⁹ Bolland, *The Formation of a Colonial Society: Belize, From Conquest to Crown Colony* 71.

autonomy, working in the bush led by one or two Baymen, as opposed to the structured systematic order of a plantation controlled by an overseer. Indeed, work in the forest provided a level of self-determination that simply would not have been accessible to those enslaved in a plantation.¹⁰ However, the interpretation of this self-determination is often flexed in different ways depending on the historical source. Gibbs's colonial text for example, highlights the positive relationships between master and slave and the independence the enslaved were afforded. He describes their existence as "the free life of the back woods" where the enslaved could "[wield] that noble tool, the axe, or the cutlass."¹¹ Oppositional accounts argue, however, that this perceived friendship and relative 'freedom' was a by-product of the particular conditions that existed in Belize, which placed the Baymen in a precarious balancing act between maintaining the success of the settlement and upholding the balance of power. Anderson, for example, refers to this balancing act as an "odd mixture", between "positive inducements, such as rewards, incentives and concessions and various forms of coercion and discipline, including threats, harsh punishments and negative propaganda about the Spanish."¹² Writing in 2004, Thompson suggested that the only real difference between plantation slavery, and that which existed in Belize, was the conditions under which the enslaved worked.¹³ The difference of conditions is a crucial one: the crux of the issue being the control that the

¹⁰ Bolland, *The Formation of a Colonial Society: Belize, From Conquest to Crown Colony* 57.

¹¹ Archibald Robertson Gibbs, *British Honduras: A Historical and Descriptive Account of the Colony from its Settlement, 1670* (London: Sampson Low, Maston, Searle and Rhyton, 1883), 170.

¹² Anderson, *Mahogany*, 157.

¹³ Thompson, *Belize: A Concise History*, 53.

Baymen had over the enslaved. The possession of heavy weapons that the enslaved were provided with are also often cited as indication of the trust and positive relations that existed between master and slave, but, as Dobson has argued, far from being a sign of trust on the part of the master, the desire for positive relations stemmed from the Baymen's fear of attack: "in these circumstances, relations between master and slave could hardly fail to be amicable, as slaves far outnumbered the white men."¹⁴

The tension between reward and coercion is not visible in colonial texts, which chose instead to positively celebrate the relationship between master and slave. Writing in 1883, Gibbs makes reference to the bravery of the enslaved in the settlement: "The slaves proved their courage – which is no uncommon trait in African nature – and their fidelity – which perhaps is more remarkable – to their masters."¹⁵ According to Gibbs, this loyalty was inspired by the excellent treatment that the enslaved received at the hands of the British settlers:

There is only one way to account for the invincible fidelity evidenced by the slaves employed in woodcutting in Honduras. Instead of the degraded bondage and grinding toil, which was the lot of slaves of plantations, the logwood and mahogany cutter was a slave only in name. He was not driven in a gang to his daily toil but walked side by side with his master."¹⁶

¹⁴ Dobson, *A History of Belize*, 150.

¹⁵ Gibbs, *British Honduras: An Historical and Descriptive Account of the Colony from its Settlement, 1670*, 37.

¹⁶ Gibbs, *British Honduras: An Historical and Descriptive Account of the Colony from its Settlement, 1670*, 37.

The following passage from Caiger, who used the *Archives* for the basis of his text, was written in 1951 and is a typical example of this perception:

It was said that the slaves of the logwood cutters around Belize were better off and better treated than most free men elsewhere [...] The negroes for the most part became more like comrades than slaves, until the good relations between them and their masters became universally known and when it could be said slaves in British Honduras had a higher standard of life and a happier lot than any free negroes in the West Indies or the world.”¹⁷

Additionally, the *Archives* note that the enslaved in Belize worked fewer hours than those in the plantations. In a despatch from 1816, a Superintendent of the colony named Colonel Arthur wrote to England stating that men worked for their masters five days a week, Sunday being entirely their own. His letter concluded that: “I have in no part of the world seen the labouring class of people possessing anything like the comforts of the enslaved population of Honduras”¹⁸ – a statement which certainly paints a positive picture of the experience of the enslaved in Belize. Although Arthur would go on to retract this statement, his initial comment illustrates the way in which colonial administrators perceived differences between plantation and settlement.

Dobson has also suggested that the particular conditions of the Belizean settlement meant that the perception that the Baymen had of their work was very

¹⁷ Stephen L Caiger, *British Honduras: Past and Present* (London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd, 1951), 82.

¹⁸ Sir John Alder Burdon (ed), *Archives of British Honduras, Volume 2*, (London: Sifton Praed and Co Ltd, 1934), 18.

different to others in the Caribbean region. Indeed, the Baymen of Belize considered the settlement to be home, and, consequently, were more invested in its survival.¹⁹ Bolland contends that unlike Caribbean plantation owners who had minimal contact with the enslaved, and therefore often lacked concern for their welfare, “The Bay settlers [...] had little contact with Britain and saw their future as dependent upon the upkeep of their property in the settlement.”²⁰ Similarly, Kroshus Medina has noted that: “During the colonial period, the ‘Baymen’ [...] defined themselves as ‘natives’ as part of their efforts to circumscribe the power of British colonial administrators.”²¹ More invested than their counterparts in other areas of the Caribbean, the Baymen played on their loyalty to country and slave alike, thus contributing to the on-going perception of British Honduran benevolence.

As I explore later in this chapter, the nature of wood cutting work in the forests meant that the Baymen were often at risk of the enslaved escaping, a factor that will have certainly encouraged more positive behaviour. As Bolland pragmatically suggests:

If the masters generally treated their slaves somewhat better than did the West Indian planters, they did so not from any spirit of egalitarianism or good comradeship but for economic reasons or through their fear of the destruction of the settlement by insurrections or mass desertions.²²

¹⁹ Dobson, *A History of Belize*, 149.

²⁰ Bolland, *The Formation of a Colonial Society: Belize, From Conquest to Crown Colony* 84.

²¹ Medina, "History, Culture and Place-Making: ‘Native’ Status and Maya Identity in Belize," 200.

²² Bolland, *The Formation of a Colonial Society: Belize, From Conquest to Crown Colony* 84.

Rather than admit fear of desertion and concern for the settlement itself, the behaviour of the Baymen towards their slaves has been flexed positively in order to contribute to a myth of benevolence and cordial relationships. Yet instances of violent treatment towards the enslaved did occur in Belize. While these instances are not foregrounded in colonial histories, they are visible in texts such as the *Archives*, alongside oblique references to resistance activities, both of which counteract the 'myth of origin'. Additionally, whilst I concur with Bolland's statement, it does not address the experiences of enslaved women, who often had a markedly different experience from men. In fact, the perception of 'kindness' is almost exclusively used when describing relationships between the Baymen and enslaved men, and it is therefore important to redress this balance.

The Gendered Experience of Slavery in Belize

Slavery in Belize, then, had a number of different features that distinguished it from plantation slavery, although the instances of desertion and rebellion that are discussed later in the chapter reflect a wider trend across the Caribbean region. One of the most significant differences between the forestocracy and the plantation can be viewed through the experiences of enslaved women. Through the parallel exercise of comparing colonial texts, such as the *Archives*, with those written by postcolonial historians, a marked difference in the way in which violence towards women is represented is revealed. The gendered experiences of oppression are a key theme in Edgell's novels and it is therefore important to assess the origins of this oppression. Like the resistance activity that stems from

the period of slavery, the roots of female subordination also originate from this moment.

Analysis of the *Archives* reveals a number of entries that describe the punishment of both men and women. The law allowed all slave masters to inflict the punishment of thirty-nine lashes, and this sentence was applied liberally, as can be illustrated:

February 16th, 1795. Sentence of flogging and transportation from the settlement, never to return on two Negro slaves for intention to desert to the Spaniards.²³

January 26th, 1804. On a warrant for 'compassing or imagining the death of John S August and some of the negroes of Alexander Anderson' a slave was sentenced to 'receive 150 lashes on the bare back at four different periods of 39 lashes each and that he be sold for transportation never to return'²⁴

October 27th, 1806, Slave sentenced to 39 lashes for playing Gumbay after 9 o'clock.²⁵

The above examples illustrate the types of crimes that were punished, whilst also contributing to a broader picture of resistance activities in which the enslaved were engaged. The sentence of 39 lashes to punish the playing of Gumbay after 9pm for example, illustrates how the enslaved continued to practice their African-derived culture, Gumbay being an essential aspect of African music and dance.²⁶ Similarly, the entry describing the punishment levelled for 'compassing' or

²³ Burdon, ed., *The Archives of British Honduras: Volume 1*, 213.

²⁴ Burdon, *The Archives of British Honduras: Volume 2*, 69.

²⁵ Burdon, *The Archives of British Honduras: Volume 2*, 69.

²⁶ O. Nigel Bolland, *Colonialism and Resistance in Belize: Essays in Historical Sociology* (Barbados, Jamaica, Trinidad and Tobago: University of the West Indies Press, 2003), 62.

imagining the death of John August indicates the African-derived practice of Obeah, a custom that was deeply threatening to whites as it was thought to inspire rebellion.²⁷ As Bolland has noted, these practices were frequently suppressed by the settlers, who were, by law, at liberty to punish the enslaved for participating in such African based practice.²⁸ Whilst entries in the *Archives* relating to crimes such as those listed above are frequent, they are written from the perspective of the Baymen, and reduce the crimes and punishment of the enslaved to notes and lists. It is also important to note that it is very likely that there were many more instances of cruelty that have gone unrecorded, particularly those which relate to women working in the domestic sphere.

The experiences of Belizean enslaved women can be located within a broader narrative of female incarceration in the Caribbean region. Janet Momsen has suggested that the institution of slavery afforded Caribbean female slaves a small degree of autonomy, contending that although slavery was barbaric, it allowed women to experience life outside of the patriarchal control of individual men.²⁹ Indeed, Momsen cites a study by Patterson from 1967, which claims that male and female slaves were seen as equal in the eyes of the master “as long as they

²⁷ For a more detailed discussion around the colonial construction of Obeah, see Diana Paton, *The Cultural Politics of Obeah* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015). The *Archives* also notes a 1791 law relating to the punishment of Obeah practice in the Belizean settlement, see Burdon, ed., *The Archives of British Honduras, Volume 1*, 195.

²⁸ Bolland, *Colonialism and Resistance in Belize*, 62. Bolland notes that Belize did not have its own slave code and used the Consolidated Slave Act of Jamaica on an ad hoc basis. For a copy of the Consolidated Slave Act of Jamaica, published in 1828, see: *Slave Law of Jamaica*, (London: James Ridgway, 1828).

²⁹ Janet. H Momsen, "Introduction," in *Women and Change in the Caribbean: A Pan-Caribbean Perspective*, ed. Momsen Janet. H (London: James Currey, 1993), 1.

worked as hard and were of equal strength.”³⁰ Additionally, while women were expected to provide sexual services on demand, they were able to perform a degree of active rebellion by controlling their fertility.³¹ For Momsen, it was these experiences that afforded Caribbean women “a degree of social and economic independence which, in the post-emancipation period, colonial and neo-colonial agencies such as the church and the education system sought to destroy.”³² Whilst the situations that Momsen describes have parallels to the experiences of enslaved women in Belize, there were crucial differences between the work of the plantation and that which was undertaken in the Belize. These differences permitted the strengthening and enforcement of much more rigid gender roles. The logwood and mahogany industry was a male-dominated environment, with enslaved men outnumbering women, sometimes by three to one. As a result of this imbalance, and the common practice of abortion – itself another form of resistance – the birth rate in the settlement was low.³³ Anderson has noted that female slaves “experienced closer supervision and discipline from their masters and mistresses”³⁴ and were expected to provide sexual services as well as undertaking domestic work and childcare. Additionally, and unlike their male counterparts who worked in the forests, the possibility of escape was less accessible to female slaves. This power dynamic and gendered positioning (male

³⁰ Momsen, "Introduction," 1.

³¹ Ibid, 1.

³² Ibid, 2.

³³ Anderson, *Mahogany*, 158, Bolland, *Colonialism and Resistance in Belize*, 55.

³⁴ Anderson, *Mahogany*, 166.

– forest, female – town) is illustrated in Edgell’s novel *Time and the River* and her literary rendering of this tension is discussed in Chapter Six.

In addition to the gendered division of work, a division also existed between the degree of abuse levelled at men and women. Whilst a degree of the increased threat to female slaves stemmed from their proximity to masters in the town, women were additionally subservient under a patriarchal system. This subordination was made all the more apparent by the small numbers of women in the colony and the reliance that the Baymen placed upon male slaves in the forest. In her discussion of the nature of work undertaken by male slaves, Dobson has argued that the particularity of woodcutting enabled the perception of benevolence to persist whilst allowing the plight of female, domestic slaves to be ignored.³⁵ Dobson goes on to note that, “records show that the majority of the cases of cruelty reported were inflicted on women.”³⁶ Often used as concubines, women were placed in a vulnerable position and were at risk of incurring the jealous wrath of the other women within the household.

Postcolonial historians Anderson, Bolland and Dobson have noted the cruelty inflicted upon domestic slaves, discussions which stand in contrast to the representation of cruelty towards women in the *Archives*. One example discussed by Dobson is the case of a slave named Lizzy who in 1817, was charged with ‘insolence and bad conduct’ and found guilty. Her sentence was: “to

³⁵ Dobson, *A History of Belize*, 150.

³⁶ Dobson, *A History of Belize*, 153.

be lashed 100 times on her bare back and then led round town 'at the carts tail."³⁷ Bolland highlights a similar case inflicted by a mistress on a female slave called Kitty in 1820. A letter from Colonel Arthur (based in the settlement) describes the account of a physician, who:

Observed the scores of several wounds, which appeared to have been recently inflicted with a whip or cowskin; they were chiefly upon the shoulders, but there were also a considerable number on the left arm, the neck and face; those on the face had produced considerable swelling and other symptoms of inflammation; one of the stripes had divided the ala of the left ear; another had wounded the left eye-ball; both eyes were much swelled and inflamed, and her whole countenance was so much disfigured that it was some time before I could recognise her.³⁸

Although this case is mentioned in the *Archives*, it is conflated within a summary of the correspondence between Colonel Arthur and Earl Bathurst.³⁹ The *Archives* notes the wounds sustained by Kitty but does not provide the extensive detail which exists in the documentation cited by Bolland. Bolland also draws attention to a further example of a lenient sentence received by a slave owner, also in 1820, despite the most barbaric actions towards an unnamed female slave. He cites further correspondence from Colonel Arthur who wrote to Britain about the case:

Michael Carty was convicted of having caused a poor young Negro Female, his property, to be stripped naked and her hands being tied to her feet with tight cords, a stick was passed under her Knees, and above the Elbow-bend of her Arms, a large Cattle Chain was fastened around her neck with a Padlock, and in this agonising posture, exposed to the burning heat of the Sun, was this wretched Female tortured from Morning until night,

³⁷ Dobson, *A History of Belize*, 153

³⁸ Arthur to Bathurst, 7th October 1820, CO 123/29, in Bolland, *Formation of Colonial Society*, 83

³⁹ Burdon, ed., *The Archives of British Honduras, Volume 2*, 235.

constantly, during that time, flogged with a severe cat by her inhuman Master and servant in the most wanton and barbarous manner – sometimes on her buttocks, at other times, being turned over on the stick, on her face and breast.... Her wounds festered to such a degree that her life was considered in the greatest danger.⁴⁰

Despite the extensive violence, Carty's punishment was limited to a fine of £50 Jamaica currency (£35 sterling); in a further injustice, the jury decreed that the female slave was to remain in his possession.⁴¹ A further case is noted by Anderson, of a female slave named Peggy,⁴² who, in 1821, was horrifically punished by her master, a Dr. Mansfield Bowen, for the theft of some handkerchiefs. Although there were three enslaved women who could have provided evidence against Dr Bowen, they were not legally allowed to testify in court because of their enslaved status. As a result, the Doctor was found not guilty by a jury of other settlers, and subsequently re-elected to the office of magistrate.⁴³ Like Bolland, Anderson has used original Colonial Office documentation that describes the details of Peggy's punishment which involved being whipped and chained in a basement for ten days. The detail of this punishment does not appear in the *Archives*; instead the summary of Arthur's correspondence only describes the "detestable inhumanity" enacted on a female slave.⁴⁴ Although the severity is noted, Bowen is protected in the *Archives* via the omission of the graphic description included in the original documents.

⁴⁰ Bolland, *The Formation of a Colonial Society: Belize, From Conquest to Crown Colony* 66.

⁴¹ Bolland, *The Formation of a Colonial Society: Belize, From Conquest to Crown Colony* 66.

⁴² Anderson, *Mahogany*, 174-75, Belize History Association, "A History of Slavery and Emancipation in Belize."

⁴³ Anderson, *Mahogany*, 175.

⁴⁴ Burdon, ed., *The Archives of British Honduras, Volume 2*, 241.

I include examples of these discrepancies between the work of postcolonial historians and the *Archives* to further illustrate the selective editing of this text. Given its omnipresence as a source, the way that violence against the enslaved is represented in the *Archives* is significant for two reasons: the first is the way in which the *Archives* reduces the punishments of the enslaved to factual lists and conflates the details of these penalties within summaries of correspondence, hence diminishing the effects of the violence enacted; the second is that the text routinely excludes the details of the abuse enacted upon the bodies of the enslaved, particularly women. Kitty's case is referred to, but the entry does not detail the specific injuries she received at the hands of her master. Arthur's letter detailing the treatment of the unnamed slave girl is not included at all: there is a short extract that details the punishment, but no mention of the barbaric treatment and the injuries sustained by the female slave. This action glosses the extent of the cruelty towards the enslaved, and further allows the myth of benevolence to be perpetuated. Indeed, used as the basis for a number of later histories, the content of the *Archives* remained unchallenged, and the legitimacy of its contents secured.

Resistance

The above examples of violence towards the enslaved illustrate an oppositional narrative to colonial texts that promoted a myth of benign incarceration. In turn, this narrative also challenges the 'myth of origin' directly. Further disruption to the

myth occurs when considering the rebellions and desertions that took place in Belize during the period of slavery. Reading between the lines reveals extensive anxiety on the part of the Baymen, particularly around desertion, and further disrupts the narrative of cordial relations.

Rebellion

One of the most significant indications that conditions were less than favourable in the British Honduran settlement are slave rebellions; indeed Kroshus Medina notes that postcolonial historians often use slave rebellions as a mechanism to “[read] slaves’ perspectives on their situation.”⁴⁵ Disturbances in Belize pre-date the broader history of slave rebellions that took place in the Caribbean in the early years of the nineteenth century, a factor which further suggests a long-standing culture of resistance amongst the working classes in Belize. Whilst Belizean slave rebellions are often absent in Caribbean slave histories – an omission that further illustrates the way in which the country is often overlooked in cultural and historical narratives of the Caribbean region⁴⁶ - these events are discussed by postcolonial Belizean historians, Bolland, Dobson, Thompson, and Anderson.⁴⁷ There were four notable slave rebellions in the Bay settlement, three of which took place between 1765 and 1773, and one in 1820. Of those that took place in the eighteenth century, the first two were small-scale affairs involving

⁴⁵ Medina, "History, Culture and Place-Making: 'Native' Status and Maya Identity in Belize," 199.

⁴⁶ For example, Belize is absent from Gelien Matthews, *Caribbean Slave Revolts and the British Abolitionist Movement* (Louisiana: Louisiana University Press, 2006).

⁴⁷ Anderson, *Mahogany*, 178-181, Bolland, *Colonialism and Resistance in Belize*, 26-30, Dobson, *History of Belize*, 150-1, Thompson, *Belize: A Concise History*, 57

less than twenty-five men each time.⁴⁸ The rebellion of 1773 is generally considered to be the most extensive of this period; it was much larger and caused more serious concerns for the woodcutters. A number of entries are recorded in the *Archives* between May 29th and November 6th 1773, which relate to the uprising, thus illustrating its importance to the settlers. As I noted in Chapter One, entries into the *Archives* comprise of summaries of documentation, such as letters, court records and minutes of meetings. The first entry which relates to the uprising is a summary of a letter between Chairman Richard Hoare and Captain Davey (located in the settlement), which notes “an insurrection of slaves on the Belize River in which two White men were killed”⁴⁹. A subsequent letter from the same Captain Davey to an Admiral Rodney, also dated May 29th, reports that he, Captain Davey, had “sent an officer and a party of sailors to assist in quelling the Negro rebellion.”⁵⁰ The next entry, dated June 21st, is another letter from Captain Davey to Admiral Rodney, and describes the incident in more detail:

The Negroes before our people came up with them had taken five settlements and murdered six white men and were join'd by several others the whole about fifty armed with sixteen Musquets Cutlasses etc. Our people attacked them on the 7th inst. But the Rebels after discharging their Pieces retired into the woods and it being late in the afternoon, we could not pursue them.⁵¹

⁴⁸ Thompson, *Belize: A Concise History*, 56.

⁴⁹ Burdon, ed., *The Archives of British Honduras, Volume 1*, 121.

⁵⁰ Burdon, ed., *The Archives of British Honduras, Volume 1*, 121.

⁵¹ *Ibid*, 121.

The summary of the letter also notes that during the rebellion, trade in the Belize region had come to a standstill: “The inhabitants are in a very bad situation: they have neither arms or ammunition and those that are here are obliged to keep guard for fear of the Negroes on the Kay.”⁵² The number of entries relating to the uprising implies its significance, but as with the majority of entries in the *Archives*, it is the Baymen’s perspective and the effect of the disturbance on the colony which is recorded. Other than the justified assumption that the rebellion was a reaction to continued bondage, the *Archives* does not note the motives behind the revolt, the circumstances that led to its inception, or how it was organised. Instead, the use of emotive words such as “massacre” and “murder”⁵³ seal the fate of the enslaved as dangerous rebels. In contrast to the lack of information in the *Archives* about the background to the rebellion, Bolland has suggested that things came to a head in 1773 because of economic issues: “settlers were attempting to increase the amount of logwood exported in order to compensate for its falling value, the brunt of which would have fallen to slaves.”⁵⁴ Read in light of Bolland’s statement, the rebellion represents an early example of labour protest and resistance in Belize; a narrative, which, whilst muted, becomes more visible when colonial texts such as the *Archives* are read against the grain.

The other major rebellion in Belize took place in 1820, and it is this incident that is re-imagined by Edgell in *Time and the River*. In contrast to the rebellion of

⁵² Ibid, 122.

⁵³ Ibid, 122.

⁵⁴ Bolland, *The Formation of a Colonial Society: Belize, From Conquest to Crown Colony* 74.

1773, there are only a few references to the 1820 disturbance included in the *Archives*. The first occurs on April 24th, where a summary of a Magistrates' meeting reports that the Superintendent has been informed about "violence on the part of runaway slaves on the Belize River."⁵⁵ A subsequent entry on April 27th, also summarising a Magistrates' meeting, describes a letter from the Superintendent, which reports that military parties had been dispatched into the interior to assist in securing runaway slaves.⁵⁶ A little later, the entry notes that forty runaway slaves, armed with guns, had raided a store.⁵⁷ A summary of a letter follows this entry, from Colonel Arthur (Superintendent in the colony), to Earl Bathurst (based in Britain) recorded on May 16th. The letter describes a "body of armed slaves committing depredations on the Belize River,"⁵⁸ but suggests that following intervention and the declaration of Martial Law, that peace had been restored. This entry is significant for Colonel Arthur's suggestion in the letter, that the rebellion had been provoked in response to unnecessarily harsh treatment of the enslaved by their masters. Unlike the 1773 rebellion which places the enslaved in the roles of rebel, the 1820 rebellion represents an isolated example of criticism towards the Baymen. The particular role of Colonel Arthur, and the on-going tension in his relationship with the Baymen is discussed later in the chapter. For now, it is important to note that the 1820 rebellion was the last significant uprising in Belize during the period of slavery.

⁵⁵ Burdon, ed., *The Archives of British Honduras, Volume 2*, 227.

⁵⁶ Burdon, ed., *The Archives of British Honduras, Volume 2*, 227.

⁵⁷ *Ibid*, 227.

⁵⁸ *Ibid*, 228.

It is notable that the two most significant slave uprisings took place thirty years before and twenty years after the Battle of St George's Caye. The timing of the rebellions further challenges the positive master-slave relationships that the battle myth sought to celebrate, with the long span of time between them providing a further indication of the prolonged and on-going dissatisfaction of the enslaved. Bolland has suggested that although rebellions in Belize were significant, the need to revolt was lessened somewhat due to the relative ease by which the men could escape in the forest.⁵⁹ Indeed, whilst rebellions were symbolic and sent a strong message of dissatisfaction to the settlers on the part of the enslaved, the problem of desertion was far more widespread and problematic.

Desertion and Runaways

Desertion occurred throughout the entire period where the enslaved were present in Belize. It is notable that colonial texts predominantly present the issues of desertion in the context of inter-imperial rivalry between Britain and Spain, which relied on opposing notions of British civility and Spanish deception. The Spanish policy of welcoming runaways was a significant thorn in the side of the British settlers in Belize. A record in the *Archives* dated November 1752 makes reference to a proclamation by the King of Spain ordering Spanish Governors to “grant freedom to such Negro slaves as should fly from the English and Dutch

⁵⁹ Bolland, *The Formation of a Colonial Society: Belize, From Conquest to Crown Colony* 81.

Colonies to my Dominions under pretence of embracing the Holy Catholic Religion.”⁶⁰ There are multiple references made to desertion in the *Archives*: an example from 1765 notes that “numbers of the Baymen’s slaves desert daily to the Spaniards,”⁶¹ whilst in 1771 it is suggested that the “chief grievance” of the Baymen “against the Spaniards is the decoying away of their Negroes.”⁶² The *Archives* rarely mention desertion without making reference to the role played by the Spanish, a perception perpetuated in historical accounts from the mid-twentieth century that used the *Archives* as its basis. Caiger, for example, describes Spanish “molestation” and “seduction” of the enslaved, words which suggest easy manipulation of those who did not know any better. The below passage is typical:

Not content with attacking the British by land and robbing their cargoes at sea, the Spanish hit on the device of enticing from them the Negro slaves without whom their industry could scarcely be carried on [...] The woodcutters countered it, not by attempting to terrify or invigilate their slaves but by redoubling their efforts to win their personal affection and loyalty.⁶³

The ‘redoubling of efforts’ by the Baymen is portrayed as a noble gesture by Caiger, yet benevolence on their part can also be attributed to fear not only of rebellion and attack, but of the failure of their venture in the Bay settlement itself.

My reading of the *Archives* found a number of statements which suggest that the problem of desertion was not only an inconvenience, but seriously threatened the

⁶⁰ Burdon, ed., *The Archives of British Honduras, Volume 1*, 79.

⁶¹ Burdon, ed., *The Archives of British Honduras, Volume 1*, 109.

⁶² *Ibid*, 117.

⁶³ Caiger, *British Honduras: Past and Present*, 82.

survival of the settlement, a situation which further disrupts the origin myth. An entry from 1773 reports correspondence to the British Government directly from the Magistrates and Inhabitants of the Bay of Honduras and includes the dramatic statement that:

Their lives and properties are so uncertain through the harbouring of their runaway slaves by the Spaniards that unless some immediate security from this oppression is obtained, the logwood trade must cease and they must evacuate the settlement.⁶⁴

A later entry from 1786 refers to correspondence between the settlers and Lord Hillsborough, noting the on-going severity of the situation: “The Spanish Governors [keep] boats constantly playing at the mouth of the river Hondo to seduce slaves; and that unless this [is] stopped, the whole of the logwood trade [will] again fall into the hands of Spain.”⁶⁵ These references, whilst emphasising Spain’s villainous role, also undercut the repeated claim of positive relationships between master and slave. That the myth persisted in the face of such statements is significant and suggests that the way in which the information about desertion was later represented in the *Archives* actively supported the on-going rhetoric of good relations, in spite of the omnipresent threat of the settlement’s collapse.

Trouillot has written about the impact of the 1791 Haitian revolution upon colonial powers who found the activities of the enslaved extraordinarily difficult to comprehend. At the time of the uprising, there was no frame of reference for such

⁶⁴ Burdon, ed., *The Archives of British Honduras, Volume 1*, 114.

⁶⁵ Burdon, ed., *The Archives of British Honduras, Volume 1*, 115.

an occurrence; rebellions “were ‘unthinkable’ facts in the framework of Western thought.”⁶⁶ Trouillot notes that in order to manage the unknown dissidence on the part of the enslaved, colonialists developed a strategy of trivialisation when recording such instances, which involved separating individual events and explaining each one. This process of separation had the effect of dissolving the collective power of resistance, draining it of its political content.⁶⁷ Trouillot terms this process a form of “banalisation,”⁶⁸ where the uniqueness of a situation is banalised by focussing on small details.⁶⁹ The presentation of desertion in the *Archives* certainly reflects this process. Although a close reading of the text reveals a number of references to desertion and its effects, like the examples of punishments inflicted upon the enslaved identified earlier in the chapter, the presentation of these entries lessens the sense of the threat, and, to use Trouillot’s words, banalises it. Unlike the specific dates and locations of the Belizean slave rebellions, the problem of desertion cannot be contextualised so easily. The *Archives* (and subsequent texts that followed it) make reference only to a collective mass of slaves who deserted over a number of years. Indeed, other than the statements noted above which comment directly on the threat, the presentation of the information about the enslaved deserting the settlement is muted through the technique of banalisation.

⁶⁶ Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History*, 82.

⁶⁷ Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History*, 83.

⁶⁸ *Ibid*, 96.

⁶⁹ *Ibid*, 83.

⁶⁹ *Ibid*, 96.

That desertions persisted over such an extensive time frame explains how the effect of banalisation was so effective. Stoler has noted: “The official documents of colonial archives [...] are so weighted with fixed formats, empty phrases and racial clichés that one is easily blinded by their flattened prose and numbing dullness.”⁷⁰ As I have previously noted, the text of the *Archives* is structured as a series of (mainly) short excerpts, which summarise original documents. As a result, the entries that relate to the enslaved (and the subsequent impact of these entries, read now in the postcolonial moment) are often lost amongst other entries, particularly those which are given greater prominence, such as the extensive ‘full-text’ coverage of the Battle of St George’s Caye, or the seven pages of text devoted to the issue of the boundaries of Honduras. These examples are juxtaposed with only a few short entries that relate to the rebellion of 1820. As Trouillot has suggested, the collective action of the enslaved dissipates through the rhetoric of the Colonial Office; the “effect [...] is a powerful silencing: whatever has not been cancelled out in the generalities dies in the cumulative irrelevance of a heap of details.”⁷¹

Despite the banalising effect of the *Archives*, the instances that I have discussed reveal the impact of these resistance activities, which represent the direction of a powerful counter-culture in Belize rooted in the black working class population. Although it would be another seventy years before the first signs of this

⁷⁰ Laura Ann Stoler, *Along the Archival Grain: Epistemic Anxieties and Colonial Common Sense* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2009), 23.

⁷¹ Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History*, 83.

⁷¹ Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History*, 97.

resistance would officially mobilise, the various rebellions and the persistence of desertion during the first part of the nineteenth century laid the groundwork for these future resistance activities.

From Colonel Arthur to the Labour Movement: A Counter-Narrative to the Origin Myth

The aforementioned instances of poor treatment of the enslaved, coupled with rebellion and widespread desertion, are significant moments in the history of the colony, despite their absence in Belize's official cultural memory. These moments disrupt the narrative of benevolent incarceration promoted by the *Archives* and the subsequent historical studies that use it as a basis. Instead, the roots of black working class resistance to colonial rule and poor labour conditions can be traced back to these moments. Although representations of resistance have been muted in Belize's cultural memory, reading colonial texts such as the *Archives* against the grain enables them to become visible.

The Battle of St George's Caye took place in 1798 but it would be almost a century later before the myth would be consolidated in culture. As discussed in Chapter One, the years between 1888 and 1920 saw the 'origin myth' being utilised and claimed by a number of groups. I discussed *how* the myth was contested, co-opted, and consolidated in Belize in Chapter One. Here, I focus on the unique set of economic and political circumstances that existed in Belize and persisted following emancipation, which provided fertile conditions for the 'myth

of origin' to endure and allowed any black working class protest to be silenced in popular memory. Indeed, although oblique, the counter narrative of working class resistance is visible. While the 'myth of origin' served to ensure that the cultural memory of slavery took a very particular shape, in the face of continued repression and relentless promotion of a particular version of events, the early years of the twentieth century saw a slow but deliberate emergence of national consciousness. Following a period of relative peace after the last slave rebellion in 1820, the riot of 1894 marked the start of sporadic unrest, which would continue into the labour resistance movement of the 1930s and the first wave of independence protests in the 1950s. As a consequence, the ways in which slavery had been hitherto remembered and represented slowly began to be challenged on the basis of both developing racial and class identities, which sought to interrupt the model of national unity supported by the elite.

I previously noted the last Belizean slave rebellion of 1820 as a key moment in the counter-narrative that resists the claim of benign incarceration. The decade in which it took place also held significance across the Caribbean region, being the last before the emancipation of the enslaved in 1838. Following the abolition of the slave trade in 1807, and as Britain moved towards full abolition, a steady distance grew between those present in the metropolitan centre, and the settler class who were present in the colonies. Writing about Jamaica, Holt notes that, following the abolition of the slave trade in 1807, there was the expectation that the planters would be "moved to reform and ameliorate the conditions of slavery

so as to preserve, if not reproduce, their existing labour force.”⁷² However, this situation did not come to pass, which necessitated a more formalised mechanism with which to compel the settlers to comply with the directive from the centre. This mechanism was the amelioration laws of 1823, which were designed to improve working conditions for the enslaved. The laws were very unpopular with the settler class who viewed the proposals as a challenge to their livelihoods and a form of British meddling in the internal affairs of the colony.⁷³

Whilst the push towards abolition affected all British interests in the Caribbean, the relationship between the metropole and the settlers in Belize was particularly fraught at times, a situation which stemmed from a deeply entrenched system of self-governance. Grant has argued that Belize existed on the periphery of British colonial attention, particularly in the early days of the settlement. He contends that Britain’s involvement in Belize’s internal affairs was characterised by ambivalence, which paved the way for a system of self-governance to become deeply rooted. Indeed: “at no time [...] did the British government remotely indicate any intention of providing the settlement with a regular constitution. The rules and regulations were formulated by the settlers.”⁷⁴ The arrival of the aforementioned Colonel Arthur was the first real test to settler dominance in

⁷² Holt, *The Problem of Freedom : Race Labour and Politics in Jamaica and Britain, 1832-1938* 18.

⁷³ Holt, *The Problem of Freedom : Race Labour and Politics in Jamaica and Britain, 1832-1938* 18.

⁷⁴ C.H. Grant, *The Making of Modern Belize: Politics, Society and British Colonialism in Central America* (London, New York, Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 1976), 55.

Belize: Arthur's tenure challenged the settlers' way of life and questioned, for the first time, their treatment of the enslaved. Arthur was Superintendent of British Honduras between the years of 1814 and 1822 and a supporter of amelioration.⁷⁵ Although he was initially positive about the conditions of the enslaved, in the later years of his term, he reversed his opinion. Arthur was also significant for the role he played in the 1820 rebellion, suggesting that the cruelty of the owners of the enslaved had provided them with good cause to revolt:

[He] found the slaves had been treated with unnecessary harshness by their owners and had good cause for complaint, but that they had committed no excesses other than destruction of some cattle and one or two robberies. He had therefore issued a proclamation offering pardon to all who would surrender and had proclaimed martial law and rewards for all the apprehension of such that would not.⁷⁶

In addition to his involvement in quelling the rebellion, Arthur also advocated for the enslaved, particularly in legal cases such as the previously discussed female slave Kitty. Arthur also attempted to compel the settlers to adhere to the 1792 Consolidated Slave Act of Jamaica. Thompson has noted that while the frame of reference of this Act was ungenerous, "it did regulate the punishments that could be inflicted and did prescribe certain minima in other treatment."⁷⁷ Although Arthur had limited success implementing the Act, his priorities remained focused upon the legal rights of the enslaved and adherence to the ameliorationist

⁷⁵For more information about Arthur and his specific involvement in amelioration in British Honduras and other areas of the British Empire, see Alan Lester, "Personifying Colonial Governance: George Arthur and the Transition from Humanitarian to Development Discourse," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 102, no. 6 (2012).

⁷⁶Burdon, ed., *The Archives of British Honduras, Volume 2*, 228.

⁷⁷ Thompson, *Belize: A Concise History*, 59.

agenda, even going so far as to recommend a Council for the Protection of Slaves. Although this was never implemented, that Arthur thought it necessary stands in opposition to the dominant narrative of positive master-slave relations. Although Arthur's dispatches around the 1820 rebellion have since been used to support proof of cruelty towards the enslaved in Belize,⁷⁸ at the time, he faced stiff opposition from the settlers. Upon his exit from the settlement just two years after the 1820 rebellion, the Baymen wrote a strongly worded 'Defence' of their conduct, which was presented to the British government.⁷⁹ The document was over one hundred pages long and detailed a number of incidents where the settlers and Arthur had conflicted. The majority of these incidents related to the poor treatment Arthur claimed the enslaved had been subjected to by the Baymen, and their rejection of these claims. Significantly, as part of the Defence, the settlers used the Battle of St George's Caye as an illustration of the good relationships that existed between master and slave and evidence of the enslaveds' loyalty towards Britain. This action is one of the earliest examples of how the Battle was appropriated for particular ends, in this case allowing the Baymen to establish their settler identity in opposition to imperial interference from outside. For the settlers based in Belize, Arthur represented a symbol of colonial meddling. Following his departure in 1822, the *Archives* documents an

⁷⁸ See Thompson, *Belize: A Concise History*, 57, Bolland, *Colonialism and Resistance in Belize*, 70.

⁷⁹ The document is a substantial pamphlet (53 pages), divided into five parts, including an appendix, which was presented to Parliament following Arthur's departure from Belize. At the centre of the settlers' grievances were the claims made by Arthur's about the standards of living and treatment of the enslaved of British Honduras.

address from the inhabitants of the colony to Lord Bathurst (in Britain) expressing: “happiness at the removal of Col Arthur, referring to the many calamities and grievances arising from his illegal and oppressive measures.”⁸⁰ This entry reflects the tone of the later ‘Defence’ and suggests that any work done by Arthur to progress the legal rights of the enslaved would be unlikely to continue following his exit.

Arthur’s work in Belize sits within the broader narrative of British ameliorationist reform policies of the period, which cultivated a perception of Britain as a paternalistic figure. It clearly distinguished the reformers located in the metropole from the violence enacted upon the enslaved by settlers in the colonies. While Arthur’s criticism of master-slave relationships represents the broader policies of the British Government at the time, it is also significant for its disruption to the dominant narrative of benign incarceration in Belize, functioning as a lone voice of protest. After Arthur’s departure, the operation of the settlement returned to normal and later dispatches from the *Archives* revert to an all too familiar commentary exhorting the positive position of Belizean slaves. A message from the Superintendent to the Secretary of State in 1833 for example, describes a visit to a mahogany camp where “a happier or more contented set of beings [I] have seldom seen.”⁸¹ Similarly, a letter from an official named John Young M.D., written in 1836 to the Private Secretary in Britain, describes the work of

⁸⁰ Burdon, ed., *The Archives of British Honduras, Volume 2*, 265

⁸¹ Burdon, ed., *The Archives of British Honduras, Volume 2*, 349.

mahogany cutters as “cheerful and exciting and anything but laborious or detrimental to health.”⁸² He concludes that:

A more vigorous and fine-looking set of men is nowhere to be met with in any part of the West Indies – which I am of opinion is the natural consequence of salubrity of climate, a healthy occupation and kind treatment.⁸³

The combination of the entrenched system of self-governance, lack of attention from Britain, and the particular nature of logwood slavery, conspired against Arthur’s efforts to implement the ameliorationist agenda. Instead, statements like those noted above, suggest that, unlike conditions in the plantations, there was little to improve. Instead, following Arthur’s departure, a narrative of benevolence returned, his voice a blip on an otherwise unblemished record.

The slave rebellions, which culminated in the 1820 uprising, represented the very first examples of organised labour protest in Belize. Although desertions continued to be frequent throughout the 1820s and 1830s, the shift towards emancipation and freedom emanating from the metropole modified resistance activities somewhat, and there was no organised protest in Belize again until 1894. However, the absence of organised protest cannot be taken as an indication that conditions had improved. Instead, a particular set of circumstances ensured that the former slave population remained subservient and dependent on the settlers for their livelihood. Indeed, as Bolland has suggested, the

⁸² Burdon, ed., *The Archives of British Honduras, Volume 2*, 388.

⁸³ Burdon, ed., *The Archives of British Honduras, Volume 2*, 388.

nineteenth century in Belize represented “a period of transition from one system of domination to another.”⁸⁴ In line with other areas of the Caribbean, Belize adopted the Abolition Act of 1833, which contained elements designed to “appease the proprietors of slaves.”⁸⁵ These elements included compensation for the loss of labour and the introduction of an apprenticeship system. Apprentices were required to work, unpaid, for a number of years before receiving full ‘freedom’; a process, which ensured they remained in a position of subservience.⁸⁶ In Belize, additional measures to safeguard the continued dependence of the former slaves included a system of advances, whereby wages would be paid ahead of the labourers’ departure into the forests for long periods in order that they could provide for their families in their absence. Payment of wages coincided with the Christmas holiday, the only time of the year that male workers were not located in the forests. As a consequence, they were often left in debt to their masters following seasonal festivities.⁸⁷ In addition, a ‘Truck’ system often required (or at least encouraged) labourers to spend their wages at the stores of their masters. All of these measures prohibited the former slave population from establishing a rural peasantry, and thus, establishing a culture independent of the woodcutters. Indeed, Grant has suggested that former slaves in Belize, “never had the opportunity to entertain the illusion of an economic existence independent of the principal industry.”⁸⁸ This scenario also highlights

⁸⁴ Bolland, *Colonialism and Resistance in Belize*, 159.

⁸⁵ Bolland, *The Formation of a Colonial Society: Belize, From Conquest to Crown Colony*, 106.

⁸⁶ For a further discussion on apprenticeship, see Holt, *The Problem of Freedom*, 55-76.

⁸⁷ Grant, *The Making of Modern Belize*, 51.

⁸⁸ Grant, *The Making of Modern Belize*, 52.

the particular experiences of enslaved women in Belize. While men's labour was highly valued by the settlers, women continued to work in domestic roles that were poorly regarded, and even more poorly paid. As Macpherson has noted: "emancipation did not lead to peasantisation, but simply revealed the extremely undervalued nature of domestic work, which 'free' women continued to do."⁸⁹

Following the boom period of the mahogany trade between the years of 1835-1847, mahogany exports started to decline, prompting a serious economic depression that lasted for the remainder of the century. Despite the fall in the fortunes of the settlement, Britain continued to limit its involvement in Belize's internal affairs. Grant has suggested that this situation continued even after it was declared a Crown Colony in 1862: "the British Government [...] was still unwilling to place it on an equal footing with the West Indian colonies."⁹⁰ Indeed, a unique set of economic and political circumstances existed in Belize, which set it apart from other British colonies: British involvement was limited and key institutions were dominated by a small settler class of mahogany merchants and landowners, who existed under the banner of the British Honduras Company (later shortened to the BEC). Grant has argued that the company was: "indisputably the most influential concern which guided the colonial government [...] its relationship [...] was overt and interlocking."⁹¹ Other than a relatively

⁸⁹ Anne Macpherson, "Viragoes, Victims and Volunteers: Creole Female Political Cultures and Gendered State Policy in Nineteenth Century Belize," in *Belize: Selected Proceedings from the Second Interdisciplinary Conference*, ed. Michael and D. Philips (Lanham, New York, London: University Press of America, Inc, 1996), 31.

⁹⁰ Grant, *The Making of Modern Belize*, 56.

⁹¹ Grant, *The Making of Modern Belize*, 38.

short period between 1871 and 1892, where colonial officials attempted to implement a new Legislative Assembly, the landowning elite, often called the 'unofficial majority', held the balance of power during the nineteenth century. These factors, in addition to the continuation of the oppressive labour schemes described above, led to increasing disenfranchisement amongst the labouring classes, which culminated in the riot of 1894. Additionally, a devastating hurricane in 1931,⁹² combined with the effects of the Great Depression and the aforementioned decline of the mahogany trade, brought the economy of Belize to a standstill and provided the conditions by which a disenchanting labour movement and later nationalist political movement could grow. These tensions would eventually lead to the creation of Belize's first independent political party, the PUP (People's United Party). The importance of this moment cannot be underestimated; indeed Bolland has argued that despite the inadequate documentation of labour disenchantment in Belize vis-à-vis other areas of the Caribbean, the labour movement of the 1930s was the predecessor of modern politics in Belize and paved the way for the sweeping political changes that occurred in the 1950s.⁹³ The hurricane and its after-effects also represented a significant shift in governance, with the landowning elites losing financial control to the British Government in 1932, thus undermining the power of the 'unofficial majority'.⁹⁴ As Grant has noted:

The colonial office believed that the unforeseen economic and financial deterioration of the colony had significantly altered the

⁹² Grant, *The Making of Modern Belize*, 62.

⁹³ Bolland, *Colonialism and Resistance in Belize*, 173.

⁹⁴ Grant, *The Making of Modern Belize*, 80.

political situation. This was not a period of 'constitutional experiment in elective representation but for firm, good and efficient government.'⁹⁵

The British Government's intentions were not realised, however, and instead, a series of blunders and financial mismanagement caused even greater levels of dissatisfaction than had previously existed under the 'unofficial majority'. In addition, the colonial administration came under increasing fire from the working classes during this period.⁹⁶ Bolland illustrates the roots of this discord using the example of a demonstration in 1919, when soldiers from the British West India regiment protested about the racist treatment they had received and the "injustices of British colonial dominance"⁹⁷. Shoman has also described this demonstration: "The Governor reported that during the incident the people had shown an 'open inclination to be insulting to Europeans in the street.' People were heard to make such statements as [...] "this is our country and we want to get the white man out."⁹⁸ As Shoman points out, this moment is significant, for it is one of the first references made by black people in Belize "articulating the anti-colonial demand to recognise *this* land as theirs, to proclaim a right to *this* country."⁹⁹ As Bolland argues, "both disturbances suggest that something more than persistent poverty provoked people into protesting against the colonial government."¹⁰⁰

⁹⁵ Grant, *The Making of Modern Belize*, 80.

⁹⁶ Bolland, *Colonialism and Resistance in Belize*, 175.

⁹⁷ Bolland *Colonialism and Resistance in Belize*, 175.

⁹⁸ Assad Shoman, "The Role of Ethnicity in the Internationalization of Belize's Independence Struggle," *Etnicidad y nación: debate alrededor de Belice. Actes de colloque* (2009): 125. <https://hal-unice.archives-ouvertes.fr/hal-00709131/document#page=117>.

⁹⁹ Shoman, "The Role of Ethnicity in the Internationalization of Belize's Independence Struggle," 125.

¹⁰⁰ Bolland, *Colonialism and Resistance in Belize*, 175.

These protests continued into the 1930s, with the inception of a group called the 'Unemployed Brigade'. Their leader, Antonio Soberanis Gomez went on to develop the 'Labourers and Unemployed Association (LUA)', which became a major political force in Belize.¹⁰¹ Again, although the drive behind much of the protest related specifically to unemployment, there were increasing attacks on the colonial Government itself: "While the specific demands were for relief work and a minimum wage, these demands were couched in broad moral and political terms that began to define and develop a new nationalistic and democratic political culture."¹⁰² Soberanis continued to be active between the years of 1934-7.¹⁰³ This first wave of protest was followed by the formation of a number of labour groups in the early 1940s.¹⁰⁴ Of particular note was the People's Nationalist Committee, which had a strong anti-British stance, and was led by Joseph Campbell: "At their meetings the nationalists demanded the expulsion of all white men, the creation of a local republic in union with the USA and the substitution of the national flag of "Belize Honduras" for the Union Jack."¹⁰⁵

The work of Soberanis and his colleagues was significant: it paved the way for the emergence of the PUP and the first wave of the independence movement in

¹⁰¹ Bolland, *Colonialism and Resistance in Belize*, 176.

¹⁰² Bolland, *Colonialism and Resistance in Belize*, 177.

¹⁰³ For a detailed discussion of the protests lead by Soberanis in Belize between 1934-7, see Peter Ashdown, "Antonio Soberanis and the Disturbances in Belize, 1934-7," *Caribbean Quarterly* 24, no. 1/2 (1978).

¹⁰⁴ These included the British Honduras Unemployed Association, British Honduras Federation of Workers Protection Association, People's Nationalist Committee. For more information, see Bolland, *Colonialism and Resistance in Belize*, 177.

¹⁰⁵ Bolland, *Colonialism and Resistance in Belize*, 185.

the 1950s and sent a clear message of working class dissatisfaction. Soberanis was also important for the way in which he resurrected the 'myth of origin' to support his cause. In 1934, Soberanis led a celebration on September 10th but rather than celebrate the actions of the Baymen and the enslaved, he chose to link the Battle of St George's Caye to national rebellion. As Macpherson has noted: "Soberanis made [the battle] palatable to a popular multiracial coalition that did not base its claims on white ancestry."¹⁰⁶ Although the momentum of the 1930s Labour movement started by Soberanis was not sustained, he continued to challenge the colonial version of events of the Battle as late as 1949 "arguing for Belize's self-determination as a black and Indian nation with deep historical roots."¹⁰⁷ Crucially, and for the purposes of my argument, Soberanis questioned the validity of the historical sources, and noted the absence of accounts from the enslaved, arguing that an oral "native tradition" of the story had been silenced in the face of the 'myth of origin.' Macpherson draws attention to this oral "native tradition" which claimed that "the Spaniards retreated when Africans on their ships mutinied after communicating by drum to Africans in the Bay Settlement their desire to escape."¹⁰⁸ Citing Soberanis, Macpherson argues that "the mythmakers ignored this memory in order to swallow up "all rights to self-determination of the descendants of the Negroes" and to "foster loyalty and devotion to His Majesty the King and the British Empire, rather than unite in a

¹⁰⁶ Macpherson, "Imagining the Colonial Nation: Gender, Race and Middle Class Politics in Belize, 1888-1898," 126.

¹⁰⁷ Macpherson, "Imagining the Colonial Nation: Gender, Race and Middle Class Politics in Belize, 1888-1898," 126.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid, 126.

native claim to self-determination.”¹⁰⁹ This view represents the culmination of years of working class protest finally given voice. Like the Black Power politicians of the 1960s, which I discuss in Chapter Five, Soberanis used his political platform to directly challenge the colonial ‘myth of origin’ perpetuated in the *Archives* and subsequent colonial texts. Although this challenge was only one element of Soberanis’s cause, it is a significant one, which speaks to this broader history of resistance, rebellion and ‘ownership’ of the land called Belize.

Grant plays down the unrest that occurred in Belize, arguing that it was not as widespread and less impactful than in other areas of the Caribbean.¹¹⁰ Yet I contend that the particular conditions in Belize – the dominance of the landowners, the deeply rooted self-governing body, the supremacy of the Creole elite, and the easier ability to desert through the forests – make Soberanis’s protests all the more significant. As Bolland has argued:

Belize, far from slumbering through the 1930s and 1940s, was actually one of the first of the West Indian colonies to participate in the widespread labour unrest that, when organised, provided the mass political base for a generation of middle class leaders.¹¹¹

It would be this mass political base that would pave the way for the first real change in Belize via the independence movement of the 1950s.

¹⁰⁹ Antonio Soberanis, cited in Macpherson, "Imagining the Colonial Nation: Gender, Race and Middle Class Politics in Belize, 1888-1898," 126.

¹¹⁰ Grant, *The Making of Modern Belize*, 67

¹¹¹ Bolland, *Colonialism and Resistance in Belize*, 173

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have explored the experiences of the enslaved in Belize, which differed greatly to the plantations in other areas of the Caribbean. I have addressed the perception of benevolence in Belizean slavery, a perception which has been produced, in part, from the representation of slavery in the *Archives* and other early colonial historical texts that use the *Archives* as a basis. Central to this perception is the 'myth of origin', which claims to 'evidence' loyalty and positive relations between master and slave. Building on my analysis in Chapter One, I have suggested that the rhetoric of benevolence and kindness, rooted in the myth of the Battle of St George's Caye, instead reveals a set of anxieties about the culture and activities of the enslaved. These anxieties point to a far more widespread colonial fear than the material in the *Archives* would initially suggest. Similarly, the instances of rebellion and, more notably, desertion, coupled with instances of poor treatment, suggest that cruelty towards the enslaved and resistance and defiance towards this behaviour was far more widespread than colonial history implies.

The undercurrent of unrest that was visible via rebellion and desertion during the period of slavery was muted after emancipation by continuing oppressive measures and the particularities of the Belizean political and economic landscape. Resistance would reassert itself with the riots of 1894, which spearheaded the working-class challenge to the origin myth, and the Servicemen's riots of 1919, which argued against racist treatment. Later, as

Soberanis activated the Labour movement in the 1930s, the myth was again resurrected, evidencing an on-going desire for an alternative version of events to be known. Returning to Holt, and his discussion of the 'symmetry between the slave rebellions of the 1820s and the Labour Movements of the 1930s, it is possible to place Belize in a wider narrative of unrest that occurred across the Caribbean, challenging colonial rule and protesting against oppressive working conditions.

Grant has argued that Belize's place as "a minor chapter in British imperial history" allowed the "popular stereotype" of benevolence to persist, via an 'out of sight, out of mind' mentality.¹¹² Indeed, the particular set of circumstances that developed in Belize led to a level of independence and autonomy not afforded to other British colonies in the Caribbean and has contributed to the perception of slavery being more benign. It also explains why Colonel Arthur and his ameliorationist policies received such a vehement reaction from the settler elite in Belize. Yet the marginalised place Belize occupied in imperial consciousness also allowed the working class protests to be muted in its broader cultural memory. The *Archives* was published between the years of 1931-5, in the wake of the devastation of the hurricane, the subsequent economic crisis, and the turbulence created by the labour movement. At this moment, the *Archives* represented a way for those 'at home' to draw attention away from the political crisis and economic woes of the colony and celebrate a colonial account of

¹¹² Grant, *The Making of Modern Belize*, 44

history and the unity that characterised this version of the story. In the process, Burdon set in motion a narrative which would go on to be almost universally replicated for much of the twentieth century.

Macpherson notes the way in which the origin myth, whilst referencing a white settler class surrounded by loyal black slaves, excludes Mayans, mestizos, and, importantly for this thesis, women. She argues that the majority of women present in the settlement in 1798 were not white and with interracial sex a taboo, “black women’s historical roles could never be safely contained.”¹¹³ Excluded from the moment of the country’s inception, then, and similarly absent in the *Archives*, women have a barely visible place in the story of the nation. Zee Edgell’s literary project confronts this absence. Having established the historical and cultural context for the ways in which Belize’s national narrative has been constructed and contested, the next part of the thesis analyses Zee Edgell’s novels for the ways in which they intervene in and re-read that national narrative. Her writing is discussed in relation to the wider canon of Caribbean women’s writing, and critically engages her status as the sole, recognisable literary ‘voice’ of the Belizean nation.

¹¹³ Macpherson, "Imagining the Colonial Nation: Gender, Race and Middle Class Politics in Belize, 1888-1898," 127.

Chapter Three: Locating Zee Edgell: Caribbean Women's Writing and Novels of Nation

A key concern of this thesis is how literature functions at a mnemonic level, thereby challenging broader concepts of nation, culture and identity. In the previous two chapters, a historical, cultural and theoretical context was provided for my analysis of Zee Edgell's literary fiction. This chapter identifies the ways in which memory intersects with literature and provides a methodological framework to analyse Edgell's literary interpretation of history. Here, I use the work of Astrid Erll, who builds on Assmann's memory framework to define "cultural" and "collective" texts. Neumann's model of "fictions of memory" is also discussed in order to illuminate Edgell's literary reimagining of the Belizean nation. The chapter also locates Edgell within a collective of Caribbean women writers and assesses the way she conforms to and departs from the tropes of this genre whilst also noting Belize's marginalised position within it. In order to place Edgell in this literary canon, it is necessary to consider the distinctiveness of this subject position. Combining a discussion of Creolisation with Stuart Hall's framework of Caribbean 'presences,' I consider the ways in which these methodologies speak to Edgell's fiction and to her identity as a Belizean writer. Edgell identifies strongly as a Belizean, and therefore the chapter concludes with a discussion that considers the relationship between nation and narrative, and the particularities of this relationship in Belize, where, she has "single-handedly

become its most widely recognised international literary voice.”¹ All of Edgell’s fiction is, to some degree, concerned with the question of narrating the nation in relation to the colonial past and the postcolonial present. She has written four novels: *Beka Lamb* (1981),² *In Times Like These* (1988),³ *The Festival of St Joaquin* (1997),⁴ and *Time and the River* (2007),⁵ and has been quoted as saying that they represent “an attempt to reconstruct my images and memories of Belize [...] to create, record, and preserve through fiction, the echoes of a rapidly changing multi-ethnic culture.”⁶

Wilson-Tagoe has written about the Caribbean’s relationship with its past, describing it as a place which is, on one hand, “created entirely by history” and on the other, “totally lacking in history.”⁷ Edgell is located within the space between these two positions: she has spoken widely about her desire to reimagine and retell Belize’s past; to challenge what she describes as “selective” history” and to “leave a record.”⁸ Conversely, she has also been quoted on her preference to respect the historical record: “I enjoy the process of creating a story that fits the known record rather than the other way around.”⁹ This contradiction is a consistent thread in Edgell’s fiction, and is revisited in the later chapters

¹ Irma McClaurin, "A Writer's Life: A Country's Transition," *Americas* 46, no. 4 (1994-5): 38.

² Zee Edgell, *Beka Lamb* (Harlow: Heinemann, 1982).

³ Zee Edgell, *In Times Like These* (New Hampshire: Heinemann, 1991).

⁴ Zee Edgell, *The Festival of Saint Joaquin*, 1997 (Oxford: Macmillan Caribbean, 2008).

⁵ Zee Edgell, *Time and the River* (Harlow: Heinemann, 2007).

⁶ Zee Edgell, "Belize: A Literary Perspective," (Washington D.C.: IDB Cultural Center, 1994), 8.

⁷ Nana Wilson-Tagoe, *Historical Thought and Literary Representation in West Indian Literature* (Gainesville, Tallahassee, Tampa, Boca Raton, Pensacola, Orlando, Miami, Jacksonville: University Press of Florida, 1998).

⁸ Renee Shea, H., "Zee Edgell's Home Within Home: An Interview," *Callaloo* 20, 3 (1997): 583.

⁹ "Zee Edgell," 2003, accessed 5/5/18, <https://bombmagazine.org/articles/zee-edgell/>.

which focus upon her novels. On the one hand, the novels' protagonists reflect and represent dominant national stories and ingrained cultural and historical myths; on the other, they voice previously unspoken versions of events, which have hitherto gone unheard in a masculine oriented society steeped in colonial ideals of femininity. The contradiction also enacts in microcosm the complexity of Belize's relationship with its past. It is at once bound to a hegemonic cultural memory which is dominated by colonial-oriented views of nation, what it means to be Belizean, and the country's relationship with Britain, yet a communicative memory, of which Edgell's novels are a central part, has also begun to emerge in more recent years. This alternative to cultural memory, aims to 'come to terms' with the past and revisit and reinterpret dominant historical narratives.

Cultural Texts, Collective Texts and Fictions of Memory

I began this thesis by identifying my rationale for the use of a memory studies framework to engage Belize's history. The work of Jan Assmann is central to my approach insofar as he makes a clear distinction between 'cultural' memory, which is located in the rituals, rites and ceremonies of a nation, and 'communicative' memory, which functions on a social level, and includes oral history, storytelling and everyday interactions. Alongside his wife, Aledia, Assmann further expanded his theory of cultural and communicative memory to identify 'cultural texts', which include written forms and a range of other "semantic

units” such as “images, gestures, dances, rites, customs and even landscapes.”¹⁰ Cultural texts are also: “taken up and reproduced by a whole society” and can be divided into ‘normative’ texts, which set cultural behaviour norms, and ‘formative’ texts which embody the identity of a group.¹¹ Astrid Erll uses Jan and Aledia Assmann’s concept of ‘cultural texts’ alongside ‘collective texts’ as part of a wider methodology for observing the intersections between literature and memory. She develops a framework for analysing how literature is at once both a “storage medium and circulation medium,”¹² functioning at the level of national identity and individual identity. Erll describes ‘cultural texts’ as storage media, which possess an institutional, hegemonic influence that ensures their inclusion in a literary canon. The literary canon “embod[ies] – and [is] used to transmit – cultural, national or religious identity as well as shared values and norms.”¹³ Erll cites the Bible, Shakespeare, Homer and Milton as examples of ‘cultural texts’. Although these works are still ‘versions’ of reality, they become ‘cultural texts’ when their messages are “simplified and over determined”, providing a “uniform message” and gaining “cultural depth.”¹⁴ Texts such as these, Erll argues, are simultaneously mediums and objects of cultural memory; they “remember something about a community’s past and are themselves remembered as

¹⁰ Jan Assmann, "Form as a Mnemonic Device: Cultural Texts and Cultural Memory," in *Performing the Gospel: Orality, Memory, and Mark. Essays dedicated to Werner Kelber*, ed. Jonathan A Draper Richard A Horsley, John Miles Foley (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006), 76.

¹¹ Assmann, "Form as a Mnemonic Device: Cultural Texts and Cultural Memory," 76.

¹² Astrid Erll, *Memory in Culture*, trans. Sara B. Young (New York and Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillian, 2011), 127.

¹³ Erll, *Memory in Culture*, 162.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, 163.

canonical works.”¹⁵ In this way, ‘cultural texts’ are part of Assmann’s wider concept of ‘cultural memory’, sitting alongside the official history, rituals and monuments of a nation.

Erll also uses the term ‘collective texts’ which she suggests embody the spheres of both cultural and communicative memory: they can include aspects of cultural memory even if they are not considered a canonical text and can also include the oral and social dimensions of communicative memory without necessarily functioning as a person-to-person interaction. Collective texts “point to a way of reading in which literary works are actualised not so much as precious *objects* to be remembered themselves, but rather as *vehicles* for envisioning the past; [they] create, circulate, and shape contents of cultural memory.”¹⁶ One of the main ways that literature is able to influence cultural memory to such a great degree is because readers “ascribe to them some kind of referentiality”,¹⁷ and that they “fit [and] resonate with a memory culture’s horizons of meaning, its (narrative) schema, and its existing images of the past.”¹⁸ These things, Erll argues, allow “mnemonic authenticity” to be maintained.¹⁹ Collective texts are distinct from ‘cultural texts’ too, in that they can be included within popular literature:

Many readers draw their mental images and ideas about historical epochs not from historiography, and not from canonical literature, but from a multitude of historical novels, romances and detective stories [...] Yet,

¹⁵ Ibid, 163.

¹⁶ Ibid, 164.

¹⁷ Ibid, 164.

¹⁸ Ibid, 166.

¹⁹ Ibid, 165.

generally speaking, every literary text can be functionalised as a collective text: Homer's epics just as well as pulp fiction.²⁰

Finally, Erll notes, that 'collective texts' often function without the reader noticing: "they shape collective memory considerably, and often without the community being aware of their workings."²¹ Assmann, and later, Erll's definition of cultural and collective texts provide a framework within which to situate Edgell's fiction. Whilst her novels can be easily recognised as collective texts, *Beka Lamb* arguably inhabits the status of a cultural text, due to the exalted place it occupies in national consciousness and its centrality in Belizean literary consciousness, both of which are discussed later in this chapter.

Birgit Neumann has suggested a model for examining the relationship between literature and memory, which she describes as "fictions of memory."²² Like Erll, she believes that by examining literary fiction through the lens of memory, individuals and societies can interrogate their individual and collective identity: "to answer the question 'who am I?' or collectively 'who are we?'"²³ Unlike Assmann and Erll, Neumann does not distinguish between cultural and collective texts.

Instead, she argues that novels:

²⁰ Astrid Erll, "Reading Literature as Collective Texts: German and English War Novels of the 1920s as Media of Cultural and Communicative Memory," in *Anglistentag München 2003 Proceedings*, ed. Christoph Bode and Sebastian Domsch and Hans Sauer (Trier: WVT, 2004), 1.

²¹ Erll, "Reading Literature as Collective Texts: German and English War Novels of the 1920s as Media of Cultural and Communicative Memory," 2.

²² Birgit Neumann, "The Literary Representations of Memory," in *Cultural Memory Studies: An International and Interdisciplinary Handbook*, ed. Astrid Erll and Ansgar Nünning in collaboration with Sara B. Young (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter GmbH & Co, 2008), 334.

²³ Neumann, "The Literary Representations of Memory," 334.

select and edit elements of a culturally given discourse: they combine the real and the imaginary, the remembered and the forgotten and, by means of narrative devices, imaginatively explore the workings of memory, thus offering new perspectives on the past.²⁴

Novels can do what history cannot: they can incorporate both 'fact' and fiction, whilst simultaneously reproducing and interrogating memory itself. In her analysis of archival sites of memory, Aledia Assmann argues: "While historians have to adjust their research and questions to the extension and range of the archives, literary writers may take the liberty to fill in the gaps."²⁵ Imaginative fiction can align with the historical record, or it can challenge and subvert it, which may subsequently impact readers' perceptions about a particular event. However, as Neumann argues: "Literature is [...] never a simple reflection of pre-existing cultural discourses; rather it proactively contributes to the negotiation of cultural memory."²⁶

Whilst it is important to note that, like history, literature is a production of which there are many versions (some which are embraced and become embedded in culture, and others which remain on the periphery), literature has a greater degree of freedom to tell stories that have previously been excluded from the historical record.²⁷ As Neumann argues, this relative freedom allows counter memories to emerge that challenge: "hegemonic memory culture and question

²⁴ Neumann, "The Literary Representations of Memory," 334.

²⁵ Aledia Assmann, "Canon and Archive," in *Cultural Memory Studies: An International and Interdisciplinary Handbook*, ed. Astrid Erll and Ansgar Nunning in collaboration with Sara B. Young (Berlin and New York: Walter De Gruyter, 2008), 106.

²⁶ Neumann, "The Literary Representations of Memory," 335.

²⁷ Neumann, "The Literary Representations of Memory," 338.

the socially established boundary between remembering and forgetting.”²⁸ This notion of a counter-memory is particularly important for this thesis; Edgell’s *Time and the River* in particular: “symbolically empower(s) the culturally marginalised or forgotten and [...] figure(s) as an imaginative counter discourse.”²⁹ Although Neumann does not reference Assmann’s argument, this statement embodies the idea of a collective, communicative memory. Edgell’s writing gives voice to a number of stories predominantly unspoken in Belizean culture, particularly those of women. It also challenges the dominance of specific ‘cultural texts’ in Belize, such as the ‘myth of origin’ and annual September 10th celebrations. For Neumann, the emergence of these texts provides the space for a debate, not only about *how* things are remembered, but *what* is remembered. The multiple subject positions available to authors – cultural, collective, communicative - have the ability to tell unspoken stories in a way which history does not:

By bringing together multiple, even incompatible versions of the past [literature] can keep alive conflict about what exactly the collective past stands for and how it should be remembered. Moreover, to the extent that many fictions of memory link the hegemonic discourse to the unrealised and inexpressible possibilities of the past, they can become a force of continual innovation and cultural self-renewal [...] Literature becomes a formative medium within the memory culture which, on the basis of symbol-specific characteristics, can fulfil particular, functions which cannot be served by other symbol systems.³⁰

As Neumann notes, imaginative fiction not only contributes to debates about what gets remembered about the past and how these remembrances are

²⁸ Ibid, 339.

²⁹ Ibid, 341.

³⁰ Ibid, 341.

realised, but also has the power to reshape what is focused upon in the present. This concept is particularly important for my reading of Edgell's novels, especially *Time and the River*, which explores the internal lives of the enslaved in Belize in a way that has not been done before. Indeed, Eyerman has argued "how slavery was represented in literature, music, the plastic arts, and later film, is crucial to the formation and reworking of collective memory and collective identity by the generations which followed emancipation."³¹ Similarly, as Neumann argues, this action is something specific to fiction, and not able to be achieved by other 'symbol systems.'³²

The work of Neumann, Erll and Assmann establishes a methodology for analysing how Edgell's novels function at a mnemonic level in Belize. Assmann and Erll's approach situate Edgell's novels within a framework of cultural and collective texts, whilst Neumann's model of 'fictions of memory' permits a deeper consideration of the texts' function within society, and the way in which novels are able to provide a 'voice' and platform for unspoken stories. The tension in Edgell's writing suggests that while her adherence to the historical 'record' aligns with Belize's dominant cultural memory, her imaginative fiction also challenges cultural memory, particularly through her focus on women's experiences (*Beka Lamb*, *In Times Like These*) and the period of slavery (*Time and the River*). At the level of memory, her novels represent both 'cultural' and 'collective' texts,

³¹ Ron Eyerman, *Cultural Trauma: Slavery and the Formation of African American Identity* (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, New York, Melbourne and Madrid, 2001), 8.

³² Neumann, "The Literary Representations of Memory," 341.

and, over time, Edgell's novels have moved further away from a more straightforward reimagining of the cultural and national memory of Belize, to explore parts of Belize's past that have often been 'unremembered.'

Caribbean Identity and Creolisation

As discussed in the introduction to this thesis, slavery is part of a wider Caribbean culture of 'un-remembering', hence any analysis of Caribbean literature and the memories it reimagines must address the particular nature of Caribbean societies, a central component of which is Creolisation. The process of 'Creolisation' and Creole identity has become a widely used method to conceptualise Caribbean society and developed from the previously held concept of 'Plural Society' that was popularised in the 1960s.³³ Shepherd and Richards have discussed the significant influence of Kamau Brathwaite, whose 1971 text *The Development of Creole Society in Jamaica*³⁴ established a framework for analysing the identities of those in the Caribbean through a 'Creole' lens, and disrupted the previous ways that Caribbean society had previously been theorised. Citing Brathwaite, they note his definition of Creolisation thus:

A cultural process [...] which [...] may be divided into two aspects of itself: ac/culturation, which is the yoking (by force and example, deriving from power/prestige) of one culture to another (in this case, the enslaved African to the European); and

³³ Verene Shepherd and Glen. L Richards, "Introduction," in *Questioning Creole: Creolisation Discourses in Caribbean Culture* (Kingston: Ian Randle, 2002), xii.

³⁴ Edward Kamau Brathwaite, *The Development of Creole Society in Jamaica 1770-1820* (London: Oxford University Press, 1971).

inter/culturation, which is an unplanned, unstructured, but osmotic relationship preceding from this yoke.³⁵

Whilst Brathwaite's theory of Creolisation is widely agreed to be the leading interpretation of Caribbean societies,³⁶ his strong views, which include a firm defence of Afrogenesis, have polarised critics. Writing in 1976, Price and Mintz approached Creolisation through an anthropological lens, arguing that the process of displacing slaves from multiple locations in Africa into multiple locations in the Caribbean, necessitated new ways of being, which were not wholly dependent on African ancestry.³⁷ French critics, Bernabé, Confiant, Chamoiseau and Taleb Khyar, also challenge Brathwaite's model, calling instead for a celebration of Creole identity as a distinct entity: "Neither Europeans, nor Africans, nor Asians, we proclaim ourselves Creoles."³⁸ Shepherd and Richards note that following Brathwaite, there is now a broad split between those who "see Creole cultures as almost entirely new creations," and those, like Brathwaite, who "stress cultural continuity between Africa and the Caribbean."³⁹ These schools of thought correspond directly with the way in which Wilson-Tagoe described the Caribbean at the start of the chapter: the 'new creations' represent a society lacking history, whilst the 'cultural continuity' she describes represents a society created by and bound to history.

³⁵ Shepherd and Richards, "Introduction," xi.

³⁶ Shepherd and Richards, "Introduction," xiv.

³⁷ Sidney W. Mintz and Richard Price, *An Anthropological Approach to the Afro-American Past: A Caribbean Perspective* (Philadelphia: Institute for the Study of Human Issues, 1976).

³⁸ Jean Bernabé et al., "In Praise of Creoleness," *Callaloo* 13, no. 4 (1990).

³⁹ Shepherd and Richards, "Introduction," xiii.

Creolisation is relevant to the culturally diverse population of Belize where both 'continuity' and 'new creations' are recognisable, but it is precisely Belize's diversity which exposes some limitations of the Creolisation debate. Although I recognise the importance of Brathwaite's work, I also note the restrictions of his argument, which privileges connection with Africa and tends to underplay other cultural influences deriving from within the Caribbean. Belize also lacks a plantation system, a characteristic that is often cited in definitions of Creole society.⁴⁰ Equally, whilst Belize is traditionally located in broader Caribbean discourses and has a recognisable European and African presence, it is also part of the Central American mainland and the Mestizo population is now the largest social group. Additionally, there are smaller denominations of indigenous Maya, Black Caribs, Mennonites, Chinese and East Indian; all factors which do not enter traditional definitions of 'Creole.' Similarly, Brathwaite's argument does not address the burgeoning 'Belizean' identity which has become more solidified in culture in recent years.⁴¹ Finally, the particularities and differences of identity that exist across the entire Caribbean region, including Belize, must also be acknowledged. Cultural critic, Stuart Hall, has drawn attention to this diversity through his own experiences: "Visiting the French Caribbean for the first time, I

⁴⁰ Shepherd and Richards, "Introduction," xi.

⁴¹ For a detailed discussion of the development of 'Belizean' culture see, Richard Wilk, "Learning to be Local in Belize: Global Systems of Common Difference," in *Worlds Apart: Modernity through the Prism of the Local*, ed. Daniel Miller (London and New York: Routledge, 1995), 113; Richard Wilk, "Real Belizean Food: Building Local Identity in the Transnational Caribbean," *American Anthropologist* 101, no. 2 (1999).

also saw at once how different Martinique is from, say Jamaica [...] It is a profound difference of culture and history. And this difference matters.”⁴²

Hall, who writes from a cultural studies perspective, provides an appropriate methodology from which to analyse the development of identity in Belize and to locate Edgell. This process has parallels with Creolisation but also exists in its own right. In his influential essay, ‘Cultural Identity and Diaspora,’⁴³ Hall proposes a framework for the contested nature of Caribbean origins. He argues that there are two ‘types’ of identity in the Caribbean; the first defined by common values and history: “a sort of collective one true self”;⁴⁴ and the second, which focuses on differences: “the ruptures and discontinuities which constitute precisely the Caribbean’s uniqueness.”⁴⁵ These subject positions are negotiated through three “presences” of identity: Africa – which is the unspoken identity that permeates multiple aspects of the Caribbean experience: religion, music, medicine, stories, art, language; Europe – the oppressive, over-arching power presence, the “dominant regime of representation,”⁴⁶ represented by the stereotypical tropes of romance, adventure, exploration, the exotic and the tropical; and finally the ‘New World’ or Americas, which Hall describes as a “juncture point where the many

⁴² Stuart Hall, "Cultural Identity and Cinematic Representation," in *Black British Cultural Studies: A Reader*, ed. Houston A. Baker Jnr and Ruth H. Lineborg Manthia Diawara (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 214.

⁴³ Stuart Hall, "Cultural Identity and Diaspora," in *Identity, Community, Culture, Difference*, ed. Jonathan Rutherford (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1990).

⁴⁴ Hall, "Cultural Identity and Diaspora," 223.

⁴⁵ Hall, "Cultural Identity and Diaspora", 225.

⁴⁶ *Ibid*, 225.

cultural tributaries meet,”⁴⁷ and the “beginning of diaspora, of diversity, of hybridity.”⁴⁸ Hall’s identification of these presences is notable for Belize, where all three play a role in the construction of identity to varying degrees. Although the African presence is often muted in the face of a strong connection to Britain, it maintains a presence through traditional ceremonies and oral and folk traditions. The European presence is strong in Belize, due, in part, to the ‘myth of origin’, which has ensured the centrality of British values, traditions and customs. Finally, the new world presence takes into account the diversity of Belize’s inhabitants, which includes a significant Mestizo population, an indigenous, Mayan history, and the expanding ‘Belizean’ culture, expressed through food, music, and dance.

I return here to my discussion in the introduction of the thesis, which examined the contested nature of remembrance in the Caribbean, with particular regard to slavery and the legacies of colonialism. Hall’s model of ‘presences’ and the broader debates around Creolisation are central to the ways in which slavery is and is not remembered in the Caribbean, and, therefore, to the way slavery is represented (or not) in its literature. Indeed, in Edgell’s novels, some characters stress European influence and a connection to colonial heritage, whilst others celebrate African-based traditions. Writing about Creole discourses in the Caribbean, Maria Sindoni has suggested that it is a combination of these influences which has led to the distinctive nature of Creolised literature. This

⁴⁷ Ibid, 234.

⁴⁸ Ibid, 235.

literature is a crucial part of establishing self-determination from the destructive legacies of colonialism:

The hybridisation of English and Western literary genres with Creole and oral-based ones brought about by writers and intellectuals in the Caribbean English areas has thus contributed to building a new sense of community and to establishing a new sense of cultural worth. The latter is essential in dismantling English cultural and linguistic hegemony, one of the most dangerous weapons within the armoury of the British Empire.⁴⁹

In order to situate Edgell within a broader canon of Caribbean women writers, it is necessary to interrogate the identity of Creolised and Caribbean literature, and it is to this analysis I now turn. A key part of this discussion is not only the way in which Edgell's writing conforms to and challenges the tropes of the canon, but whether there is a space for her, as a Belizean woman, within the broader definitions of the genre.

Caribbean Women's Writing

The process of situating Edgell both within a broader framework of Caribbean writers, and more specifically, within a canon of Caribbean women writers is necessary for two reasons: firstly, to create a space for Belize, which is often overlooked in literary critical debates of the region; and secondly, to define Edgell's writing against the broader themes, characteristics and divisions inherent within the genre. The majority of Edgell's novels address the needs of a particular

⁴⁹ Maria Grazia Sindoni, "Creole in the Caribbean: How Oral Discourse Creates Cultural Identities," *Journal des Africanistes* 80, no. 1/2 (2010): 217.

moment in time, mirroring changes taking place in the national and political landscape of Belize. While *Beka Lamb* reflects the positivity and hopefulness of the first independence movement of the 1950s, Edgell's later novels have more pessimistic undertones, and present an overt challenge to the colonial order, patriarchal gender roles and cultural memory in Belize. Significantly, the novelistic exploration of the period of slavery in *Time and the River* (2007) represents an extensive shift in social, political and cultural awareness in Belize, allowing Edgell to place this issue into the broader consciousness of Belizeans. As well as her location within a genre of Caribbean women writers, Edgell can also be classed as a postcolonial novelist. *Beka Lamb* was published in 1981 and was written over the previous decade, amidst a context of sweeping change in the literary landscape. Following the decolonisation process in the Caribbean which began in the 1960s, the production of work by writers from the region rapidly increased. Much of the writing produced during this period addressed the fraught relationship between 'self' and nation, and saw writers attempt to negotiate a history previously defined by colonial rule, a process which contributed to the 'new sense of community' and 'cultural worth', described by Sindoni above.

The action of reimagining colonial history through fiction is complex. Wilson-Tagoe has noted the particular challenges inherent in conceptualising the past in the Caribbean: "It has no artefacts or monuments, and no ancient epics connect it imaginatively to the landscape to reveal a continuous, tiered concept of a

past.”⁵⁰ Like the Caribbean, Belize’s past is multifaceted: complicated by a version of history produced by white British settlers who popularised the ‘myth of origin’ whilst simultaneously erasing the narratives of the Maya from history and popular memory. Edgell’s process of reimagining Belize’s history also foregrounds her contradictory process noted at the start of this chapter: her desire to tell ‘untold’ stories, whilst also managing the obligation to maintain historical ‘accuracy.’ This process is particularly challenging in Belize, due to the strong colonial bias in its cultural memory and popular history. Whilst Wilson-Tagoe suggests that imaginative fiction provides a space to make sense of the past outside the bounds of traditional historical narrative,⁵¹ she also acknowledges that this process can be both a nightmare and a challenge for writers:

[It is] a nightmare if his or her relation to it remains imprisoned in the fixed relations and attitudes of the region’s linear past; a challenge if he or she exploits the artist’s freedom to endow history and experience with figurative meanings and explores other areas of experience beyond the rational linear order.⁵²

This process of ‘working through’ presents its own set of difficulties, requiring postcolonial writers to reconcile colonial history with a desire to expand upon and confront this narrative.

In the Introduction to this thesis, I discussed the lack of a widely known literary canon from Belize. As a result, Edgell is predominantly defined as a Caribbean

⁵⁰ Wilson-Tagoe, *Historical Thought and Literary Representation in West Indian Literature*, xi.

⁵¹ Wilson-Tagoe, *Historical Thought and Literary Representation in West Indian Literature*, x.

⁵² *Ibid*, 4

writer although she is often overlooked in critical accounts of Caribbean writing, despite the success of her first novel, *Beka Lamb* (1981). Edgell's novels sit within a broader context of Creolised literature, which engages the 'presences' of both Africa and Europe to varying degrees. The impact of the European novelistic tradition is certainly recognisable in Edgell's work, which follows traditional structures of form and style. This novelistic narrative tradition is rooted in the earliest 'slave narratives' of the region. Although there were no slave narratives published from Belize, its status as a former British colony strengthens its ties to the Anglophone Caribbean, where, although publication remained in the shadow of US authored texts, a number of narratives were published.⁵³ Slave narratives have been traditionally viewed through the lens of the white abolitionist framework and the most famous slave narratives adopted European literary tropes and conventions of style and format. Although recent scholarship has expanded the traditional perception of slave narratives to consider a broader range of documentation, locations and voices, the development of a Caribbean literary tradition has been shaped by the slave narratives of the region.⁵⁴ Booker and Juraga have commented upon the "strong European influence"⁵⁵ exhibited in Caribbean authored texts and argue that: "the very fact that the novel has been the most single important form taken by Caribbean literature itself is [...] a legacy

⁵³ For more information about the specific development of Caribbean Slave Narratives, see Nicole. N Aljoe, "Caribbean Slave Narratives: Creole in Form and Genre," *Anthurium* 2, no. 4 (2004).

⁵⁴ For a further discussion of the development of the slave narrative outside the traditional boundaries of the abolitionist movement, see Nicole. N Aljoe and Ian Finseth, *Journeys of the Slave Narrative in the Early Americas* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2014)..

⁵⁵Keith Booker and Dubravka Juraga, *The Caribbean Novel in English: An Introduction* (Portsmouth: Heinemann, 2000), 5.

of the area's European heritage.”⁵⁶ Like the authors of slave narratives, early Caribbean writers sought to emulate the novelistic tradition, seeking to adopt the language of those who held the balance of power. As Dabydeen and Wilson-Tagoe have argued, the development of Caribbean literature is a product of the experiences of the region, which “reflects the progress of West Indian engagement with history, with political and social adjustments.”⁵⁷ Literature developed in the Caribbean also reflects the changing nature of the relationships between colonies and metropolises.

Whilst other Caribbean authors have gone on to experiment with variations in style, format, and subject matter,⁵⁸ Edgell's fiction remains overwhelmingly loyal to the European novelistic tradition, but the 'presence' of Africa is also interwoven throughout her novels via the actions and words of certain characters and descriptions of African-derived traditions and sites of colonial resistance. Indeed, Murray has suggested that a strong feature of Creolised literature is connection to an oral tradition, which comprises folk-tales, myths and songs: “The resulting cultural diversity reflects a historical relationship with the languages of the Native Americans; the Caribs; the Arawaks, the Taino and the Ciboney, [...] and slaves from Africa or South America.”⁵⁹ A focus upon women as the bearers of orality is

⁵⁶ Booker and Juraga, *The Caribbean Novel in English: An Introduction*, 5.

⁵⁷ David Dabydeen and David Wilson-Tagoe, *A Reader's Guide to West Indian and Black British Literature* (Kingston-upon-Thames, Surrey: Dangaroo Press, 1987), 130.

⁵⁸ For a more detailed discussion, see Helen Scott, *Caribbean Women Writers and Globalisation* (Hampshire and Burlington: Ashgate, 2006), 5.

⁵⁹ Melanie A. Murray, *Island Paradise: The Myth, An Examination of Contemporary Caribbean and Sri Lankan Writing* (Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2009), 2.

a key critical insight in the genre of Caribbean women's writing. In her discussion of Merle Hodge's novel *Crick Crack Monkey*⁶⁰ published in 1970, Juneja has argued that contemporary usage of the oral tradition is particularly noticeable in novels by Caribbean women, often functioning as a subversive method of breaking away from the language of colonial dominance:

Orality often functions as a counter-discourse to voicelessness [...] Telling of stories, listening to stories is an important element in the lives of these women for these stories embody the counter-culture and subvert the norms of the established culture.

Similarly, Hoving argues for the specificity of the female voice in utilising the oral tradition:

Just as women's experience of life differs from men's [...] their strategies of appropriation and abrogation of both national and colonial languages and discourses are always specific, and therefore we find a different perception of voice and silence in women's novels and poetry, and other relationships to oral genres.⁶¹

Adopting and representing an oral tradition also enables a connection to the language and cultural traditions of ancestors. Denise Decaires Narain has argued that "in the context of the Caribbean, 'the oral', particularly as it is manifested in Creole speech, has become the key marker of cultural authenticity and is frequently invoked as metonymic of the everyday texture of women's lives."⁶² Significantly, this context is often placed in opposition to the "cultural

⁶⁰ Merle Hodge, *Crick Crack Monkey*, (London: Heinemann, 1981).

⁶¹ Isabel Hoving, *In Praise of New Travellers: Reading Caribbean Migrant Women's Writing* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2001), 6.

⁶² Denise Decaires Narain, "Writing 'Home': Mediating Between 'The Local' and 'The Literary' in a Selection of Postcolonial Women's Texts," *Third World Quarterly* 26, no. 3 (2005): 498.

values inherent to Standard English and European literary forms.”⁶³ Characters such as Granny Ivy, in *Beka Lamb*, emphasise this ‘continuity’ of tradition, where Edgell acknowledges origins and celebrates the link between Belize and an African homeland, thus strengthening communicative memories. Ivy is also one of a few characters who vocalises elements of Creole speech, which links her to an ‘authentic’ lineage and sets her in opposition to those characters in the novel who identify and align with British colonial values.

Edgell has stated that a goal of her fiction is to present the point of view of someone who “wrestles daily with the complexities and contradictions of being a writer, female, Black Creole and Belizean.”⁶⁴ As noted above, her fiction is imbued with the presences of Europe and Africa, but also reflects Belize’s ‘new world’ identity. Edgell’s relationship with Belize is one of the most enduring themes in her fiction. She has been quoted as saying that Belize itself always functions as a major character in her work: “not just [as] a backdrop [but] an integral part of the narrative.”⁶⁵ Although it is important to consider her location within a collective of Caribbean women writers, this third, ‘new world’ presence, must also be acknowledged. While Edgell’s novels encompass many of the characteristics of Caribbean women’s fiction, the degree to which they engage the tropes of this genre varies as time progresses, a process which mirrors the parallel, shifting concerns of the critiques of the genre.

⁶³ Decaires Narain, "Writing 'Home': Mediating Between 'The Local' and 'The Literary' in a Selection of Postcolonial Women's Texts," 498.

⁶⁴ Edgell, "Belize: A Literary Perspective," 1.

⁶⁵ McClaurin, "A Writer's Life: A Country's Transition." 38.

Beka Lamb was published in the early 1980s, in line with a proliferation of female-authored texts from the Caribbean.⁶⁶ In response to what is broadly seen as a 'boom' in the genre, a critical framework for the analysis of Caribbean women's literature was also established and a set of common, recognisable concerns was identified.⁶⁷ Examples of these concerns include a female (often adolescent) perspective, a focus on mother-daughter relationships, and a strong sense of place, space and landscape.⁶⁸ The influences of race and class, and the destructive power that these classifications exert upon women, are also explored, in particular, the way in which these classifications affect women's mental state.⁶⁹ A number of these themes are visible in Edgell's novels, *Beka Lamb* in particular. The novel focuses on female subjectivity and follows Beka's journey as she interacts with colonial structures, such as her convent school, and her relationships with her mother, father, and best friend, Toycie, who descends into madness following her unplanned pregnancy. While *Beka Lamb* contains many of the conventional literary tropes identified in early critical frameworks, and indeed, was part of the wave of novels published during this time period that

⁶⁶ For example, Michelle Cliff, *Claiming an Identity They Taught me to Despise* (London: Persephone Press, 1980); Michelle Cliff, *Abeng* (New York: Plume, 1984); Maryse Condé, *Heremakhonon* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1982); Maryse Condé, *Tree of Life* (London: Women's Press, 1987); Jamaica Kincaid, *Annie John* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1983); Jamaica Kincaid, *A Small Place* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1988); Merle Hodge, *Crick Crack Monkey* (London: Heinemann, 1981).

⁶⁷ See Carol Boyce Davis and Elaine Savory Fido, eds., *Out of the Kumbla: Caribbean Women Writers and Literature* (Trenton NJ: Africa World Press, 1990); Evelyn O'Callaghan, *Woman Version: Theoretical Approaches to West Indian Fiction by Women* (London and Basingstoke: Macmillan Caribbean, 1993).

⁶⁸ O'Callaghan, *Woman Version: Theoretical Approaches to West Indian Fiction by Women*, 3-5.

⁶⁹ *Ibid*, 3-5.

helped to establish them, Edgell's later novels are more complex. *In Times Like These*, *The Festival of Saint Joaquin* and *Time and the River*, each move away from the straightforward bildungsroman structure of *Beka Lamb*, to address the fractured identities of women in Belize across a broad historical timeframe. *In Times Like These* is characterised by themes of class and socioeconomic development. It tells the story of a single mother who accepts a role in the newly formed Women's Unit of the Belizean Government in the run-up to independence from Britain in 1981. As previously noted, *Time and the River* reimagines the period of slavery in Belize from multiple perspectives, including a slave girl, Leah, who later comes into a fortune after marrying a white settler. *The Festival of Saint Joaquin* is not discussed in detail in the thesis, yet it warrants attention here for its subject matter. Told from the point of view of a Mestizo woman who has recently been released from jail after murdering her husband, the novel does not have a straightforward place within the models of Caribbean women's writing outlined above. Similarly, although the predominant subject position explored in Edgell's novels is that of the Black Creole woman, which reinforces Black Creole dominance in Belize, Edgell's novels also feature Mestizo, Mayan and Black Carib characters, all of which prevent straightforward classification of the novels as 'Caribbean.' As a result, the early critical frameworks have some limitations when considering Edgell's writing.

As the genre of Caribbean women's writing has grown, its critical frameworks have also expanded to develop a broader lens of analysis. Conde and Lonsdale

open the introduction of their 1999 study with a discussion around the difficulties of classifying Caribbean women writers. 'Grouping' women under a particular nationality, for example, must consider the following sub-categories: "the area from which writers come, the area in which they now live, the settings which they use, their ethnic descent, the generation to which they belong."⁷⁰ This discussion recognises the diverse subject position that Edgell writes from and sets out the framework for a later chapter on *Beka Lamb* that appears in the collection. Alison Donnell also notes the way in which female writers from the Caribbean are often classified under a collective gendered identity, a process, she suggests, that does not occur when considering male writers from the region who are able to retain their own distinct identities.⁷¹ Linked to her rejection of the concept of collective classification, Donnell also rejects the concept that Caribbean women's writing "explode[d] out of voicelessness in the 1970s and 1980s."⁷² Instead, she focuses upon the omissions present in the genre: women writing prior to the 1970s for example, or texts written by non-black women from the Caribbean. Although *Beka Lamb* can be straightforwardly identified as a text written by a Black Creole woman during the 'boom' years (and hence part of the narrow parameters of the genre which Donnell takes issue with) her framework is relevant to Edgell's later novels. These texts display a broader scope of character, context and themes, thus rendering earlier critical insights insufficient.

⁷⁰ Mary Conde and Thorunn Lonsdale, *Caribbean Women's Writers: Fiction in English* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 1999), 1.

⁷¹ Alison Donnell, *Twentieth Century Caribbean Literature: Critical Moments in Anglophone Literature* (London and New York, 2006), 4.

⁷² Donnell, *Twentieth Century Caribbean Literature: Critical Moments in Anglophone Literature*, 142.

Indeed, Donnell argues that a pressing need exists for critics of the genre to connect to a broader concept of what it means to be a female Caribbean writer:

It seems absolutely crucial to an appreciation of Caribbean women's writing that women are restored, not only as writers but in all their historical dimensions – as slaves, as rebels, as mothers, as workers. The absence of an open conversation between feminist historiographers and literary critics until very recently, seems to underwrite the neglect of Caribbean women in the accounts of history that these studies present in their turn to the US or Britain for an historical context.⁷³

Donnell's call to 'restore' women to their historical identities speaks directly to the aims of this thesis, specifically my discussion around how Edgell negotiates, engages with, and re-writes key moments from Belize's history. The diverse nature of Edgell's later heroines – a middle-aged public servant, a Mestizo woman found guilty of murder, and a slave girl who goes on to become mistress of a large estate – each represent a neglected voice that sits on the periphery of the genre of Caribbean women's writing.

Helen Scott's 2006 study on Caribbean women's writing and globalisation also departs from earlier critical frameworks that assess Caribbean women's writing by instead employing a materialist literary approach. Like Donnell's call to recognise the marginalised perspective of Caribbean women's historical dimensions, Scott argues for the centrality of class, a category which she notes is often marginalised in favour of an emphasis upon gender, race, sexuality and

⁷³ Donnell, *Twentieth Century Caribbean Literature: Critical Moments in Anglophone Literature*, 142.

nationality.⁷⁴ Rather than focus on the ways in which women's voices have been silenced because of their gender, Scott argues that women's "experience of oppression varies qualitatively and quantitatively with class"⁷⁵ and that this experience emerges "thematically and figuratively in a broad range of Caribbean women's literature."⁷⁶ Edgell's fiction is certainly relevant to Scott's argument, with class being a pervasive theme in all of her novels. The downtrodden characters of National Vellor (in *Beka Lamb*) and Junie Silver (in *In Times Like These*) represent lower-class, fallen women who are rejected by everyone in society, including other women. In *Beka Lamb*, Beka's best friend Toycie is poor but academically gifted, yet when she becomes pregnant, she is outcast by the community, leading to her descent into madness, and an untimely death. In *Time and the River*, the rigid class structure of Belizean slave society illustrates the varying experiences of oppression endured by the different female characters in the novel, in particular the slave girl, Leah, who works for rich white women and covets their lifestyle, and later becomes the mistress of an estate, leading to her rejection by her former friends.

Scott also argues for an indigenous perspective of Caribbean women's writing, which recognises the specificity of the local. The women's literature she analyses is:

⁷⁴ Scott, *Caribbean Women Writers and Globalisation*, 6.

⁷⁵ Scott, *Caribbean Women Writers and Globalisation*, 8.

⁷⁶ *Ibid*, 17.

Acutely aware of national specifications – of flora, fauna, language, art, food, religion – and of the force of the national economy and institutions – political, military, juridical.⁷⁷

Edgell's commitment to Belize ensures that these national specifications are wholly represented within her fiction; a process which prohibits a straightforward space for her in traditional models of Caribbean women's writing. Scott's framework is more appropriate for situating Edgell: Scott does not view Caribbean women's literature as a revised version of history, but argues that literature expresses a moment in time, echoing diverse social, economic and political change. Edgell's literary project confirms this expression: she does not simply amend history, but actively challenges it, reimagining key moments from marginalised perspectives.

Nation, Identity and Narrative

Edgell's fiction can, then, be situated in relation to Creolised, Caribbean women's writing but she is also a Belizean writer, and therefore questions concerning the nation and national identity are at the heart of her novels. I discussed the Belizean literary landscape in the Introduction to this thesis. Here, I consider the ways in which Edgell's novels address key moments in the development of the Belizean nation and the relationship between her work and Belize itself. Any discussion of Belize must also acknowledge its cultural and ethnic diversity and the way in which a historically-produced narrative has enabled a Creole

⁷⁷ Ibid, 19.

constituency to remain dominant. As I discussed in the Introduction to this thesis, Belize is located on the Central American mainland, but sits on the edge of the Caribbean Sea, with the nearest ex-British colony some 700 miles away in Jamaica. As a result, it occupies an uncertain space: part of both spheres but not truly 'belonging' to either. As a Black Creole woman, what does it mean, then, for Edgell to narrate the nation? This question speaks to Scott's work; indeed, a central tenet of Scott's argument suggests that the hybrid nature of Caribbean women's experience links them, inextricably, to the nation state. Of the nation, she writes, "it has negative and positive resonance – as a confining space and as a self-anchoring point of reference."⁷⁸ Boehmer has also drawn attention to the contradictions that arise when describing the role of the nation, which can be "deployed to reactionary and progressive ends; as a means to self-determination and social justice for an entire people [...] *and* as an oppressive formation run in the interests of an elite."⁷⁹

Edgell's novels are often discussed in terms of nationhood and national identity, in particular the fractured relationship between her female characters and the nation state. Trambach's study explores the "literary aspirations of women who challenge destructive gender ideologies in Belize" in the specific context of Belize's political history as a British colony and the nationalist movement of the

⁷⁸ Ibid, 19.

⁷⁹ Elleke Boehmer, *Stories of Women: Gender and Narrative in the Postcolonial Nation* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005), 4.

1950s.⁸⁰ Moody-Freeman has discussed Edgell's novels in the context of "the muted history of slavery and colonization in Belize" and how this history has "shaped the development of the colony and independent nation."⁸¹ Moody-Freeman also identifies women as a central force in the "nation-building process in colonial and postcolonial Belize."⁸² I discuss the work of Kirsten Mahlis more extensively in Chapter Five, but for now I note her critique of *In Times Like These*, which focuses on central character, Pavana's, interwoven journey with the national formation of Belize, and the way in which the novel "recovers the displaced narratives of Belizean women and, in doing so, presents a compelling alternative to masculinist concepts of nation and national identity."⁸³ Pitts' analysis focuses on *Beka Lamb* and argues for the way in which Edgell is able to "reconceptualise the Belizean nation" whilst simultaneously attempting "to re/locate women from the margins to the centre of nationalist discourses."⁸⁴ Finally, the work of Christopher De Shield on *Beka Lamb* is discussed in more detail later in this chapter. De Shield' work utilises empirical evidence from those located within and outside Belize who have taught or written about the novel. In doing so, he addresses the novel's critical reception in the context of Edgell's close ties to the Belizean nation and the implications of this role.⁸⁵

⁸⁰ Monica Trumbach, *Rethinking the Female Body: Gender and Nation in Zee Edgell's Belize* (MA Concordia University, 2000).

⁸¹ Julie Moody-Freeman, "Zee Edgell: Novelist as historian/activist: (Re)imagining Nation," *African Identities* 7, no.1 (2009), 33.

⁸² Moody-Freeman, "Zee Edgell: Novelist as historian/activist," 33.

⁸³ Kristen Mahlis, "Women and Nationhood in Zee Edgell's *In Times Like These*," *Ariel: A Review of International English Literature* 31, no. 3 (2000): 125.

⁸⁴ Candice Pitts, "Belize – A Nation (Still) in the Making," *Wasafiri* 31, no. 3 (2016): 13.

⁸⁵ Christopher De Shield, "Writer, Nation, Text: Beka Lamb and the Metonymic Trinity," *Belizean Studies* 3, no. 10 (2010).

The multiple examples which consider Edgell's work in the context of the nation represent the centralised place that her novels occupy in Belizean cultural consciousness. In a former colony like Belize, where the country's national identity is both irrevocably interwoven with that of the ex-colonial power and simultaneously defined in opposition to it, Edgell's location in the literary and cultural landscape of the country enacts the tension described by Boehmer above: between self-determination and oppression.⁸⁶ This tension also reflects the contradiction in Edgell's work: of simultaneously telling untold stories whilst also adhering to the historical 'record'. Edgell's writing is intertwined with Belize; she uses the relationship between her novels and the country's history as a mechanism to establish autonomy, but she is also at the mercy of, and, to use Boehmer's words, 'oppressed' by, Belize's cultural memory. Cultural memory in Belize has been defined by a reliance on colonial narratives and the "myth of origin", so the way in which Edgell both engages with and challenges these narratives in her fiction is a key concern of this thesis. Cultural memory and the 'cultural texts' it shapes and produces are in service, to a large degree, to the nation itself and its subsequent national narrative and memory. In addition, Edgell's gender ascribes further implications to her role in voicing the nation; as Mayer has argued, the "cultural construct" of nationalism is: "the language through which sexual control and repression (specifically but not exclusively, of women and homosexuals) is justified and masculine prowess is expressed and

⁸⁶ Boehmer, *Stories of Women: Gender and Narrative in the Postcolonial Nation*, 4.

exercised.”⁸⁷ Finally, although Edgell’s novels represent the ethnic diversity of Belizeans, the predominant subject position explored is that of the Black Creole woman, a factor which reinforces the historic status of the Black Creole population in Belize.

Brenan argues that all nations are “imaginary constructs” which depend “on an apparatus of cultural fictions in which imaginative literature plays a decisive role.”⁸⁸ Although Brenan focuses on the rise of the novel in Western Europe, his argument is equally applicable to ex-colonies like Belize, given its young age as an independent nation. For Brenan, the novel historically accompanied the rise of nations:

By objectifying the ‘one yet many’ of national life and by mimicking the structure of nation, a clearly bordered jumble of languages and styles [...] its manner of presentation allowed people to imagine the special community that was the nation.⁸⁹

Writing about fictions of nation, Boehmer concurs, suggesting that:

Narrative, like metaphor, can be said to have a discursive materiality; therefore, the story of the nation permits the forging and testing of particular kinds of affiliation to the national community. Stories [...] *embody* nations, inscribing a national destiny into time and injecting new life into its myths of the past.⁹⁰

⁸⁷ Tamar Mayer, "Gender Ironies of Nationalism: Setting the Stage," in *Gender Ironies of Nationalism: Sexing the Nation*, ed. Tamar Mayer (New York: Routledge, 2000), 1.

⁸⁸ Timothy Brenan, "The National Longing for Form," in *Nation and Narration*, ed. Homi K. Bhabha (New York: Routledge, 1990), 49.

⁸⁹ Brenan, "The National Longing for Form," 49.

⁹⁰ Boehmer, *Stories of Women: Gender and Narrative in the Postcolonial Nation*, 11.

According to Mayer, novelists and nations function as: “keeper[s] of the past [...] ensuring that memories of communal suffering survive.”⁹¹ Yet the nation is a contested space: on one hand it is a place of opposition “from which to resist the multiple ways in which colonialism distorts and disfigures a people’s history”⁹²; on the other, it generates a legitimising, hegemonic narrative that binds a people together using the markers of an ‘invented tradition’, for example, songs, celebrations, flags and rituals, all of which imply belonging to Anderson’s now famous idea of the nation as an “imagined community.”⁹³ A further contradiction for postcolonial societies is the tension between the desire to assert autonomy and break away from colonial structures and the continued influence of these structures. This tension is something which is also embedded within national narratives, and in societies like Belize, which have retained close ties to the ex-colonial power, it is impossible to extricate the influence of this presence completely. As Boehmer has noted: “the nation may be more than a mere counter-force and mirror image to the colonial power it resists.”⁹⁴

Gender is a dimension which is also central to the construction of the nation. The relationship between gender and nation is a key concern for Edgell. From Toycie’s shameful pregnancy and subsequent downfall in *Beka Lamb*, to the disadvantaged position of the Women’s Unit in the Belizean Government,

⁹¹ Mayer, "Gender Ironies of Nationalism: Setting the Stage," 1.

⁹² Boehmer, *Stories of Women: Gender and Narrative in the Postcolonial Nation*, 10.

⁹³ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London and New York: Verso, 2006).

⁹⁴ Boehmer, *Stories of Women: Gender and Narrative in the Postcolonial Nation*, 10.

discussed in *In Times Like These*, Edgell's novels explore the marginalised roles that women occupy in relation to the nation, and how these roles have developed over time. Both men and women are assigned gender-specific roles in relation to national identity. Mayer notes: "Men take the liberty to define the nation and the nation-building process, while women for the most part accept their obligation to reproduce the nation biologically and symbolically."⁹⁵ Additionally, powerful cultural stereotypes such as the 'mother country' and the 'father of the nation' reinscribe gendered roles for men and women in the project of nation building. Chapter Two noted the violence enacted on the bodies of female slaves and the absence of women in the founding myths of the nation. These factors, combined with women being traditionally confined to the domestic sphere in Belizean slave society, has meant that women have continued to be placed into this familial role, with the role of mother being privileged above all others. Motherhood is a theme which runs through all of Edgell's novels but is most visible in *In Times Like These*. In Chapter Two, I described the work of Janet Momsen, who, while acknowledging a culture "of patriarchy, of female subordination and dependence" in Caribbean slave societies, has also documented the strong tradition of women-centred households in the Caribbean.⁹⁶ This contradiction illustrates the dual nature of women's roles: "Caribbean gender relations are a double paradox: of patriarchy within a system of matrifocal and matrilocal families; and of domestic

⁹⁵ Mayer, "Gender Ironies of Nationalism: Setting the Stage," 16.

⁹⁶ Janet H. Momsen, "Introduction" in *Women and Change in the Caribbean: A Pan-Caribbean Perspective*, ed. Janet Momsen (London: James Currey, Kingston & Jamaica: Ian Randle, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), 1.

ideology co-existing with the economic independence of women.”⁹⁷ As a consequence of Belizean women’s historical placement in the domestic sphere, the stereotypical role of mother has persisted. Edgell directly reimagines the persistency of such stereotypes in her fiction. Indeed, in the same way that fiction can be used to dispute the oppressiveness of colonialism, it can also be used to challenge traditional concepts of gender roles and provide a space for women to explore other facets of identity that sit outside the traditional mother/domestic sphere. As Boehmer notes:

By conveying women’s give-and-take between public and private spaces, women writers use the novel as a powerful instrument with which to reshape national cultures in a way more hospitable to women’s presence.⁹⁸

This action is a necessary one, particularly given the ‘ideal’ of femininity that was celebrated throughout the colonial period, which has remained embedded in structural institutions such as the church and education system across the Caribbean, and, indeed, in Belize.

In addition to fiction’s ability to challenge ingrained national stereotypes, during the decolonisation period in the Caribbean it was also used to overtly reject colonialism and support the concept of a ‘new’ nation. Although I agree with Donnell’s argument that the scope of Caribbean women’s writing must extend beyond the creative ‘boom’ period of the 1970s and 1980s, I acknowledge that literature produced during this period has a strong connection to new concepts of

⁹⁷ Momsen, “Introduction,” 1.

⁹⁸ Boehmer, *Stories of Women: Gender and Narrative in the Postcolonial Nation*, 12.

nation. Indeed, the concept of 'post-independence' fiction speaks directly to *Beka Lamb*. The novel was published on the eve of Belizean independence from Britain and describes an account of the first independence movement of the 1950s: a period of time which saw the development of a political consciousness amongst the working classes across the Caribbean. Boehmer has argued that novels published as part of the 'first wave' of Anglophone postcolonial fiction (of which *Beka Lamb* is one) produced historical or realistic accounts and were "shaped in the service of national politics".⁹⁹ Scott has similarly described literature written in the period of independence struggles as "consciously nationalist".¹⁰⁰ In her discussion of V.S Reid's *A New Day*, Wilson-Tagoe notes how pressure for political change: "facilitated an important historical awareness that became part of a growing sense of a West Indian people distinct from other groups."¹⁰¹ This new concept of national consciousness then emerged through Reid's novel. The way in which writers used fiction, poetry and drama to vocalise their dissatisfaction with colonial rule and to assert the idea of independence became a characteristic feature of postcolonial writing. Edgell's writing broadly follows this trajectory; her novels move from embodying the hopes and desires of the nation in *Beka Lamb* before shifting to challenge dominant national narratives through the focus on women's roles in *In Times Like these* and confronting the pervasive, colonial-oriented "myth of origin" in *Time and the River*. Yet

⁹⁹ Boehmer, *Stories of Women: Gender and Narrative in the Postcolonial Nation*, 146.

¹⁰⁰ Scott, *Caribbean Women Writers and Globalisation*, 17.

¹⁰¹ Wilson-Tagoe, *Historical Thought and Literary Representation*, 43.

throughout, she consistently maintains a strong link to the known 'national' story, and this link is a key feature of her writing.

Edgell represents the 'type' of postcolonial writer who "assume(s) that a story helps to constitute nationhood or forms the cultural wealth of the nation."¹⁰²

Writing about *Beka Lamb*, Christopher De Shield has argued that Edgell can only be considered alongside the nation; her place in Belize's literary imagination: "is too attractive and important for any consideration outside the nation."¹⁰³

Although Edgell's desire to 'write the nation' has remained a pervasive theme in her writing, the subjects she has addressed and the way her novels have been commercially and critically received varies considerably. *Beka Lamb*, for example, is firmly embedded into Belizean national consciousness. Taught on the Belizean high school curriculum, the novel is treasured by Belizean readers, who describe it as relevant and 'authentic.'¹⁰⁴ As noted previously, its protagonist is a young Black Creole girl, but the text also represents a broad spectrum of ethnic groups in Belize. De Shield has gone on to suggest that Edgell's strong ties to Belize, and the perceived 'truths' inherent within *Beka Lamb*, implicate her in a power dialectic with the Belizean national government. He cites the invitation received by Edgell from the Belizean government to appear as a visiting dignitary at the launch of *Time and the River* to illustrate this implication. De Shield suggests that, "by rearticulating founding myths of the nation in print and placing

¹⁰² Boehmer, *Stories of Women: Gender and Narrative in the Postcolonial Nation*, 146.

¹⁰³ De Shield, "Writer, Nation, Text: Beka Lamb and the Metonymic Trinity," 14.

¹⁰⁴ De Shield, "Writer, Nation, Text: Beka Lamb and the Metonymic Trinity," 5.

the contingent historical moment within a literal, textual narrative, Edgell preserves the territorial, sovereign legitimacy of the nation.”¹⁰⁵ In *Beka Lamb*, Edgell retells stories that characterised a significant moment in Belize’s history, which is remembered nostalgically and, in doing so, becomes complicit within the ‘preservation’ of this particular moment, which represented hope for the future and a strong desire for political change. That the novel has remained so close to the hearts of Belizeans is symbolic of how the story has become embedded within Belize’s cultural memory. Viewed from this perspective, the novel functions as a ‘cultural text’; it “transmits [...] cultural, national or religious identity as well as shared values and norms.”¹⁰⁶ Yet as Pitts has argued: “One of the underlying assumptions of the novel is that the colonial infrastructure of Belize informs the formation of the nation-state.”¹⁰⁷ Although *Beka Lamb* does not overtly challenge the ‘myth of origin’, the text describes the St George’s Caye day parade, and normalises colonial values throughout; thus representing ideals which remain deeply entrenched in Belizean society.

Edgell has suggested that the success of *Beka Lamb* stems from the “idealism, hopefulness and innocence”¹⁰⁸ of the novel which is set during a time period which is still active within the ‘communicative memory’ of Belize. The years that follow the period in which *Beka Lamb* is set, however, were predominantly

¹⁰⁵ Ibid, 29.

¹⁰⁶ Erll, *Memory in Culture*, 162.

¹⁰⁷ Pitts, "Belize – A Nation (Still) in the Making," 13.

¹⁰⁸ McClaurin, "A Writer’s Life: A Country’s Transition," 44.

characterised by political stagnation and lack of change. That the idealistic shift presented in *Beka Lamb* did not materialise, foreshadows the way in which Edgell's later novels adopt a more critical view of the nation, particularly in terms of women's roles and colonially-dominated histories. Although *Beka Lamb* promotes a positive perception of the nation, thus preserving its legitimacy as De Shield suggests, Edgell's later novels reverse this action. Instead, a more overt challenge to Belize's national identity and cultural memory is displayed, and fictions of memory which insist upon marginalised stories from the past being heard are produced. In simultaneously legitimising and challenging narratives of history and nation, Edgell represents a hybrid national voice: her novels are multifaceted and do not promote a single national narrative. In line with the development of the Caribbean women's writing category itself, her novels move away from a collective identity to a place of difference, insisting on the inclusion of Belizean women's stories and readdressing a British colonial bias in the history of the country.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have identified Edgell's novels as 'collective' texts, which "circulate, and shape contents of cultural memory"¹⁰⁹ and, in certain cases, as 'cultural texts' which "transmit – cultural, national or religious identity as well as shared values and norms."¹¹⁰ Edgell's novels also function as 'fictions of

¹⁰⁹ Erll, *Memory in Culture*, 164.

¹¹⁰ Erll, *Memory in Culture*, 162.

memory', voicing previously unspoken stories and representing a challenge to hegemonic narratives of nation and culture. This chapter has also traced the development of the Caribbean women's literary tradition in order to situate my readings of Edgell's novels in the forthcoming chapters. I have argued for the way in which these novels both embody and represent the genre of Caribbean women's writing, and also depart from it. Edgell has been established as a 'national' writer, but, over time, as the nation of Belize has changed and developed, Edgell's approach and focus has also progressed. In many ways, Edgell's fiction is emblematic of the complexities that define Caribbean women's writing. She is at once aligned with the Caribbean region yet insists on being recognised as a Belizean writer, with all of the specificities that this identity brings. Grouping women writers under a collective heading encourages unity and coherence across the genre, but this definition is not flexible enough to encompass the myriad of differences that exist, not only between Belize and the rest of the Caribbean, but between the various islands in the archipelago. Conversely, it is insufficient to situate and define Edgell's writing purely in terms of her (and Belize's) difference to the rest of the Caribbean; Edgell must be located in the 'new world' juncture defined by Hall, the "beginning of diaspora, of diversity, of hybridity".¹¹¹

Through her fiction, Edgell addresses the legacies of colonialism: from the period of slavery, to the moment of the first independence movement which signified a

¹¹¹ Hall, "Cultural Identity and Diaspora", 235

culmination of working class resistance, to the point where Belize finally achieved independence from Britain. In doing so, she recasts the deeply-rooted myths that have characterised Belize's engagement with its past up until this point. Through the vehicle of imaginative fiction, writers are able to interrogate and explore the idea of identity, and, subsequently, begin to rewrite the dominant narratives of cultural memory. As Hall has observed: "Identity is always a question of producing in the future an account of the past [...] It is always about narratives; the stories which cultures tell themselves about who they are and where they came from".¹¹² In the creation of 'fictions of memory', Edgell is able to explore imaginatively what has been silenced and find new ways of engaging with the past, memory, and identity.

¹¹² Stuart Hall, "Negotiating Caribbean Identities," *New Left Review* 209 (1995): 5.

Chapter Four - Colonial Resistance and Colonial Legacies: Memory, Gender and the Nation in *Beka Lamb*

In the last chapter, I discussed Caribbean women's writing in order to situate Edgell within a recognisable canon and to contextualise her fiction, particularly her relationship with the nation of Belize. Featuring a number of the motifs of Caribbean women's writing discussed in the previous chapter, Edgell's first novel, *Beka Lamb*, can be located in earlier critical models of the genre, yet the novel also places Belize firmly at the heart of its concerns. Set on the eve of the first Belizean independence movement in the 1950s, the novel is intimately tied to the development of Belize with the central character, Beka's, growth and development functioning, in part, as an allegory for the young nation. Published in 1982, the year after Belizean independence, the novel looks back, nostalgically, to the inception of this movement and taps into feelings of national pride, national identity and 'coming of age' (both Beka, and Belize itself). Rather than present a challenge to colonial history and the "myth of origin", as Edgell goes on to do in *Time and the River*, *Beka Lamb* comments instead on the legacies of slavery, and the way in which colonial values have become assimilated and normalised in Belizean society, particularly for women. At the same time, she reimagines a key period in Belize's history, when the country was in the throes of extracting itself from centuries of colonial dominance and attempting to establish its independence.

Beka Lamb is influenced by all of the ‘presences’ identified by Hall, and noted in the previous chapter. Africa – realised through the description of the wake, for example, and Europe – manifested most clearly through the character of Lilla, and normalised colonial practices. With Belize’s self-determination at its heart, *Beka Lamb* also explores the complexity of the ‘new world’ considering the way in which colonial values are beginning to be destabilised and identifying specific sites of colonial resistance. Although the plot situates Beka’s story against a backdrop of present-day political change, *Beka Lamb* is also a novel which is infused with the past: myth, legend, folk-tale, and storytelling are drawn on throughout. I agree with Moody-Freeman’s reading of *Beka Lamb*, which argues that the use of the wake is one of many “carefully placed cultural signifiers, which allude to a history of slavery and resistance in Belize that has too often been untold and muted in Belize’s historiography.”¹ Moody-Freeman’s argument is significant for this thesis, with its focus on the memory of slavery, and is certainly a key way in which Edgell comments upon the contested nature of the past in Belize. Whilst Moody-Freeman’s piece highlights Edgell’s identification of various sites of resistance, it does not address the complex, conflicted relationship between past and present that exists in the novel. In terms of the broader themes of this thesis, *Beka Lamb* is not wholly comfortable with the past, and this discomfort is frequently alluded to in the text, as the community and country is forcefully dragged into the present. Complicating this shift further is a selective remembering of past events: in *Beka Lamb* Edgell reflects upon the way in which

¹Julie Moody-Freeman, "Waking the Gone: Nine Nights as Cultural Remembrance of an African Heritage in Belizean Literature," *Resources for Feminist Research* 31, no. 3/4 (2006).

the development of the “myth of origin” and its pervasive effect on Belizean society has led to the memory of slavery being excluded and distorted in cultural narrative and official remembrance. The on-going tension between past and present in the novel illustrates the uneasy relationship that exists with the darker areas of Belizean history; the novel’s characters are often burdened by the weight of the troubling legacies of the colonial past and its traumatic after-effects.

The novel documents seven months in the life of a fourteen-year-old Black Creole girl, Beka Lamb, and begins on the day that she wins a prestigious essay contest at her convent school. References are also made to Beka’s friend, Toycie, who has died, and to the personal wake Beka holds in lieu of an official celebration of Toycie’s life: “Beka felt that a wake should have been held for Toycie, at least a remembrance in the privacy of Beka’s own heart.”² As a post-colonial *bildungsroman*, the novel follows a number of significant events in Beka’s life, which enable her to grow and mature. The most pertinent of these are the pregnancy, descent into madness and untimely death of Toycie; retaking a year at school due to her prior academic failing; the death of her Great Grandmother; and winning the aforementioned essay contest. Whilst retaining a number of tropes familiar from Caribbean women’s writing, the novel is also intimately concerned with the fate of Belize itself and thus also requires reading through the hybrid lens suggested by Donnell, to establish the particularities of its existence as a Belizean novel.

² Zee Edgell, *Beka Lamb* (Harlow: Heinemann, 1982), 4. All references are to this edition and are given in the text.

Beka Lamb: National Allegory

In Chapter Three, I discussed the ways in which *Beka Lamb* has been aligned with the development of the Belizean nation. Postcolonial novels of nation occupy a conflicted space: on one hand representing a positive vehicle of self-expression and self-determination, set in opposition to the hegemonic order; on the other, repeating and reflecting the colonial values that have become intrinsically woven into the cultural and national memory of the country. A number of critics have noted the way in which Beka's and Belize's journeys to self-fulfilment are linked: De Shield has described the text as "an independence-era West-Indian novel-of-development"³, whilst Newson suggests that the novel sits "firmly within the tradition of the black female *bildungsroman*"⁴ and that "as Beka advances towards womanhood, so too does Belize itself race to political maturity."⁵ Beck also notes the text as a *bildungsroman*, and emphasises the use of this mechanism in postcolonial literatures.⁶ The traditional definition of a *bildungsroman* focus on a male 'hero' who:

Develops moral agency and authority in the novel; that is, he proves his capability to become at last a model of behaviour based on his discovery of social, ethical and personal truths that mirror the beliefs and values of the author, and presumably, of readers.⁷

³ Christopher De Shield, "Writer, Nation, Text: Beka Lamb and the Metonymic Trinity," *Belizean Studies* 3, no. 10 (2010), 20.

⁴ Adele. S Newson, "The Fiction of Zee Edgell," in *Caribbean Women Writers: Fiction in English*, ed. Mary Conde and Thorunn Lonsdale (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 1999), 186.

⁵ Newson, "The Fiction of Zee Edgell," 188

⁶Ervin Beck, "*Social Insecurity in Beka Lamb*," 2001, accessed 12/7/17, <https://www.goshen.edu/academics/english/ervinb/beka-lamb/>.

⁷ Anne.T Salvatore, "Toni Morrison's New Bildungsroman: Paired Characters and Antithetical Form in *The Bluest Eye*, *Sula*, and *Beloved*," *Journal of Narrative Theory* 32, no. 2 (2002): 156.

Beka's text, although a *bildungsroman*, departs from this definition. Although her journey from unruly child to mature adolescent replicates the process described above, her gender places limits upon this designation. Sondra O'Neale has argued that black women's *bildungsroman* texts depict instead "the Black woman's internal struggle to unravel the immense complexities of racial identity, gender definitions [...] and awakening of sexual being."⁸ Like O'Neale, Salvatore also describes the more recent development of the female *bildungsroman*, which is less focussed on the journey towards self-discovery, and more on the realisation of the limitations placed upon women. Beka, whilst representing a model of success by the end of the novel, also faces a number of struggles along the way, many of which relate to her gender.

Both the setting and publication of *Beka Lamb* have significant links to the independence movement in Belize, the development of Beka's story sitting in parallel with that of the young nation. The 1950s saw a rapid change in the political landscape in Belize, and for the first time in the country's history, allowed Belizeans to imagine a future independent of Britain. The Peoples United Party (PUP), whose goal was to achieve political and economic independence were founded in 1950 and spearheaded the nationalist movement of the 1950s.⁹ Although the party's major leaders were Creoles, they "recognised the urgent

⁸ Sondra O Neale, "Race, Sex and Self: Aspects of Bildung in Select Novels by Black American Women," *MELUS* 9, no. 4 (1982): 25.

⁹ Assad Shoman, "The Role of Ethnicity in the Internationalization of Belize's Independence Struggle," *Etnicidad y nación: debate alrededor de Belice. Actes de colloque* (2009), 126. <https://hal-unice.archives-ouvertes.fr/hal-00709131/document#page=117>.

need to reach out to other peoples in the districts and create a sense of national unity,"¹⁰ hence the agenda of a 'united' Belize became a cornerstone of their ethos. The main opposition party were the Nationalist Independence Party (NIP), who traditionally aligned themselves with the Creole elite and British colonial values. The PUP were successful in their first election in 1954 against the NIP and have since gone on to win every general election in Belize, except those in 1984 and 1993.¹¹ The 1950s were defined by a number of pressing issues: whether the country should seek independence and align itself with Central America (argued for by the PUP), or become part of the West Indies Federation (as part of the British decolonisation process). The territorial land dispute between Britain and Guatemala was also heightened during the 1950s; with the PUP taking the position that friendly relations should be maintained, which the NIP used to suggest that the PUP were "pro-Latinisation." The PUP contended that their aim was not to appeal to distinct groups or ethnicities, but rather to "reject what it considered the British scheme of false decolonisation, which could continue to tie [Belize] to British interests via the West Indies Federation."¹² Set in the early 1950s, *Beka Lamb* takes this political change as its backdrop, reflecting a turbulent moment where colonial structures were beginning to be destabilised.

¹⁰ Shoman, "The Role of Ethnicity in the Internationalization of Belize's Independence Struggle," 126.

¹¹ O.Nigel Bolland, *Colonialism and Resistance in Belize: Essays in Historical Sociology* (Barbados, Jamaica, Trinidad and Tobago: University of the West Indies Press, 2003), 212.

¹² Shoman, "The Role of Ethnicity in the Internationalization of Belize's Independence Struggle," 128.

As Beck notes, Edgell's intention to link the journeys of Beka and Belize is highlighted from the start of the novel, the narrator describing Beka's essay contest win, alongside news that Gladsen and Pritchard had been imprisoned for sedition by the British colonial government.¹³ Gladsen and Pritchard are fictional names but they are based on the PUP members: Goldson and Richardson, who were imprisoned for seditious intention in 1951 "for publishing favourable articles about Guatemala."¹⁴ In the novel, Beka's Granny Ivy says: "The Jamaican lawyer said there was little he could do to stop Gladsen and Pritchard from going to jail because anybody who criticises the British Government can be prosecuted under the present law" (p.168). De Shield has noted that Belizean writers and politicians often revisit the sedition trials in newspapers and speeches and argues that: "These authoritative and imaginative returns to the history forming the novel's backdrop underscore its perceived importance for national consciousness."¹⁵ By directly alluding to famous characters from Belize's past, Edgell contextualises her narrative and foregrounds the importance of the independence movement for the novel. As Beck has summarised: "Both Beka's personal action and Gladsden and Pritchard's national action were turning points in corresponding drives for self-realisation and independence."¹⁶ By recasting famous political characters, Beka's narrative is connected to a key moment in the nation's story, one which symbolises Belizean resistance to colonial oppression.

¹³ Beck, "Social Insecurity in *Beka Lamb*," 1.

¹⁴ Anne Macpherson, *From Colony to Nation: Women Activists and the Gendering of Politics in Belize: 1912-1982*, (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 2007), 211.

¹⁵ De Shield, "Writer, Nation, Text: Beka Lamb and the Metonymic Trinity," 5.

¹⁶ Beck, "Social Insecurity in *Beka Lamb*," 1.

The inclusion of Glasden and Pritchard's case at the start of the novel also foregrounds the importance of national politics to the narrative, with Beka's father, Bill, and his mother, Ivy, predominantly representing the two opposing sides. A key way in which political change was discussed and negotiated in Belize was through ethnicity: the PUP focusing on the development of a 'united' Belize regardless of ethnic background, whilst the colonial-leaning NIP sought to maintain the dominance of the Creole elite and connection to a British heritage. Beka's parents, Bill and Lilla Lamb, embody the Black Creole subject position, and are examples of Edgell's on-going preoccupation with social structures and class. It is revealed that Bill occupies a moderately successful position at "Blanco's Import Commission Agency" (p.8). The families social position is also confirmed: "The Lambs and the Hartleys were two of the few black families on Cashew street that had much of anything at all" (p.21). A clear distinction is made between Bill's work and that of the traditional forestry industry in Belize, Beka noting that he "was too impatient a man, [...] to subject himself to the uncertainties of the mahogany tree scattered fewer than ten to an acre out in the bush" (p.8). While Bill is not explicitly named as a member of the Creole elite, he represents the emerging black, middle-class subject, afforded opportunities under the colonial administration. As Shoman has observed, the Creole elite were traditionally successful in the civil service,¹⁷ which is recognised in the novel, through the following exchange between Bill and Ivy:

¹⁷ Shoman, "The Role of Ethnicity in the Internationalization of Belize's Independence Struggle," 122.

"I work for Blanco's. Local businessmen have to be careful not to lose what ground we've gained. Civil servants are in a similar position."

"They think they are British," Granny Ivy said, curling her lips. "They talk British, act British, and go on "home" leave."

"Well the British *did* help Creoles gain a monopoly in the civil service [...] I wouldn't have minded being a civil servant myself [...] Regular hours, a pension, and dignity [...] One day I encouraged myself, one day Billy boy, you'll make the property qualification, be able to vote, and be one of the few black men exerting a little influence on the way things are done in this country" (p.96).

While Ivy is a supporter of the PUP and disdainful of the British connection, progression through the Civil Service is aspirational for Bill and this aspiration clearly aligns him with the desires of those in the Creole elite.

The broader consequences of the 'myth of origin' also emerge through Bill's narrative via his suspicion of the numbers of Mestizos arriving in Belize.¹⁸ The novel clearly distinguishes between Creole characters and Mestizo characters, the latter of whom predominantly run successful retail businesses, as Bill notes:

As much as he hated to admit such a thing about his own people, Creole shopkeepers did not seem to consider trade or business dignified, serving customers with an attitude of condescension indicating that shop-keeping was a temporary misfortune, an occupation they would abandon the moment something better suited to their talents turned up (p.82).

The Creole attitude to what is seen as a more menial form of work illustrates an imperially-derived disdain for petit-bourgeois commercialism and illustrates the

¹⁸ Terry Rugeley, "Preface: The Caste War," *The Americas* 53 (1997).

legacy of the Spanish-British conflict. In reimagining tension between the Creole and Mestizo groups, Edgell represents the normalisation of Creole superiority, which developed as part of the origin myth. These tensions also speak to broader concepts of the Belizean nation and its diverse ethnic make-up, which Edgell is careful to represent. There are a number of Mestizo characters: Toycie's boyfriend, Emilio, and the local priest, Father Nunez, for example. Beka is also friends with a Mayan girl who attends the same convent school. The Black Carib (or Garifuna) group are also present in the narrative; the wake of Granny Straker prompting a discussion between Lilla and Ivy about the different traditions practiced by the Creole and Carib groups. Ivy, who is supportive of the Caribs practicing these traditions, represents Belize's connection to its ancestral past. Lilla, on the other hand, is suspicious of such practices and represents the Black Creole subject position, which aspires to a 'civilised,' colonial way of life.

Sites of colonial resistance in *Beka Lamb*

There are moments in *Beka Lamb*, where African ancestry is connected to and celebrated, representing the preservation of communicative memory and posing a challenge to colonial order. Beck has noted that an "impressive, traditional Creole folk culture" exists in Belize¹⁹ and certainly one such site of resistance is the presence of interwoven folk-tales throughout the novel. The 'Maskman' story describes a boy who "compromised the daughter of a Carib man" (p.31), whilst

¹⁹ Ervin Beck, "Telling the Tale in Belize," *The Journal of American Folklore* 93, no. 370 (1980): 418.

the fantasy figure of Tataduhende is described as “a little man roaming around the Sibun bush [...] looking for unprotected little boys and girls to break off their thumbs” (p.139). These figurative characters highlight the centrality of Belizean folk culture, and also enhance understanding of present day relationships in Belize. The Maskman story, for example, describes the common ancestry shared by Creoles and Caribs but notes that members of these groups seldom married (p.31). The power and presence of story-telling is also solidified through the knowledge that ordinary Belizeans are subject to their own myths and legends, as the narrator notes: “Anonymity [in Belize] though not unheard of was rare. Indeed, a Belizean without a known legend was the most talked about character of all” (p.11). The novel also frequently describes examples of gossip, suggesting that stories, whether fantasy or reality, are central in Belizean life, thus preserving a strong communicative memory: “Along Victoria avenue, acquaintances on verandas nodded to them respectfully [...] before passing the news onto other neighbours” (p.133). While not officially sanctioned, these stories occupy a place in Belizean popular consciousness and their survival demonstrates a communicative memory in action and a subtle resistance to colonialism.

A further site of resistance is revealed via strong links to African-based traditions, despite the absence of these traditions in the official, cultural memory of Belize. The African presence becomes particularly apparent when Beka’s Great Granny Straker passes away. She is a significant figure, due, in part, to her age, which is revered by the older members of the community: “Old Mother Straker was one of

the last. Not too many left now of the old people that remember things from the time before. The young ones aren't interested. All they think about is picture show, motor car, party and clothes" (p.62). Here Edgell establishes a tension between the old and the new, which remains a ubiquitous theme in the novel. At Great Granny Straker's funeral and the subsequent wake, the dichotomies of both past and present, and of colonial practice and African traditions, are sharply revealed.

Vincent Brown's study on death in the Atlantic slave world proposes the concept of "mortuary politics."²⁰ This model recognises the central role that death has played in social structures and tension and considers the way in which the conflicting meanings associated with death have been utilised to particular ends both by the enslaved, as a method of resistance and connection to ancestry, and by colonial powers, as a method of control and subjection. Brown's reading is significant for my analysis of the wake ceremony in *Beka Lamb*. In its representation of African-derived tradition the wake is a powerful moment in the novel, but it also demonstrates how colonial practices around death inform the present-day moment. Again, the characters of Ivy and Lilla represent the old and the new: the tension between them representing the historical tension between the practice of African-based traditions, and the resulting colonial suspicion of such practices. Brown's study concentrates on Jamaican slave society, yet the

²⁰ Vincent Brown, *The Reaper's Garden: Death and Power in the World of Atlantic Slavery* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008), 5.

particular ways in which death is figured by Belizean characters in the novel, speak to his model of mortuary politics. Great Granny Straker's funeral is a significant event, which "commanded the total attention of the community. Its size was commented upon, and the life story of the deceased [...] whispered from person to person. It was more than a funeral they watched" (p.63). The size of the funeral and the space it occupies within the community confirms the centrality of death rituals and the preservation of tradition. Prior to the wake, and on the "ninth morning after Great Gran Straker died"²¹ (p.66) the narrator describes a conversation between Ivy and Lilla about Great Granny Straker's funeral arrangements. Lilla asserts:

My Grandmother was Christian, and she had a Christian burial. We don't need to protect ourselves from my Granny Straker [...] That's just a bunch of superstition, Miss Ivy. When a person dies, that's it [...] Granny Straker's spirit isn't roaming around trying to hurt a single soul (p.66).

In contrast, Ivy views the wake as "a get-together, to remember and pay respect to the dead" (p.66). The crucial word here is 'remember'; whilst Ivy attempts to maintain a link to the past, Lilla's words enact the broader silencing of African-derived traditions and communicative memories in favour of British, colonial practices.

²¹ 'Nine Nights' is an African-based tradition which celebrates the life of the recently deceased for nine nights after death. For a detailed discussion of this tradition, see Moody-Freeman, "Waking the Gone: Nine Nights as Cultural Remembrance of an African Heritage in Belizean Literature," *Resources for Feminist Research* 31, no. 3/4 (2006): 32.

As noted at the start of this chapter, Moody-Freeman argues that Edgell uses the wake to forge a connection to the forgotten history of slavery and resistance in Belize.²² Although Ivy's narrative does not explicitly vocalise these elements of the past, in her insistence that a wake is held she makes a powerful link to African-based tradition, thus replicating the actions of her ancestors. Indeed, Brown has suggested that historically the funeral practice challenged "the dominant mores and imperatives of slavery. Evocations of kinship and ancestry during funerals yoked participants to their past, even in the accelerated world organised by slaveholders' expectant outlook."²³ Here, there is an imperceptible effort by Ivy to hold on to the traditions that shaped her community. Ivy and Lilla's conflicting desires to retain and reject such traditions respectively also exhibit the broader tensions around the role African-derived Creole traditions play in shaping national identity in post-colonial, multi-ethnic Belize. The wake described in *Beka Lamb* provides a direct challenge to the cultural memory of Belize, which has been traditionally steeped in colonial practices. In contrast, Beka describes a spirited gathering of people who were "clapping, stomping and shouting" (p.78). Whilst representing the traditional ceremony, the older members of the community are quick to point out its inferiority to the ceremonies of their youth. The character of Miss Janie notes that things are "slow", for example, contrasting it with the "lively" affairs when she was young (p.75):

The body was on a cooling board for everybody to pay their respects. What a good wake we had the same night as the death. Not the coffee and johnny cake kind they keep nowadays.

²² Moody-Freeman, "Waking the Gone: Nine Nights as Cultural Remembrance of an African Heritage in Belizean Literature," 30.

²³ Brown, *The Reaper's Garden: Death and Power in the World of Atlantic Slavery*, 62.

Nowadays its law this, and law that. The body gets buried before a proper wake. Takes the life out of the whole thing” (p.75).

Beka’s aunt, Miss Winny, agrees: “The drumming was hotter too. Sometimes it was only box we had to beat on but everybody sing and dance and punta till we all fall down. We got the spirit” (p.76). For Miss Winny, the sanitised version of the old traditions is the fault of the new generation: ““Course nowadays, everybody so genteel with all this education’ here she glanced at Beka, ‘that they shame to do the old things”” (p.76). Miss Winny’s words directly attack colonial-derived systems of education and organisation, of which Beka is a participant. Here, Winny also reveals the power of these structures, which ‘shame’ African-derived traditions.

As Brown argues, funeral practices provided a symbolic avenue of resistance for the enslaved but were also a means for colonial actors to express their disdain for African-based practices and assert their civility and restraint.²⁴ As a loyal supporter of the colonial administration, Lilla’s disparaging views of the traditional wake ceremony represent those colonial administrators who attempted to restrict and suppress such traditions. Whilst Ivy and her friends unite with a community of the dead that looks back to a tradition of African celebration, Lilla’s attitude to the funeral exhibits the way that the pervasive colonial ‘myth of origin’ has delegitimised these traditional narratives. Lilla clearly aligns herself with the ‘imagined community’ of colonial administrators and Creole elite, those who focused on English decorum and Christianity, whilst rejecting African-derived

²⁴ Brown, *The Reaper’s Garden: Death and Power in the World of Atlantic Slavery*, 75.

culture and delegitimising traditional narratives of the past. Cultural memory in Belize has forgotten such practices in favour of alignment with the 'myth of origin' and colonially-derived notions of civility. Through the representation of the wake, Edgell ensures that the communicative memory of Belize survives.

Moody-Freeman has identified a further site of resistance in *Beka Lamb* that is important for my argument: the use of Sibun, which was the location of a runaway slave community.²⁵ Following Toycie's breakdown, Miss Elia takes her to live in Sibun, a location which is also present in the novel through Beka's remembrance of stories told to her and Toycie by Miss Elia when they were children "about some of the small settlements along the Sibun River, established by runaway slaves; about how much better things had been at Sibun before her parents died" (p.137). Miss Elia's nostalgia for Sibun contributes to its symbolic location as a sanctuary: both for Toycie, after her breakdown, and for the enslaved who were able to escape. Moody-Freeman has argued that Edgell's use of Sibun "disputes the myth of a harmonic relationship between slaves and their masters."²⁶ She describes Toycie's relocation there as "a symbolic return to her ancestor's home of refuge."²⁷ I agree with this analysis by Moody-Freeman. In a novel which avoids direct confrontation with the traumatic nature of the past in Belize, Edgell's choice of Sibun as Toycie's final resting place is significant.

²⁵ Moody Freeman, "Waking the Gone: Nine Nights as Cultural Remembrance of an African Heritage in Belizean Literature," 35.

²⁶ Moody Freeman, "Waking the Gone: Nine Nights as Cultural Remembrance of an African Heritage in Belizean Literature," 35.

²⁷ Ibid, 35.

Cast out by a society defined by British patriarchy, Toyocie's return to Sibun is also an emblematic shift from the orderly world of Belize town where a colonial grip still encircles the community, to the wilder, freer location of the forests: a motif which Edgell also employs in *Time and the River*. In returning Toyocie to the forest of her ancestors, Edgell removes Toyocie not only from her difficult personal situation, but also from the broader difficulties implicit in her experience as a working class Black Creole woman. Through Edgell's use of Sibun, the celebratory wake ceremony, and the presence of folk-tales and storytelling, a strong link to the past is established in the novel, one which challenges the troubling legacies of colonialism and slavery and asserts connection to an African 'presence.'

"I Don't Want to Remember": Silencing the Traumatic Past

In addition to the sites of colonial resistance identified above, the past is interlaced through the novel in many other ways; references are frequently made to "the time before" or "times gone by", thus rendering the past omnipresent in the novel, almost a character in itself. Ivy is the main vehicle through which Beka and her brothers learn about the past: "[She] always tried to explain the present to Beka with stories about the past" (p.2). As an older, maternal figure, Ivy functions as a cultural repository for the past, which is a recurring motif in Caribbean women's writing. In her study, which focuses on the rituals of the Black Carib population in Belize, Virginia Kearns notes that the older women:

Perpetuate the primary markers of [...] culture [...] and a system of morality and exchange that centres on obligations to lineal kin. As spiritual mediators, they protect their descendants by representing them in ritual [...] their actions serve to strengthen and sustain ties between lineal kin: male and female, young and old, living and dead.²⁸

Whilst Ivy protects ritual tradition, inter-generational storytelling is also represented in the novel through Beka's conversations with her Great Granny Straker, which often connect to significant moments in Belize's history, such as the Great Hurricane of 1931 and the associated economic turmoil of the time: "We were very depressed. Things had broken down. My gentleman couldn't get work cutting wood because nobody overseas was buying much, even what we had to sell" (p.28). Here, Edgell utilises the historical record to contextualise and authenticate Great Granny Straker's narrative. Symbolically, Beka's narrative fulfils the same function for readers: they discover what is important in the present through characters' recollection and remembrance of the past.

In addition to the omnipresence of the past in the novel, Ivy repeatedly uses the phrase 'befo' time' to illustrate the changes that Belize has experienced since the turn of the century: "'Befo' time', her Gran remarked [...] Beka would never have won that contest'" (p.1) and "'Long befo' time, you wouldn't be at no convent school'" (p.3). More significantly, Ivy's use of 'befo time' also reflects an uncomfortable relationship with the past, with characters unable to vocalise to what or when 'befo time' refers. Instead, the use of this vague, general term

²⁸ Virginia Kearns, *Women and the Ancestors: Black Carib Kinship and Ritual* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1983), 7.

expresses a reluctance to name and describe preceding events, thus suggesting an inability to engage with what has come before. Hirsch's concept of 'postmemory' is significant here. She describes it as:

The relationship that the 'generation after' bears to the personal, collective, and cultural trauma of those who came before, to experiences they "remember" only by means of the stories, images, and behaviours among which they grew up."²⁹

Postmemory is visible in *Beka Lamb* through the stories Ivy tells Beka and the references to past lives. These are not only passed to Beka, but to her two younger brothers who also revel in the stories told by their Grandmother: "Tell us 'bout before time, Granny Ivy" (p.149). Although cross-generational trauma is visible in *Beka Lamb*, it is transmitted by silence, rather than stories. This transmission reflects the silences inherent in slave narratives, where narrators removed the less palatable elements of their stories to avoid offending their audience, a narrative device that will be discussed further in Chapter Six. Here 'befo' time' represents an echo of these slave narratives and a disinclination to vocalise painful memories. While Ivy and Great Granny Straker are happy to share stories about certain things that have occurred in the past, neither are comfortable acknowledging the experiences of their ancestors under slavery. The avoidance of difficult memories can also be illustrated by the fleeting reference made to the death of two of Beka's younger siblings, something which is not dwelt upon by Beka or the narrator:

Beka didn't remember the girl that died when she was four, but she remembered her four-year old brother who had died when she was eleven. Her brother became sick one day and was buried in the late evening of the next. Dr. Clark said the malaria

²⁹Marianne Hirsch, "Postmemory," accessed 26/7/17, <http://www.postmemory.net/>.

fever had gone to his brain. The dry was coming now, and the sprays from Beka's bougainvillea vine would be missed (p.43).

This brief quote is the only time the unnamed children are mentioned in the novel, suggesting that the family's memories of the children were buried at the same time they were. The narrator's jump to the change in the weather actively deflects any exploration of the memory further. Indeed, the lack of engagement with this personal tragedy enacts in microcosm, Belize's complex relationship to its past.

In addition to Ivy's use of 'befo' time', there are other, frequent occurrences where the past is rejected, both individually and collectively. Beka asks her mother why Creoles don't mix with the Carib group, and Lilla answers: "Nobody really remembers the reasons" (p.70), thus burying the details under the guise of forgetting. The exchange further confirms the dominance of the Black Creole voice: in Lilla's inability to speak to the cause of the conflict, the Caribs story is symbolically silenced, thus perpetuating an on-going absence of remembrance. Similarly, at Great Grandmother Straker's funeral, it is noted that "Belizeans did not often articulate what they did know of their history, even amongst themselves. By and large, most people preferred to forget the time that had gone before" (p.63). Here Edgell imagines an entire community of people who have collectively disengaged with the past. Even Beka herself suggests that the turbulent political tensions "reminded her of things she wanted to forget" (p.151), although she does not articulate exactly to what it is she is referring. Through Ivy's narrative,

Edgell also comments upon the imperial ambivalence that characterised Belize's relationship with Britain:

People like us helped to build up that empire though we didn't choose to; now we have to help break it down, though there was no need for all this wrangling. People out in those countries forget the time gone before, they forget the wars, they forget all kinds of things to do with us (p.153).

Here, Ivy casts the net of collective amnesia beyond Belize, acknowledging that the past is avoided, not only by those who prefer to forget, but by those empowered to create memories. Indeed, Ivy's narrative targets the myth-makers directly; her reference to the 'wars', likely a reference to the Servicemen's dispute of 1919 following the First World War.

I have already discussed Lilla's unwillingness to engage with Great Granny Straker's wake. Her unwillingness extends to engagement with anything outside the bounds of colonial respectability. For the majority of the novel, Lilla expresses a desire to adopt and enact British ways, from her "cream satin curtains" (p.143), to the way she insists on straightening the curls out of Beka's hair, much to her husband's annoyance: "If you're not careful, [Beka] is going to grow up ashamed of herself and her people" (p.20). A recurring motif for Lilla's colonial identification is her roses, which she chooses to cultivate over Belize's native flowers:

When the rains finally came that drought year, Beka's Dad tried to persuade Lilla to concentrate on bougainvillea, crotons and hibiscus [...] but Lilla kept these trimmed back and continued to struggle year after year in her attempt to cultivate roses like

those she saw in magazines which arrived in the colony three months late from England (p.9).

Lilla often uses the roses at significant moments; she picks her best ones when her father comes to visit, and proudly exhibits a bowl of “deep red roses with black tipped petals” (p.143) on National Day. Lilla’s colonial loyalty also extends to her adoption of the stereotypical British ‘stiff upper lip’, a behaviour which she transmits to Beka: “Stop that crying [...] Get tough. Be strong like London with all those bombs falling. Our boys aren’t crying over there, they’re fighting so we can be free” (p.22). Indeed, “crying was something Lilla detested and rarely did herself that anybody could see” (p.22). In a rare moment of honesty after Great Granny Straker’s death, Lilla acknowledges that her behaviour stems from a desire to forget; she tells Ivy: “I know all about the old days [...] I don’t want to remember. The old ways will poison the new. I don’t want Beka getting into the habit of those things” (p.66). Lilla’s words represent postmemory in action: her refusal to engage with the painful aspects of her own (and her ancestors) past is passed directly to her daughter. As Lilla’s narrative unfolds, a link between the development of Black Creole identity and the wider silencing of slavery is acknowledged:

See, in the old days, according to Granny Straker, the more you left behind the old ways, the more acceptable you were to the powerful people in the government and the churches, who had the power to change a black person’s life. [...] Any-how, when slavery was over in fact, a lot of people only went to the bush to cut mahogany when they absolutely had to do so. The bush maybe reminded them of the cruelties and forced labour, for little or nothing, which they had endured. Living in town became a habit” (p.70).

The shifts in the Black Creole population described here – from forest to town, and from manual labour to the office or factory – function as a way to process and forget the “old ways”. This process is also bound up with the shame of slavery: rather than linger on traumatic memories, Lilla suggests it was easier to forget and to look instead to those with power who were able to effect change. That this process involved co-operation with the oppressors appears secondary (in Lilla’s case at least) to the rejection of traumatic memory. Additionally, Lilla’s narrative symbolises the way in which attempts to officially recognise and remember slavery were redirected by the colonial administration and the Creole elite. As Shoman has argued, institutions dominated by colonial structures such as the church and schools, aided the Creole elite in their mission to convince the working class Black Creole majority of the origin myth, and, by extension, their “legitimacy to become the natural successors to the white colonisers [and] the accepted leaders of the nation that was evolving.”³⁰ A combination of shame and the desire to forget, coupled with the legitimising ‘myth of origin’, then, provided the conditions for a collective Black Creole forgetting.

Although the less palatable aspects of the past are seldom referred to in the novel, there is evidence of the broader cultural memory of Belize present in *Beka Lamb*. The “myth of origin” is directly referenced in the novel and replicates the ‘facts’ from the historical record. Beka’s narrative illustrates her understanding of this aspect of history:

³⁰ Shoman, "Reflections on Ethnicity and Nation in Belize."56.

Somewhere out there in 1798, the battle of St George's Caye had been fought. A few British masters assisted by black slaves had beaten back a fleet of Spanish man-o-wars, and this event was celebrated throughout the colony on September tenth each year (p.46).

Beka goes on to explicitly acknowledge the forgetting of slavery, suggesting that, like the legitimising process described by Shoman above, the myth worked instead to solidify and legitimise Black Creole identity:

Granny Ivy said that Belizean people liked to remember the battle, because it was one of the few things attempted in the country that hadn't broken down. The slavery part, what was known of it, Granny Ivy often commented, many liked to pretend hardly ever existed (p.46).

There is an implicit suggestion made here that the Black Creole group have consciously adopted the myth and – for reasons of advanced personal mobility – have chosen to remember it positively. In opposition to the pride associated with the battle, the novel makes multiple references to things 'breaking down', often referring to Belize itself, as Granny Ivy warns Beka: "But nothin' lasts here [...]" Her eyes looked funny. 'Tings bruk down'" (p.16). Here Edgell posits a reason for why the Black Creole group have held onto the myth of St George's Caye so tightly: in a world where things are constantly 'breaking down', it is easier to forget traumatic memories and embrace stories which have positive connotations, regardless of their 'truth'. The specific process of remembering and forgetting is reflected through Beka's account of her involvement in the National Day parade on September 10th, which vividly expresses her excitement: "She thoroughly enjoyed marching to the blaring brass bands along the streets packed with crowds of wildly cheering people [...] She shook her Union Jack vigorously

at relatives, friends and acquaintances” (p.54). Beka is not only delighted by the food, drink and cheering, but is proud to be marching:

That day, the whole world seemed decorated in red, white and blue; the bleached whiteness of school uniforms reflected the foam on the sea below the lawns of Government House, her sateen waist ribbon matched the cobalt blue of the sea beyond the reef, and the blood-red hibiscus ringing the lawns was the red of the streamers, dangling and fluttering on the hats of the children (p.54).

The imagery, which interweaves Beka’s experience to the natural world, further cements the power of the origin myth: her experience of the parade and the celebration of the Battle is interchangeable with the physical environment of Belize itself; they are irrevocably united.

Although traumatic memories of the past are muted in the novel, *Beka Lamb* does engage with the period of slavery, albeit obliquely. Beka’s interaction with Belize’s Coat of Arms, for example, illustrates the way in which images of slavery have been normalised in Belize. She describes a drawing which was included in the “brief sketch” (p.8) of the colony she was given by the nuns at her school.

The drawing shows:

...two black men, bare to the waist, standing on either side of the spreading branches of a mahogany tree. One held an axe, the other a saw. Beka had been told in history class, the year she failed first form, that the Latin words beneath the picture meant ‘Under the shade we flourish’ (p.8).

As noted in the Introduction, the Coat of Arms originally featured two Black Creole men on the insignia, however it was changed during the independence

process in 1981 to show a Mestizo man and a black man standing under the tree together; indicating a desire to show unity between the two largest ethnic groups in the country.³¹ While the image aims to promote cultural unity, it also perpetuates the myth of benign incarceration, the language of ‘shade’ and ‘flourish’ the antithesis of plantation imagery. The same motif used on the Coat of Arms has also been part of the Belizean flag since 1981. As Hobsbawm has argued, national flags are a notable marker of ‘invented tradition’, which can: “proclaim [...] identity and sovereignty [...] command instantaneous respect and loyalty [...] [and] reflect the entire background, thought and culture of a nation.”³² The Belizean flag, then, problematically replicates an image which celebrates the historical legacy of the mahogany industry and promotes positive working conditions. In the process, the identity and memory of the enslaved (and their descendants) are silenced under a guise of unity. It also promotes a male-centric image image of the country. Additionally, that Beka only receives a “brief” history of the colony at school suggests that the curriculum is selective and lacks detail. Certainly, Beka’s narrative faithfully replicates the image without questioning its origins. Rather her passive description suggests a vague indifference to the work of the mahogany cutters, indeed: “Beka [...] had never seen a mahogany tree in her life” (p.8). Here, Edgell presents a clear delineation between Beka’s own subject position in a middle class Black Creole family, and those who worked in the old industry of logwood and mahogany under slavery. Her silence is clear:

³¹ For more information about the Belizean flag see "Belize Flag," accessed 5/5/18, <https://www.belize.com/belize-flag>.

³² Eric Hobsbawm, “Introduction: Inventing Traditions,” in *The Invention of Tradition*, ed. Eric Hobsbawm and Terrance Ranger (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 11.

Beka's lack of awareness about the oppression suffered by her ancestors reflects the broader silences that are present in Belizean cultural memory.

Gendered Legacies of Colonialism in *Beka Lamb*

In Chapter Two, I discussed the particular conditions that Belizean women experienced under slavery, which set in motion a particular trajectory for the development of women's roles in Belize. The spectre of colonial oppression looms large over the women in *Beka Lamb*, although the novel's view of womanhood is not straightforward. The novel reflects how women, particularly those who fall outside the boundaries set for them by colonial society, are victimised, outcast and forgotten, yet it also displays examples of female strength, and, through Beka herself, a development outside the boundaries of traditional femininity is proposed.

A number of critics have noted *Beka Lamb*'s positive image of womanhood. Salick argues that "Edgell makes it clear that the future of Belize rests more clearly with the women than with the men,"³³ whilst Wilson notes that "Beka has grown up in a household where strong women speak their mind."³⁴ Down also comments on the strength of the women in the novel, arguing that "Great Gran Straker, Miss Ivy and Lilla also represent three generations of women, a strongly

³³ Roydon Sallick, "The Martyred Virgin: A Political Reading of Zee Edgell's 'Beka Lamb'," *Ariel: A Review of International English Literature* 32, no. 4 (2001): 116.

³⁴ Lucy Wilson, "Illness and Insight: Virginia Woolf and Caribbean Women Writers vs. Western Medicine," *Kunapipi* 31, no. 2 (2009): 74.

bonded community”.³⁵ Although all three women exhibit visible ‘strength’ at different moments in the novel, Down’s assertion that Ivy and Lilla are ‘strongly bonded’ is questionable, particularly given that Edgell sets their ideologies in direct opposition to one another throughout the novel. Rather, Ivy and Lilla present opposing visions of Belize and its history and complicate the concept of ‘strong women’ which proliferates in the critical canon of Caribbean’s women’s literature.

The Victorian version of womanhood, brought from Britain to the colonies during slavery, remains visible in *Beka Lamb*. O’Callaghan has noted how Caribbean women writers reveal the ways in which “restrictive gender roles imbue colonial ideology”³⁶ and this is certainly explored by Edgell in the novel. While male characters are afforded varied employment opportunities, women in the novel are placed squarely in a domestic realm as they were in the period of slavery in Belize. As the narrator notes, the home is a thoroughly gendered space where questions of race and class are secondary: “Women and girls, whether they lived in a ‘good home’ or a ‘dawg-siddown’,³⁷ scrubbed, dusted, polished and cooked in order that they might do as they pleased Saturday night and Sunday afternoon” (p.26). Beka takes pride in the domestic nature of her chores, which

³⁵ Lorna Down, "Singing her own Song: Women and Self-hood in Zee Edgell's *Beka Lamb*," *Ariel: A Review of International English Literature* 18, no. 4 (1987): 46.

³⁶ Evelyn O’Callaghan, *Woman Version: Theoretical Approaches to West Indian Fiction by Women*, (London and Basingstoke: Macmillan Caribbean, 1993), 4.

³⁷ Bolland describes how, following a hurricane: “people made their own shacks from the wreckage called ‘dog-sit-downs’” in O Nigel Bolland, *Colonialism and Resistance in Belize: Essays in Historical Sociology* (Barbados, Jamaica, Trinidad and Tobago: University of the West Indies Press, 2003), 175.

she links directly to her identity as a woman: “Beka felt she had handled the job like a woman and in Belize, to be able to work like a woman was an honourable thing” (p.27). Edgell does not expand on what ‘working like a woman’ entails, but the novel leans towards a cultural construct, which aligns women with a domestic way of life.³⁸

In *Beka Lamb*, the consequences of deviating from a colonial version of womanhood are revealed most sharply through Toycie. Like National Vellor, a local “half-crazed Coolie woman” (p.5), who is infamous in the community for her glitzy outfits and implied promiscuity, Toycie represents the fallen, working class woman who is set in direct opposition to feminine standards of beauty and decorum. Before Toycie begins her ill-fated relationship with a local Mestizo boy, Emilio Villanueva, her future is filled with promise. The novel describes her as intelligent, dedicated and thoughtful, despite her poverty, but her pregnancy and the subsequent end of her relationship with Emilio sends her into a destructive spiral, in which her mental health collapses. Her appearance disintegrates as the novel progresses, a representation of her severed connection with the domestic feminine ideal. Toycie goes from cotton dresses and clean hair, to puffy eyes and an un-ironed uniform, to a “frock tail [which] drooped around her calves. Show whitening smeared Toycie’s brown ankles, and her worn flat-heeled shoes keeled over on the outer sides like sailing dorys on a rough sea” (p.102-3). The outward deterioration of Toycie’s appearance represents not only the deterioration of the

³⁸ Macpherson, *From Colony to Nation: Women Activists and the Gendering of Politics in Belize: 1912-1982*, 34.

place she occupies in the community but her mental state, the imagery of boats on a stormy sea reflecting her inner turmoil. Upon confessing her pregnancy to the convent school, Toycie is expelled; her interactions with the unsympathetic nuns representing a critique of the dominant catholic ethos of the nation, which is used to shame and deride the girls:³⁹ “Remember the story of Eve. As young ladies you must walk always with an invisible veil about you so as not to unleash chaos upon the world” (p.90). The ‘invisible veil’ described by Sister Virgil, mirrors the way in which Beka hides her own emotions, describing a “special cavern of her being where she stored great hurts” (p.141). Here Beka’s emotional repression connects to the broader repression of female emotion by the church. Toycie’s collapse after she finds she is to be expelled foreshadows her descent into madness and her eventual death. As Salick has noted: “For as destructive as Emilio’s betrayal is, the betrayal by St Cecilia’s Academy is the deathblow for Toycie, who has pinned her hopes on the employment possibilities attendant on graduation.”⁴⁰ Through Toycie’s interactions with the convent, Edgell represents the way in which colonial institutions such as the church controlled the girls’ bodies and their inner lives. This policing extends beyond the walls of the convent school, reflecting a wider colonial control of female sexuality; indeed, Toycie’s fall from grace has fatal consequences: her death representing the

³⁹ For a further discussion of Belize’s religious composition see. O.Nigel Bolland, *A New Nation in Central America* (Boulder and London: Westview Press, 1986), 47. For a discussion of female sexuality, religion, and shame in Belize, see Aminata Maraesea, "Saving Face, Losing Life: Obeah pregnancy and reproductive impropriety in Southern Belize," *Culture, Health and Sexuality: An International Journal for Research, Intervention and Care* 14, no. 1 (2012): 97.

⁴⁰ Sallick, "The Martyred Virgin: A Political Reading of Zee Edgell’s ‘Beka Lamb’," 111.

grave repercussions of not conforming to the community's exacting standards of femininity.

Madness is a significant motif in Caribbean women's literature. While she recognises the traditional romanticised 'madwoman' figure - the "embattled heroine", who is constructed in opposition to the status quo - Caroline Brown argues that madness serves "as the refraction of the cultural contradictions, psychosocial fissures and often-buried political tensions of the larger society."⁴¹ Toycie is not presented as a heroine, but rather a woman, who, like Belize, 'breaks down' in the face of a number of intersecting oppressions. Following her expulsion from school, Toycie's mental health rapidly declines, as Miss Elia observes: "Hardly says a word all day long. Works a bit in the house or sits in my chair rocking back and forth [...] Nurse tells me she's anaemic and what they call depressed" (p.125). While Beka hides her hurt in her "cavern," Toycie is eventually silenced, and refuses to talk at all. Again, Toycie's actions represent the consequences of her misdeed. Silenced by her condition, she symbolises the wider silencing of women by colonial standards of femininity. Following her miscarriage, Toycie sinks deeper into an unstable mental state and is moved to an asylum, known as the 'Sea Breeze Hotel' (p.133), a euphemism which further reinforces the cultural desire to gloss that which is difficult or shameful. Later in the novel, Miss Elia makes the decision to move Toycie to Sibun and it is here

⁴¹ Caroline Brown, "Introduction: Women, Writing, Madness: Reframing Diaspora Aesthetics," in *Madness in Black Women's Diasporic Fictions: Aesthetics of Resistance*, ed. Caroline A. Brown and Johanna X.K. Garvey (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 8.

that the hurricane takes her life: "My Toy wandered away in the confusion of preparation and a mango tree fall to break her skull" (p.158). Toycie's story is a specifically gendered tragedy, which speaks to the wider silences of Belizean history. Her silence, madness and death represent how the unpalatable is buried in Belize, both figuratively and, in Toycie's case, literally – her death removing her voice from the story. Unlike the ritual ceremony of Great Granny Straker's death when the whole community comes together to remember and celebrate her life, only a short letter from Miss Elia communicates Toycie's death; there is no funeral or wake, and there is no reference to her shameful story outside the family. It is only through Beka's pledge to keep a wake for Toycie, "a private remembrance in her own heart" (p.5), that Toycie's story can be told. That Beka's wake for Toycie structures the entire novel, represents Edgell's searing critique of normalised colonial gender roles. Indeed, Beka's remembrance functions as a broader remembrance for the Belizean women who have been thwarted by colonial standards of femininity. As Brown has argued: "Within the fictional text, mental illness serves as an especially resonant metaphor for the disruption caused by oppression and by alienation not only from the larger social structure but, most pervasively, from the very self."⁴²

Beka Lamb displays competing concepts of womanhood which is most pointedly displayed through Beka's friendship with Toycie, Toycie's pregnancy, and her

⁴² Brown, "Introduction: Women, Writing, Madness: Reframing Diaspora Aesthetics," 8.

untimely death. A number of critics have suggested that Toycie functions as Beka's alter ego in the novel, and that Toycie and Beka illustrate the opposing paths available to women.⁴³ For example, Salick argues that "Toycie dies so that Beka can live [...] so that Beka, much more cautious and informed in sexual matters, and more politically oriented, can fulfil her own ambitions and those of her friend."⁴⁴ While the eventual outcomes for Toycie and Beka differ considerably, their personality traits and character development, is not as straightforward as the 'alter-ego' motif would suggest. Throughout the novel, a more untamed, emotional side of Beka's character is revealed, which blurs the boundaries between her and Toycie, destabilising the "cautious" personality described by Salick. The way that Beka attempts to manage her emotions illustrates the confined nature of the female experience under colonialism. This experience imposes a particular kind of silence upon women – one which is bound to the feminine ideals of virtue and propriety. It is against this version of womanhood that Beka begins to rebel.

Indeed, Beka's inner world also provides insights into the confining legacies of colonial standards upon women, even those who have not so obviously 'fallen'. Beka is scolded for crying, and often reprimanded for speaking out: "The first thing you better learn, Beka Lamb, is to keep your tongue between your teeth" (p.35). Unable to express her feelings, Beka's emotions are experienced

⁴³ Sallick, "The Martyred Virgin: A Political Reading of Zee Edgell's 'Beka Lamb'," 109; Down, "Singing her own Song: Women and Self-hood in Zee Edgell's *Beka Lamb*," 44; "Social Insecurity in *Beka Lamb*." 2.

⁴⁴ Salick, "The Martyred Virgin: A Political Reading of Zee Edgell's 'Beka Lamb'," 109.

inwardly, a thread which runs throughout the novel: “In Beka’s mind of late, a tidal-like wave was always there, and she lived in a constant tension between the drawing back of the water and the violence of it crashing against the shore” (p.43). The metaphor of the sea is frequently used to describe Beka’s inner narrative, a device which is woven through all of Edgell’s novels. Edgell’s use of the sea metaphor also connects her novels to the broader genre of Caribbean writing, where the sea is often employed “to address the collective, historically imposed cultural amnesia of the African Diaspora.”⁴⁵ As Bloomfield has noted: “Associated with fluidity, flux, and intersecting currents, the sea offers possibilities for a historical imagination based upon complex, often unknowable genealogies.”⁴⁶ Edgell frequently uses the experience of water in Beka’s mind, to signify her separation from the ordered version of femininity she is expected to inhabit. This process destabilises rigid colonial structures lodged in historical narrative and cultural memory, thus inviting a more fluid, flexible version of gender to be explored. The first time Beka experiences a feeling of untamed emotion is when she challenges a priest about the concept of heaven and hell in front of her class:

That was the moment Beka first heard the roar of seawater in her head. She felt like smashing her fist straight through the desk. She began to fear there was something and within herself that was spoiled, something that caused her to continuously do and say things against her own best interests (p.91).

⁴⁵ Mandy Bloomfield, *Archaeopoetics: Word, Image, History* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2016), 185.

⁴⁶ Bloomfield, *Archaeopoetics: Word, Image, History*, 186.

Beka's monologue reveals a more destructive side to her personality, which challenges traditional models of femininity. The most significant moment in Beka's emotional development is when she finds out about Toycie's death. At this point, all her repressed emotions are released in a surge of grief: "And the tidal wave crashed in Beka's brain and she was screaming and screaming [...] and her Daddy was holding her tight" (p.158). Here, the destructive force of the tidal wave signifies Beka's complete devastation at the loss of her friend: "There was no staunching Beka's grief. She was in a state of hysteria and Granny Ivy slapped her, shook her, cajoled her, threw water into her face, but Beka could not regain control" (p.158). This moment represents an apex in Beka's emotional maturity. After suppressing her worries and emotions for so long, her emotional release symbolises the moment that she is able to past the trauma of Toycie's passing.

Following Toycie's death, the Lamb family collectively withdraw from life:

They didn't open the shutters during the daytime very much either, and in the gloom, dust and dirt weren't noticeable. Granny Ivy stopped going to political meetings, Daddy Bill came straight home from work and didn't to the club after tea, and Beka decided there was no sense walking the way to Miss Doodie to straighten her hair (p.160).

However, following a period of mourning, all members of the family regain their vigour for life, a process which occurs on a number of different levels. Lilla begins to reject her British loyalty, opting to embrace the concept of Belizean identity instead: "I'm turning over a new leaf, Bill. I'll keep the bushes that survived, but

I'm not expending too much energy anymore cultivating rose bushes" (p.163). If the roses exist as a metaphor for Lilla's (and Belize's) faithfulness to Britain and the 'old ways', this late rejection of her previous passion surely represents a move toward new beginnings and acceptance of change. It is significant that Lilla's abandonment of her roses occurs following the metaphorical tidal wave that Beka experiences following Toycie's death, which coincides with the physical event of a hurricane. Both suggest an emblematic washing away and moment of rebirth. In this period of reawakening, Beka also finds the courage to return to school, despite being challenged on this decision by Sister Gabriela, a nun who Beka has clashed with throughout the novel. In a moment of internal defiance, Beka thinks to herself: "If you think all Belize people break down so easily you are mistaken!" (p.161). This moment inspires Beka to return to school to the glory of her competition win, and contrasts sharply with the resigned way that 'broken' Belize has been referred to in the novel, representing a moment of clarity and renaissance. By connecting with her emotions in defiance of oppressive structures, Beka is able to work through her feelings, and mourn Toycie, thus enabling her to let go:

Concentrating on [...] the memory [Beka] relived the times they floated, fingers linked and spluttering with delight on the choppy aquamarine sea beneath the pier. Deliberately she spun her kaleidoscope of sunshine and seawater waiting for the twinges of pain she associated with these memories. There were none although the memories remained bright and clear [...] Beka smiled. Her watch-night for Toycie was over and she felt released – there was need no need for guilt or grief over a mourning postponed (p.171).

Chambers has argued that the sea, whilst representing a metaphorical link to the Middle Passage, can also be utilised as a metaphor for redemption.⁴⁷ Here, the tidal wave has calmed, leaving space for Beka to daydream of happier times with Toycie. Beka's last sentence in the novel is one which is infused with memory. Yet rather than blocking painful memories, Beka is able to remember Toycie with positivity. That the novel ends in this way suggests that Beka's sadness, release of emotion and subsequent mourning period for Toycie has been the cathartic change she needs in order to move on with her life. In providing Toycie with a wake, Beka has afforded her the proper remembrance, and although it takes place only in her "own heart" it is adequate enough to release her from the pain of Toycie's passing. In doing so, Edgell implicitly suggests that Belize must undergo a similar process, in order to be free of the past and to move forward into the future.

Conclusion

Beka Lamb is a novel which recognises the creolised presences of both Europe and Africa but remains resolutely focused upon the fate of Belize. It is certainly possible to view the novel as a national allegory, with Beka's adolescent turmoil reflecting the turmoil of the young nation of Belize. In the final pages of the novel, Lilla's new enthusiasm for Belize reveals itself in the cooking she attempts "of

⁴⁷ Eddie Chambers, "Black British and Other Diaspora Artists: Visualising Slavery," in *African Diaspora in the Cultures of Latin America and the United States*, ed. Persephone Braham (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2015), 142.

every ethnic group in the country, from Maya to Carib” (p.149.) While Bill protests about the spiciness of the food, Lilla explains her reasoning: “Don’t you hear what the politicians are saying out at Battlefield Park? We must unite to build a nation, learn about our country, study the names of trees, flowers, birds and animals” (p.150). This key moment in Belizean history marks a turning point, visible in Lilla’s narrative. Here, Edgell harnesses the excitement and possibilities set out by the independence movement of the 1950s, and reimagines this period thirty years later, as Belize prepares for full independence in 1981. Although the novel documents the ups and downs of political change, it is also significant for the way in which it explores the legacies of colonialism, at a pivotal moment in the country’s history. Normalised colonial practice is very present in the novel, from Beka’s appearance in the St George’s Caye Day parade, to her description of the Belizean flag, but there is also an imperceptible feeling of energy for change. Indeed, the novel illustrates the on-going clashes between old and new, from politics to ceremony to social behaviour. By including sites of colonial resistance such as the wake, the location of Sibun, and the myriad references to folk and oral traditions, the communicative memory of Belize is preserved in the novel and a challenge to colonial legacies is presented.

In terms of the broader concerns of this thesis: namely how the presence of the memory of slavery is realised in Edgell’s work, the novel is shrouded in a notable silence about this element of the past. Whilst the cultural memory of Belize – namely that of the ‘myth of origin’ – is described and remembered, the references

to slavery are oblique and fleeting. There is a sense that the characters in the novel, particularly the older generation, are weighed down by the unspoken nature of events – the use of ‘befo’ time’, a frustrating euphemism which relates to the broader silences of the slave narrative – those events “too difficult to relate.”⁴⁸ The tension between the past and the present is particularly visible for female characters in the novel who are additionally bound by colonial versions of femininity designed to suppress any deviance from these morals. Toycie’s downfall represents the culmination of this way of thinking: her pregnancy, descent into madness and eventual death signifying the consequences of stepping outside the boundaries of established convention. That Toycie’s wake is only conducted in Beka’s “own heart” illustrates how far she has fallen; excluded from the African-based traditions that the family are so keen to preserve, but also unable to participate in a formal memorialisation by the church.

Beka Lamb is a hybrid text: a well-loved novel which ‘embodies’ the Belizean nation, but also a comment upon the normalisation of colonial dominance. Although it has the status of a ‘cultural text’ in Belize, reflecting and confirming founding myths of nation – both in a colonial sense, and in the narrative of Belizean independence – it also preserves the communicative memory of Belize. Despite the note of optimism that *Beka Lamb* ends upon, Edgell’s second novel, *In Times Like These* presents a more cynical view of women’s roles, where the hope of the 1950s has been replaced by weariness with the political situation.

⁴⁸ Toni Morrison, “The Site of Memory,” in *Inventing the Truth*, ed. William Zinsser (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1995), 91.

Indeed, this novel acts as a mirror, politically at least, to *Beka Lamb*. It is to this novel I now turn.

Chapter Five - Gendering the Nation: Female Subjectivity and Selfhood in *In Times Like These*

Neumann's definition of 'fictions of memory' argues that imaginative fiction enables an assessment of individual and national identity, often as a response to present needs.¹ Like *Beka Lamb*, Edgell's second novel *In Times Like These* (1991) focuses on a key moment in Belizean history and represents both a reconstruction of a moment in the past and a readdressing of the historic gender imbalance in historical and cultural accounts of the country.² Like *Beka Lamb*, *In Times Like These* has the fates and identities of the Belizean people, primarily women, at its heart. *In Times Like These* also follows a similar narrative structure to its predecessor, with a woman's personal journey played out against the backdrop of the nation's journey towards decolonisation. Although *In Times Like These* continues Edgell's quest to represent a particular moment in Belizean history, it also speaks to the unrest, turmoil and change that characterised other independence movements in the wider Caribbean region. *In Times Like These* is also significant for its portrayal of the women's movement in Belize. It challenges Belizean cultural memory by giving voice to previously marginalised female narratives. Women's experiences are woven into the national story thus representing a radical reprioritisation of gender relations. Edgell's sharp focus on the experiences of women shows a strong critique of patriarchal notions of the

¹ Birgit Neumann, "The Literary Representations of Memory," in *Cultural Memory Studies: An International and Interdisciplinary Handbook*, ed. Astrid Erll and Ansgar Nünning in collaboration with Sara B. Young (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter GmbH & Co, 2008), 334.

² Other than the historical work undertaken by Anne Macpherson and Narda Dobson, all histories of Belize, to date, are written by men.

nation, thus re-inscribing the dominant, masculine ‘myth of origin.’ Instead, Edgell reimagines her own story of nation at the point of independence, which rearticulates founding myths and places women at the centre.

This chapter will discuss the way in which the novel reconstructs the past, rewriting the cultural memory of Belize from a female perspective. This discussion will be situated within the context of the development of Black Power politics of the 1960s and 1970s, both in Belize and more widely, and within the broader development of the women’s movement in Belize. This chapter also discusses the novel’s importance to the wider aims of the thesis by addressing the way in which it illustrates Belize’s on-going, complex relationship with its ancestry and an inability to engage with traumatic memories. Unlike *Beka Lamb* and *Time and the River*, *In Times Like These* is almost completely devoid of references to the distant past, including slavery and the battle myth, and this absence speaks to the broader cultural disengagement with the past in Belize. Like *Beka Lamb*, the novel is written from the point of view of a Black Creole woman, and represents the contentious position of the Creole elite who find it difficult to engage with the past and who struggle in a society where things are persistently ‘breaking down.’ Indeed, the resignation displayed by many characters in the novel, represents the on-going legacies of colonialism in Belize, which have erased the memory of slavery and allowed the Creole elite to normalise colonial values to avoid engaging with this shameful element of the past.

Edgell situates *In Times Like These* at a key moment in time by referencing a number of issues that affected Belize in the run-up to independence. These include the political – the on-going situation with Guatemala and the controversial ‘Heads of Agreement’ dispute³ – the fraught state of the economy, and the changes affecting Governmental structures and public services. Edgell’s representation of the unrest that characterised Belizean society in the early 1980s further strengthens the counter-narrative of labour resistance, which began in the period of slavery. The central character, Pavana Leslie, is a Belizean native who moves to London to study as a teenager. There, she meets a number of people who figure in her present, including the father of her two children, Alex Abrahams. At the start of the novel, Pavana returns to Belize from a job in the international development sector in East Africa, to take up a post in the Belizean Government, as Director of the newly formed Women’s Unit.

Critical Reception and Feminist Frameworks

There is little critical material that focuses on *In Times Like These*, which reflects Belize’s status in wider literary debates of the Caribbean region. Similarly, *In Times Like These* did not repeat the critical or commercial success of its predecessor, which may be explained by the nostalgia of the pre-independence

³ Belize’s history has been characterized by a long-running border dispute with Guatemala, The UN became involved in the late 1970s, which resulted in the aforementioned and controversial ‘Heads of Agreement’, a treaty signed in March 1981, between Britain, Belize and Guatemala, allowing Guatemala certain concessions in return for dropping its claim on Belize. For more information, see "Government Explains Heads of Agreement," University of Florida Digital Collection <http://ufdc.ufl.edu/uf00099046/00001>.

movement captured in *Beka Lamb*, in contrast to Edgell's female-centric vision of a tumultuous period in Belize's history. Of the criticism that exists, many accounts emphasise the intertwined nature of Pavana's narrative with the wider story of Belize's development into an independent nation.⁴ Richard Patteson has described the "delicate web of connections" that Edgell makes "between her protagonist's situation and that of the country, between the personal and the political."⁵ Similarly, Kirsten Mahlis alludes to the "interwoven" nature of Pavana's narrative with that of Belize's national formation. Many, as I do, recognise Pavana's strong feminist identity and focus upon women's rights, with Moody-Freeman describing Pavana's "resistance to patriarchy."⁶ Whilst I agree with Moody-Freeman's reading, which argues that *In Times Like These* is a critique of nationalist and post-nationalist leaders, her strong statement that Pavana "refuses to participate in her own victimisation and rejects all forms of oppression"⁷ does not take into account the complexity of Pavana's identity and the multi-faceted way it reveals itself in the novel. Indeed, Pavana does not outrightly reject all oppressions she is subjected to. The novel instead reveals a character on a journey from voicelessness to assertiveness, and this transformation is arguably still in process as the novel reaches its conclusion.

⁴Richard Patteson, *Caribbean Passages: A Critical Perspective on New Fiction from the West Indies* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publications, 1998). Judy Moody-Freeman, "Zee Edgell: Novelist as historian/activist: (Re)imagining Nation," *African Identities*, Vol 7, Issue 1 (2009), Kristen Mahlis, "Women and Nationhood in Zee Edgell's *In Times Like These*," *Ariel: A Review of International English Literature* 31, no. 3 (2000).

⁵ Patteson, *Caribbean Passages: A Critical Perspective on New Fiction from the West Indies*, 69.

⁶ Moody-Freeman, "Zee Edgell: Novelist as historian/activist: (Re)imagining Nation," 49.

⁷ Moody-Freeman, "Zee Edgell: Novelist as historian/activist: (Re)imagining Nation," 48-49.

My reading of *In Times Like These* builds on Mahlis's account, which argues for the way in which Pavana's story uncovers a previously unspoken, female narrative which she links to theories of nationalism and nation building. As Mahlis argues: "Edgell's novel shows these discourses to be not only particularly inadequate in fully representing women's experience but also flawed in their insistence on a linear, binary model of nationhood and nationalism."⁸ Pavana's narrative highlights women's roles, status and significance in nation building, and challenges the traditional ideas that fix them in the nurturing role of mother, without any active contribution to the nation's development. Crucially, Mahlis argues that Pavana's vision of motherhood represents "individual strength and acceptance of her freedom as a sexually active woman."⁹ It is this strength, which allows her to reject the traditional Caribbean stereotype of the unmarried, abandoned single mother. Mahlis also views Pavana and the nation as inextricably linked, suggesting that Pavana's retelling of her story via the excavation of memories from her past is comparable to the process which Belize as a nation goes through in order to re-remember the past through collective national memory.¹⁰ Whilst I agree with Mahlis that Pavana's narrative reframes Belize's recent political history to foreground female collective memory, I also acknowledge the continued uneasy way in which the novel engages with the past in Belize, and highlights the link between present day political conflict and Belize's contested history. Although Pavana is able, by the end of the novel and

⁸ Mahlis, "Women and Nationhood in Zee Edgell's *In Times Like These*," 127.

⁹ Mahlis, "Women and Nationhood in Zee Edgell's *In Times Like These*," 130.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, 12.

having come to terms with her own past, to “stand in relation to the past and present at the same time”¹¹ it is less clear whether Belize is able to do the same. The divergence between Pavana’s and Belize’s journey, then, implies that female autonomy and concepts of nationhood and national identity are fundamentally at odds.

Belize underwent significant political and social change between the first independence movement in the 1950s and achieving independence in 1981, yet scholarship on the role of women in the development of the Belizean nation is scant, reflecting the lack of importance assigned to women within the nationalist project. Of the scholarship that does exist, Anne Macpherson’s informative work, *From Colony to Nation: Women Activists and the Gendering of Politics in Belize*,¹² argues that “the contested, contingent making of the nation was a gendered process” and aims to disrupt the dominant narrative that women in Belize were only politically active in the spheres of the church and charity work.¹³ Macpherson focuses on the women’s resistance movement and celebrates the development of female consciousness in Belize, highlighting the ways in which women’s contributions have been consistently underplayed in the development of

¹¹ Zee Edgell, *In Times Like These* (New Hampshire: Heinemann, 1991), 138. All references are to this edition and are given in the text.

¹² Anne Macpherson, *From Colony to Nation: Women Activists and the Gendering of Politics in Belize: 1912-1982* (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 2007).

¹³ Macpherson, *From Colony to Nation: Women Activists and the Gendering of Politics in Belize: 1912-1982*, 8.

the political landscape, whilst looking to rectify the void in existing literature that excludes women.¹⁴

Another key, isolated text, that takes Belizean women's voices as its subject is Irma McClaurin's study *Women of Belize* (1996); an ethnography focused on stories by women from the district of Toledo. McClaurin's goal for the project was to reveal "the historical circumstances, cultural beliefs and institutional structures that have rendered women in Belize socially disenfranchised and economically dependent on men."¹⁵ Belizean society has traditionally leant upon colonial versions of femininity, which prioritise feminine modesty and exist within a familial framework. McClaurin's interviews with Belizean women reveal the dominance of masculine narratives of nation in Belize, where women are construed primarily as mothers, whose "national importance is based on their reproductive roles."¹⁶ McClaurin argues that "women's value, either ascribed or self-attributed, comes from the degree to which they conform to social norms of a "good wife or mother."¹⁷ Similarly, McClaurin's interviews illustrate the high value placed upon marriage "as a legal recognition of the commitment between a man and a woman" although she notes that many women "tend to acquiesce and accept male behaviour [...] in order to 'save' the relationship."¹⁸ For example, in a case

¹⁴ Macpherson, *From Colony to Nation: Women Activists and the Gendering of Politics in Belize: 1912-1982*, 7.

¹⁵ Irma McClaurin, *Women of Belize: Gender and Change in Central America* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1996). Back Cover.

¹⁶ Tamar Mayer, "Gender Ironies of Nationalism: Setting the Stage," in *Gender Ironies of Nationalism: Sexing the Nation*, ed. Tamar Mayer (New York: Routledge, 2000), 7.

¹⁷ McClaurin, *Women of Belize: Gender and Change in Central America*, 19.

¹⁸ McClaurin, *Women of Belize: Gender and Change in Central America*, 20.

study of a participant, “Rose”, McClaurin observes the way that “the category ‘woman’ in Belize implies a certain set of behaviours to which all females must conform,”¹⁹ behaviours, which correspond closely to hegemonic ideals promoted by the nation. This conformity is also effected by Rose herself: she is oppressed by the male figure in her household, yet simultaneously “perpetuate(s) her own subordination,”²⁰ reinforcing his thoughts on a woman’s ‘place’ and role, through her criticism of American women whom she describes as immoral. The example of Rose illustrates the way that European derived codes of traditional feminine propriety have been internalised in Belize, whilst a more ‘progressive’ American female identity is rejected.

Macpherson’s work represents a marginal voice in a historiography dominated by men and is an important text that helps to situate *In Times Like These*, providing a female-centred account of the independence movement. Similarly, McClaurin’s work is a standalone oral history project, which documents the stories of real Belizean women. This text is useful in its specific focus on gender roles and its depiction of the way in which women have been traditionally relegated to that of domestic or mother. Both McClaurin’s and Macpherson’s works inform this thesis, providing alternative gendered frameworks from which to approach Belize’s history: frameworks which depart from the traditional, masculine version of history which is predominantly circulated. Both texts, therefore, can enrich my reading of *In Times Like These* as an explicitly feminist novel.

¹⁹ Ibid, 50.

²⁰ Ibid, 51.

***In Times Like These* and Belizean Race Politics of the 1960s and 1970s**

Gendered theories of nation are a persistent concern for Edgell, yet of all her novels, *In Times Like These* reveals this concern most explicitly, via a strong critique of masculine ideals of nationhood. Mayer has suggested that masculine nationalism developed in the Anglophone Caribbean in two different areas: trade unions “where men who held central positions articulated ideas about a Caribbean-based self-determination” and in black communities: “where a black consciousness was growing and black national pride was evolving.”²¹ Mayer’s statement extends to Belize, where the 1960s and 1970s saw the newly mobilised black working class population and the Black Power movement both develop narratives which competed with the traditional images of nation celebrated by the Creole elite. Mayer has also noted that much of the nationalism that developed in the Caribbean was advanced by men “therefore reproduce[ing] many of the male-dominated political and social institutions of the colonial era.”²² Mayer notes: “men’s goals, which were embraced both by women and men as if they were to benefit the entire nation, defined the nationalist project in the colonial era and continue to do so in the postcolonial era too.”²³ Mayer’s argument about gendered colonial resistance is not new and in *In Times Like These*, we see the novel attempting to function as a site of resistance to various forms of patriarchy. Although written a decade later, the novel is set in 1981, with

²¹ Mayer, “Gender Ironies of Nationalism: Setting the Stage,” 15.

²² Mayer, “Gender Ironies of Nationalism: Setting the Stage,” 15.

²³ *Ibid*, 15.

Belize on the cusp of becoming postcolonial. Although the narrative of the novel flashes backwards to various points in time, it is at the moment of independence where Edgell focuses much of her active resistance against patriarchal notions of gender, thus re-inscribing traditional narratives of nation and cultural memory.

Writing about *In Times Like These*, Mahlis has argued that the silencing of women's narratives both reinforces the inequality of colonial rule, and "undermine(s) the emancipatory and democratic ideals of anti-colonial struggles."²⁴ The inequalities perpetuated by the colonial nation towards women are explored most pointedly in the novel via Pavana's suspicion of the Black Power movement. In line with the development of this movement in the USA and the Caribbean in the 1960s, the United Black Association for Development (UBAD) formed in Belize in 1969. UBAD were one of the strongest dissenters against the legacy of colonialism – a central tenet of their ideology attacked the 'myth of origin' – yet their alignment with Black Power rhetoric simultaneously perpetuated gender stereotypes, thus illustrating inequalities, even as they sought democratic ideals.

The influence of Black Power, and UBAD are felt throughout the novel, and indeed, UBAD had a significant impact on party politics in Belize during the 1960s. The space they occupied in Belize's political history, although relatively short-lived (they disbanded in 1974), is significant for my reading of *In Times Like*

²⁴ Mahlis, "Women and Nationhood in Zee Edgell's *In Times Like These*," 126.

These. The party's active disavowal of the 'myth of origin' extended beyond the PUP's call for a united Belize, and actively sought to dismantle the myth. Edgell's decision to set Pavana in opposition to the Black Power movement is complex: on one hand her aversion aligns her within the Creole elite and represents a subject position which supports the colonial perspective of the past and the celebration of the battle myth, but it also enacts her feminist views, representing a challenge to the movement's gender politics. UBAD's arrival onto the political scene in Belize brought the question of 'race' firmly back onto the agenda, addressing "in a more profound and sustained manner, than any other before or since, questions of racism and of ethnic relations in Belize."²⁵ Their leader, Evan X Hyde, was quick to attack the "Creole bourgeoisie"²⁶ through impassioned speeches and articles in the party paper *Amandala*.²⁷ These speeches resurrected the discussion around the origin myth, which had been largely absent from the political landscape of the early 1960s. In 1969, Hyde wrote a satirical leaflet, published with the sole intention of discrediting the St George's Caye myth:

No one can deny that the most effective historical source of division between the tribes in our society has been the so-called Battle of St George's Caye [...] The myth was created that white master and black slave fought hand in hand against a dastardly

²⁵ Assad Shoman, "Reflections on Ethnicity and Nation in Belize," *Documento de Trabajo. No. 9 / Document de Travail No. 9, México: Proyecto AFRODESC / EURESCL* (2010). http://www.yassermusa.com/uploads/3/4/7/0/3470758/reflections_on_ethnicity_and_nation_in_belize.pdf, 14.

²⁶ Assad Shoman, "The Role of Ethnicity in the Internationalization of Belize's Independence Struggle," *Etnicidad y nación: debate alrededor de Belice. Actes de colloque* (2009), 132. <https://hal-unice.archives-ouvertes.fr/hal-00709131/document#page=117>.

²⁷ The paper was formed in 1969 specifically for UBADs purposes but became politically independent in the 1970s. It is still the most widely circulated Belizean newspaper. "The name "Amandala" is adapted from the *Xhosa/Zulu* and means "power."

aggressive tyrant – the Spaniard... For the sycophantic Creole bourgeoisie class, the 10th represented a legitimisation of their supremacy in the civil service administrative circles of government.²⁸

Hyde's statement powerfully attacks the Creole elite, whilst resurrecting the question of how the past, and more specifically, slavery, is remembered in Belize. Moreover, he directly challenges those who have downplayed the role of the Creole elite in the perpetuation of the systematic oppression of working class black Belizeans. Hyde's statement also illustrates the tension between public and private memory, and speaks, on a wider level, to the need for recognition of marginal and dispossessed groups in the nationalist project of selective remembering and forgetting. Through the political lens of Black Power, Hyde attempted to critically develop a specific black consciousness in Belize, one that was separate to colonial rule. His rhetoric draws clear battle lines over memory in Belize, arguing for the centrality of black suffering within the project of nation building and claiming a class politics for black Belizeans above the Creole elite. However, although they managed to harness a degree of popular support in Belize, their passionate, Afro-centric rhetoric did not connect with a significant proportion of the electorate, a factor which represents the on-going, pervasive power of the Creole elite in Belizean society.

The development of UBAD in Belize is reflected in *In Times Like These* via Pavana's interactions with Black Power politics, which occur throughout the

²⁸ Evan X Hyde, *Knocking Our Own Ting*, Belize City. 1969, in Shoman, "The Role of Ethnicity in the Internationalization of Belize's Independence Struggle," 132.

novel. The most significant engagement comes during her time in London in the 1960s when the movement was gaining momentum, a factor which indicates its broader global circulation. Upon Pavana's arrival in London, the novel describes a bedsitting house with a multicultural clientele: "One never knew who one would meet on the stairway – West Indians, Africans, and a number of other nationalities – muttering apologies in diverse accents" (p.99). Pavana is attracted to a group of radicals, which include Alex: "A most conspiratorial bunch, very much of the Fidel-Che ilk, and their consorts" (p.98). Political allegiances are disclosed at once; Pavana notices the floor of the flat is "littered with books, magazines and pamphlets, all of them in one way or another connected with the Black Power movement in the United States, or with apartheid in South Africa" (p.39). Pavana is welcomed into the fold by Alex, but quickly realises that her attitude and beliefs are at odds with those in the group.

Edgell's portrayal of Pavana's social group in London foregrounds their Afrocentric identity. A key member, Stoner, wears "an orange, green and yellow striped Nigerian *agbada*" (p.38) whilst other friends are dressed in "various types of African clothing" (p.38). The attire is alien and unfamiliar to Pavana, which she betrays through her narrative:

Some of the men wore their hair in dreadlocks, which made one man in particular look positively leonine and dangerous; a few of the women wore theirs in tiny plaits which stood up like sticks all over their heads. Two other women with longer hair had decorated their multiplicity of plaits with multi-coloured beads which rattled ominously as they swung their heads (p.38).

In contrast to Stoner and his friends' colourful clothes, Pavana's outfit is drab and conservative: "the front of [her] hair, cut short, straightened and curled, the plait down her back, the grey pullover sweater, the string of graded fake pearls and the baggy, ankle-length maroon skirt" (p.38). Pavana's nondescript clothing aligns her with the European presence, and, more specifically, the Creole elite, her outfit a symbol of her colonial loyalty. Like Beka, Pavana has straightened her hair, adopting a version of beauty that allows her to integrate into her new life in Britain. Pavana's suspicion of the African presence persists throughout the novel; back in Belize years later, she describes the sunshine in her kitchen which "glinted through the vacant eyes of a giant African mask [...] a steady stream of light poured through the huge, thick lips carved into a gruesome grin" (p.63). Through these moments of aversion, Pavana represents the Creole elite, dislocated from her ancestry. Pavana's suspicion of Stoner and his friends, then, is symbolic of the way in which the African presence has been silenced in Belize. Additionally, geographically situated in the capital city of the colonial power, amongst a masculine, nationalist group, preoccupied with global politics, Pavana is unable to access the female-centric, communicative memory which stresses the positive connection to African-derived ritual and tradition on display in *Beka Lamb*.

Although Pavana feels threatened by Alex's friends, she endeavours to meet his expectations of her and fit in; wearing clothes with geometric patterns "to create the desired effect" (p.107) or "[draping] giant hand-made shawls, although she

always had the silly feeling of being enveloped in a tablecloth” (p.108). She also engages with spicy food cooked by Stoner, although it disagrees with her:

“To tell you the truth Stoner, I feel a little upset. It’s the curry.”

“It’s not the curry *per se*, Pavana. It’s because it’s curried goat and at home people don’t eat goat as a rule, *ergo* you feel sick. That’s known as dietary prejudice and you should rid yourself of it.”

He waved his arm and the sleeve of his *agbada* flapped against her face.

“What will you do when you go to Africa and people offer you camel milk to drink or fried insects to eat? What will you do Anna Banana, refuse the brethren and sistren?” (p.39).

Through his assignation of a cultural identity to a basic act of human survival, the centrality of Stoner’s devotion to Africa is confirmed; although Belize is ‘home’ in the above exchange, Africa is his life-blood (“brethren and sistren”). Pavana’s distaste for the curried goat indicates her wider failure to engage with her African heritage, and, crucially, a further rejection of the anti-colonial politics and beliefs of the group.

Pavana’s anxiety around Alex’s friends denotes her middle class Creole subjectivity and provides a space for Edgell to symbolically explore the political tensions between the Creole elite and UBAD, but through Pavana’s critique of Stoner and his consorts, Edgell also posits a challenge to the gender politics of the Black Power movement. It is now recognised that women held significant positions of power within these organisations, which were responsible, in part, for the beginnings of black feminist consciousness, yet the overtly masculine rhetoric

of Black Power often appeared to exclude women from this nationalist project.²⁹

Writing about the development of the Black Power movement in Trinidad, Pasley

has suggested that:

The movement's leaders paid little attention to the double or triple exploitation of black woman by their race, sex, and class. In linking racism to an attack on their masculinity Black Power advocates failed to see how the construct of power and masculinity in itself oppressed women."³⁰

Stoner's determined loyalty to Black power locates him within this masculinist sphere, and through Pavana's rejection of Stoner, Edgell metaphorically rejects the Black Power standards of femininity. Additionally, while Alex is not as obviously loyal to Black power politics as Stoner, his condescending attitude consistently oppresses Pavana, reflecting his symbolic role as the oppressive, masculine nation. Alex's superiority is often displayed via his frustration of what he perceives to be her ignorance, particularly in political matters:

Her questions and comments would not have been unacceptable; perhaps, if they had been backed by some well-known authority, or placed in the context of the ideologies on which they considered themselves advanced students, even experts (p.108).

Pavana never explicitly articulates her politics (although she is certainly listening) but her fractious relationships with Alex and Stoner symbolise the Creole elite's

²⁹ For more information about women's roles within the Black Power movement and the development of black feminist consciousness, see: Joseph. E Peniel, "The Black Power Movement: A State of the Field," *The Journal of American History* 96, no. 3 (2009); Rhonda. Y Williams, "Black Women and Black Power," *OAH Magazine of History*, 2008; Dayo. F Gore, Jeanne Theoharis, and Komozi Woodard, *Want to Start a Revolution? Radical Women in the Black Freedom Struggle* (New York and London: New York University Press, 2009).

³⁰ Victoria Pasley, "The Black Power Movement in Trinidad: An Exploration of Gender and Cultural Changes and the Development of a Feminist Consciousness," *Journal of International Women's Studies* 3, no. 1 (2001): 26.

fear of mobilised black working-class nationalism. As a result, the primacy of the Creole elite subject position in Belizean society is also challenged, revealing the complications of marrying gender, race and class politics. Here, the legacies of colonialism are clearly visible: through Pavana's aversion to Alex and Stoner's politics, the inability of the Creole elite to engage with the past is sharply revealed. Pavana's identity is certainly complex: while her position as a middle-class Creole is cemented by her interactions with Alex and Stoner, the decisions Pavana makes as a mother reveal a more subversive and powerful version of womanhood, one which goes beyond the boundaries of colonial femininity.

Motherhood and the Nation

In Times Like These challenges nationalist and Caribbean models of femininity through an interrogation of women's roles in Belize, and the way in which these have continued to be culturally produced and reproduced. This critique is primarily explored through Pavana's sometimes-contentious status as a single mother of twins. As I discussed in Chapter Three, gendered theories of nationalism in the Caribbean and beyond predominantly situate women in the role of mother. Similarly, the role of the mother, and mother-daughter relationships are recognisable tropes in Anglo-Caribbean writing.³¹ In *In Times Like These*, Edgell speaks directly to this tradition whilst simultaneously

³¹ See Simone A. James Alexander, *Mother Imagery in the Novels of Afro-Caribbean Women* (Columbia and London: University of Missouri Press, 1991); Susheila Nasta, ed., *Motherlands: Black Women's Writing from Africa, the Caribbean and South Asia* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1992). Evelyn O'Callaghan, *Woman Version: Theoretical Approaches to West Indian Fiction by Women*, (London and Basingstoke: Macmillan Caribbean, 1993).

challenging and re-inscribing it. The focus upon mothers in *In Times Like These*, is important for my argument, not only for its nod to this literary tradition, but for the way in which Pavana negotiates motherhood, rejecting its traditional and nationalist concepts and establishing a powerful counter narrative in the process. Boehmer writes about the cultural preference for prescribing the role of 'mother' onto nations across the globe,³² questioning how women can best reconcile the role of 'bearer' of the nation, which has been bestowed upon them, with the often sexist, oppressive gender roles set forth by the nation: "Figures of mothers of the nation are everywhere emblazoned [...] but the presence of women in the nation has in many cases been officially marginalised and ignored."³³ While motherhood is a central thread in *In Times Like These*, Mahlis argues for the positive way in which Pavana's story challenges Caribbean stereotypes of female suffering, including the "seduced and abandoned women and of the mother as martyr."³⁴ She suggests: "[The novel] unsettles the ideological foundation of the seemingly 'natural' distinction between the traditionally female realm of the domestic (dependence and reproduction) and the public realm of male experience (independence and production)."³⁵ Pavana consistently avoids her prescribed domestic role. She travels extensively with her children and rejects her job as a schoolteacher to take up a position in the male-dominated world of Government.

³² Elleke Boehmer, *Stories of Women: Gender and Narrative in the Postcolonial Nation* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005), 88-89.

³³ Boehmer, *Stories of Women: Gender and Narrative in the Postcolonial Nation*, p.91.

³⁴ Mahlis, "Women and Nationhood in Zee Edgell's *In Times Like These*," 130.

³⁵ Mahlis, "Women and Nationhood in Zee Edgell's *In Times Like These*," 136.

The theme of motherhood, particularly the consequences of being an unmarried mother, looms large in the novel. At a wedding attended by a thirteen year-old Pavana, the congregation witnesses the groom, Edward Kelly, being confronted by an ex-lover, who claims he is the father of her baby. Distraught and desperate, the mother murders the child in front of their eyes. This traumatic scene is significant, not only for its portrayal of the consequences of single motherhood, but for the way in which it delineates acceptable and unacceptable versions of woman-hood, thus exhibiting normalised colonial values. The bride, Miss Sylvia Johnson, is wearing traditional “ivory satin, embroidered with beads” (p.10) and a “stem of maidenhair fern, cascading down her dress (p.10). In opposition, the single mother, Junie Silver, is wearing a crumpled dress with a broken zipper, “plastic slippers on her feet [...] caked in mud” (p.11). Like her characterisation of Toycie and National Vellor in *Beka Lamb*, Edgell uses Junie’s shambolic appearance to represent her digression from acceptable notions of femininity; her black, working class identity set in opposition to Sylvia and Edward’s location within the Creole elite. Junie’s additional failure to conform to the colonial gender norms of the nuclear family also confirms her exclusion: both from society, and from the nation. Later in the novel, it is revealed that Junie has passed away: “she ate a quantity of rat poison, so I was told” (p.14). Like Toycie, the consequences of being an unmarried mother have fatal consequences for Junie, and she is literally removed from the story and silenced by her death. This representation of Junie’s demise again exhibits a damning critique of colonial standards of femininity by Edgell.

The juxtaposition of Miss Sylvia and Junie, reflects Peter Wilson's famous structuring analogy of 'respectability', "which is oriented toward standard English, home, family, hierarchy, decorum, stability, honest, economy", and 'reputation', "which is oriented toward the centrifugal, toward carnival, toward Creole, the street, autonomy, mobility, trickery, display and transience."³⁶ Wilson's model positively rejects European social structures, but problematically suggests that women are "the bearers and perpetuators" of respectability, with men afforded the superior status of reputation.³⁷ Besson rejects Wilson's thesis, arguing that women, in fact, "participate in the main dimension of reputation [...] and are therefore central to the Caribbean peasant cultures of resistance."³⁸ In their rejection of respectability, then, black, working class characters like Junie Silver, Toyocie and National Vellor, illustrate active resistance to colonial-dominated gender norms. Although they are ultimately rejected from society, they broaden the perspective of what it 'means' to be female in the Caribbean.

The contrast between 'respectability' and 'reputation' is also observable through the community's unsympathetic response to Junie's plight. Pavana's Aunt observes: "Every day women in this town have babies for men that don't marry

³⁶ Saline Puri, "Beyond Resistance: Notes Towards a New Caribbean Cultural Studies," *Small Axe* 2, no. 7 (2003): 23.

³⁷ Jean Besson, "Reputation & Respectability Reconsidered: A New Perspective on Afro-Caribbean Peasant Women," in *Women and Change in the Caribbean: A Pan-Caribbean Perspective*, ed. Janet Momsen (London: James Currey, 1993), 16.

³⁸ Besson, "Reputation & Respectability Reconsidered: A New Perspective on Afro-Caribbean Peasant Women," 30.

them, but they don't kill their babies. They keep their head" (p.11). In contrast the groom, Edward Kelly, is exonerated, protected by his position in the Creole elite:

Mr Kelly is a decent, upstanding man, a fine Creole, well respected in the service and by everyone. And the bride's father, he's in the service as well. They come from a long line of people in the service. Fine people all (p.13).

This dialogue cements the power of the Creole elite and the prestige of a career 'in the service.' In contrast, Junie's tragic story represents a cautionary tale of the potential pitfalls of single-motherhood. Pavana's decision to proceed with her pregnancy and her embrace of motherhood alongside a career represents a departure from the narrow view offered by gendered nationalism.

The self-determination exercised by Pavana around her pregnancy contrasts sharply with the response of the children's father, Alex. Mahlis has suggested that Alex embodies the nation; he has moved from young activist to political leader, gaining the power with which to change his life and the lives of others: "This process of moving from boyhood to manhood [...] serves as a compelling narrative for the nation's coming of age."³⁹ This embodiment of the nation is fluid, and through the interplay between Pavana and Alex, a dual narrative of nation is proposed by Edgell. Indeed, Pavana's rejection of traditional stereotypes of motherhood challenges the aggressive and distinctly masculine rhetoric displayed by Alex. Through Pavana's narrative, the previously silenced, private moments of women become incorporated into collective memory

³⁹ Mahlis, "Women and Nationhood in Zee Edgell's *In Times Like These*," 134.

The breakdown of Alex and Pavana's relationship centres around Pavana's pregnancy. Alex makes Pavana two 'offers' – to pay for an abortion, or for her to live as his mistress – both of which are steeped in misogyny and suggest adherence to a model of femininity which compromises female agency. In contrast to Sylvia and Edward's 'respectable' family, who represent the Creole elite, the former Black nationalist, Alex, symbolises the masculine 'reputation' model; his proposal rejecting the traditional family unit celebrated by the Creole elite and colonial institutions. Pavana refuses both offers, giving birth to twins and confirming that the role of mistress is not for her: "Well I know very well I wouldn't. Too proud, I suppose, to prove that I'm cut from the same cloth as most of the unmarried women at home" (p.111). The following exchange crystallises the gulf between Alex's traditional views of gender roles, and Pavana's desire to depart from them:

"What was so terrible about the offer I made that day in the park? [...] What was so shameful about that? So disgraceful? Why were you so outraged?"

"All my life I'd struggled to break free of certain cultural patterns. I didn't want to end up being supported by you [...] I wanted to be able to stand on my own feet."

"What makes you think you're so different from most Caribbean women that I know? They accept their lives, it seems. Even like it, since as boys we are raised to become the men that we are. How can you be so different?" (p.149).

Here, Pavana clearly differentiates her own subject position from that of the 'unmarried mother' Caribbean stereotype embodied by working class women

such as Junie and Toycie. She rejects the passive acceptance of the role set out for her, and instead demands control, indeed:

Pavana believed passionately that a woman should have the right to decide whether or not to have a child. She also believed that a woman should be prepared to face the consequences of that choice (p.147).

In this statement, Pavana not only rejects patriarchal views, but represents the 'respectable' woman, who is critical of those women who fail to take responsibility, thus echoing her Aunt's views on Junie's behaviour years earlier. Pavana is not wholly 'respectable' either: her decision to continue with the pregnancy sets her outside the boundaries of the traditional nuclear family, yet she transcends the inevitability of the single-mother status laid out for her by colonial society, by raising her children, having a successful career, and travelling the world. Freed from traditional stereotypes of motherhood, and thus, the nation, Pavana is able to symbolise a new version of national identity, one which prioritises female subjectivity. In the representation of their differing reactions to Pavana's pregnancy Edgell presents two views of the nation: Alex embodying the dominant, male subject position that has been prescribed to him, whilst Pavana re-conceptualises the role of mother.

In this re-conceptualisation of the mother role, Boehmer's identification of the conflicting demands placed on women is instructive. These demands require women to reconcile pre-determined stereotypes of motherhood whilst also conforming to a patriarchal narrative of the masculine nation. Boehmer offers a possibility to women: to negotiate this contradiction through engagement with

writing: “To write [...] is to *make* one’s own place and narrative, to tell the story of oneself, to create an identity.” Women are able to do this, Boehmer argues, in two key ways:

“The first [...] involves *interrupting* the language of official nationalist discourse and literature with a woman’s vocality. Nationhood is so bound up in textuality, in ‘definitive’ histories and official languages and mythologies, that to compose a substantially different kind of text [...] is to challenge normative discourses of nationhood [...] The second [...] involves *changing the subjects* that have dominated the nationalist text – and therefore questioning the centrality of the male-defined nation as the *key* historical player in the post-independence period.⁴⁰

Boehmer’s possibilities for the “disruption and/or transformation of the masculine nationalist text”⁴¹ are realised by Edgell in *In Times Like These*, which foregrounds female experience, thus *interrupting* the nationalist narrative in Belize. Similarly, the novel also *changes the subjects*, choosing to focus on a key moment from Belizean history through a previously unaddressed female lens. The way in which Edgell most clearly ‘changes the subjects’ is realised through the narrative of Pavana’s work in the first Women’s Unit in the country.

“Changing the Subjects:”⁴² Writing Women’s Stories of Nation

An understanding of the women’s movement in Belize is important for my reading of *In Times Like These* as a feminist, independence novel which has the concerns of the Women’s Unit of government at its heart. Edgell continues to represent the strong political divisions first presented in *Beka Lamb*, which are

⁴⁰ Boehmer, *Stories of Women: Gender and Narrative in the Postcolonial Nation*, 94-95.

⁴¹ Boehmer, *Stories of Women: Gender and Narrative in the Postcolonial Nation*, 94-95.

bound to pre-existing racial and class-based tensions rooted in the colonial period. Whilst *In Times Like These* re-inscribes the absence of women in the founding myths of the nation, the novel also comments on the role played by women who continued to be wedded to colonial ideals of femininity. The struggle for gender equality was not unique to Belize, but the push towards female equality and rejection of colonial modes of femininity was complicated by the complex party politics in Belize. Although they were opposed to colonialism, the ruling People's Independence Party (PIP, later PUP) did not sanction the mobilisation of the women's movement. Instead, the strongest collective female voice was located within the National Independence Party (NIP), whose women's group began to gain support throughout the 1960s. Of significance to the broader arguments of this thesis is the strong faction of Creole elite members in the NIP; a factor which locates the genesis of the women's movement within a group who had a vested interest in preserving the origin myth. An example which harnessed the NIP to the origin myth further was a movement called 'Save Our Country' (1961-2), of which the women's wing of the NIP was a key agitator. The campaign was an organised rejection of a PUP policy which proposed renaming 'St George's Caye Day', 'National Day.'⁴³ In contrast to the women who would later look to challenge colonially-derived notions of femininity, the NIP women involved in the campaign firmly connected themselves to the founding myths of the nation, despite women's absence in this story. The conflict between those women attempting to challenge entrenched gender norms, and those attempting

⁴³ Macpherson, *From Colony to Nation: Women Activists and the Gendering of Politics in Belize: 1912-1982*, 248-249.

to preserve them is explored by Edgell in *In Times Like These*. Indeed, in seeking to assert her agency, central character Pavana must also negotiate the legacy of her political ancestors.

The UN 'Decade on Women' began in 1975, which pushed the reluctant PUP to develop a women and development policy.⁴⁴ This action paved the way for the formation of the independent Belize Committee for Women and Development (BCWAD), who "sought a 'woman-centred' approach to analysing and changing Belizean women's reality" in 1979,⁴⁵ and the development of the Women's Bureau in 1981. Both initiatives advanced the goals of the women's movement. BCWAD was comprised of predominantly middle class members, the majority of whom had secondary and/or postsecondary education, and who held white collar or professional jobs.⁴⁶ Pavana, with her middle-class background, degree in journalism and job as a schoolteacher is symbolic of this group. Yet although the establishment of the Women's Bureau was a significant victory, the ruling PUP were quick to stifle many of the proposed initiatives. This subject is a prominent concern for *In Times Like These*.

Indeed, mirroring Edgell's own career (she was the first Director of the Women's Bureau in 1981), Pavana's main reason for returning to Belize on the eve of

⁴⁴ Macpherson, *From Colony to Nation: Women Activists and the Gendering of Politics in Belize: 1912-1982*, 244.

⁴⁵ Macpherson, *From Colony to Nation: Women Activists and the Gendering of Politics in Belize: 1912-1982*, 246.

⁴⁶ *Ibid*, 267.

independence is to take up a new post in the newly-formed Women's Unit in the Belizean government. By focusing upon the development of female-centred politics in the novel, Edgell deliberately rewrites women's voices into the narrative of nation building and independence. Scott's argument that Caribbean women's literature should pay more attention to class, economics and collective struggle⁴⁷ is certainly realised in *In Time Like These*, with Pavana representing not only a single mother, but a working mother. Her role in the Women's Unit also provides an alternative to traditional female roles of 'wife and mother.' Her job situates her amongst a small group who are passionate about changing the status of women in Belize and, through successful community events, Edgell writes women's importance to the development of nation into the communicative memory of the country. In the process, she "changes the subjects" that have previously dominated Belizean national narratives.⁴⁸ Yet Pavana's induction into the world of government affairs is not straightforward and her rocky initiation at a critical moment in Belize's history, on the cusp of becoming an independent nation, represents both broader political tensions and the complexity of the decolonisation process.

One of the central tenets of Scott's analysis of Caribbean women's writing is that the advent of neoliberalism and globalisation has trapped former colonies in service to dominant world powers, thus rendering the concept of 'independence'

⁴⁷ Helen Scott, *Caribbean Women Writers and Globalisation* (Hampshire and Burlington: Ashgate, 2006), 5.

⁴⁸ Boehmer, *Stories of Women: Gender and Narrative in the Postcolonial Nation*, 94-95.

a fiction. Her study explores the impact of global forces on Caribbean societies, and how these forces, in turn, are reflected in female-authored literature from the Caribbean. *In Times Like These* represents such literature. Although set a few weeks prior to Belize's actual independence from Britain, the novel reflects the way in which, like the new forms of dominance that replaced slavery after emancipation, post-independence societies continued to be subjected to dominant power structures. Writing about *In Times Like These*, Patteson places the novel alongside Caribbean-authored texts by Philips, Naipaul, and Cliff, all of whom comment upon the disappointments of decolonisation.⁴⁹ Unlike *Beka Lamb's* positive appetite for political change, *In Times Like These* suggests frustration with Belize's social, economic and political development. The placement of Pavana's struggles within the Women's Unit role against the broader disillusionment of the Belizean people highlights what Anne McClintock has described as: "the premature celebration of the pastness of colonialism (which) runs the risk of obscuring the continuities and discontinuities of colonial and imperial power."⁵⁰ That a Women's Unit exists represents some progress, yet its existence glosses a fiction of female advancement so that Pavana's inability to progress her cause can be seen as reflective of the wider failures of independence.

⁴⁹ Richard Patteson, *Caribbean Passages: A Critical Perspective on New Fiction from the West Indies*, 74.

⁵⁰ Anne McClintock in Scott, *Caribbean Women Writers and Globalisation*, 3.

Pavana returns to Belize excited to start her new role but is disappointed to find it plagued by setbacks from the start, controlled by a government which remains steeped in double standards and sexism, despite the rhetoric of change.

Pavana's decision to relocate herself and her children back to Belize is contingent upon the role being a secure, full time position, yet her first meeting with her new colleague, Mrs Elrington, reveals that the contract has been slashed to a year, with the promised salary decreased, and the opportunity to represent Belize overseas removed. Mrs Elrington sympathises, but notes there is little that either she or Pavana can do to change it: "It's a defeat for both of us. I would go as far to say for Belizean women in general, but perhaps I exaggerate" (p.74). This exchange, one of Pavana's first interactions in her new role, sets the tone for future discussions of gender politics, a situation which is not helped by the volatile political situation. Pavana does not align herself with any one political party, rather she aspires to address the needs of all of Belize's women "regardless of their political, religious or any other kinds of belief" (p.194), but this broad philosophy is difficult to manage in pre-independence Belize where the political landscape is turbulent. Alex's sister, Moira, warns Pavana of the pitfalls of neutrality: "With no strong constituency in either political camp, you're vulnerable. It'll continue to be rough going and the unit will only be able to move so far" (p.194). Despite Pavana's inclusive attitude and desire to implement change, she faces a number of barriers to success; her initiation into the world of government sees her encounter a complex web of subterfuge amongst her colleagues. Like the destabilising, paranoid, political situation playing out in

streets of Belize City, Pavana's agency is undermined by a culture of gossip, plots and conspiracies, with a number of actors each competing for their own objectives.

The absence of female liberation and equality is also visible in Pavana's interactions with male characters in government. The legacy of women's economic history, in tightly regulated, domestic roles, is still visible in the novel, despite the aforementioned political shifts, as Belize moved towards decolonisation. Many of the novel's references to female political ambition locate women within domestic organisations such as the home economics unit, a scenario which Pavana endeavours to change. In an exchange between Miss Elrington and a government minister for example, the minister expresses his surprise at the ambitions of the Women's Unit, which he thought would function "to train women to be better wives and mothers, an extension of the Home Economics Unit, so to speak" (p.134). As a representative of government, the minister personifies the masculine nation of Belize and reinforces patriarchal stereotypes that proclaim women as the cultural bearers of nation. Later in the novel, another male government worker, the Permanent Secretary, and a "young, pretty junior officer" (p.219), discuss the officer's need for transportation to attend a cake-decorating workshop. The young officer, who incidentally works in the Home Economics department, has baked the Permanent Secretary hot *panades*, and promises him a cake, if transport to the workshop can be secured. This flirtatious conversation, steeped in motifs of female domesticity, contrasts sharply

with the stilted, tense exchange that follows between Pavana and the Permanent Secretary, where Pavana is reprimanded for failing to mention the minister in the radio show broadcast to advertise the series of workshops. While unsubtle in its portrayal of male and female interactions, the gulf between these interactions represents the isolated position that Pavana finds herself in, and the challenge the unit faces in changing the ingrained sexism present in government.

Additionally, it is revealed that the Permanent Secretary is the very same Edward Kelly, the father of Junie Silver's baby, and whose wedding Pavana witnessed when she was a young girl. By placing Edward at the centre of the male-dominated administration in Belize, Edgell implies that the success of Creole nationalism driven by the elite comes at the cost of the oppression of black working class women.

Pavana's experiences in government, then, reflect the frustrating enormity of her task. In reimagining the early days of the women's movement, Edgell is able to reclaim a previously male-dominated space. One of Pavana's successes is her establishment of a series of female-led workshops. The success of the "exhilarating and rewarding" (p.217) events is a contrast to Pavana's other challenges, thus representing a site of female resistance against patriarchy. In line with other areas in the Caribbean, the 1970s saw the emergence of women's groups in Belize. Evolving from community and church collectives, they were a primary vehicle for training, information giving and female advocacy.⁵¹ Edgell's

⁵¹ McClaurin, *Women of Belize: Gender and Change in Central America*, 23.

description of these workshops is a nod to a run of six community workshops that were held in rural districts in Belize throughout 1981 and 1982.⁵² Although the workshops in the novel are successful, Pavana faces much resistance to her plans, and is criticised by the Permanent Secretary (and others) for deviating from the prescribed home economics agenda. The first workshop takes place in the village of 'Burrell Boom', "one of the sites in the country used as a trapping point for logs floating downstream" (p.213). A 'boom' was a heavy metal chain stretched over the river to catch mahogany logs, and was invented specifically to assist with the transportation of mahogany.⁵³ Like her use of the symbolic location of Sibun in *Beka Lamb*, Edgell's choice to locate the workshops – themselves a vehicle of communicative memory – in a place of historical significance to the mahogany trade, represents Edgell's continued desire to connect her present-day stories to Belize's past and reclaim geographic space where her ancestors were oppressed. In the process, she re-inscribes the narratives of history. Sibun represented hope in *Beka Lamb*: its historical location as a maroon slave community functioning as a site of resistance,⁵⁴ which reflected the political hope described in the novel. In contrast, *In Times Like These* locates an example of organised female resistance that questions dominant socio-economic notions of femininity in a place which represents the mahogany trade, an industry which excluded women. The location of Burrell Boom therefore allows Edgell to

⁵² Macpherson, *From Colony to Nation: Women Activists and the Gendering of Politics in Belize: 1912-1982*, 273.

⁵³ Renate Joanna Mayr, *Belize: Tracking the Path of its History* (Berlin and Zurich: LIT Verlag Münster, 2014), 62-63.

⁵⁴ Julie Moody-Freeman, "Waking the Gone: Nine Nights as Cultural Remembrance of an African Heritage in Belizean Literature," *Resources for Feminist Research* 31, no. 3/4 (2006): 35.

reimagine women's economic roles and relocate them from the confines of domesticity. By recasting an underrepresented historical moment in fiction, Edgell writes these elements of the female experience into Belize's national story, and, to use Boehmer's words, "changes the subjects" that have hitherto dominated the nationalist text.⁵⁵ McClaurin has suggested that women's groups have the ability to "break the silence", and function as a powerful symbol of women's ability to change their circumstances in the face of adversity. Indeed, "in refusing to [...] be socially isolated, women create the conditions for altering their [...] circumstances and also gain some understanding of solidarity."⁵⁶ Edgell's fictional inclusion of the interplay of the women's workshops creates a story in which female-operated, female-centred communities enable particular articulations of female subjectivity.

I have focused on the ways in which Edgell privileges the voices of women, thus re-shaping Belize's dominant cultural memory to include women's stories in the narrative of the country's independence. Whilst Burrell Boom is a significant location for Edgell's vision of female-centred resistance, it is also notable because it is one of only a few instances where the novel references the period of slavery directly. Like *Beka Lamb*, *In Times Like These* also displays a complex relationship with its past.

⁵⁵ Boehmer, *Stories of Women: Gender and Narrative in the Postcolonial Nation*, 94-95.

⁵⁶ McClaurin, *Women of Belize: Gender and Change in Central America*, 59.

Burying the Past: Colonial Legacies and the Failures of Independence

For this thesis, which has a primary concern with how slavery is remembered in Belize, *In Times Like These* is notable for an almost complete absence of references to the period of slavery. As the novel's title would suggest, it is concerned instead with the present moment. Although there are a number of flashbacks to Pavana's recent past, and a smaller number to her childhood, there is little prior to these moments. For a novel with the fate of the nation at its heart, situated at the moment of independence, this lack of interaction with Belize's broader history is emblematic of the on-going normalisation of colonial values noted in *Beka Lamb*, and the marginalisation of black working class memory. Pavana's criticism of UBAD via her interaction with Stoner emphasises this marginalisation and again, as in *Beka Lamb*, Edgell represents the Black Creole group as having little desire to engage with the past. Instead, Pavana embodies a middle-class Creole elite subject position, which has no interest in challenging the dominance of the origin myth. Far from remembering the role of her ancestors, Pavana's narrative places her within a broader narrative of Creole success, aligned firmly with a British way of life.

In *Beka Lamb*, references to the colonial past are implied but unspoken, yet the novel is awash with moments where traditions, folklore and stories from the past emerge. Conversely, *In Times Like These* rarely looks further back beyond Pavana's time in London. Like Bill and Lilla in *Beka Lamb*, we learn that

Pavana's parents, Raul and Carrie, are self-starters and focused on the future, speaking little of the past "absorbed as they were in creating their new lives and rigorously training themselves at night school to become the people they wanted to be" (p.229). Like Beka's young brothers who demand to hear Granny Ivy's stories about 'befo' time', Pavana's children pester their grandfather to talk about when he was young but he "seldom seemed to know the stories in detail and would say in pathetic tones, that it was such a long time ago, he was sure he'd forgotten almost everything" (p.229). Similarly, Pavana's descriptions of her childhood refer to "horror, cruelty and sadness" (p.14), but other than the story about Junie Silver, she does not disclose what this may have entailed. In these moments, a clear generational transference, and thus forgetting, is revealed. Unlike Granny Ivy's insistence on the celebration of old traditions, Pavana rarely refers to her childhood, instead she notes the way in which her parents had always "tried to shield her from the worst of the [misery and hardships]" (p.292), choosing instead to invest their energy in seeking independence and opportunity. Additionally, the 1950s garnered a positive wave of optimism, which gave people of Pavana's parents' generation hope for the future and a sense that change was possible. This national feeling is commented on by Pavana in the novel: "In London, as she'd read the newspapers her parents sent her [...] she could sense the excitement in the country, hear the hopeful roar of the crowd" (p.143). Like the way the characters in *Beka Lamb* attempt to stay positive in the face of things persistently 'breaking down', a lack of engagement with the past represents a desire by the Creole elite to look forward, rather than backwards, only holding

tight to things which instil a feeling of pride (such as the celebration of the enslaved in the founding of the nation myth).

The present moment in *In Times Like These* describes a fractured society, with a disillusioned electorate plagued by paranoia and fear. The controversial 'Heads of Agreement' debate saw Britain attempt to reach agreement with Guatemala around the ownership of land. Pavana represents a generation that has all but forgotten the historic struggles of their ancestors. Instead, the characters in the novel engage with the past through entrenched loyalty to political parties and adherence to received behaviours. Characters in the novel bemoan the political situation but feel powerless to change it, and there is a passive acceptance by many of the inevitability of 'how things are'. This attitude is commented on in the novel by one of Pavana's friends, who notes, "So many people in Belize seem to [...] stay detached, heads way down [...] fearful of involvement" (p.54), whilst Pavana suggests that she "expects they have very good reasons for doing so if they do" (p.54). This attitude is inherited, reflecting an active avoidance of what is unpleasant or difficult. Moreover, although the political situation is freely discussed, it is not something that people feel able to change. This inability to change is commented on by Pavana, as she reflects on why Alex and Stoner were unable to harness success. She suggests that many Belizeans had expressed a desire to support their new and revolutionary politics, but that the political landscape in the country made it impossible: "And it really was with the greatest reluctance that the population turned once more to the seasoned

politicians, many of whom had grown cynical, corrupt” (p.144). This weary acceptance of the ‘way of things’ reflects the effects of an extensive period of occupation, and also speaks to the wider post-colonial malaise across the Caribbean region which followed the initial excitement of the independence movements. I return here to Scott, who acknowledges “the reality that independence is rendered fictitious by enduring imperialism.”⁵⁷ Unlike *Beka Lamb*, published close to independence and more straightforwardly ‘in-service’ to the nation, *In Times Like These*, reflects instead the disillusionment of a country still shackled by imperialism, both literally and figuratively. This picture of Belize, still gripped by colonial legacies, renders Edgell’s portrayal of the Women’s Unit all the more significant. It highlights the on-going struggle faced by women to achieve gender equality and to move away from entrenched colonial standards of femininity, while simultaneously intervening in a masculine history which has forgotten the stories of women.

An undercurrent of anxiety and dissatisfaction is also realised in the novel through the narrator’s descriptions of space and place. Unlike the evocative descriptions of the island shores in *Beka Lamb*, and the green forests of *Time and the River*, the Belize City of *In Times Like These* is neglected, reflecting the poor state of the economy and the turbulent political action. Pavana describes a dilapidated scene thus:

On some verandas, laundry dried on drooping clothes-lines, the yards were swampy and there were some in which sour grass grew as high as bushes. Uncollected garbage, swarming with

⁵⁷ Scott, *Caribbean Women Writers and Globalisation*, 1.

flies, spilled into the lane. The shallow, narrow drains, uncleared for weeks, overflowed with stinking water, green with morass (p.79).

Writing about 'fictions of memory', Neumann has argued that spaces symbolically hold memories of the past, yet the accessibility of these memories depends on the structure of such space: "whereas spatial order often indicates the easy accessibility of the past, spatial disorder suggests that the access to the past is difficult, intricate or even impossible."⁵⁸ The run-down, shambolic imagery of present-day Belize City stands in direct contrast to the bright and breezy coastal location described in *Beka Lamb*, when the country was poised to embark on a more active engagement with the past. In *In Times Like These*, the novel describes a troubling, if not "impossible", relationship with its past. Even the sea, which is normally used as a calming metaphor for Edgell's characters, has become tarnished, filled with rubbish and pollution, representative of the stagnation the country finds itself in: "Floating in the choppy waves, bouncing over the wall, were dead fish, rotting vegetables, a cow's head, an old shoe and other debris from the market and town" (p.79). In *Beka Lamb* the sea is used to reflect Beka's inner state, and this motif continues in *In Times Like These*. Here, the sea is polluted, reflecting Pavana's troubled mind and the broader troubles of Belize itself. The descriptions of Belize City are reinforced by Pavana's description of the National Stadium, which she calls "another misnomer. The drains bordering its chain-linked fence were choked with overgrown, razor-edged weeds" (p.91). The stadium functions as a metaphor for the country itself,

⁵⁸ Neumann, "The Literary Representations of Memory," 340.

strangled by political turbulence and lack of national unity. As Scott has observed, the promise of glorious independence and national cohesion has been rarely realised in the Caribbean:

Independence failed to bring equality and justice to all formerly colonised subjects; political independence did not fundamentally transform social relations and structures but rather installed national bourgeoisies whose task was to manage capitalism while the world's super powers developed new systems to maintain their influence over strategically significant regions.⁵⁹

At the moment of the novel's setting, independence has not yet been achieved but the sad descriptions and metaphors used by Edgell anticipate the failures of independence and the difficult road still to travel.

Finally, despite the strong, female position adopted by Pavana in the novel, the effects of a powerful colonial silencing of women are still visible in her narrative, again reflecting the normalised legacies of colonial femininity, which required women to stifle emotion. Although the more mature Pavana is more likely to speak her mind, like Beka, her voice still betrays conformity to a silenced model of femininity. Pavana's emotions threaten to overflow a number of times in the novel, such as the time she is confronted by Stoner Bennett on the street in Belize City: "Control, she cautioned herself, control, don't make everything worse. Do not over-react for God almighty's sake" (p.93). Later, in the novel, her children are kidnapped but despite the severity of the situation, she compels herself to keep her emotions stifled: "Calm' she cautioned herself. This is an emergency

⁵⁹ Scott, *Caribbean Women Writers and Globalisation*, 9

and you cannot allow yourself to be flattened by the first stiff wind that blows” (p.243). This recourse to self-control suggests that although women have moved forward since Beka was a teenager, the rhetoric of feminine self-possession and modesty still holds powerful influence. When Alex and Pavana end their relationship, she does not cry, but is: “proud that no tears shone in her eyes, glad that only her throat felt constricted and that her face must show an equal casualness” (p.114). Here, Pavana’s pride in her ability to keep her emotions intact symbolises a wider, ingrained behaviour which avoids difficult emotions and uncomfortable memories. This reluctance to display emotion is compounded following Alex’s death at the end of the novel. Pavana’s son, Eric, suggests: “we’ll soon be able to forget all about this, eh?” (p.306). Instead of showing her true feelings, Pavana responds that they will in time, “though she really wanted to weep, as she knew she would do, though silently, for years to come, perhaps for as long as she lived” (p.306). Like her parents before her, Pavana does not show her true feeling to her children, only passing on her silence around emotional pain. Pavana is emblematic of the middle-class, Black Creole elite subject position in Belize, confined by the pervasive and on-going legacies of slavery. She is desperate to make her mark and change the status of women in Belize, but is equally constrained by this identity, which struggles to engage with uncomfortable truths and difficult memories; her ‘silent tears’, symbolising the wider, generational silence around traumatic memory in Belize.

Conclusion

Pavana is in many ways a transnational subject, living in both Europe and Africa. In the novel her return to Belize is symbolic, the whole novel representing a kind-of 'working through' and re-engagement with everything she has avoided so far in her life: "There were so many conflicting emotions, successfully ignored for years, stirring urgently within her and demanding recognition, resolution" (p.19). *In Times Like These* maps a story of a nation coming into being and continues where *Beka Lamb* finished, functioning, in part, as a continuation of the allegorical story of Belize. Like Pavana, the Belize of *In Times Like These* is moving forward, towards independence, and although the pathway is not necessarily a smooth one, the outcome is significant nonetheless and functions as a turning point. The novel embodies the nation, but also represents a hybrid model: the nation's desires are realised not only through the idealistic, masculine vision of Alex; but also through Pavana who represents a previously silenced female voice in Belize. Alex's death at the end of the novel is representative of the failures of a traditional, male-centred view of nationalism, whilst Pavana is exonerated – able to pursue her career in the Women's Unit, and finally free of the weight of the secret of her children's parentage, which she has held close to her chest since their birth. In filling the gaps of Belizean historiography with a female view of independence, Edgell's text functions as collective and communicative memory, giving voice to occluded stories of women. In doing so,

Edgell suggests that the future of Belize lies with certain women and insists on their inclusion in the national story.

In Times Like These empowers women, and acts as a counter-discourse to existing narratives of nation and culture. Yet when considering the novel in light of its role in terms of the wider cultural memory of Belize, it is not wholly straightforward. Although Pavana is never explicitly identified as a member of the Creole elite, her middle-class feminism and outward criticism of UBAD suggests that despite her strong feminist perspective and desire for change, she is reluctant to embrace the changes required for a similar narrative of Black consciousness, or indeed, inclusion or recognition of this group's history into the wider cultural narrative of Belize. Instead, her narrative exhibits a broader silence that exists around all aspects of the more distant past, both in Belize and in the wider Caribbean region. Belize was one of the last countries in the Caribbean region to achieve independence, and so the country arguably has a further distance to travel in terms of engagement, recognition and reconciliation with the past. Whilst *Beka Lamb* ends on a positive note, suggesting the opportunity for a redemptive engagement with the past, in *In Times Like These* illustrates the failure of this endeavour. Instead, the implication is that the nation's halting progress can be linked to its lack of progress when engaging with the past. Despite its positive re-inscription of female identity and memory, the novel continues to be weighed down by the past, the implicit suggestion by Edgell being that the country is unable to fully move on without a full exploration of its

ancestry. Edgell revisits the past, and Belize's complex relationship with its ancestry further in her fourth novel, *Time and the River*, which is the subject of the final chapter.

Chapter Six – Recasting the Belizean “myth of origin”: Slavery, Trauma and the Literary Imagination in *Time and the River*

Edgell opens her fourth novel, *Time and the River* (2007),¹ with a quotation from Adrienne Rich’s 1973 poem ‘Diving in the Wreck’. In the poem, Rich describes the exploration of a sunken wreck; a journey that is motivated by a desire to see:

the wreck and not the story of the wreck
the thing itself and not the myth.²

The use of Rich’s poem, a work of demythologisation itself, indicates Edgell’s intentions for the novel and makes clear her purpose from the outset. In reimagining the period of slavery from the point of view of the enslaved, *Time and the River* is a departure: both from Edgell’s other novels, and from the way in which Belize’s cultural memory has been traditionally represented. In *Time and the River*, Edgell moves beyond the stories and myths that have previously dominated Belize’s memory of its past, in order to explore the marginalised experiences of the enslaved. Although *Time and the River* is situated within a recognisable historical framework, describing both the Battle of St George’s Caye, and the 1820 rebellion, the novel functions as a ‘fiction of memory’ and tells an alternative version of these events. As in previous novels, Edgell situates real-life characters from Belize’s history in the story; yet in a change to the placement of historical actors who appear on the periphery of *Beka Lamb* for example, Edgell re-imagines the experiences of characters from Belize’s history

¹ Zee Edgell, *Time and the River*, (Harlow: Heinemann, 2007), 7. All references are to this edition and are given in the text.

² Adrienne Rich, *Diving in the Wreck: Poems 1971-1972* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2013).

who were enslaved and locates them at the heart of the novel. Although a more straightforward historical novel than *Beka Lamb* and *In Times Like These*, *Time and the River* can still be located within a wider body of Caribbean women's writing; as Patteson has noted: "Like Olive Senior, Caryl Phillips and a number of other third wave West Indian writers, Edgell has made fiction a vehicle for the retrieval of subsumed and submerged elements of Caribbean consciousness."³

These 'subsumed and submerged' elements are the focus of this chapter, which explores the way that Edgell uses fiction to address the period of slavery and rewrite the history of the origin myth. The novel continues to display the contradictory thread which I have identified, and which runs throughout Edgell's novels: the desire to remain 'true' to the historical record, whilst illuminating stories that have been occluded. Although Edgell uses the historical record to frame and contextualise, unlike the oblique and often conflicted references to the past in *Beka Lamb* and *In Times Like These*, *Time and the River* represents a direct engagement with the buried memory of slavery. As a consequence, the colonial-oriented "myth of origin", and hence the dominant cultural memory of the country, is challenged. The novel also interrogates the use of memory as a process and the importance of this process for the novel's characters, both in remembering and memorialising, and burying and forgetting. *Time and the River* continues Edgell's commitment to exploring the female experience. Through the novel's central character, Leah, she reimagines the life of a female, domestic

³ Richard Patteson, *Caribbean Passages: A Critical Perspective on New Fiction from the West Indies* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publications, 1998), 52.

slave in Belize, and explores the complexities of this subject position. Finally, through a detailed exploration of the forest-based system of slavery in Belize, Edgell offers a narrative that complicates the conventional understanding of slavery as always and only plantation-based.

Time and the River is written from a number of narrative perspectives. The story begins in 1798, the year of the Battle of St George's Caye. The dominant narrative voice is that of Leah Lawson, a slave girl whose fortunes change when she marries a white slave owner and eventually inherits his estate. The other narrative perspectives are of Will, a slave who experienced the Middle Passage following capture in Africa at the age of twelve, and Sukie, Leah's half-sister, who is descended from the free Indians on the Miskito Shore.⁴ Leah lives with her mother, Hannah, and brother Sam. She and Sukie are the daughters of Graham Lawson, "a Scottish mahogany trader and slave owner who had fathered several children in the settlement" (p.18) but they have little contact with him. The plot follows the story of Leah and Will's lives in Belize town and the mahogany forests and concludes in 1820, the year of the most famous rebellion in Belize. The epilogue of the story is Leah's will, dated 1822.

⁴ In the *Time and the River* glossary, Edgell describes this area as a "region on the east coast of Nicaragua and Honduras, Central America. The name is derived from the Miskito, the original inhabitants," 205.

Critical Reception

Despite its compelling subject matter and the timely release date in 2007, the year of the Bicentenary of the British Abolition of the Slave Trade, *Time and the River* has received scant critical attention. Upon publication, a small number of local news stories appeared in the Belizean press.⁵ A review of the novel by Adele Newson Horst was also published in *World Literature Today*, although this review was not circulated more widely in the Belizean public sphere.⁶ Classifying the novel as a 'neo-resistance' text, Newson-Horst praises Edgell's commitment to exploring "the conditions, the revolts, the heartaches, the betrayals, and the triumphs of the individual characters of the era" but does not delve more deeply into the content of the novel.⁷ Since then, the novel has been referenced briefly in Bucknor and Donnell's anthology of Anglophone Caribbean literature.⁸ Most significantly, the novel has also been discussed by Moody-Freeman as part of a wider analysis of Edgell's novels.⁹ In this article, Moody-Freeman posits that *Time and the River* "remembers and critiques imperialist narratives about slavery and colonization in Belize" and suggests that the way in which the novel

⁵ "Zee Edgell releases *Time and the River*," 2007, accessed 25/3/18, <http://www.7newsbelize.com/sstory.php?nid=2522>; "Belizean Author Autographs Copies of *Time and the River*," 2007, accessed 25/3/18; "Belizean Zee Edgell Visits to Launch New Novel after 10 Years," Belize Reporter, 2007, accessed 25/3/18, <http://www.reporter.bz/2007/03/page/2/>; "Belizean Author Launches Latest Novel," Channel 5 News, 2007, accessed 24/3/18, <http://edition.channel5belize.com/archives/7395>.

⁶ Adele Newson-Horst, "Zee Edgell: *Time and the River*," The Free Library, 2008, accessed 30/7/17, <http://www.thefreelibrary.com/Zee+Edgell.+Time+and+the+River.-a0173463964>.

⁷ Newson-Horst, "Zee Edgell: *Time and the River*."

⁸ Lisa R Brown, "Caribbean Life-Writing and Performative Liberation," in *The Routledge Companion to Anglophone Caribbean Literature*, ed. Michael A. Bucknor and Alison Donnell (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2011), 22.

⁹ Julie Moody-Freeman, "Zee Edgell: Novelist as historian/activist: (Re)imagining Nation," *African Identities* 7, no.1 (2009).

remembers the past “provides a lens to examine her retellings of Belizean history in the twentieth century.”¹⁰ Moody-Freeman utilises historical texts and contrasts the novel with these accounts, suggesting that *Time and the River* “disputes, first, the myth that ‘slavery didn’t exist’ and, second, the myth that when slavery did exist, slaves lived comfortably as a result of their ‘egalitarian masters.’”¹¹ My analysis of the novel concurs with Moody-Freeman’s, but in a departure from her exploration - which focuses upon Leah’s complex relationship with her husband, Thomas McGilverny, and the use of ‘The Wreck’ as an epigraph – I dispute the myth of benevolence via specific interrogation of traumatic memory and Edgell’s re-imagining of the Battle of St George’s Caye. Other than Moody-Freeman’s article, and those cited above, the novel has remained absent from critical debates, both around slavery and Caribbean women’s writing. I have already alluded to the marginalised position Belize occupies in Caribbean and Latin American debates. The lack of critical and commercial attention given to *Time and the River* connects to the broader lack of engagement with the specificities of logwood slavery. This absence, in turn, does little to contradict the perception that logwood slavery was a more benevolent form of bondage.

As I noted in the introduction to this thesis, in 2016, Edgell ‘re-launched’ the novel to coincide with the opening of the first exhibition about the slave trade at the museum of Belize. At this event, she spoke about the novel’s lack of success and

¹⁰ Moody-Freeman, “Zee Edgell: Novelist as historian/activist,” 43.

¹¹ Moody-Freeman, “Zee Edgell: Novelist as historian/activist,” 42.

proposed that the subject matter is one which Belizeans find difficult to engage with:

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 [...] [Slavery] was so many things and it is emotionally overwhelming when you are trying to write about it. So I can imagine that many people prefer not to deal with it.¹²

The broader lack of engagement with slavery in Belize, may contribute, in part, to the lack of attention paid to the novel. *Beka Lamb* was critically and commercially well received. Its focus on a period of hope and optimism about the future holds a special place in the hearts of Belizeans and it functions at the level of a 'cultural text', while *Time and the River*, like *In Times Like These*, foregrounds difficult moments from Belizean history. In Chapter Five, I discussed these moments in terms of the developing women's movement and political stagnation of the 1980s. I suggested that Pavana's (and other Black Creoles) disconnection from the past represented, in part, a way for this group to hold onto that which has traditionally 'broken down', whilst maintaining a level of upward social mobility to which they had become accustomed. In *Time and the River*, Edgell reframes key historical moments from the distant past, such as the mythical Battle of St George's Caye. In telling the story through the eyes of the enslaved, readers, particularly Black Creoles, are compelled to re-engage with the identities of their ancestors, a process which is destabilising in a society which has traditionally marginalised this perspective in favour of a narrative dominated by heroism,

¹² "Author Zee Edgell re-launches "Time and the River"." accessed 18/7/18, <http://edition.channel5belize.com/archives/136264>

comradeship and superiority. The move towards this point represents the shift in Edgell's literary voice over time. In *Beka Lamb* and *In Times Like These*, Edgell occupied a contradictory position, juxtaposing moments of colonial resistance with a replication of normalised colonial values. *Time and the River* continues in the same vein but illustrates a more pointedly critical view of the nation and a challenge to the cultural memory of Belize. In a development from *Beka Lamb* and *In Times Like These*, *Time and the River* is not only concerned with giving voice to female characters, but also confronts for the first time the traumatic silences around slavery and Belize's complicated relationship with its past. Despite the broader lack of critical and cultural engagement with the text, the novel speaks directly to the silences inherent within the production of history in Belize and is the first Belizean novel to do so.

***Time and the River* as Neo-Slave Narrative: Challenging the Belizean Narrative of Slavery**

In Chapter Three, I highlighted Alison Donnell's call to restore Caribbean women to *all* of their historical dimensions: "as slaves, as mothers, as workers."¹³ *Time and the River* represents such a novel, engaging directly with the experiences of the enslaved, particularly women, and their economic and social identities. *Time and the River* functions as a neo-slave narrative, that which Rushdy has defined as, "modern or contemporary fictional works substantially concerned with

¹³ Alison Donnell, *Twentieth Century Caribbean Literature: Critical Moments in Anglophone Literary History*, (London and New York: Routledge, 2006), 142

depicting the experience or the effect of new world slavery.”¹⁴ In contrast to the structured form of the traditional slave narrative, neo-slave narratives explore the experiences of the enslaved through a contemporary lens:

Neo-slave narratives are characterised by their treatment of slavery and its aftermath, interests in memory and storytelling, attempts to gender the slave experience, and reclamations of an African heritage.¹⁵

The most celebrated neo-slave narrative written by a Black woman and addressing the gaps and omissions of colonialism is *Beloved* by Toni Morrison.¹⁶ This work demands that the history of African-Americans, rooted within the legacies of the middle passage and transatlantic slavery, be heard, whilst simultaneously acknowledging the enormity of such a task. Morrison has spoken frequently about her desire for fiction to provide a space for her to re-interrogate the past, and more specifically, the slave experience, a critical approach which is relevant to my reading of *Time and the River*. Morrison has noted the way in which traditional slave narrators were all too frequently required to soften their experiences to make these more palatable to the predominantly white readership. In response, she argues that her job as a writer of fiction, is to “rip that veil drawn over ‘proceedings too terrible to relate’”¹⁷ and to uncover that

¹⁴ Ashraf Rushdy, H.A., "Neo-Slave Narrative," in *The Oxford Companion to African American Literature*, ed. Frances A. Foster Williams L. Andrews, and Trudier Harris-Lopez (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 533.

¹⁵ Seretha D. Williams, "Mediation, Misremembering, Creativity and Healing in Zake Mda's Cion," in *Afterimages of Slavery: Essays on Appearances in Recent American Films, Literature, Television and Other Media*, ed. Seretha D. Williams Marlene D. Allen (North Carolina: MacFarland and Company, 2012), 7.

¹⁶ Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (London: Vintage, 1997).

¹⁷ Toni Morrison, "The Site of Memory," in *Inventing the Truth*, ed. William Zinsser (Houghton Mifflin: New York, 1995), 91.

which has been silenced and excluded from the historical record and, therefore, cultural memory. King has suggested that:

Toni Morrison's purpose is to 'make some memorial, somewhere where these things' – the unspoken and unspeakable history of the Middle Passage – 'can be thought.' Here the author restores an interior life to people who were either presumed not to have one, or whose subjectivity had never been fully represented.¹⁸

Like Morrison, Edgell desires to give a voice to those not afforded one in historical narratives and restore the "interior life" of the enslaved in Belize. Similarly, in a country where ties to Britain are still strong, and Black Creole memory is still interwoven with that of the 'myth of origin,' Edgell's fictional account challenges the dominant cultural memory and memorialisation of the past, honouring and recognising the enslaved of Belize.

Nicole Aljoe has described the relative lack of slave narratives that have come to light from the Caribbean, particularly when compared to the USA, but notes a number of Caribbean writers who are attempting to "ventriloquise those 'lost' voices [...] and contest sanctioned history."¹⁹ Considering Caribbean writing, Wilson-Tagoe has suggested that historical novelists "exploit the imaginative leeway of artistic construction to explore not only exact details or events of history but also their imagined possibilities."²⁰ Edgell certainly uses historical

¹⁸ Nicola King, *Memory, Narrative, Identity: Remembering the Self* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000), 9.

¹⁹ Nicole N. Aljoe, "Caribbean Slave Narratives: Creole in Form and Genre," *Anthurium* 2, no. 4 (2004), 1.

²⁰ Nana Wilson-Tagoe, *Historical Thought and Literary Representation in West Indian Literature* (Gainesville, Tallahassee, Tampa, Boca Raton, Pensacola, Orlando, Miami, Jacksonville: University Press of Florida, 1998), 40.

details to structure *Time and the River*, but the heart of the novel reveals the ‘imagined possibilities’, made possible by the reconstruction of memory. Writers who have revisited the past to reimagine historical or literary narratives have been addressed by the canon of Caribbean women’s literature; often giving voice to those not previously afforded one. Most famously in relation to Caribbean women’s writing Jean Rhys retold Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* in *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966)²¹ from the perspective of the ‘mad’ white Creole woman, whilst Maryse Condé revisited the Salem Witch Trials in *I, Tituba: Black Witch of Salem* (1986).²² In her 2012 study, Vivian Nun Halloran posits that by using historical actors and objects, the postmodern Caribbean novel is able to function as a “national history museum.”²³ This process, she argues, constructs “a space in which visitors/readers can overcome their sense of belatedness and self-righteousness by acting like witnesses to the past.”²⁴ Whilst more of a straightforwardly realist novel than the postmodern stories discussed by Nun Halloran, *Time and the River*, nevertheless aligns with her suggestion that incorporating literary or historical actors into works of fiction allows the novel to act as a catalyst to political action.²⁵ Nun Halloran uses the example of *I, Tituba: Black Witch of Salem* to suggest that Conde’s narrative process elevates the previously marginalised Tituba “from the dustbin of history.”²⁶ *Time and the River*

²¹ Jean Rhys, *Wide Sargasso Sea* (London: Penguin, 1991).

²² Maryse Condé, *I, Tituba: Black Witch of Salem*, trans. Richard Philcox (New York: Ballantine Books, 1992).

²³ Vivian Nun Halloran, *Exhibiting Slavery: The Caribbean Post-modern Novel as Museum* (Charlottesville and London: University of Virginia Press, 2009), 1.

²⁴ Nun Halloran, *Exhibiting Slavery: The Caribbean Post-modern Novel as Museum*, p.20.

²⁵ *Ibid*, 34.

²⁶ *Ibid*, 34.

has the same outcome, promoting those who have been forgotten by history to centre stage. The novel is dominated by characters who appear, albeit obliquely, in Belize's history. Leah is based on the story of Grace Tucker Anderson,²⁷ a slave who married a white landowner and, upon his death, came into a fortune. Will and his best friend, Sharper, are characters in Belizean history, named in connection with the final slave revolt of 1820.²⁸ The character of Sukie is loosely based on the slave girl, 'Peggy', who was cruelly punished by her master, but is unnamed in the *Archives*. In addition to the enslaved characters who feature in the novel, Edgell also references historical actors such as Captain Burnaby, a Jamaican Commander-in-Chief, who came to Belize in 1765 and was responsible for 'Burnaby's Code' – the first attempt to codify the regulations and governance of the settlement.²⁹ In her placement of these characters, Edgell seeks to collapse the history/fiction divide and present a different kind of narrative authority, allowing those who have previously appeared as footnotes to occupy a central platform, alongside more famous names, like Burnaby

The boundaries between history and fiction are blurred throughout the novel. Edgell steepens her narrative in historical detail, representing her on-going desire for 'accuracy', yet these historical representations are often challenged and

²⁷ Keith Swift, "Zee Edgell releases *Time and the River*," accessed 25/3/18, <http://www.7newsbelize.com/sstory.php?nid=2522>.

²⁸ O Nigel Bolland, *The Formation of Colonial Society: Belize, from Conquest to Crown Colony* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1977).

²⁹ For more information about Captain Burnaby and the establishment of 'Burnaby's Code' see O.Nigel Bolland, *Colonialism and Resistance in Belize: Essays in Historical Sociology* (Barbados, Jamaica, Trinidad and Tobago: University of the West Indies Press, 2003), 36

subverted. Much of the novel is situated in the forest interior and fictionalises the day-to-day workings of the lesser-known logwood and mahogany industries. This narrative disrupts the dominant narrative of Caribbean slavery, which primarily locates the enslaved within plantation economies. The narrator provides extensive detail on the set up of the camp and the work undertaken by the enslaved in the forest:

Sometimes if he saw a spot in the bush where the mahogany trees seemed plentiful, Will would descend and lead Dover and the other men, without a compass or other guide, to the area where the trees were located. Each tree was carefully marked, and the bush cleared, creating trails, which led from one tree to the next (p.12).

The work itself is also described in detail. Will describes the scaffolding used in the forest: “It was about twelve feet high – people called it a barbeque. [It] was constructed around the girth of a mahogany tree that was about the width of ten or fifteen men standing shoulder to shoulder” (p.41). Echoing the descriptions of forest-based work in historical texts, Will and Sharper are provided with muskets, machetes and axes (p.13) to assist them in the forests. As noted in Chapter Two, the provision of these weapons is historically ‘accurate’; many accounts highlight how slaves were furnished with weapons, some even going as far as to suggest that it was proof of the good relations that existed between master and slave. Yet Edgell directly challenges this dominant construct of harmonious relations, by later placing Will at the centre of a rebellious plot. Similarly, in Will’s description of the barbeque, Edgell recasts the famous ‘shoulder to shoulder’ phrase. This motif has been utilised over a number of years to describe the heroic, collective

endeavours of the Baymen and the enslaved at the Battle of St George's Caye. Here, the camaraderie of 'shoulder to shoulder' is reimagined to instead describe the arduous existence of the enslaved working in the jungle. The narrative also challenges the colonial record on the subject of Belize's origins. As discussed in Chapter One, the *Archives* suggest that the Maya were not present in the interior during the period of slavery. However, Edgell chooses to locate the Maya in the forest alongside the British settlers and the enslaved:

Sometimes at the river, they met a few Maya Indians who looked at them with dark eyes, set in faces devoid of animation. Will and Sharper would stare back at them with the same fascination and fear. However, as time went on, Will and Sharper began to understand that, if they were careful to maintain their distance, the Indians posed little threat to them" (p.41).

As well as face-to-face encounters with the Maya, Will's narrative also draws attention to their ancient claims to the land: "Sometimes he'd stand on high hills of limestone blocks [...] People believed that these ruins [...] were temples used by the Maya Indians a long time ago" (p.11). Here Edgell draws a line between Belize and its earliest inhabitants, pointing towards a pre-colonial era, which is often excluded from colonial histories.

The novel also represents the well-documented dispute over land between the British and the Spanish, highlighting certain aspects of the terms of the agreements in the narrative: "The British settlers wealth was in slaves because Spain's claim to the entire area did not permit the British to own land, establish estates or build fortifications" (p.12). The novel also represents the way in which

Spain subtly controlled the settlement through their use of treaties and policy: “[Spanish Officials] descended on the town every now and then to make sure the settlers were not violating any treaties by building fortifications or establishing large plantations” (p.23). The novel also makes reference to the journey that many Belizean slaves made to the Spanish border. While colonial texts describing inter-imperial rivalry between Britain and Spain consistently cast Spain in the role of villain, *Time and the River* does the opposite, and Spain is often presented as a ‘promised land’ or safe haven. Edgell conveys the relationship between Britain and Spain using neutral language, recognising the temptation of escape that was a reality for the enslaved characters in the novel:

Some people fled through miles of bush, trying to cross the borders away from the British settlement to the Spanish territories. It was said that the settlers there gave runaway slaves their freedom, asking only that they be baptised into the Roman Catholic faith. Many perished through these dangerous treks through the forest.” (p.18)

Whilst texts such as the *Archives* place the blame of ‘seduction’ firmly upon the Spaniards, *Time and the River* destabilises this long-held belief, and escape to Spain is posited as a real possibility for freedom. There are a number of times where the journey through the forest to Spanish territory is alluded to. A conversation between a marginal character, Conjo Jack, and Will, for example, reveals that Conjo Jack assisted his own children to escape to the border: “I hope they are free and living as best they can” (p.58). Later in the novel, Will and Sharper discuss the possibility of escaping to Spain, but agree to stay, at least temporarily, and fight during the Battle of St George’s Caye (p.76). Desertions

are also raised as a concern by characters in the novel who own slaves; a conversation between Leah and her husband, following the abolition of the slave trade for example, describes Thomas's concerns for the survival of the settlement: "Slaves will become scarcer and more expensive, especially here where the men escape so often, and the women have so few children" (p.143). Through her literary representation of desertion, Edgell provides an alternative to the frequent, but 'banal' accounts of desertion noted in the *Archives*. Instead, the interior life of the enslaved is centred, including the real and present temptation of escape to the border. In the process, the Spanish myth of 'seduction' is recast.

The Belizean Slave Experience: Two Perspectives

Time and the River predominantly represents a dual perspective on the slave experience, as told through the eyes of Leah, a Creole born and raised in the settlement with a family, and Will, who was taken from Africa aged twelve and separated from his mother during the Middle Passage. The dichotomy between Leah and Will reimagines life in the settlement from both an African and a Creole perspective. As the novel progresses, the gulf between Leah's and Will's experiences widens, representing the experience of a mixed-race Creole woman, and a black, African man, who are often set in opposition to each other. Neumann has noted the way in which 'fictions of memory' "exploit the representation of space as a symbolic manifestation of individual or collective

memories.”³⁰ In *Time and the River* Edgell uses vivid descriptions of space and place to reflect Leah and Will’s inner world, thus bringing to life the static accounts of logwood slavery recorded in historical texts. These descriptions also embody, as Neumann argues, the “physical presence of the multi-layered cultural past,”³¹ which is manifested most clearly between the contrasting locations of forest and town, with the often claustrophobic atmosphere of the forest – where the majority of the enslaved live and work – contrasting sharply with the ordered world of the colonial settlement.

Edgell disrupts the dominant, gendered placement of enslaved women by occasionally situating Leah in the forest, undertaking domestic tasks at the camp. In doing so, the male-dominated environment of the forest is broadened, to include a feminine perspective of the interior. For Leah, the “impenetrable forests” (p.9) are sinister places:

There were so many strange, often frightening things happening in other camps up and down the river. She’d once seen a Tommy-goff snake wriggling beside her in the river [...] Thick bushes and enormous trees threw grotesque shadows on the water there (p.13).

The plentiful mangoes, although a significant food source, inspire feelings of revulsion in her: “She hated the squishy, sticky feeling of over ripe fruit squelching between her toes and the buzzing flies and other insects crawling

³⁰ Birgit Neumann, “The Literary Representations of Memory,” in *Cultural Memory Studies: An International and Interdisciplinary Handbook*, ed. Astrid Erll and Ansgar Nünning in collaboration with Sara B. Young (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter GmbH & Co, 2008), 340.

³¹ Neumann, “The Literary Representations of Memory,” 340.

along her face, arms and legs” (p.16). Similarly, the animals which inhabit the forest are also a source of worry: “It was frightening knowing they were alone and in danger from jaguars, snakes and insects. The howling of baboons [...] often drowned out the noise of birds” (p.41). Leah’s main aspiration is to purchase freedom for herself and her family and live a simple life, and the untamed forests unsettle her:

She had been dreaming that she was lashed to an enormous raft of mahogany logs which was hurtling along the river in flood. In the dream the water rolled over her. She felt unable to breathe or move her arms and legs. The rushing water filled her lungs and she was forced to inhale (p.32).

The paralysis Leah feels in her dreams is indicative of the claustrophobic nature of the forest, where she feels imprisoned both by the oppressive physical world of the jungle itself and by fear of uprisings by the enslaved in the bush.

In contrast to the stifling atmosphere of the forest, Leah dreams of living by the coast, namely St George’s Caye, which is described as a place where people went “for honeymoons or when they were ill and needed to recuperate” (p.22). Leah envies those who live there permanently, because of the more “idyllic” (p.23) surroundings. In direct opposition to the suffocating atmosphere of the interior, the coast is a calmer place, and thus viewed much more positively in her eyes:

What impressed her there was the silence, except for the waves mingling with the wind rustling in the coconut palms. [...] The smell of salted fish, strung out to dry on the piers permeated the air. She’d felt healthier too. The white sand was clean, cool and soothing between her toes [...] There was no shortage of food on the island (p.23).

Unlike the swirling tides of internal emotion experienced by Beka, Leah's experience of the sea is calming, representing a place of safety and contentment. In addition to the domestic work she undertakes for her owner, Thomas McGilverny, Leah also works for the Clare sisters, a pair of Christian mulatto women who have obtained their freedom. Like the calm existence she covets by the sea, Leah also finds contentment in the luxurious home of the Clare sisters, the descriptions of which contrast sharply with her experiences in the jungle. The house is a clean, calm haven for her, with its "freshly laundered towels, sheets and pillowcases" (p.26), a "mahogany four poster bed with its slender, graceful uprights" (p.26), the "red Turkish carpet beneath her bare feet" (p.68), and the "gleaming glass lamp [...] polished pinewood floor [and] high, wide mahogany archway into the commodious hall with beautiful pictures and mirrors" (p.69). A British colonial sensibility is instantly recognisable in the Clare household. The Clare sisters retire "to the parlour to sing hymns before drinking tea with sandwiches and cakes" (p.71), whilst frequent references are made to their Christian faith. Again, this way of life contrasts with the untamed nature of the forests. For Leah, whose ambition is to be "independent and free like the Clare sisters" (p.24), life in their house, located in the heart of the colonial settlement, is inspirational. In the Clare sisters Edgell draws attention to the complexity of race and social status: the siblings are wealthy and highly regarded, and both are mixed-race and therefore inhabit a different place in the strict racial hierarchy that existed within the slave settlement. Through Leah's relationship with the Clare

sisters, who embody a colonial way of life, Edgell foreshadows the later development of the Creole elite, who aligned themselves with colonial subjects in order to advance their own standing.

In opposition to Leah's sentiments, Will "did not like the annual river trip to Belize town, built on low, swampy ground near the sea. He preferred working upriver in the rolling hill country, where he could glimpse the blue mountains in the distance" (p.49). Following his forcible movement from his African home at the age of twelve, the sea fills him "with a familiar melancholy which made him long to be upriver" (p.51). Like the descriptions in *Beka Lamb* and *In Times Like These*, the sea is a central part of the imagery of the novel. In *Time and the River*, the sea performs a dual role, associated at once with refuge (for Leah) and with loss (for Will). As Will comments, "[Leah] loved the sea, perhaps because, like Sharper, she had been born in the settlement, while he still felt like a foreigner and was still treated liked one" (p.79). The sea represents where Will has come from and where he will never return; his journey speaking to the broader literary device in Caribbean and African-American literature which connects the sea to the journey of the Middle Passage. Throughout the novel, there are references to Will's homeland, memories which he desperately tries to "hold fast" to, in order to preserve his "mental survival" (p.44):

He remembered the red clay earth. He could almost see it, even feel it on the soles of his feet. He could easily conjure up the huge trees in the shade of which he had played as a boy. At night, in good harvest years, there was the sound of drums, the smell of palm oil bubbling in a pan and the taste of the groundnut

stew with balls of pounded tams which he popped into his mouth (p.47).

While Leah's story is structured around her life in the settlement, Will's narrative is geographically more extensive and broadens the perception of the Belizean slave experience to include Africa. Will represents the voices of those who were forced out of their homelands and transported in "a dark prison beneath the earth" (p.48) to the Caribbean. Although Will cannot name the place he was born, he remembers his given name: "Nzimbu, which means valuable shell" (p.78) and this memory represents a significant possession from his old life. An African connection is also vocalised through Leah's description of a traditional dance, of which Will is a part: "He had stuck a grey and white fowl feather in the bandage around his head, his eyes were closed, his body naked to the waist [...] His bare feet were moving across the ground as though he was flying" (p.98). In *Beka Lamb*, African funeral rituals represent a symbol of colonial resistance; here Will's dancing represents both a statement of resistance, and a connection to his homeland. As Rice has noted, "dance provided an important radical counter-culture for the slaves that undermined the owners' lordship of their feet and other parts."³² At this moment, Edgell speaks to the tradition of flying as a symbol of liberation and a return to homeland, which is a key trope in African folklore and thus a direct challenge to colonialism. Rice has explored this motif, describing scenarios of folktales whereby "flying heroes and heroines [...] by magical means, alter their status and through sheer force of will, wing their way home to a

³²Alan Rice, *Radical Narratives of the Black Atlantic* (London and New York: Continuum, 2003), 85.

reinstated pre-slave past in utopian Africa.”³³ In connecting to a subversive African tradition, Edgell disrupts the colonial “myth of origin” and the amalgamation of European and Creole culture by the Creole elite. The majority of extant historical texts and the *Archives* make little reference to the lives and location of the enslaved prior to their arrival in Belize, but in Will’s literal and figurative flight to Africa, Edgell insists on widening the narrative of slavery in Belize to include its presence, and that of transportation and the Middle Passage. In the process, the ‘myth of origin’ is disrupted.

The Female Experience of Slavery in *Time and the River*

As in Edgell’s other novels, the experiences of women are a primary concern in *Time and the River*. Through the characters of Leah and Sukie, Edgell explores life in the settlement from a female perspective that is often neglected and marginalised, disrupting the masculine origin myth and agitating for women’s inclusion in Belize’s early history. Taking inspiration from the historical record, Edgell uses Sukie to represent the violence enacted on the bodies of women. In the process, she interrupts the narrative of benign incarceration that exists in colonial texts such as the *Archives*. In addition, Leah’s narrative explores romantic love, colonial standards of femininity and the complex concept of freedom, all of which are absent from colonial texts.

³³ Rice, *Radical Narratives of the Black Atlantic*, 88.

As noted earlier in the chapter, the punishment inflicted upon Suki in the novel is based on the real case of a female slave called Peggy, which was discussed in Chapter Two. Like Peggy, Suki is accused of a theft of some handkerchiefs, a charge which she denies. As punishment, her mistress orders her to receive “ten hard lashes with the cat-o-nine-tails” (p.164) and places her in a storehouse for the remainder of the day:

In the storehouse, Suki felt the dried blood from the welts sticking to her blouse and her head ached as if it would burst wide open. She leaned her forehead against the bars of the window and heard the clanking of the chains on her ankles (p.167).

This punishment is the first of a series of physical attacks that occur over a number of days. Following her initial punishment, Suki is “chained to a tree and made to wash bowl after bowl of laundry in the boiling hot sun [...] She felt the blood caked on her back and neck from the wounds inflicted the day before” (p.168). The following day, Leah witnesses a public beating of her half-sister:

Two male slaves dragged Suki out into the open [...] The chains on her manacled legs were removed. The men tied her to the ground face down. Her arms and legs were stretched out and tied with cords to four stakes. She lay exposed in a perfect state of nature. The crowd murmured and counted until she was severely flogged thirty-nine times [...] Suki was screaming in agony as salt was poured into her bleeding wounds (p.170).

Mistress Callow clearly adheres to the 39-lashes law, but whilst historical accounts such as the *Archives* frequently note the application of this punishment in short, prosaic prose, the novel represents the full extent of this violence, which echoes the violence enacted upon Peggy’s body. Peggy’s case is referred to in the *Archives*, but she is not named, and the entry which focuses on her violent

beating is paraphrased, indeed 'banalised',³⁴ amidst other entries. Sukie's punishment functions instead as an oppositional narrative to the sanitised version of events which comprise colonial history. In the process, the novel departs from traditional slave narratives, where violence is often glossed by the narrator. Returning to my earlier discussion of Morrison's literary approach to writing slavery, Sukie's treatment represents a "ripping of the veil"³⁵; forcing readers to engage with violence that is traditionally absent in slave narratives and accounts of the slave experience in Belize. At the same time, the historical narrative of benign slavery, which is a central part of Belize's cultural memory is ruptured.

Leah avoids violent treatment, but her personal journey represents the complex nature of the enslaved female subject position. Stepping outside the boundaries of the traditional slave narrative format, Leah's narrative explores female ambition and romantic love, both of which function as an escapist fantasy from the drudgery of her life as a slave. Like Edgell's other protagonists, Leah's narrative is characterised by an underlying determination and desire for self-fulfilment, even in the face of oppression and gendered servitude. Despite the lack of opportunity available to her, Leah's ambition is asserted from the outset: "What she wanted most was rarely possible in the settlement. She wanted a legal marriage, a family and a home" (p.25). Although marriage was "actively

³⁴ Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995), 83.

³⁵ Toni Morrison, "The Site of Memory," in *Inventing the Truth*, ed. William Zinsser (Houghton Mifflin: New York, 1995), 91.

discouraged, in the harshest ways, amongst people like Will and herself” (p.25), Leah aspires to lead a quiet, civilised family life, an objective which is undoubtedly influenced by her experiences in the colonial homes of Belize town. Through Leah’s relationship with Josiah Potts, the son of a wealthy family in the settlement, the masculinise rhetoric of the ‘myth of origin’ is broadened to consider romantic, inter-racial love. This representation is a common feature of the neo-slave narrative; as Robinson has argued: “the inclusion of romance becomes yet another way in which the neo-slave narrative complete the picture of the people who were enslaved.”³⁶ In the same way in which Will’s African heritage and his longing for his homeland are prioritised in his narrative, Leah’s descriptions of her relationship with Josiah foreground her interior life, which is impossible to access in the historical record. In the novel, romantic love is envisaged through utopian daydreams of escape and freedom:

“[She] had glimpsed another life, one that in her dreams already belonged to her. During the past year, those dreams had transported her out of the squalor and misery of her days and the more recent terror of her nights” (p.22).

Leah’s narrative reveals a colonially-inflected desire; her escape is envisioned not through flight to the Spanish border by way of the forests that she finds so oppressive, but through marriage. Like the comfortable life of the Clare sisters that she covets, Leah idolises Josiah and the potential their relationship offers her, which represents security – his “shoulders felt like the safest harbour in her life” (p.28) and knowledge. Indeed, he teaches her to read and she learns to

³⁶Angelo Rich Robinson, "Why Does the Slave Ever Love? The Subject of Romance Revisited in the Neoslave Narrative," *The Southern Literary Journal* 40, no. 1 (2007): 40.

mimic his “clear, persuasive tones” (p.23). Josiah provides an alternative for Leah and through her reproduction of his values, interests and speech, she moves closer to the life she desires. Although they have plans to marry as soon as Leah achieves her freedom, Josiah’s father discovers the relationship and commands him to return to England:

Josiah, the connection you formed is neither honourable nor creditable and I suppose it would not require so great an effort as crossing the Atlantic to emancipate yourself from the fascinating charms of a female Negro slave. The settlement unhappily has long laboured under great moral darkness (p.103).

This statement highlights the impossibility of Leah’s subject position, which sits in opposition to the colonial standards of female propriety which she will never be able to obtain. Like Toyocie in *Beka Lamb* and Junie Silver in *In Times Like These*, Leah’s race and social status ensure she will never meet the required standards of colonial womanhood. The end of the relationship brings into sharp focus the impossibility of the life that she had hoped to achieve. For Leah, who has always attempted to internalise colonial standards of femininity, the dissolution of her relationship is all the more devastating:

With Josiah’s promises in her heart, it had been easier to say ‘One day I won’t need to say or do this anymore. I’ll be a free woman with a home, children and my own industry. [...] Why had she thought she could escape the fate of her mother and grandmother and so many other women she knew simply by willing it to happen [...] She did not wear off the shoulder dresses, nor lift her skirts in the streets no matter how muddy and filthy they were, to show off a red petticoat and a well-turned ankle. She still felt like a modest woman who had hoped that hard work, a little reading, a little writing and her domestic skills would somehow release her from bondage (p.112).

Leah's aspirations of freedom are intimately bound to a desire to conform to the regulations of colonial society, her ambition contemplated through adherence to institutions such as marriage. Her motivations reflect a colonial feminine ideal which prizes domesticity and servitude, and functions as a product of the slave society's gender hierarchy. Similarly, Leah's love of Josiah, whether consciously or unconsciously, is linked to his family's standing in the community, in both religious and legal terms, and the security it offers her.

Later in the novel, Leah approaches her slave master, Thomas McGilvery, to purchase freedom for herself and her brother, but Thomas has a different proposal for her:

"If I give you your freedom, you will need to agree to marry me – a license, magistrate and all that."

"You don't have to do that sir," Leah said feeling chilled to the bone. She understood now why her mother had always said that she shouldn't meet with the settlement owners or their wives by herself (p.133).

Although Leah is conflicted, she accepts. As the wife of Thomas McGilvery, Leah is afforded the luxurious home and beautiful clothes of her prior aspirations, yet she finds her new status difficult to accept:

Her manumission paper and the marriage certificate, wrapped in cloth and sewn into a leather pouch which she strapped to her body every day, did not make her feel very different inside. It was a daily struggle to remind herself that she was no longer a slave and should not feel like one or act like one. But it was not easy (p.157).

In marriage Leah exchanges one type of bondage for another. Her house is a prison and she has no agency to make her own decisions: "In a way she felt less free than she'd been when she was a slave moving about the town" (p.159).

Leah's social position is also conflicted: the enslaved community treat her with disdain, yet her former status means she has little in common with the other settlers:

The change in status had caused the slaves she knew to dislike her, perhaps even to despise her [...] The slaves did not believe she could, or would, do as much for them as a white woman would have done. Leah admitted to herself that in this last they were probably right. As a former slave, she did not have very much influence in the white settler community (p.158).

Leah's narrative represents the competing notions of freedom and servitude which defined the lives of female slaves. This theme threads through all Edgell's novels. On the one hand, characters like Leah, Beka and Pavana have a troubled relationship with domesticity and prescribed female roles and harbour ambitions to move beyond the patriarchal structures which govern their existence; on the other hand, all are bound, in some capacity, by powerful notions of femininity which prize domesticity and servitude and place restrictions on ambition which sits outside these boundaries. Like her failed relationship with Josiah, Leah's marriage to Thomas represents the impossible situation of the female slave: she is paralysed by her gender, and unable to assert herself, despite being legally 'free.' Her circumstances also echo the hopeless position that many members of the enslaved community found themselves in following emancipation, with many remaining in service to white settlers through oppressive systems, such as

apprenticeship, which effectively moved former slaves from one system of bondage to another. Leah's lack of agency, despite her 'free' status, also represents the wider issues faced by postcolonial and independent societies: the very concept of 'independence' is something that has been shown to be false for postcolonial societies, which often become reliant on aid and trapped in an on-going cycle of dependence. Edgell's discussion of Leah's ownership and freedom enacts this cycle of dependence in microcosm.

As the novel progresses, Leah is further estranged from her former friends and family, a process which is compounded by the death of her husband and her subsequent inheritance of his estate and slaves, including Will, Sharper and Sukie. The novel describes a series of decisions which ostracise her further. These include the demotion of her old friend, Will, in favour of her son, Edmond, who later uses his power to flog Will and Sharper. In a fit of jealousy, Leah also sells Sukie - who has become romantically involved with Will - to a cruel slave owner named Roderick Horton. While Leah maintains that she was promised Sukie's freedom if the marriage went ahead, her decision contrasts with Sukie's own wishes, which were to remain enslaved and marry Will. Instead, Leah's actions re-enact her own, earlier choice and force Sukie to undergo the same experience, suggesting a tangled logic to her decision-making and a disintegration of her self-hood. Leah's transformation throughout the novel vividly illustrates the distorting and self-cancelling brutality of the slave system. Although Leah is 'free', she has lost Josiah's love and has been marginalised further, a

process which has led to a collapse of her sense of self. Instead she is plagued by anxiety about her decisions, to the point where she questions her own safety: “She didn’t think that, in spite of everything, Will and Sharper would want to kill her. Or would they?” (p.185). Leah’s final decision occurs during the slave revolt of 1820. As the person who discovers the rebellion and calls for aid from the magistrates, her action leads to the deaths of Will and Sharper. Edgell’s re-imagining of this moment places her central character in opposition to the rebels, an act which cements Leah’s conflicted subject position and speaks more broadly to the complex development of the Creole elite, who silenced their identities as enslaved in order to achieve freedom and social standing. The epilogue of the novel is Leah’s final will and testament, which bequeaths some of her estate to her slaves, and officially sets them free. This redemptive action enables a deeper understanding of the decisions that Leah was compelled to make. Constrained by colonial expectations on her gender and loyalty to the man who officially freed her, the presence of her will illustrates the difficulty of her decision and highlights her own thwarted agency.

Traumatic Legacies: Rewriting Belize’s cultural memory of slavery

The difficult scenes of violence enacted upon Sukie’s body, Will’s longing for home, and Leah’s powerlessness against the rigid structures of the slave system all foreground the traumatic nature of the slave experience, both physically and psychologically. Indeed, *Time and the River* can be read as a trauma narrative. *Time and the River* also addresses the wider cultural trauma experienced by

Belize as a nation, which materialises through the absence of slavery in a cultural memory which is dominated by colonial narratives. Through this action, Edgell vocalises the roots of the persistent silences and glossing that characterise engagement with the past by characters in *Beka Lamb* and *In Times Like These*. Writing about the complex nature of ancestry for the enslaved, Patterson has noted that the unique experience of enslavement prohibited the enslaved from integrating the experiences of their ancestors into their own lives. As a result, they were not able to: “anchor the living present in any conscious community of memory.”³⁷ In contrast to the nationalist origin myth which has dominated Belizean cultural memory, *Time and the River* mandates for engagement with a “conscious community of memory” and argues for the inclusion of traumatic memories in national memory of the past. Like *Beka Lamb*, *Time and the River* also illustrates the process of ‘postmemory’, whereby traumatic memories are transferred to subsequent generations.³⁸ The most obvious example of postmemory in the novel appears through the behaviours and silences that Hannah passes to her children: Leah and Sam. In his discussion about those who have endured trauma, Laub has suggested that survivors “live not with memories of the past but with an event that could not and did not proceed through to its completion [and therefore continues] into the present.”³⁹ Hannah’s

³⁷ Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death* (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London: Harvard University Press, 1982), 5.

³⁸ Marianne Hirsch, "Postmemory." accessed 5/5/18, <http://www.postmemory.net/>.

³⁹ Dori Laub, "Bearing Witness or the Vicissitudes of Listening," in *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis and History*, ed. Shoshana Feldman and Dori Laub (New York: Routledge, 1992), 69.

memories of the past are unexpressed and buried within her, and as a consequence, remain unresolved and follow her into the present.

Edgell's use of imaginative fiction explores the undocumented emotional impact of slavery. Middleton and Woods have argued that "Literary texts have been particularly effective at tracing the consequences of living out the belief in [...] traumatic memory, or memory as a vivid spatio-temporal re-enactment of the past."⁴⁰ In the imagined world of the settlement, Edgell uses her characters to interrogate traumatic memories. Again, this process is particularly apparent in the character of Hannah. The novel provides glimpses of Hannah's past life; whilst Leah and her brother avoid the "quick temper and quicker hand with a whip" (p.33), Hannah is not so fortunate, enduring "whippings on her bare back without crying out" (p.34). Leah also describes "burn scars on her right hand," and a "brand on her left shoulder" (p.149). Despite these obvious bodily manifestations of violence, Hannah never reveals how the scars appeared on her body: "Her mother would never allow her to see it closely or to talk about when it was done or who had done it" (p.149). Instead, the majority of her presence in the novel is felt through what is *not* said, rather than what is, the "silent tears" (p.33) she sheds, emblematic of the wider cultural silence which surrounds traumatic memory in Belize. Hannah's narrative also echoes the silences which characterised the earliest slave narratives, those moments alluded to by Morrison

⁴⁰ Peter Middleton and Tim Wood, *Literatures of Memory: History, Time and Space in Postwar Writing* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1988), 85.

where a veil is drawn over the proceedings too terrible to relate.⁴¹ Hannah's experiences represent this subject position: having been scarred, objectified and abused, she is unable to assert her humanity and is weighted down by an oppressive silence.

Like the questions Beka asks Lilla in *Beka Lamb*, and those posed by Pavana's children to their grandfather in *In Times Like These*, Leah too asks her mother to describe her life as girl. And like Lilla and Pavana's father, Hannah is unable to vocalise these experiences, admitting that it would be too painful: "I can't go over all of that Leah. It would just about kill me to put those things into words. I feel ashamed of some of the things I had to do" (p.149). This recurring motif across Edgell's novels represents a cross-generational inability to cope with past traumas, and the widespread, inherited transference that spans centuries. In this context Rogers, Leydesdorff and Dawson's work on trauma is relevant. For them, symptoms of trauma are often "manifested unconsciously in a range of bodily symptoms and disturbances, in neurotic behaviours, in nightmares and hallucinations and in amnesia."⁴² The only time Hannah is able to speak about the past is in her dreams or "when she awoke screaming that someone was beating her or trying to enter her room (p.192). Again, memory functions as a pervasive force; having been silenced throughout her life, it breaks through into Hannah's subconscious. By the end of the novel, Hannah's inability to express

⁴¹ Morrison, "The Site of Memory," 91.

⁴² Kim Lacy Rogers, Selma Leydesdorff, and Graham Dawson, eds., *Trauma and Life Stories: International Perspectives* (London and New York: Routledge, 1999), 2.

her emotions about the past profoundly manifests itself in a literal loss of memory: “Hannah had forgotten that Graham Lawson was dead, that Thomas McGilvery had inherited his property and that after McGilvery’s death, Leah had sold the Lawson logging concession to pay his creditors” (p.192). Like Toychie, who is physically and mentally silenced by the rigid gender structures of colonial society, the disintegration of Hannah’s mind is symbolic of the traumatic, silencing nature of the colonising system.

Other characters also display a reluctance to engage with difficult memories. Will’s friend, Sharper, is unable to recall anything about his life before the Bay, for example, “People called him Sharper Saltwater, so he believed he must have been born at sea, although he had no memory of ever having a mother” (p.42). When Will attempts to recall his life in Africa, he notes “Sharper didn’t like to hear about what he called ‘those days long done and long gone’” (p.44). Will also observes the culture of silence that pervades the atmosphere of the slave population:

Most people hated to talk about the terrible things that had been done to them. They lived with the knowledge of what they themselves had done to others and continued to do in their desperate struggle to survive, to avoid the cow-skin whips of the jail. During their lifetime, if they had now been dragged through the streets of the town by a mule and cart, had not died from hard labour in the bush, were not mutilated, crippled, or murdered, were not hung, drawn, quartered and burnt, many slaves thanked their lucky stars, trying to ignore their feelings of guilt (p.44).

Like the abuse enacted upon Sukie's body, Will's statement stands in contrast to the rhetoric of benevolence and directly contests colonial versions of history. As I have explored, the myth of benevolence is disrupted by multiple instances of desertion, rebellion and poor treatment, all of which are noted in the *Archives*, yet detail is sparse, and a culture of banalisation diminishes their importance. Rather than choosing to reflect the historical record exactly, in statements such as Will's above, Edgell elaborates and develops the small snippets of information that are presented in the *Archives*, placing them into a recognisable and emotive counter-narrative.

Memory is a pervasive force in *Time and the River* and is used in different ways by the novel's characters to remember and forget by turns. As noted above, Sharper and Hannah employ tactics of burying and forgetting, but, in contrast, Will desperately clings to his memories: "His mental survival [...] depended on trying to hold fast to the memories of his life before he had been brought by ship from Africa to Jamaica and then to the Bay of Honduras (p.44). Will consistently looks back, haunted and traumatised by memories which are imprinted in his mind: "He had watched the crew throw sick and dying slaves overboard. He would never forget their anguished cries and the slender hands of a woman, about his mother's age, trying to grab at the side of the sailing ship" (p.81). Will is the bearer of memory in the novel, his memories actively traumatising him. Will's memories also make a connection between Belizean and Trans-Atlantic slavery, thus situating Belize in a wider narrative of transportation and challenging the

myth of benevolence that separated the experiences of the enslaved in Belize from those in other locations in the Caribbean. Will describes his mind as a “rag-bag of jumbled memories and thoughts” (p.46). These fragmented moments, whilst often difficult, allow him to escape from his life, even if only in his imagination. Like the folk motif of flying from bondage, discussed earlier in the chapter, Will’s memories of Africa, whilst traumatic, also enable self-determination and connect him to his ancestors. Through Will’s narrative, Edgell insists that the link to Africa as a homeland and place of freedom is maintained. Like my earlier identification of sites of colonial resistance in *Beka Lamb*, Will’s narrative consistently connects to Africa and African-based tradition, and thus disrupts the colonial rhetoric which sought to eliminate these practices. In contrast, Hannah and Sharper who repress their memories of the past, represent in microcosm, the way that a particular, traumatic, version of slavery – which includes the presence of Africa – has been traditionally forgotten and silenced in Belize. In Sharper and Hannah, the attitude to slavery in Belize is personified: it is something that is to be buried, forgotten and not passed on.⁴³

Dismantling the “myth of origin”: The Battle of St George’s Caye Through Will’s Eyes

In line with its dominant position in the *Archives*, and in the cultural and historical narratives of Belize, the Battle of St George’s Caye is a key moment in *Time and the River*. The story told in Edgell’s literary reimagining, however, contrasts

⁴³ Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (London: Vintage, 1997).

sharply with the famous, mythologised tale, as it is articulated through the eyes of the African rebel, Will, as opposed to the Creolised Belizean or the white Baymen. This decision is significant and represents a direct engagement with the Black Creole identity as enslaved, an aspect of self which has been routinely marginalised in Belizean historical, cultural and national narratives. Via Will's experience, an oppositional narrative of trauma and violence is described, which disrupts the connection between the Belizean nation and the heroic 'myth of origin.'

Will's lack of interest in the battle is made clear from the outset, his voice representing a lone protest amidst an atmosphere of military zeal. He derides his fellow slaves, who were "enthusiastically throwing themselves into preparation for the upcoming struggle of settlers against the Spanish" (p.51). Instead, "he felt ambivalent about the entire enterprise" (p.51). Will's narrative actively challenges historical accounts that suggest that the enslaved were loyal supporters of the Baymen's mission:

He had not been infected by the martial spirit which Sharper, and other slaves and their masters were feeling so passionately. Will would have preferred to be fighting against the British settlers, rather than helping them repel the Spaniards from the settlement of Belize. He felt out of place and knew that the settlers expected many of the slaves to desert (p.74).

As noted earlier in this chapter, *Time and the River* departs from historical accounts, which demonise Spain. Will's narrative continues in a similar vein. His suggestion that the settlers expect the enslaved to desert also challenges the

common perception of settlers and slaves united, fighting ‘shoulder to shoulder.’ Whilst the novel implies that at least some of the enslaved were enthusiastic about the battle, Edgell proposes that the zeal displayed stems from self-preservation as opposed to genuine excitement. As Will notes, “He began to accept the fact that if he was going to save his life, it was vital that he show enthusiasm for this fight” (p.75). Sharper also voices an ulterior motive for his show of engagement: “then they’ll call us loyal and patriotic, you see Will. I’m thinking of my children you know” (p.76). This conversation echoes Granny Ivy’s comments in Chapter Four, which suggest that Black Creoles actively chose to participate in the ‘myth of origin’ in order to advance their own social mobility. However, Will’s thoughts go further, implying this decision is a matter of life and death, a thought which collapses the cultural construct of the loyal slave. Like the contradictory subject position occupied by Leah, Will and Sharper’s conversation represents the internal conflict between remaining ‘true’ to themselves and their beliefs, and maintaining security and safety. In Will and Sharper’s exchange, Edgell imagines the origins of the Creole elite alignment with the colonial power, complicating the perceived cultural perception of superiority by this group with a need for basic, human survival.

Edgell’s reimagining of the battle includes many famous moments from the historical record. Will observes that “The settlers and slaves had been instructed by the Commander in Chief to burn down the houses and huts on the island to deprive the enemy of food stored and of shelter” (p.52), an event which is

documented in the *Archives*.⁴⁴ Similarly, Will and Sharper's dialogue conveys information about the ships, canons and weaponry which has become immortalised in the story that has been told and retold over the years; however, in contrast to the rigid descriptions of the history books, the action of the battle is vocalised by a slave: "The *Merlin's* cannons look to me like twelve and sixteen [pounders]. The Baymen have maybe an eighteen. The others are nine-and-six pounders, maybe" (p.76). Sharper also recounts the Baymen's vessels, names which are now familiar in the story of the battle: "That's the *Tickler*, then the *Towser* and the *Swinger*" (p.75). The precision of the historical detail continues once the battle commences as key parts of the story are recounted through Will and Sharper's voices. As the Spanish ships advance, Sharper notes, "They're beached on the sand. I knew that would happen. It's too shallow there for those ships" (p.79). Alongside the practical elements of the famous story, Will's narrative also describes the fear, anxiety and restlessness of the moment:

The Baymen and their slaves, watchful and apprehensive, huddled in groups behind the barricades. Above their muted voices and restive movements, Will heard the souging of scorched coconut trees, the hissing of the waves and the clank of swords. Every now and again he caught a whiff of the acrid scent from charred and burnt houses. The sour smell combined with the pungent odour of sweating, stinking, anxious men made him want to retch (p.73).

For Will, the physical surroundings of the Caye are almost as oppressive as the fear of the battle itself: "He'd begun to hate the incessant sounds of tumbling

⁴⁴ Sir. John Alder Burdon, ed., *The Archives of British Honduras, Volume 1* (London: Sifton Praed and Co, 1931), 26.

waves and the stiff breezes [...] His lips felt dry and cracked and he was shivering – whether from the fear of death, fever, or both, it was difficult for him to tell” (p.79). Again, Edgell uses the physical world to reflect the inner world of her characters, Will’s descriptions of the sea around him relentlessly confirming his discomfort and echoing his traumatic memories of the Middle Passage. Edgell explicitly links the confusion and terror Will felt on the transportation ship from Africa, to the battle itself: “As he fought on, he felt like his terrified younger self aboard the slaving ship to the West Indies from Africa” (p.81). Here, Will’s experience is connected to a wider narrative of transportation, thus broadening the narrative of slavery in Belize beyond its traditional boundaries. By aligning the centrepiece of Belize’s heroic, national memory, to the harrowing narrative of the Middle Passage, Edgell inscribes this moment with trauma, shattering the perspective of benevolent slavery and comradeship in the process. The confusion and violence of the fighting described by Will, also contrasts sharply with the heroic rhetoric described in the *Archives*, which glosses the violence in favour of a narrative of adventure, heroism and victory:

Sharper was still firing at the Spaniards when he stumbled across a dead body and fell head foremost onto the main mast. Blood spurted from his forehead and Will, dragging him by his good arm, kept firing [...] Will, pistol in hand, pushed back the bodies of two dead Spaniards and said to Sharper, ‘Lie down, lie down. Try not to move – pretend you’re dead” (p.82).

Edgell’s narrative places readers in the thick of the action, and re-inscribes the national narrative with scenes of violence, death and confusion. In her use of key, recognisable moments from the frequently told story, Edgell is able to reinforce

the 'truth' of the battle, making it recognisable to modern day Belizeans. Yet Will's narrative provides an oppositional account to the colonial meta-narrative. Unlike the clipped description of the Battle described in the *Archives*, which tell only the colonial perspective, Edgell's evocative descriptions create atmosphere, tension, and empathy with the enslaved.

Edgell also disrupts key elements of the colonial narrative. The *Archives* assert that no men were lost on the British side,⁴⁵ with one dispatch going as far as to suggest that, "we had not a single man hurt."⁴⁶ Although it is impossible to know exactly what occurred, Edgell entertains the possibility that both slaves and Baymen were killed in the combat, with both Leah and Will describing scenes of death. Following the battle, Leah observes the sick and injured returning: "[she] heard a loud groan and cries as three or more corpses, wrapped in sailcloth, were carried ashore" (p.72). Later, Will chooses to remember his fallen comrades rather than celebrate the victory:

The beating of the goombay drums in a nearby yard made his injured head throb. To him, they did not speak of victory, but of those slaves who had died in the fighting during the past six or seven days [...] He suspected that the ghosts of the dead slaves would join the other phantoms from his old world to inhabit his dream during the nights to come from which he would awake shaking with terror and drenched in sweat (p.89).

Will's statement further disrupts the construct that the battle was a resounding victory. His anticipation of the psychological disturbances that will follow, further

⁴⁵ Burdon, ed., *The Archives of British Honduras, Volume 1*, 254.

⁴⁶ Burdon, ed., *The Archives of British Honduras, Volume 1*, 260.

connect the experience of the battle to his memories of the Middle Passage. Indeed, through Will's interior narrative of mourning, Edgell reimagines the event as traumatic, which contrasts sharply with the romanticised version of events documented in the *Archives* and later colonial texts which used it as a basis. In the process the 'myth of origin' is dismantled, and the foundations upon which Belizean cultural memory has been built is shattered. In addition, the origins of black working-class resistance can be viewed in this moment, which strengthens the counter-narrative discussed in Chapter Two. In reimagining the famous battle scenes through Will, who is strongly resistant, Edgell challenges the authority of Belize's official narrative. As Bhabha has suggested, "Counter narratives of the nation that continually evoke and erase its totalising boundaries – both actual and conceptual – disturb those ideological manoeuvres through which 'imagined communities' are given essentialist identities."⁴⁷ Indeed, through Will's narrative, Edgell disrupts the dominance of the 'imagined community' of Black Creoles and disturbs the collective identity, and hence memory, which has prevailed in Belize since the Nineteenth Century.

Conclusion

In *Time and the River*, Edgell "rips the veil"⁴⁸ on the slave experience in Belize.

Although she remains faithful to a number of 'facts' from the historical record, she

⁴⁷ Homi. K Bhabha, "DissemiNation," in *Nation and Narration*, ed. Homi K. Bhabha (New York: Routledge, 1990), 300.

⁴⁸ Morrison, "The Site of Memory," 91.

fills in the gaps left by colonial texts and gives voice to those slaves who were forbidden to recount their experiences in writing. One of the most fundamental elements of the novel is the way in which Edgell not only describes the painful physical distress of the enslaved, but also the mental hardship and the contradictions and internal conflict inherent in their quest for freedom. Although Will and Leah have widely differing experiences, they are united in the difficult decisions they must make in order to improve their lives. Leah betrays her own people in order to achieve her goal of freedom, whilst Will betrays himself, choosing friendship over freedom during the battle.

In terms of the wider themes of this thesis, *Time and the River* represents a significant moment: where the history of the enslaved is finally voiced. Unlike *Beka Lamb* and *In Times Like These*, this novel, preoccupied as it is with the period of slavery, inhabits the traumatic memory of Belize's inauguration as a nation. In the process of doing so, Edgell places the experiences of enslaved women at the heart of the narrative in the process, thus privileging an experience which has been widely forgotten. Amongst the 'un-remembering' of the period of slavery, the experiences of women exist even more on the periphery, excluded from the masculine origin myth. *Time and the River* is also significant for the clear generational trauma that it exhibits. The prevailing silence in Belizean culture has been an on-going thread throughout this thesis, and it is possible to see, through the character of Hannah, the beginnings of cross-generational

trauma, transferred not only between the characters in this novel, but also Edgell's other novels.

Through the concept of considering the postmodern Caribbean novel as museum, Nun Halloran has argued that: "works of literature can contribute to the establishment of a national foundation myth through references to real or imagined documents, as well as to elements of popular culture."⁴⁹ In reimagining the Battle of St George's Caye, *Time and the River* destabilises the 'myth of origin' which has been so prevalent in Belize and looks to contribute to a new understanding of the slave experience in Belize, thus rewriting the founding myths of the nation. The novel shatters the perception of benign slavery, a concept which is rooted in the heroic story of the battle. In Edgell's representation, readers are forced to consider an alternative version of events and are brought face-to-face with the interior life of the enslaved. In the absence of the existence of traditional Belizean slave narratives, *Time and the River* functions as a neo-slave narrative, the novel insisting that these marginalised perspectives are given equal weight to the characters in history. This process is a significant one, which forces the nation to confront that which has been silenced and muted in Belizean cultural memory for centuries.

⁴⁹ Nun Halloran, *Exhibiting Slavery: The Caribbean Post-modern Novel as Museum*, 43.

Conclusion

Writing about ‘fictions of memory’, Birgit Neumann has argued for the powerful role novels play in memory work: “Novels do not imitate existing versions of memory, but produce, in the act of discourse, that very past which they purport to describe.”¹ Neumann’s argument is particularly pertinent in relation to Zee Edgell’s imaginative fiction. This thesis has argued that her novels represent significant, alternative versions of Belize’s history that foreground the voices of women and, in *Time and the River*, give voice to the enslaved. Analysis of Edgell’s novels has enabled me to achieve the central aim of this thesis: to assess Edgell’s role in how the cultural memory of slavery has been shaped and re-shaped in Belize.

Much of the scholarship that focuses on Edgell is centred on the relationship between her novels and the Belizean nation, and her attention to the female experience in Belize.² This thesis has acknowledged and discussed these themes, but has expanded the breadth of scholarship to consider the multiple ways in which Edgell confronts, illuminates and illustrates the silences that characterise Belize’s engagement with its history. Although, as Julie Moody-

¹ Birgit Neumann, “The Literary Representations of Memory,” in *Cultural Memory Studies: An International and Interdisciplinary Handbook*, eds. Astrid Erll and Ansgar Nünning, in collaboration with Sara B. Young, 333-345 (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter GmbH & Co, 2008), 334

² For example, Julie Moody-Freeman, “Zee Edgell: Novelist as historian/activist: (Re)imagining Nation,” *African Identities* 7, no.1 (2009), Kristen Mahlis, “Women and Nationhood in Zee Edgell’s *In Times Like These*,” *Ariel: A Review of International English Literature* 31, no. 3 (2000), Candice Pitts, “Belize – A Nation (Still) in the Making,” *Wasafiri* 31, no. 3 (2016), Christopher De Shield, “Writer, Nation, Text: Beka Lamb and the Metonymic Trinity,” *Belizean Studies* 3, no. 10 (2010).

Freeman has argued, Edgell's novels foreground sites of colonial resistance which enable positive engagement with the past,³ I have argued that these moments of engagement are ultimately overshadowed by the past's traumatic weight. In order to discuss this weight, it has been necessary to situate Edgell's novels within a historical framework, and in doing so, recognise and highlight the very specific ways this colonial history has been produced and maintained. Read this light, Edgell's novels take on new meanings. While the marginalisation of women and the enslaved in national, colonial histories is not unique to Belize, knowledge of the way in which the past has been produced in Belize and the specific silences around the commemorative Battle of St Georges Caye enables a deeper engagement with the legacies that characterise Belize's colonial period; legacies which are a characteristic feature of each of Edgell's novels discussed in this thesis. Edgell's novels specifically address how these legacies have affected women at various, key moments in Belize's history, thus illuminating the gendered experiences of repression.

Indeed, my initial investigation revealed that that slavery has been muted in the official national history and cultural memory of Belize. When it does appear, it is heavily mediated, and often linked to the pervasive "myth of origin." At the centre of this myth is the perception that slavery in Belize was benign. Additionally, women are absent from this narrative and do not feature at the founding moment of the country. In order to situate Edgell's literary reimagining of this dominant

³ Judy Moody-Freeman, "Waking the Gone: Nine Nights as Cultural Remembrance of an African Heritage in Belizean Literature," *Resources for Feminist Research* 31, no. 3/4 (2006): 30.

narrative it was necessary to interrogate how it became so prominent in Belize. The selective nature of this history, shaped, in large part, by the colonial *Archives of British Honduras* and dominated by the centrality of the legendary 'Battle of St Georges Caye,' confirmed the importance of Edgell's literary project.

Edgell's significance as an author lies in her development of various counter-narratives, which challenge and subvert the version of history that has been ubiquitous in Belize for centuries. In *Time and the River*, Edgell dramatises logwood slavery, a marginalised industry that exists on the periphery of Atlantic-wide studies of slavery. Her fictionalised accounts of the slave rebellion of 1820, and, in *In Times Like These*, the civil unrest on eve of independence in 1981, support the muted counter-narrative of black working-class labour resistance in Belize discussed in Chapter Two. Most significantly, Edgell re-imagines the moment at which the "myth of origin" was created, and conceptualises the Battle of St Georges Caye as traumatic, rather than heroic. Will's voice provides an oppositional narrative that is critical of the actions of the colonial powers and the British Baymen, thus destabilising a narrative that has been dominant for years. Edgell's counter-narratives provide a perspective into the interior lives of those who have been traditionally excluded from Belize's official history and cultural memory. In this sense, her project is akin to Toni Morrison's. Speaking about the writing of *Beloved*, Toni Morrison has described her desire for the novel to "fill in the blanks" of the historical record and imagine the interior lives of the enslaved,

a process which she terms “a kind of literary archaeology.”⁴ Edgell’s novels differ in form and content from Morrison’s but share the same aspiration. In *Time and the River*, Edgell explores the unspoken voices of the enslaved. In a country where official history has been dominated by a powerful origin myth for centuries, reimagining the period of slavery traumatically, and giving voice to the enslaved represents a departure from the ways in which slavery had hitherto been represented in Belize.

In addition to Edgell’s focus on the period of slavery, she also gives voice to women, who have been routinely marginalised from Belize’s official history. Through her fictionalised female protagonists, Edgell’s novels place women’s stories into Belize’s national narratives of the past. In *Beka Lamb*, Beka’s story is intertwined with that of the new, young nation of Belize, poised on the edge of independence. In *Times Like These*, Edgell pointedly inserts women’s stories into the male-dominated world of the Belizean government and charts the development of the first Women’s Unit. In *Time and the River*, Edgell reimagines two women’s experiences – Leah and Sukie – which differ considerably and illustrate the complexity of life as a slave in Belize. Through the characters of Beka, Pavana and Leah, Edgell represents three different generations of women, who are silenced by their gender, but aspire to step beyond the prescribed roles of colonial femininity. In opposition, the experiences of Toychie, Sukie and Junie represent the destructive power of colonial femininity and its attack on black

⁴ Toni Morrison, “The Site of Memory,” in *Inventing the Truth*, ed. William Zinsser (Houghton Mifflin: New York, 1995), 92.

working-class women in this context. The imagery of the sea is a consistent thread throughout Edgell's novels, representing a strong tidal force of female emotion, which stands in contrast to the silence around women's experiences and the historical narrative that traditionally excludes them.

Edgell's exploration of the interior lives of women and the enslaved also enables engagement with the individual and collective trauma present in Belize. In a society where the experiences of the enslaved have been warped into a heroic founding narrative that is celebrated annually, Edgell's intervention is critical. Although the Battle of St Georges Caye is a central part of Belize's remembrance of its past, by silencing the traumatic nature of the slave experience in Belize and remembering it heroically, the Battle myth simultaneously forgets these experiences, and thus functions as a moment of traumatic erasure; a collective blockage which is difficult to move past. Edgell's use of the novel, therefore, permits a deeper engagement with the traumatic silences that characterise Belize's relationship with its past and enables a therapeutic confrontation with this moment. While the moment of trauma itself occurs in *Time and the River*, the legacy of the "myth of origin" is present in Edgell's other novels. Although *Beka Lamb* focuses upon Beka's allegorical journey to wholeness, the novel is saturated with references to an unspoken past; the "be'fo time" euphemism burying any direct engagement with the painful elements of Belize's history. In *In Times Like These* the past is barely present. Instead, fleeting and oblique

moments illuminate the individual and collective silencing of the nation's painful history.

As a Black Creole woman, Edgell represents the collective trauma of this group, who have exhibited an on-going structural compulsion to participate and confirm a colonial version of the nation's history. Edgell explores the contentious nature of this subject position whose reasons for complicity are more complex than a simple desire to rise up through the ranks of Belizean society. Instead, Edgell's novels represent the complex nature of an oppressive system, which encouraged Black Creoles to forget the traumatic nature of their past to achieve security, wealth, and influence. From Hannah, to Granny Ivy, to Lilla, to Beka, to Pavana: each struggle to vocalise traumatic moments. If they have not experienced trauma directly, their lives are weighed down by the need to silence that which is difficult, and to avoid engagement with the past. This inability stems from the generational silences passed on to them by their mothers, fathers and grandparents. This powerful transference of traumatic memory is central to all of Edgell's novels and represents her wider comment upon the unspoken nature of the past in Belize and its effect on the cultural identity of its people.

A challenge for this thesis has been how to locate Edgell within various literary contexts. The Belizean literary canon is small, and critical material that assesses Belizean writers collectively is almost non-existent. Edgell is predominantly located in a Caribbean context. Her novels share a number of characteristics of

Caribbean women's writing and she was a key writer to publish during the 'boom' years of the genre. Yet this reading also has limitations because of the specificity of Belize's complex history, and when considering Edgell's later novels which depart from the more recognisable tropes of the genre. I return here to Stuart Hall's comment about the diversity of Caribbean identity. Hall argues that while there are commonalities of experience and identity within the region, it is impossible to view the Caribbean as a homogenous entity. Instead, the deep and critical points of difference must be acknowledged and a 'new world' juncture of hybridity and difference embraced.⁵ This principle has guided this thesis. While it has been possible to note the space that Edgell (and Belize) occupy within particular Caribbean frameworks, it has also been essential to acknowledge the specific characteristics of Belize's history and culture. Many of these characteristics relate to the specifics of the under-researched period of logwood slavery, which was widely considered to be benign. The solely domestic nature of female enslavement in Belize, for example, contrasts sharply with the experiences of enslaved, male woodcutters, and with female slave roles in the Caribbean. During the colonial period, Belize existed on the periphery of colonial interest, which resulted in the development of an entrenched system of self-governance. In addition to the specifics of Belize's history, further, important considerations, were Belize's diverse, multicultural population; and the cultural influences of both the Caribbean and Central America. All of these particularities

⁵ Stuart Hall, "Cultural Identity and Cinematic Representation," in *Black British Cultural Studies: A Reader*, ed. Houston A. Baker Jnr and Ruth H. Lineborg Manthia Diawara (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 214.

necessitated the development of a broad interdisciplinary framework through which to read Edgell's novels. Indeed, it has been necessary to consider, not only how the past has been "produced" in Belize, but how it has been mediated via the colonial archive and represented in Belize's historiography.

Edgell remains on the periphery of transatlantic studies of slavery and studies of Caribbean literature. Most of the scholarship that examines Edgell's literary fiction focuses on *Beka Lamb*, in part due to its publication during the boom of Caribbean writing in the 1980s, which has aligned Edgell with this genre. Yet it is in *In Times Like These*, and *Time and the River*, where Edgell's criticism of the postcolonial nation emerges and where the voices of women and of the enslaved are fully foregrounded. To date, there has been scant critical attention paid to these novels. This thesis has addressed this gap and it has argued that Edgell's novels are a necessary intervention into the cultural memory of Belize. The novels are an important exploration of a painful and contested history and their significance lies in the way that they intervene in Belize's history and memory. Indeed, Edgell's fiction has the capacity to provide an alternative account of Belize's past; one that is acutely aware of the particularities of its history and alive to the problems that this history reveals. In the process, the marginalised voices – of women and of the enslaved – are re-inscribed in Belize's national narrative, and their stories, reimagined by Edgell, can be heard.

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