

# Waking the Gone

## Nine Nights as Cultural Remembrance

JULIE E. MOODY-FREEMAN

*Dans la foulée de Kbaka pour Toycie, l'auteure redécouvre une tradition africaine qui se meurt, celle des neuf nuits et celle de l'histoire occultée d'esclavage et de résistance au*

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*Bélize. De plus, la perspective sexuée de Baka révèle un lien intime entre la suppression des légendes et de la culture sous la domination anglaise et une oppression sur la communauté des femmes.*

When criticism of these [black women's] texts acknowledges the activity of speech as its challenge, both in its direct engagement of a victimizing silence and in the specific (re)membrance of a tradition that has been socially and politically devalued in a modern world, then speech itself . . . becomes a critical part of a theory that speaks, not only to "the women out there," but to a tradition in literature that has waited for its own voice to emerge from the text. (Holloway 83).

Carole Boyce Davies asserts that

[B]ecause we were/are products of separations and dislocations and dis-memberings, people of African descent in the Americas historically have sought reconnection. From the "flying back" stories which originated in slavery to the "Back to Africa" movements Garvey and those before him to the Pan-Africanist activity of people like Dubois and C. L. R. James, this need to re-connect and remember . . . has been a central impulse in the structuring of Black Thought. (17)

A Black Creole woman and the first Belizean writer to be published internationally, Zee Edgell's 1982 novel *Beka Lamb* illustrates Davies' assertions by remembering an African cultural tradition, one that was under British

suppression in the 1950s, the setting for this novel. Her depiction of a young Creole girl's insistence on holding a wake to complete traditional burial rites is symbolic of Edgell's own social and political agenda to employ the wake as narrative structure thus linking Belizean traditions and customs to an African past. While Edgell's African diasporic intent may not be evident in the present title of the novel, the significant link is obvious in her novel's original title, "A Wake for Toycie," changed by the publishers. In this paper, I argue that *Beka Lamb* acts in part as a historic and sociological document of traditions and traditional places of colonial resistance in Belize. Reading *Beka Lamb* through the lens of Belizean and Caribbean sociology and history, I will examine the language of Edgell's novel and her carefully placed cultural signifiers, which allude to a history of slavery and resistance in Belize that has too often been untold or muted in Belize's historiography, and I will examine the connection she makes between British colonial suppression of cultural traditions and histories as well as its oppression of women's lives. Layering her text and encoding them with cultural markers of Africa connects Edgell to a tradition of women writers in the African Diaspora such as Paule Marshall, Michelle Cliff, Toni Morrison, and Gloria Naylor, among others, for whom women's remembrance of history and Africa are important.

In the introduction of Zee Edgell's *Beka Lamb*, readers learn that Beka is upset because Toycie has died and

No wake had been held for Toycie, not even one night's worth. Miss Eila had explained to her Gran that times were too hard to hold a proper *nine nights* for Toycie. . . . Miss Ivy offered to pay for food, but Miss Eila's refusal had been strong. (5) [my emphasis]

In lieu of a formal waking held by the family, Beka holds her own wake for her friend, "a remembrance in the privacy of Beka's own heart" (5). Chapters four to the end of the novel, as Beka remembers Toycie, partly bears witness to the racial, sexual, economic, and political oppression of Toycie Qualo, a 17-year-old young woman of Creole and East Indian descent, who becomes pregnant by a Mestizo boy, Emilio Villanueva, in the final year at a Catholic high school for girls. Rejected by Emilio and expelled from school for the pregnancy, Toycie descends into insanity and attempts suicide. Her suicide attempt

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results in the end of her pregnancy, but even after her aborted pregnancy, Toycie never recovers mentally. In hopes of assisting Toycie in her recovery, Miss Eila, her aunt and guardian who has been entrusted with the care of Toycie by her sister, removes her from internment at an asylum to her family home at Sibun.<sup>1</sup> There, Toycie wanders away during a hurricane, is killed when a tree falls on her, and is immediately buried without the traditional wake. As Beka holds her “watch night” for Toycie, Edgell’s narrative structure rehearses an African tradition of waking the gone. This is a powerful literary strategy, which reconnects the cultural practices of slave descendants in Belize, Central America, to an African tradition that for centuries had been under attack by slavery and colonialism. Edgell’s novel illustrates that remembering one’s history and culture is important for the preservation of one’s self, and cultural remembrance is a crucial step for self-empowerment.

I want to turn to historian O. Nigel Bolland’s “Slavery in Belize and *The Formation of A Colonial Society: Belize, from Conquest to Crown Colony* to document a tradition of waking the gone in Belize during slavery and to Orlando Patterson who documents a similar tradition in Jamaica. The colonies share related traditions since slaves in Belize came via Jamaica. Bolland documents a wake ritual that took place in Belize during slavery after a night of drumming, singing, and dancing where the dead is spoken to by a friend:

... [T]he corpse was carried in the morning to the churchyard, the coffin being borne by labourers, who in their progress used to run up and down the streets and lanes with their burden, knocking at some door or doors, perhaps visiting some of the friends of the deceased, professing to be impelled by him, or to be contending with the spirit who opposed the internment of the body. At length some well known friend came forward, speaking soothingly to the dead, and calling him Brother, urged him to go home and promised him rest and blessing. (1977: 97)

In his article, “Slavery in Belize,” Bolland argues that traditionally Africans believed “that at death one’s spirit rejoined one’s ancestors; it is understandable that death, as a release from slavery and a return to Africa, was celebrated with feasting” (1978: 16). Bolland documents the cer-



Marie-Denise Douyon, “Ahonahen,” engraving inks and oils on masonite, 20.75” x 42.5”, 2003. Photo: Paul Simon

emony associated with the wake in Belize:

In the negro yard below, "the sheck'ka" and the drum "proclaimed the sport, the song, the dance, and various droom" ... "[by] the different African nations and creoles, each in parties... Sometimes a tent was erected, where rum, coffee, and ginger tea were dispensed to all who chose to come and make free." (Crowe qtd. in Bolland 1977: 97)

In *The Sociology of Slavery*, Orlando Patterson quotes an eighteenth century writer whose description of the wake records a similar festival quality to the African slaves'

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funeral rites in Jamaica:

... the Attendants scream out in a terrible manner, which is not the Effect of grief, but of Joy; they beat on their wooden Drums, and the women with their Rattles make a hideous Noise: After the grave is filled up, they place the Soup which they had prepared at the Head, and a bottle of rum at the Feet...; they return to town, or to the Plantation, singing after their manner, and so the ceremony ends. (Leslie qtd. in Patterson 196-197)

Patterson argues that the African slaves' funeral rites were based on their belief that at death they would be united with their ancestors, which was common amongst a variety of African tribes (198). "Among the Ibos, for example, when a man dies he is said to 'have gone home' or 'gone to the land of the spirits'" (Patterson 198). Nine nights, which is my focus in this paper, is a ceremony which like the wake celebrates the gone with food, dance, drums, and singing nine nights after death. It is similar to "post-burial ceremonies of West African peoples ... [and] bear a striking resemblance to the after-burial rites of the Ibo people" (Patterson 198). Note, however, Patterson's description above of African's funeral rites also demonstrates colonialist's negative attitudes regarding these spiritual practices.

In Belize, the British had a negative response to wakes and voiced their complaints:

... a very large assemblage of Negroes either free or Slaves...who have resorted to certain appointed Huts situated in different parts of the Swamps on the south

side of this town, whose apparent motive for which is Dancing. Whatever may be their real motive for such Meetings, certain it is these Nightly revels are productive of much noise and occasion much disturbance in the Neighbourhood, as to deprive the Inhabitants therein from enjoying their natural rest. (Bolland 1977: 97-98)

The strict British colonial laws did much to suppress African traditions. Slaves were prevented from beating the "gombay or goombay" drums in the wake of the white settlers complaints that they were too loud.

In 1807, for example Superintendent Hamilton complained about the slaves being accustomed "to beat Gumbays or other Instruments sounding like Drums, and to be strolling about the Streets at all hours of the Night" (Bolland 1977: 97).

Zee Edgell's novel, *Beka Lamb*, identifies the British suppression of nine nights, that Bolland and Patterson record, while documenting traces of the tradition that remain in drums, dance, and song during the 1950s, the setting for the novel. For example, at Great Granny Straker's wake, Miss Janie, an elderly family friend of Miss Eila and the Lamb family, cites that British law prevented the practice of displaying the corpse to "wake" it:

Oh, but wakes was lively things when I was young... The body was on a cooling board for everybody to pay their respects. What a good wake we had same night as the death ... Nowadays it's law this, and law that. The body gets buried before a proper wake. Takes the life out of the whole thing. (75)

Miss Winnie, another elderly friend, reveals censoring of the drumming which accompanied the celebratory ritual: "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. Course nowadays everybody so genteel with all this education ... that they shame to do the old things (75-6)."

This diatribe reveals that the practice of waking was in danger from Belizeans themselves who adapting British law and culture through education regarded nine nights as primitive. Ironically, Miss Eila, one of the members of the women's group lamenting the loss of traditions, refuses to hold a wake for Toyocie citing financial woes. Beka realizes the symbolic significance of "waking" Toyocie that Miss Eila misses in her grief, for the wake is a process that brings peace and rest to the souls of both the living and the gone. It is a tradition symbolically connected with a cultural past.

*Beka Lamb* is important for it celebrates the African wake ritual, which finally brings peace and rest to Toyocie and Beka and rejoins them with their ancestral past. This narrative strategy of the wake is significant, for it is in the ritual remembrance of Toyocie that Beka begins to under-

stand her history. In "Singing Her Own Song: Women and Selfhood in Zee Edgell's *Beka Lamb*," Lorna Down argues that Edgell employs the wake as "a folk ritual" in *Beka Lamb*. While the wake is necessary for Beka to mourn the loss of her friend, Down argues, her "(re)memory"<sup>2</sup> of Toycie's life allows her a greater understanding of herself and her community. According to Down, "the Wake is a symbol of past traditions which Edgell shows Beka must retain if she is to have an awareness of her community and her race" (40). Indeed, the wake is "a symbol of the past traditions" which is in jeopardy of being forgotten in Belize. However, I would go even further by asserting that Beka's wake for Toycie is as much a remembrance of her friend's life as it is a symbolic tribute to a tradition of slave resistance. In making the connection between the story of the place, Sibun, where Miss Eila takes Toycie as a place of refuge, death, and burial, Edgell is able to record in fiction a place of refuge for slaves in Belize. Furthermore, the symbolic presence of this place disputes an all too common myth in Belize that slavery "in British Honduras was, as has always been claimed, much less oppressive than elsewhere" (Waadell qtd. in Bolland 1977: 68). Edgell uses Toycie, then, as a synecdoche of a slavery past in danger of being forgotten. Toycie has no mother, no father, and no wake to celebrate her life. She is therefore a synecdoche for slaves in Belize who without mother and motherland have had their lives/their history invented and misrepresented in the discourses of others.

Before examining this latter assertion and how the wake functions in the novel as a symbolic remembrance of slavery and resistance, I want to turn, first, to Beka's own (re)memory of Toycie's tragic life. I propose that the wake functions as a revelatory testimony about the legacy of slavery and colonialism and about how the private and public politics of gender and gender relationships are intensified in this environment of social, cultural, economical, and political oppression. Edgell layers the narrative structure of the wake with historical, sociological, and anthropological codes that work to illustrate the race, class, and gender oppression of Toycie, a young pregnant woman of mixed Creole and East Indian heritage, as well as other Belizean women.

Early reviews and literary criticism of *Beka Lamb* have been highly critical of Edgell's characterizations of Toycie's pregnancy, insanity, and subsequent death. They characterize Toycie's story as "simplistic" (Nemhard 61) and "a cliché" (Nemhard 61), "melodramatic" (Ganner 91), and "not the big point of the story" (Hunter 4).<sup>3</sup> Critics have argued that because Beka articulates the story, the reader is not privy to Toycie's own thoughts and "the reader is never allowed to enter the world of Toycie's emotions" (Ganner 91). While the critiques reveal a valid feminist concern for women to articulate their own stories, Lizabeth Paravisini-Gebert offers a socio-cultural and theoretical contextualization of the complexity of Caribbean writers and culture which critics/readers might consider:

I would posit that as scholars committed to studying Caribbean women we must anchor our work in a profound understanding of the societies we (they) inhabit. The evaluation of a differing reality from the theoretical standpoint of other women's praxes comes dangerously close in many cases to continued colonization. Caribbean feminism must be understood not in the light of other women's feminist histories and goals but in the light of their own experiences and practices. Feminism, if it is to lead to its goal of assuring women as full and multifaceted an existence as possible, must be responsive to the conditions in which that existence must unfold. (4)

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### The wake functions as a revelatory testimony about how the private and public politics of gender and gender relationships are intensified in this environment of political oppression.

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Paravisini-Gebert's assertions make possible a feminist reading of Beka's wake for Toycie which symbolically recovers the stories of women's, especially Toycie's, muted/lost voices and bodies as well as symbolically recovers muted/lost cultural traditions and history in the context of Belize.

Toycie's tragic end, remembered through Beka's wake, results from a composite total of many factors—abandonment by her estranged Creole and East Indian parents, by Emilio Villanueva, by the nuns at St. Cecilia's academy as well as the rigid and contradictory control of the state, the Roman Catholic church, and the unfair gender coded Belizean cultural traditions—of which colonialism plays a central role. While I will not address all these factors in this paper, I want to highlight one scene recalled by Beka, as Toycie attempts suicide, which illustrates the interconnections of colonial politics and sexual politics and their effects on the body of women's lives.

Toycie's expulsion from the girl's academy precipitates Toycie's suicide attempt at the creek and her downward spiral into madness. While Emilio's refusal to marry Toycie in the beginning is a devastating blow to her, she keeps striving to receive her education. It is Toycie's expulsion from the community of girls at St. Cecilia by Sister Virgil that delivers the final crushing blow. Exiled from her community, Toycie withdraws from society. Pregnant and turned away from the community she loves, St. Cecilia's Academy, Toycie refuses to eat or take her medicine to aid in the growth of the fetus, and she denies the changes taking place in her body; pregnancy for her is the end of the world. The gravity of her situation becomes evident as she attempts suicide in the creek behind her house. Ironically, Toycie is rescued by National Vellor, a

local East Indian prostitute, assisted by British soldiers who Vellor services. She is sent to an asylum and there creates her own reality that mimes the one she lost. The image we see in the mental asylum, after her attempted suicide, is that of a girl, "hands cupped in front of her face in a most peculiar fashion" (134), frozen in a moment of perpetual study.

Zee Edgell encodes the language relating the story of Toycie's suicide with socio-cultural and historical signs that illustrate how the sexual politics of colonial Belize work destructively on women's lives. As Beka flees from Vellor's home after Toycie has been rescued, the merged image that confronts her is that of National Vellor and Toycie, two women who are ostracized from society because they have transgressed the sexual boundaries society has assigned their gender and because their race and class status have limited their opportunities in colonial Belize. To Beka, Vellor and Toycie become indistinguishable from each other:

In front of her, as she raced across the lumber yard, loomed Vellor's luminous, glowing black eyes, her bedraggled hair, the green fields of grass. Vellor's face melted into Toycie's, Toycie's face merged into Vellor's and then Vellor became Toycie, as she had been, her mouth open in song, and there on the narrow path between sheds piled high with lumber. (128)

Vellor is symbolic of the cultural and linguistic alienation that occurred to East Indians who were brought as indentured labourers in 1858 and who migrated from Jamaica in the 1900s. According to St. John Robinson, "...many East Indians arrived already somewhat acculturated; that is, they had English surnames, generally dressed in Western fashion, and were nominally Christian, primarily Anglican" (33). A few East Indians over fifty years old can understand Hindi, and "it survives as vocabulary isolates particularly with reference to food" in a small group in the Toledo district (Robinson 32-33). The picture above Vellor's bed metaphorically tells as much about the ethnic group she belongs to as it does about Vellor's situation: "...an old fly-stained calendar showing a giant tree, its roots above the ground. Behind the tree, flowing unending fields of ... emerald grass. Women resembling National, wearing veils on their heads, walked through the fields, pottery vessels on their heads or in the crook of their elbows" (128). The pictorial description symbolizes Vellor's alienation from the Belizean society and a sense of displacement from her culture. The tree with its roots above the ground symbolizes the East Indian woman, who is not in her environment, displaced, naked, exposed, and vulnerable to the natural elements.

Furthermore, the characterizations of National Vellor and Toycie emphasize the plight of women during the 1950s. Without jobs, power, or even the right to vote, the

choices for women are few: the washtub under the house, baking and selling bread, taking out slop pails, being a wife dependent on one's husband, being dependent on one's son, being unmarried, pregnant and uneducated, or being a prostitute. Vellor's apologetic words to Beka—"No mother, no father, no school. What can I do?"—as Beka's eyes rest upon a "velvet dress lying in readiness across a chair beneath a window overlooking the creek" (128) reveal the latter choice for Vellor, prostitution. Beka's response, "Toycie had school," to Vellor is her attempt to distinguish Toycie from this local prostitute; however, Beka's comment only serves to underscore Toycie's present predicament—like Vellor, Toycie no longer has school.

Vellor and Toycie, victimized socially, economically, and sexually, illustrate the full implications of colonialism. Both Vellor and Toycie, without mother and father, ostracized by the community, make choices that further their victimization. Britain is known to have taken more than it gave back to Belize and with the devaluation of the dollar, the 1950s was economically difficult for all Belizeans, women and men. As a woman, Vellor's job choices are limited, so she supports herself as a prostitute for the British soldiers stationed in colonial Belize. She chooses to sell her body to the very men in the British military that are stationed in Belize to uphold the imperial powers of Britain that have failed Belize. Vellor is re-victimised by Belizean boys who shout taunts at her, "Soldier taffee" and by people in her community like Lilla who discourage Beka from talking "with that half-crazy coolie woman" (5). Furthermore, Miss Eila's poverty prevents her from accomplishing for Toycie what Bill Lamb argues is done by people with money: "Families without resources have no strings to pull when their children get in trouble" (119). Because of her family's cultural and economic background, the social, economic, and education systems work against a pregnant Toycie, and she is expelled which leads her to commit suicide and exile herself mentally from her community, which failed her. Miss Eila cites financial strain, a result of devaluation, as a reason for not waking Toycie, despite offers from her community to assist her with food. Thus, her failure to turn to community in the face of colonial economic oppression and social and cultural erosion of *nine nights* signal Toycie's final victimization. However, Beka's wake in (re)memory of Toycie recovers these women's stories and indicts and repudiates a colonizing culture's destructive legacy of creating racial, cultural, and gendered divisions. The wake thus fulfills Edgell's purpose to 'decolonize the mind,' to recognize the fallacies that colonialism perpetuated, and to remember the past.

I have examined how Beka's wake for Toycie functions in the Beka Lamb to recover stories of how colonialism has affected the lives of women, like Toycie and National Vellor. In the remainder of this study, I will examine the second function of Toycie's wake to remember the often muted history of slavery and resistance in Belize.

In the context of the wake's second function, Sibun is a cultural signifier for resistance and freedom in Belize. It is therefore crucial that Edgell chooses Sibun as the place for Toycie's return rather than any other location in Belize, for Sibun plays an important role in the history of slavery in Belize. On the surface, Miss Eila's removal of Toycie from the mental asylum is to get her away from the other residents there and to remove her to a more natural environment at her brother's place in Sibun where she can recover. Yet, Edgell could have chosen any other place in Belize. Miss Eila's words are significant to understanding the symbolism of Sibun to the idea of slavery and the significance of nine nights that concerns me. Miss Eila removes Toycie from the mental asylum "refusing to believe that anything 'could be so wrong with Toycie that good hard work, a strong talking to, and *going home to the place she belonged* wouldn't cure" (140-41) [emphasis mine]. During her wake for Toycie, Beka recalls her vacations with Toycie in Sibun when Miss Eila would recount stories of communities developed alongside the Sibun river by runaway slaves. Thus, Miss Eila's removal of Toycie from Belize City to Sibun is a symbolic return to her ancestors' home of refuge.

To understand this latter assertion, one must understand the historical significance of Sibun. Bolland records the following British reports regarding runaway slaves:

In 1816, reference was made to such a community "near Sheboon River, very difficult to discover, and guarded by poisonous Stakes." The following year, Superintendent Arthur reported that "a considerable body of runaway slaves are formed in the interior," and in 1820, he referred to "two Slave towns, which it appears have been formed in the Blue Mountains to the Northward of Sibun." ... there were Maroon communities in the Belize area, particularly near the Sibun River, a tributary of which is still called Runaway Creek. (1977: 81)

This runaway community disputes the myth of a harmonic relationship between slaves and their masters that has been passed down through history in Belize. One result of this utopic relationship takes a mythical form in the Battle of St. George's Caye, September 10, 1798, where slaves and masters were said to take up arms to drive the Spaniards away from the shores of Belize.

This history that has been mythologized has had long lasting racial and political consequence in Belize and bears description to understand how Edgell's citing of Sibun as Toycie's place of rest is a crucial sign. Historically, the Battle of St. George's Caye was fought between the British Baymen and their slaves and the Spaniards in their ongoing power struggle over who would control the small portion of land by the Caribbean Sea known as British Honduras (now Belize). Ironically, it didn't matter who won the skirmish; the slaves' status would not change even

though the British won the battle. An historical document presented to the British parliament reveals that a conscious effort was made to use the 1798 battle to present the image of solidarity between slaves and their masters. In *Thirteen Chapters of A History of Belize*, Assad Shoman, Belizean historian, documents an article titled "The Defense of the Settlers of Honduras Against the Unjust and Unfounded Representations of Colonel George Arthur, late Superintendent of the Settlement," which argued that

one of the strongest proofs of ... the contentment and good condition of the Slaves of this country is evidenced by their conduct in the last descent made by the Spaniards on the Settlement in 1798 [as well as by] the marked preference of these faithful Slaves to their state of bondage than to the freedom offered by the Spaniards. (151-52)

This proclamation has had serious and complex racial and political ramifications in Belize. It pits Creole, descendants of African slaves, and Mestizos against each other as well as Creoles of the upper class and the middle class against the poorer class. To oppose the celebration of the Battle of St. George's Caye is to de-legitimize the Creole descendants of the black slaves who were said to have fought valiantly with the Baymen. To oppose the celebration is also to side with the Spanish, particularly Guatemala, against the motherland, England. For many years these attitudes have led to a belief by some elements of the population that Belize should not become an independent country. It would be preferable to remain under British rule rather than be ruled or become a part of a Latin nation (Shoman 151-52). In the 1950's in an attempt

to build nationalism, eschewing references to St. George's Caye on the 10th [of September], the People's United Party (PUP) changed the celebrations to National Day. (Shoman 155)

When George Price, the leader of PUP and a Mestizo, referred to the battle as a "myth," he received severe opposition from the Creoles who charged that he was "discriminating against Creoles by diminishing the significance of the battle" (Shoman 155). As a result, he was forced to rescind his views. To this day, even after independence, no government has been able to ban the celebration of the "Battle of St. George's Caye."

If one digs deep into historical records, the evidence disputing the harmonic relationship between masters and slaves in Belize can be found. In his book, *The Formation of a Colonial Society: Belize from Conquest to Crown Colony*, O. Nigel Bolland documents that in 1813, 15 years after the 1798 Battle, 15 slaves ran away to Spanish territory to escape slavery under Thomas Paslow, "one of the baymen

whose slaves were supposed to have fought by his side with 'devotion and zeal'" (78). In Belize, slavery maintained an economy for the exportation of logwood and mahogany rather than sugar as in Jamaica and other islands. Therefore, male slaves carried machetes and worked in isolated groups in the interior of Belize; the Belizean terrain in addition to the fact that slaves carried weapons admittedly made for less mistreatment by masters. This reality has led to a common belief that slavery in Belize was more favourable than the condition in other places (Bolland 1978: 82). Yet this should in no way excuse the fact that slavery as an institution was cruel. Men, women, and children were forcibly displaced from their homeland, transported to Belize via Africa and other West Indian countries, and forced to work in deplorable conditions. The existence of runaway slave communities alongside the Sibun river, that Bolland documents, testifies to the slaves' rejection of the theory that the conditions of slavery were favourable in Belize. Therefore, their runaway communities document a history of slave resistance in Belize that white slave owners, historiographers, and most Belizeans have tried to deny.

In the context of this historical information, Beka's wake for Toyicie in *Beka Lamb* is important for its description of Toyicie's return, death, and burial at a historical site, Sibun. Beka's "watch night" is significant in telling and reconfiguring the historical discourse of slavery in Belize. Miss Eila's words in the novel that Toyicie is "going to the place she belonged" is significant to understanding Edgell's purpose in the context of slavery. Sibun symbolizes freedom in Belize's history. As demonstrated, Sibun was a place of refuge for slaves—an escape from the turmoil of slavery. When Eila removes Toyicie from the mental asylum in Belize, she is aiding Toyicie in her escape from the other forms of slavery she encounters—racially, sexually, and economically. For runaway slaves, Toyicie included, Sibun was an escape from the physical burdens and bestiality of slavery. Toyicie's slavery is having to conform to the traditions and practices of marginalizing culture and religion. Yet Miss Eila's return of Toyicie to where she belongs foreshadows her impending "death," symbolic of those who did die from the tragic realities of slavery. While Miss Eila returns Toyicie to Sibun, Beka's wake for Toyicie symbolically joins Toyicie's life experiences with the life of runaway African slaves.

Sibun is a cultural signifier for freedom, but it is also a repudiation of the official "happy slave" story; therefore, it is multivalent in symbolic meaning in this novel. The effects of remembrance through the nine nights ritual is important in this novel, in its recollection of Toyicie and Beka's personal lives, and in connecting these memories historically to an African heritage. *Beka Lamb* rehearses the West African ceremony and practice the belief that the gone should be celebrated not mourned. Like the African slaves who did not mourn death because it was an escape from slavery, the novel does not mourn death; it mourns

the hardships of life. Beka is left with a joyful feeling at the end of the novel and remembrance of the past is no longer painful:

Beka remembered the days spent swimming and diving with Toyicie at St. George's Caye. Concentrating on memory she relived the times they floated, fingers linked and spluttering with delight. (171)

As the memories float through Beka's mind, she awaits "the twinges of pain she associated with these memories" (171), yet she had none. Beka felt no pain; "there was no need for guilt or grief over a mourning postponed" (171). It is through embracing a tradition from her African ancestors, a waking process of remembering Toyicie, that Beka has achieved a peaceful state. Like Paule Marshall's "Sleeper's Wake," in *Praisesong for the Widow*, *Beka Lamb* is central to Diaspora studies because its mode of telling recovers a tradition that links writer, characters, and readers to a tradition and history at once lost and found.

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<sup>1</sup>Cited in my interview with Zee Edgell at her home in Kent, Ohio, 5 May, 1997. During this interview, Zee Edgell shared with me the history of Sibun and runaway slaves, which in my 27 years I had never known. It was our discussion of Sibun that influenced my focus in this paper.

<sup>2</sup>Karla Holloway's articulation of (re)memory, in *Moorings and Metaphors*, as a "dialectic ...form of memory because it has presence through its translucence, as well as being in form and clarity" (67) has resonance in terms of Edgell's use of the wake as narrative structure for Beka to remember Toyicie's fictional past as well as a mode of remembering Toyicie's past as a reflection on the history of women's oppressions in colonial Belize.

<sup>3</sup>Later literary analysis of Toyicie's story developed a connection between her tragic demise and her abandonment by "the women in her life" (Parham; Newson) and a connection between her "the psychic damage and distorted self-image of the individual as metaphors for a kind of pervasive 'illness' to which our societies are prone as a result of colonial encounter" (O'Callaghan 104). In addition, Lorna Down, to whom I refer in this essay, develops an argument that examines the relationship between Toyicie's demise and the colonial context.

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*Darcy Ballantyne* is a Ph.D. student in English at York University, Toronto.

*Sylvia D. Hamilton* is a Nova Scotian filmmaker and writer who is known for her award winning documentary films as well as her publications, public presentations and extensive volunteer work with artistic, social and cultural organizations on the local and national levels. She currently holds a Distinguished Chair (Nancy's Chair) in Women's Studies at Mount Saint Vincent University in Halifax.

*Katherine McKittrick* is a Postdoctoral Fellow at York University. She is currently preparing a manuscript for publication titled *Demonic Grounds: Black Women, Geography and the Poetics of Landscape*. Her current research interests also include the writings of Caribbean intellectual Sylvia Wynter. She is the editorial assistant for *Gender, Place and Culture: A Journal of Feminist Geography*.

*Andrea Medovarski* is completing her PhD in English at York University, specializing in Black diasporic and postcolonial literatures. Her research focuses on the economies of citizenship and representations of the body in writing by women of the Black diaspora.

*Leslie Sanders* teaches African American and African Canadian literature in Atkinson's School of Arts and Letters. She has published on such writers as Dionne Brand, Claire Harris, Nourbese Philip and Djanet Sears, as well as on Langston Hughes. In 2003, she was made a University Professor.

*Esther Tharao-Lyaru* currently works as a health promoter at Women's Health in Women's Hands with a specialty in the areas of HIV/AIDS and FGM. She has been actively involved in the AIDS movement locally and nationally for over eleven years. She is interested in academic and community-based research and the transfer of scientific knowledge into practice to ensure effective health care programs and services.

*D. Alissa Trotz* is an Assistant Professor at the Institute for Women's Studies and Gender Studies, University of Toronto/Sociology and Equity Studies/Ontario Institute for Studies in Education. She has published numerous articles and book chapters and is the co-author with Linda Peake of *Gender, Ethnicity and Place: Women and Identities in Guyana* (London: Routledge, 1999).

*Njoki N. Wane* is Assistant Professor at OISE/UT. Her areas of interest include Black Canadian feminist thought, Indigenous knowledges, spirituality, anti-colonial theory and anti-racist education. Her latest publication is a co-edited book: *Back to the Drawing Board: African Canadian Feminisms* (Sumach Press).