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Succouring an Ixtabai: Zee Edgell's Deployment of Belizean Folklore in *The Festival of San Joaquin* (1997)

Si bien el folclore se utiliza a menudo en la literatura beliceña, generalmente se lo trata de dos maneras: infantilizado en historias de miedo expresamente para fascinar a los niños o en recuentos creativos para la preservación de tradiciones. En la obra de la célebre autora beliceña Zee Edgell, The Festival of San Joaquin*, se observan temas e inquietudes sociales recurrentes en los escritos de la novelista. Esta novela despliega figuras folclóricas como tema central organizativo en un método nuevo para la literatura beliceña, ofreciendo una reescritura del folclore que aspira a recuperar un 'mito activo'. El estudio de esta novela puede revelarla como un texto conformado a la crítica de los arquetipos indígenas, pero tal crítica solo puede contribuir a los esfuerzos descolonizadores si se interroga su propia problemática para adoptar las figuras folclóricas cuyos orígenes indígenas han sido oscurecidos en la época poscolonial.*

Palabras clave*: folclore, literatura beliceña, descolonización, mito activo, indígenas*

While folklore is often used in Belizean literature, it is generally treated there in one of two ways: infantilized as ghost story – told expressly for fascinating children – or in novel retellings – for the preservation of tradition. The Festival of San Joaquin*, by celebrated Belizean author Zee Edgell, treats her recurring thematic and social concerns while deploying folkloric figures as an organizing motif in a novel way for Belizean literature; she offers a reworking of folklore that aspires toward recuperative 'active myth.' Exploration of her work might reveal it as amenable to an indigenous archetypal criticism, but such a criticism can only contribute to efforts at decolonization should it interrogate its own problematic adoption of folkloric figures whose indigenous origins have been obscured in the post-colonial era.*

Keywords: *folklore, Belizean literature, decolonization, active myth, indigenous*

Zee Edgell is Belize's preeminent novelist; her novels, all published by Heinemann, have global reach and have earned international attention. As an author, she is the subject of multiple studies, interviews, and dissertations.[1] Whether to provide helpful contextualization or illustrate intertwining socio-historical concerns implicating gender, colonialism, or ethnicity, her novels are routinely drawn into academic studies on Belize – including ethnographic work, sociological studies, accounts of Belizean history, and work in environmental conservation. Intimately tied to Belize as a nation, Edgell's short stories and her novels, *Beka Lamb* (1982), *In Times Like These* (1991), *The Festival of San Joaquin* (1997), and *Time and the River* (2007) all engage the legacies of Belize's colonial history, gender dynamics, women's activism, ethnic identity, and national belonging.

Of all the novels in Zee Edgell's *oeuvre* though, it is her third, *The Festival of San Joaquin*, that holds the most peculiar place: it seems at once representative and atypical. While still treating Edgell's recurring thematic and social concerns, the novel shrugs off the frank mimesis that characterizes her other works. Edgell's other novels take up Belizean context, including several famous personages and place-names in largely representative ways – often disguising features with only the thinnest pseudonymity. *The Festival of San Joaquin*, however, does not. The novel is unmistakably Belizean and yet, through techniques of literary pastiche, it frustrates attempts to read easy one-to-one correspondences to real-world Belize. While toponyms and geography sometimes so closely correspond to Belizean realities in Edgell's early novels that readers might conflate the fictional with real-world Belizean locales serving as setting for the novels, in *The Festival of San Joaquin* the fictional titular village is likely better understood as a kind of literary pastiche; it takes on an amalgam of Northern Belize and Western Belize Maya-Mestizo cultural attributes. Subtle cues of cultural geography are present in the novel to which Belizean readers respond: the fact of a real-world village and Festival of San Joaquin in Belize's Northern Corozal district, for example, coupled with the specific mention of the village's distance, "seventy-two miles away" (Edgell, *The Festival* 2) from Belize City (a distance that firmly associates the fictional village with the Western Belizean town of San Ignacio). The Festival of San Joaquin itself, as Edgell reveals in interviews, is similarly a kind of pastiche of Belizean festivals, Northern, Western, and Southern. In her 1997 interview with Renee H. Shea published in *Callaloo*, Edgell mentions how political entities in the novel, such as the Belize Environmental Action group, might be viewed as a fictional amalgam of "many environmental groups" and various events and ecological threats in the historical record are here blended for literary ends ("Edgell's Home"

576-77). These types of amalgamations make the novel an enjoyable work for the Belizean literature classroom, where readers explore Edgell's literary representations informed by real-world contexts more intentionally; they are arguably more complicated in this novel than in her previous works.

Furthermore, unlike her other novels – *Beka Lamb* (1982), *In Times Like These* (1991), and *Time and the River* (2007) – the plot of *The Festival* is not wedded to a singular moment of national significance. The novel is anomalous in that it does not offer any comparable nationally significant isolatable event as context: it is not set during 1950s nationalist agitation (as is *Beka Lamb*), nor Belizean independence (*In Times Like These*), nor does it delve into the national mythos and explore the historical archive and events around the Battle of St George's Caye (*Time and the River*).[2] Instead, Edgell's source for the novel was a photograph of a woman leaving court she saw in a Belizean newspaper; intrigued by the woman in the photograph, Edgell imagined a story behind what she saw depicted there (Edgell, "Interview by Evaristo" 59).

From this news clipping and photograph, Edgell constructs *The Festival of San Joaquin*: the tale of Luz Marina, a young Maya-Mestiza domestic servant working for the wealthy Doña Catalina, matriarch of the Casal family. Against his mother's wishes, Doña Catalina's son, Salvador Casal takes Luz Marina as common law wife and together they have three children. Salvador's ambitions are thwarted by his mother who cuts Salvador off from the family business and inheritance following what she perceives as his insubordination. Salvador Casal, never the brightest businessman, engages in failed schemes, turning to drinking and taking the resulting frustrations out physically on his wife. Suffering from domestic abuse at her husband's hands, Luz Marina one day defends herself from a drunken attack and kills him.

The narrator doesn't reveal the details of this manslaughter until near the end of the book. The reader is introduced to Luz Marina in much the same way the author herself fell upon the idea for the story: at the novel's start, Luz is walking out of the courthouse as she is released from prison on probation. The reader learns that Luz Marina's three children are in the custody of Doña Catalina, her former employer and the children's paternal grandmother. Now Luz Marina must navigate social ostracism, poverty, family stresses, slander, and even threats to her life, in order to cultivate some semblance of normalcy that seems forever out of reach. But rather than carve out a new life with the freedom granted her, Luz Marina feels the pull of her old life, and her responsibilities to family, especially her

children. She immediately decides to return to the titular town of San Joaquin to be near her children, who are in Doña Catalina's care.

This move to reclaim her life and children reveals another exceptional aspect of Edgell's fiction in *The Festival of San Joaquin*: her skillful and non-derivative use of Belizean folklore. Undergirding her character and story is a motif, perhaps similarly pastiched, of La Llorona and the Ixtabai/ Xtabai/Xtabay. Conflating the two may not be simply a matter of poetic license; the figures La Llorona and Ixtabai are distinct figures in Belizean folklore though – as cited in Meg Craig's *Characters and Caricatures in Belizean Folklore* – they "have traditionally become merged into one legend and, as enchantresses, are said to be variations of the same lore" (35). Edgell's drawing on the motifs of both figures thus resembles actual Belizean usage. Despite this authenticity, it is useful to note claims that fundamental distinctions between the two figures persist with regard to their potential for symbolizing resistance. Sharonah Frederik, for instance, contrasts the "pliant Aztec 'Malinche' model" present in La Llorona with the "sexually decisive" and powerful Ixtabai figure in an effort to theorize cultural roots to Maya exceptionalism in indigenous resistance (Frederik 220). Regardless, in Luz Marina, Edgell offers a sophisticated, recuperative interpretation of the wailing woman who returns to the site where she lost her children. Edgell's depiction is recuperative in that her protagonist attempts to negotiate her own agency and rebuff the village machos' violence – both physical (in their attempts to provoke and harm her) and discursive (in their attempts to saddle her with the weight of the myth of the she-devil or enchantress).

The potential of La Llorona to serve as an icon of feminist resistance to patriarchal oppression is perhaps most associated with the work of Gloria Anzaldúa whose seminal *Borderlands/La Frontera* redeploys the weeping woman as a personal muse or call to action. Larissa Mercado-López reveals Anzaldúa's concern with La Llorona as a "central metaphor" enabling Anzaldúa's own critical practice. In her essay "From Lost Woman to Third Space Mestiza Maternal Subject: La Llorona as a Metaphor of Transformation," Mercado-López discusses Anzaldúa's recuperation of the figure from emblematic "bad mother" and victim to agent of active resistance (217). Drawing on the language of feminist sociologist Patricia Hill Collins, Mercado-López argues that the recuperative view contrasts La Llorona's traditional role as a "controlling image" that is an image "used to dominate oppressed groups and foster internalized oppression by defining what is and is not acceptable" (217).

The Festival of San Joaquin is a novel creative contribution to this archive of recuperative feminist writing and a signal achievement within

Belizean literature that routinely draws on its folklore, though rarely with such deftness. Further, Edgell, along with other Belizean writers such as David Ruiz, extend the range of published stories featuring these folkloric figures beyond the US/Mexico borderlands of Chicano concern to others such as the Mexican/Belizean and Guatemalan/Belizean underserved by scholarship.[3] Edgell's interpretation of La Llorona and the Ixtabai is sophisticated in the subtlety of its appropriation of the motif. While La Llorona and the Ixtabai are featured in other works of Belizean Literature, these are invariably short stories in which figures appear from the folkloric tradition or, indeed, published retellings of folktales.[4] *The Festival of San Joaquin* is distinct from such retellings in the complexity of its appropriation, its abstraction of the motif from folkloric retellings, and its use of the figure's resonance for social critique and literary effect. And yet, despite its exceptionalism, the recuperative appropriation of this traditionally reviled figure naturally flows with the current of gendered social activism that pervades all of Edgell's works.

Exploring *The Festival of San Joaquin* through Gloria Anzaldúa's reclamation project in *Borderlands/La Frontera* is profitable here. Anzaldúa's seminal work documents a progression of the "New Mestiza" through states of self-consciousness and agency.[5] From the wailing of La Llorona as "feeble protest" within a male-dominated war-driven scheme (55), Anzaldúa attempts to re-read the figure's mourning as a recuperative crying for her lost people (60). Sonia Saldívar-Hull notes that the figure is an indigenous deity, *Cihuacoatl*, "the deity who presided over childbirth" (Anzaldúa 6) that becomes reviled in the post-Cortesian avatar La Llorona. Like Tata Duende/Nukux Tat, another figure from Belizean folklore whose origins lies in Maya mythology, and other indigenous figures that underwent similar processes, the indigenous female deity of childbirth is discursively perverted into "a woman who murders children rather than one who guides them into life" (Saldívar-Hull 6). Thus, Edgell in *The Festival of San Joaquin* offers a Belizean literary submission as contribution to the work of Chicana/o feminists who have reclaimed and reinvented the weeping woman figure. In so doing, it would seem, *The Festival* confounds conventional attempts to frame Edgell as writer of distinctly or strictly Afro-Caribbean themes and concerns and positions Belize as a site for interrogating or contesting Latin American and Caribbean borders.

Edgell scrupulously avoids explicit mention of the term "Mestizo" in her fiction but suggests at a tension between Maya and Mestizo heritages in interviews. Indeed, in Belize, the term Mestizo is a misnomer for those who would otherwise identify as Yucatec Maya, for instance. Because of this, the neologism "Maya-Mestizo" works in this paper as a reclaiming act.

Indeed, in refusing to have the protagonist theorize herself along these ethnic labels favoured by the population census, Edgell seems to achieve a greater authenticity and simultaneously avoids the danger of obscuring indigeneity in the manner that Cherríe Moraga finds troublingly implicit in the academe's use of such terms. In Moraga's words, the terms risk "assum[ing] and succumb[ing] to the loss of … aboriginality with no hope for recuperation" ("Indígena as Scribe" 88).[6] In the novel, Luz Marina imagines or daydreams of her Maya heritage and in describing the protagonist the term Maya-Mestiza might be more appropriate to reveal these tensions than simply Mestizo.

Viewed from the tradition of West Indian Literature, *The Festival* might seem unusual in that it seems to foreground Belize's Central Americanness over its Caribbean aspect – though early assessments of Guyanese and Surinamese Literatures will reveal how mainland or continental Caribbean countries have challenged provincial definitions of the Caribbean that fail to acknowledge unities beyond shared "islandness." Edgell's exploration of Belize's Maya and Mestizo cultures – understood as a representative gesture within Belizean fiction writing – appears to bolster area studies scholars' questioning Belize's Caribbeanness (despite Edgell's being often received as part of a tradition of Caribbean women writers).

Like other works of Caribbean fiction that offer representations governed by nationalism, *The Festival* revels in a reciprocation of text and nation. Such works are read as broadly realistic in their offering representative treatments of Caribbean subjectivity. But traditionally, for West Indian Literature, this subject-formation is viewed as a consolidation of the politically significant Afro-Caribbean folk. Edgell's first novel might be read in precisely this way. *Beka Lamb* (1982) allegorizes the maturation of a Creole girl in national terms. Thus, while Edgell's representations in *The Festival of San Joaquin* fit this quintessentially Caribbean mold, it still breaks with the early West Indian tradition as first described by Kenneth Ramchand in *The West Indian Novel and Its Background* because it breaks from Edgell's typical Creole narrative perspective.

Perhaps it is for these reasons that the novel does not attract near as much attention in the critical literature as her debut – *Beka Lamb*. If so, at least part of the blame lies at the feet of those academics who value her works primarily for the accuracy of their historical and cultural representation despite their being works of fiction. Critics abroad assure their readers that the novel navigates actual racial and cultural complexities of Belize (Edgell, "Interview by Evaristo" 55), or foreground

the authenticity of its portrayal, finding its basis in real or historical events (Newton-Horst 199; Nweze 143).

The critical attention it does attract in the published literature concerns its complex portrayal of burgeoning female agency within machismo culture. So, despite *Festival*'s focus on the task of imagining and narrating Belizean national identity in ways that foreground the lives and work of Belizean women – especially Maya-Mestiza women – the novel might still be sidelined because it does not conform to the mode of national allegory conventional for literary postcolonialism nor to the traditional motifs of Caribbean postcolonial Bildungsroman. But rather than speculate further as to its relative critical neglect, we would like to attend to what appears to be a unique achievement and argue that a signal contribution *Festival* makes is its literary treatment of a native archetypal figure, specifically the Ixtabai, and her cognates La Sucia and La Llorona.

Edgell's use of the figure of the Ixtabai, and its cognates, is remarkable in Belizean Literature. It constitutes more than just an attempt to draw upon Belizean folklore to cement the work in Belizean or regional culture. She also does not simply draw upon the Ixtabai's resonance as a symbol for an interpretation of the protagonist Luz Marina's character. Rather, Edgell's work constitutes an attempt to recuperate the figure along the lines of active myth: she complicates the legacy of patriarchal demonization of the figure through a folkloric retelling, reifying the Ixtabai as re-worked symbol of female empowerment. Exploring Edgell's use of myth and folklore might even suggest an indigenous literary archetype for novel interpretations of Belizean Literature.

In an interview for *Caribbean Quarterly*, Wilson Harris speaks of his novel *Palace of the Peacock*. The novel, which is heavily influenced by Guyanese Amerindian cosmovision, myths, and folklore, possesses what he calls "active myth." According to Harris, active myth "marries character and medium of place into celebration of consciousness" (Ogbaa and Harris 61). This celebration of consciousness he speaks of is achieved by employing folklore as a literary gateway to harness the latent lessons of native mythology.

Harris was famous for using Amerindian ethos as platforms to critique colonialism, Caribbean identity, and the metaphysical self's place in the physical world. Harris's symbolic representations of culture and society, especially in the first novel of the Guyana Quartet, feature conflations of nature and the indigenous, and a sexualization of nature and race. The Amerindian woman in *Palace of the Peacock* becomes "a seductive siren" signaling the "longing for the folk and the security of the land" (31). The very landscape in the novel is described in gendered terms: the rapids

enclosing the crew is also the presence of the indigenous folk; the river's agitation, for example, resembles the Amerindian woman's "desire" and the "ruffles in the water were her dress rolling and rising to embrace the crew" (73). Despite its desire to reconcile and repair a societal fracture born of conquest, Harris's mythopoeic vision becomes a masculinist postcolonial appropriation of conventional colonial trope of woman and land. The novel mythifications he presents at *Palace of the Peacock*'s climax – a scene of ghostly embrace – still feature an indigenous woman in a kind of salvific role.

While they recognize the transformative power and potential of the scene as a "formative myth of a culture," early commentators fail to problematize the gendered constructions. And this is where Edgell's work offers a useful distinction. Contrasting Harris's early reinterpretations of history and mythic cure, Zee Edgell's work emerges as a counterpoint to the tendency toward foregrounding nationalist articulation as one of male action. Edgell in *The Festival of San Joaquin* engages folkloric resonances of meaning that evoke ancient loyalties. Again, while these resonances are representative of Belizean experience, they also resist national attachment and origin. As Jean Franco has indicated, these ancient loyalties sometimes fail to complement loyalty to nation, and they exist as unruly or potentially transgressive forms of identification and national attachment (37). Thus, Edgell's novel also presents a laudable intervention in this continental Caribbean masculinist discourse; her work presents an alternative to prescriptive Creole nationalism with its descriptive transnational folkloric resonance.

In *Creole Indigeneity*, Shona Jackson charts the articulation of Creole subjectivity through an identity in labour correspondingly denied to Indigenous peoples in Caribbean fictional representations. Jackson also offers a useful critique of Caribbean discourse surrounding myth, arguing that the material effects of myth and the role it plays in the Caribbean are not given the requisite attention in Caribbean Literature.

Instead, Jackson highlights a genealogy of critical discussion on myth that coalesces in the work of Eduardo Galeano and Wilson Harris, whose work, though seminal for Caribbean studies, is not as useful for exploring what might be more usefully understood as the cultural *ideology* expressed, however subtly, in myth or folklore. She cites Galeano's "myths as collective metaphors" as a strategy for interpreting silences in the historical record, thereby suggesting an opposition between history and myth. She also discusses Harris's attachment to pre-historical and originary myths as "raw material" for visionary social recuperation in Caribbean societies, but characterizes Harris's conception of myth as

synonymous with "imagination" and "fable" (113). As such, these seminal regional writers on myth remain important but not foundational for the kind of exploration of myth Jackson seeks. In their utility for contemporary representations of Caribbean indigeneity they remain significant for their unifying vision but problematic in their deployment of indigenous symbolism. These problems of treatment prompt Jackson to write in *Creole Indigeneity* that

> [o]ur understanding of myth and the role it plays in the Caribbean has largely fallen into the split between what is considered idealist or imaginative, and therefore potentially false, and what is considered socially concrete or real. Thus, the real purchase of myth on society and economy remains relegated to the imagination, to the domain of culture, without real attention to its continued material effects. (115)

Following Jackson's critique, it is possible to read Edgell's contribution to this discussion as twofold: Edgell complements Harris's societal vision of a creolized society unified through myth; at the same time, Edgell provides "real attention" to the "material effects" of myth through her exploration of gendered violence inherent in folkloric retellings of the Ixtabai. Jackson focuses on the El Dorado myth as a foundational one for enabling both colonial European exploitations of the Caribbean and perpetuations of contemporary Caribbean wealth disparities. Edgell's original and revisionary storytelling challenges the rhetorical deployment of myth and folklore.

Regardless of the specific critique Edgell's fiction might provide of Harris's project (and however participatory Edgell herself might have been through her debut novel *Beka Lamb* in the allegorical deployment of woman-as-nation motif, the nation-building wake, the strategic appropriations of both nature and indigeneity to augment claims and prescriptions of national culture), Harris's nuanced explorations of myth, folklore, and fiction remain touchstones for readers of Edgell's fiction as they do for many writers of Latin America and the Caribbean. An exploration of Harris's strategies helps to broaden readings of Edgell's own, despite his famous rejection of realism and Edgell's preference for it. Still, just as her realist style, and her use of indigeneity and gender differ importantly from Harris's, so too does Edgell's use of myth in *The Festival of San Joaquin* differ.

Harris takes native myth and folklore that is a ubiquitous aspect of Guyanese culture and uses it as a lens for introspection. In fact, many other Guyanese writers have drawn inspiration from him and have similarly observed that it is

> a great mistake to infantilise [folklore], as if it were only suitable for children and should be confined to them. When used in adult literature as with Harris … such influences hold an undeniable power, just as there is power to be gained from ancient Homeric myths in works such as James Joyce's *Ulysses*. These myths are an adult business. (Melville 9)

Belizean literature sits distinct from the literature produced by Guyanese writers like Wilson Harris, Mark McWatt, and Pauline Melville; theirs is a literature employing native folklore as a literary motif that becomes a lens to study social concerns. The same cannot be said about Belizean literature. Even though Zee Edgell observes in the foreword of *If di Pin Neva Ben* that folklore is used as "cautionary tales, told to hint at some of the more ignoble aspects of the human psyche," by and large, the literature that has been produced by Belizeans thus far seems to foreground folklore like the Duende, La Llorona, and La Ixtabai, among many others, as stories to be told to kids to scare them into behaving properly (8). Whatever "ignoble aspects of the human psyche" Edgell speaks about remain ignored. Belizean literature that engages with native folklore tends to be mere derivations and retellings of stories that grandparents tell their grandchildren, the retellings functioning as traditional warnings, reinforcing patriarchal norms that restrict women's roles and lives. In any event, the narrative often remains too unaltered to become what Harris calls an active myth.

It is widely accepted that many of the folkloric figures that circulate in Belizean storytelling appeared after the contact between Spanish and Maya belief systems. It can be argued, however, that these myths existed in pre-Columbian imaginaries. The character known as El Duende, for example, predates colonial narratives. The original Yucatec Maya name for him is Nukux Tat. He, like many non-Western mythological figures, was dual in nature, i.e. both good and evil. The Nukux Tat was considered a guardian of the forest and all animals that inhabit it. He was and still remains a Maya deity of sorts, as people still pray to him, even though he may have been syncretized with the Christian God, when harvesting from their *milpas* or after a successful hunt. After the colonial encounter, however, he becomes treated as a demon, a trickster, and a child abductor. Evidence for this change in perception can be seen in the change of his name to Tata Duende, and, even more contemporarily, simply El Duende. He has also, like much Belizean folklore, been adopted and adapted by other cultural groups. His name has been Creolized as Tata Duhende. And while this speaks to the dynamism of Belizean cultures, the name change also mirrors a shift in the ontology and manner that the character is

perceived by Belizean imagination. This shift is symptomatic of how native Maya belief systems, ideologies, and modes of worship were also demonized.

The very same has been said of the Ixtabai. It is posited that the Ixtabai also predated European contact, as did the goddess Xtab, a deity who ferried the souls of those who died in childbirth or of suicide to the other side. However, recent scholarship into the archaeological iconography and cultural acceptance of Xtab as a suicide goddess has revealed that the folklore of the Yucatec Maya in Mexico is based on misinterpretations of the Dresden Codex, and mistranslations by Diego de Landa's part in his writings of Maya religion in Yucatan. Beatriz Reyes-Foster and Rachael Kangas say of Landa's writing: "despite the manuscript's merits, it must be understood as an incomplete and altered version of the original … There is no ancient Maya iconographic or glyphic reference to the name Ix Tab or to a suicide goddess that occurs anywhere before Landa" (11).

Archaeological implications aside, there is also the story of two sisters, Utzcolel and Xkeban.[7] Xkeban was said to be a very kind and caring person, yet because she was promiscuous, she was reviled by everyone. Her sister, Utzcolel, on the other hand, was said to be a very mean and vile person. But, because she remained chaste and a virgin throughout her life, she was the paramount of purity and goodness in the eyes of the community. Upon dying, fragrant flowers bloomed from Xkeban's body, while when Utzcolel died, a cactus bloomed smelling of death and decay. Utzcolel's spirit vowed revenge against humanity and became the demon Ixtabai who uses her beauty and sexuality to lure men to their death.

And while Ixtabai's presence in the collective psyche of Belizeans is celebrated for its intangible importance in our oral traditions, the demonization of a hyper-sexualized woman goes unnoticed and perpetuated in literature that is far from becoming the type of active myth Harris describes. This hyper-sexualization speaks to Belize's conservative moral standards that mistakes victims for aggressors and aggressors for victims. If an active myth serves as a lens or guide for social introspection, in the narrative of the Ixtabai and her male victims, who then, is the true victim? In the retellings of encounters with the Ixtabai, or any other seductress for that matter (La Llorona and La Sucia, for instance, as they are all used interchangeably in colloquial narratives), the victim is always the man. These figures, however, do not actively ensnare or entrap their so-called victims. They only appear beautiful to the men. And the men, believing that women are sexual objects at their disposal, fall prey to their own toxic masculinity, and considered victims of female sexuality.

Again, while most of these mythic figures have native Maya origins, they, much like the Nukux Tat, have all been contaminated by colonial belief systems and morality. By accepting casual retelling and perpetuating them, we add fodder to the demonization of real-life women and their struggles in a society that has been set up against them. In Mexico, much like Guyana, these myths have been taken out of their locally accepted register and have been put to use as active myths. Chicana writers like Sandra Cisneros have employed the myth of La Llorona. In her short story "Woman Hollering Creek," Cisneros uses the myth as a mirror for Mexican-American societies and the violent machismo so prevalent in them, while redeeming once demonized women, like the Llorona and the Ixtabai as victims of said machismo.

In her short story, Cisneros uses La Llorona as a sort of receptacle for the collective lived experiences of Mexican women. In "Woman Hollering Creek," the protagonist, Cleófilas, is taken to live in a town across the Mexico-US border after her marriage to a man. There, she finds that the married life promised in her telenovelas was a lie, as she is subjected to physical abuse "because the town [was built] so you have to depend on your husband" (Cisneros 53). In the middle of her misery, she finds she is trapped living beside two neighbours, Soledad (loneliness) and Dolores (pain) who perpetually mourn the men who have left either by choice or by death. Cisneros writes: "There is no place to go. Unless one counts the neighbour ladies. Soledad on one side, Dolores on the other. Or the creek" (51). The creek, synonymous with death in the narrative of La Llorona, becomes the only option to escape loneliness and pain. The creek is symbolic of La Llorona's fate, and the similar fate faced by women who are subjected to domestic violence. They must either experience the utter loneliness and pain from a life lived under abuse, or commit unspeakable acts like La Llorona did in order to herself abuse both husband and society. Earlier in the story, Cleófilas wonders why the creek was named Woman Hollering, or La Gritona as everyone called it. While Cisneros never explicitly uses La Llorona as an evil spirit in the story, she points out a very important, and very often overlooked aspect of the folklore, and indeed of narrative women in general. The stories told to children about the Llorona, or even the Ixtabai for that matter, never question why they haunt, or even kill the men that come in contact with them. Through her story "Woman Hollering Creek," Cisneros seeks to understand the Llorona's cries. Cleófilas asks if the woman's cries are out of anger or pain. This question not only humanizes an evil folkloric character, and removes the demonized woman, be it the Llorona or the Ixtabai from the role of aggressor to victim, but also creates a space in which folkloric characters can be a lens

for introspection of a society that continually places blame on women rather than seeing them as victims of circumstance.

Mexican art has proved that an active myth does not need to only be political, as in Cisneros' writing, but can be used to poetically render the pangs of unrequited love into art. In the popular Mexican folksong, "La Llorona," the evil enchantress becomes the focus of heartache. There are many different versions of song, indeed, with every new cover of the song, the lyrics change. What remains constant, however, is that the Llorona is never treated as an ungodly spirit seeking revenge or hell-bent on causing harm to anyone. Instead, in some cases at least, she is the elusive love that the song's persona can never attain. In others, La Llorona is the one who has been rejected and heart broken, and the persona is haunted by her sadness and heartache. Perhaps because she is the Weeping Lady, her pain has become idealized by the poetic imaginaries of musicians and singers where she becomes the epitome of beauty and the pain caused by the elusiveness of love, rather than a ghoul as she appears in most narratives in Belize. That is not to say, however, that she does not manifest in equal manner as an evil spirit in the psyche of Mexicans. Children are still afraid of La Llorona, yes, but she has also taken her place as active myth in the ethos of artists that seek to look past colonially encoded folklore and attempt to discern lessons these myths have to offer.

Here it seems to us that a postcolonial writer like Zee Edgell – postcolonial in the literary sense of a writer whose fiction works *through* the legacies of colonialism – when confronted with this historical record and cultural legacy, must weigh her options. On the one hand, it is important to unearth and re-discover aspects of Belize's oral tradition and folklore. Through story-telling and writing, it is crucial to perform, preserve and build on this intangible cultural heritage. On the other hand, the question of what to do with a problematic inheritance that emerges from a cloudy legacy of appropriation and perversion inherent in the folkloric figures in common circulation remains. Further, writers like Edgell must ask themselves how they might harness this legacy and folklore to counter those social forces that have compounded historical hurt with contemporary chauvinism. We submit that Edgell's novel attempts precisely this type of socially progressive re-appropriation of folklore.

Early in the novel, Edgell inserts a conversation between the chief antagonists Doña Catalina and Luz Marina. Luz Marina *imagines* going to Doña Catalina's house to explain things to her, to reveal exactly what happened and why. Luz Marina, as narrator, reveals her thoughts – "I think of going back there to talk with her, to explain, but what is there to

explain? What could I say? Would she look down at me … ?" – and then goes on to speculate as to Doña Catalina's response: "What would she say? Would she reply? Or would she gaze unblinkingly down at me" (Edgell, *The Festival* 5).

Going along with Luz Marina's informed speculations is a sneaky strategy born of Edgell's writerly preference for unreliable first-person narration. Readers gain some knowledge about both Luz Marina and Doña Catalina helping them understand both characters. But the careful reader must remember that this conversation never actually happens. This is simply the narrator imagining a likely exchange. A page later, the narrator, Luz Marina, is remembering "the terrible look" Doña Catalina gave her at the trial. From this actual memory in the novel, she extrapolates that

> the sad truth is that I know she would never answer if I dared to call from the street. And if I waited in the plaza, and if by chance we met there, and if by some grace of God she chose to speak, I can guess what she would say, as loudly as possible so that anyone who cared to could stop and listen.
> "You always were brazen, barefaced and bold, Luz Marina. Heartless, without conscience, or you wouldn't even think of approaching me. So where is the famous smile that enchanted the judge and jury? My family, and my church ladies, and even Rufina, agree that I succoured an Ixtabai. Regardless of what you now say Salvador did or didn't do, how come you didn't think of me?" (Edgell*, The Festival* 7-8)

It is here, in this important revelation for the novel, that Edgell provides the first explicit invocation of the archetypal Ixtabai. Luz Marina, through the imagined eyes of the grandmother who has custody over her children, imagines herself to be Ixtabai, Belizean folkloric version of the "she-devil" or "killer-woman" (178). By attempting to see through the eyes of Doña Catalina, the town's matriarch, Luz Marina reveals how the society engages in misogynistic scapegoating and represses specific details of her abusive common-law husband's death to the point of almost absolving him for his transgressions.

Edgell is careful not to overstate the parallelism between Luz Marina and Ixtabai, an example of a nuanced or tasteful strategy on her part that preserves something of its complexity. The next explicit reference to the Ixtabai only re-occurs once more and near the end of the novel (Edgell, *The Festival* 178). That said, a cognate, La Sucia, is invoked in part one (44). In addition, and far more subtly, numerous references are made to her seeming unreal (19, 25, 45, 59, 87, 104, 141), misperceived (34, 105, 141, 152), and being sullied or soiled (43, 44, 97).

The specific references enumerated here that focus on incorporeality, misperception, and dirtiness have been noted by feminist scholar Monica Trumbach in her thesis on Zee Edgell's work. Trumbach argues that Luz Marina's "subjectivity develops as a condition of her corporeality" (27). That is, her perceived powerlessness, her apparent lack of agency, is indicated in the novel not only through her failure to effect change in the social and political arena, but also through her physical incorporeality (Trumbach 27, 34). Indeed, subtle references to Luz Marina's sensitivity to light (after her emerging from dark courthouse to bright tropical sun), to her veering to the left (the sinister side), to her feeling cold despite the outdoor heat, and to an old man seemingly failing to perceive her, taken as a whole, suggest Luz Marina's literal incorporeality. Individually, however, they are dismissible as evidence of her ghostly appearance.

Trumbach draws on feminist models of theorizing the body to read a progression in Luz Marina's character from ineffectual, submissive, incorporeal, and dirty to confident, agential, solid, and clean. Indeed, it is only after Luz Marina's dawning awareness of her selfhood and realization of autonomy that she takes charge of her personal appearance and is she able to make decisive business maneuvers, as well as to accept or *refuse* assistance. Trumbach's reading is compelling both in its argument and its affinity to Edgell's stated social concerns, but the character's incorporeality and her insertion in the realm of *fantasía*, also indicate she parallels the realm of folklore. Astute feminist readings, like Trumbach's, reference Belize's actual socio-political fabric. They collapse the distance between Belizean women's real psychical and material concerns and Edgell's fictional representations of them. But, arguing that Luz Marina's experience of her own body reflects the gendered power dynamics at work in her own development of subjectivity (Trumbach 34), Trumbach does not comment on Edgell's employment of the Belizean folkloric figure of the Ixtabai. Thus, this more properly literary aspect of Edgell's art – her skillful infusion of folkloric material – goes by unnoticed.

Characters and Caricatures in Belizean Folklore, a UNESCO-funded collection of "eminently readable" tales for the Belizean public compiled from interviews and reviews, describes Ixtabai as "a bitter woman who has been abandoned by her husband and deceived by her lover and now roams the forest in search of men on whom she can wreak vengeance" (Craig 46). Readers familiar with other figures in Belizean and Mestizo folklore note parallels to yet another cognate to Ixtabai, La Llorona, known as the weeping woman. In some variants her origins lie in the fate of a beautiful woman – coincidentally named Maria – jilted by a lover of a different social class who refuses to marry her. Upon seeing him with

another woman, she is enraged and throws her children in the nearby river where they drown. She dies of grief, her spirit cursed to roam the river banks, where it will capture and kill men and children.

Edgell's novel does not simply offer a fictional retelling of the folkloric tale. She appears to engage in a deliberate conflation of figures. Just as her San Joaquin resists geographical pinpointing (being a pastiche of Northern and Western Belizean locales), so too does Edgell pastiche the concept of the devil woman. Luz Marina is taunted and labeled by her nemesis Doña Catalina and the local *machos* as Ixtabai; or, as she imagines, by her family, as La Sucia; or even, given her tragic longing to be reunited with her children, La Llorona. Similar to the figure of Nukux Tat who becomes variously codified according to ethnic culture, so too does Edgell conflate these images of the she-devil for rhetorical purpose. But in a reversal of the traditional folkloric scene, it is the town's *machos* who corner and trap Luz Marina and taunt her with the label Ixtabai, revealing the patriarchal magic transmogrifying aggressors into victims.

In the course of the novel, Edgell's protagonist slowly gains greater self-awareness and cognizance of the social forces and agents that attempt to restrict her agency and deny her voice. Recuperating the nature-protector function of the figure, similar to the Nukux Tat, Luz Marina, albeit unintentionally, is the reason for an aborted land sale; her accidental press leak drawing attention to shady backroom deals that fall through, preserving the livelihood of the campesinos who subsist on the big landowner's properties. In the process we see how Edgell appropriates the familiar folkloric tropes to offer an alternative trajectory for her character. She refuses both to infantilize and to traffic in problematic rehashings of gender-regressive folkloric tropes. Instead, she counters the problematic legacy of "socio-political and psycho-sexual oppression[s]" her protagonist attempts to resist (Trumbach 10). And, in so doing, Edgell seems to recuperate the figure as a vehicle for a progressive social critique, offering up a story as a contemporary fable or active myth. In *The Festival of San Joaquin*, Edgell provides a recuperative vehicle and alchemical narrative for translating inherent lessons of Belizean folklore and addressing the material effects these folkloric legacies engender. Her novel moves beyond a problematic retelling and signals not simply an artistic grappling with the visionary raw material of Belizean society but a working through the problematic inheritance of the colonial era to productively intervene in Belize's social development.

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NOTES

1 There are numerous treatments of her fiction. Edgell has several published interviews. Her work is the subject of multiple dissertations and theses: Hamlin (2018), Persico (2011), Trumbach (2000). Discussions of her fiction in historical or sociological studies of Belize can be seen in work by Julie Moody-Freeman (2009), Irma McClaurin (1994), and Anne MacPherson (2007). Edgell's depiction of the problematics of environmental conservation in *The Festival of San Joaquin*, prompts Struder, *et al.* to include a discussion of the novel in an analysis of Belize's cultural geography for an interdisciplinary project in environmental sustainability (169).
Zee Edgell passed away on December 20, 2020, as this issue was going to press. The authors wish to dedicate this article to her memory in gratitude for her life and her life's work.

2 The Battle of St George's Caye is celebrated every year on the 10th of September, it commemorates the victory of the British Colonizers over the Spanish in Spain's last attempt to exercise sovereignty over the region by forcibly expelling the British. See Shoman's "Reflections on Ethnicity" for a discussion on how local Creole elites took this event, celebrating the victory of colonial slavemasters, and turned it into a celebration of national identity.

3 David Ruiz's *Old Benque érase una vez en Benque Viejo* consists of four short stories written in Spanish that draw upon the folkloric tradition of Benque Viejo a community near the border to Guatemala which formed on the banks of Belize's Mopan River and which began in the 1700s as a logging camp. In her preface to a study of La Llorona, *There Was a Woman*, Domino Renee Perez expresses surprise at hearing stories of La Llorona beyond her own specific Mexican/US community and from people without Mexican heritage. Perez writes of her surprise encountering both the diversity of ethnicities and geographies associated with the tales and the strange predominance of male tale-tellers. Although Perez's own book *There Was a Woman* intentionally "participates in the theoretical practice of privileging Chican@ storytelling traditions as sources of critical inquiry" but, notes the innumerable manifestations of the figure across cultures (3). Perez excludes representations of La Llorona generated in Mexico, Central America, South America, and the Caribbean for reasons of scope, noting that "a consideration of the rise and dissemination of La Llorona folklore in these countries or locales would require a political, historical, and cultural contextualization particular to the nation or region." (4). Edgell's novel might be inserted into this schema as providing a Belizean contextualization in fiction of the folkloric figure.

4 Ruiz presents a good example. The figures of Ixtabai and La Llorona are often conflated in Belizean tale-telling. According to *Characters and Caricatures in*

Belizean Folklore the figures "have traditionally been merged into one legend and, as enchantresses, are said to be variations of the same lore, each possesses distinct characteristics and behaviour" (35).

5 Sonia Saldívar-Hull reads this progression in her introduction to the second edition of Anzaldúa's book.

6 In her discussion of the terms Moraga notes that the Chicano movement's use of *mestizo* was originally intended to be a reclaiming act and assertion of indigeneity. Moraga is dismayed by the academe's coopting such terms into the manicured discourse of liberal multiculturalism in service of imperialism (Moraga 215, n. 7).

7 These stories are collected from various folkloric traditions of the Yucatán, and published in collections such as Mendoza's *Leyendas de los antiguos mexicanos* specifically the story "La leyenda de la flor de Xtabetún" and "La flor de Xtabetún" in *Leyendas del México prehispánico* (49-51).

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