

Women and Nationhood: Zee Edgell's "In Times Like These"

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To have common glories in the past and to have a common will in the present; to have performed great deeds together, to wish to perform still more — these are the essential conditions for being a people. . . .

Yet the essence of a nation is that all individuals have many things in common, and also that they have forgotten many things.

ERNEST RENAN, "What is a Nation?" (19, 11)

QUESTIONS OF NATIONHOOD and the role of nationalism in postcolonial struggles have received much attention in the writings of contemporary theorists such as Homi Bhabha and Edward Said, who explore the dynamics of national formation and the ideologies that underlie the modern nation.¹ Bhabha responds in particular to the French theorist Ernest Renan, who, writing in the late nineteenth century, defines the modern nation by invoking the concept of a unifying "will to nationhood" and emphasizing masculinist notions of heroism. While Said and Bhabha, in contrast to Renan, acknowledge the marginalized — migrants, minorities and women — in their vision of the modern nation, it is in the literature of postcolonial women writers that a sustained focus on the status and significance of women in national formation emerges. In this essay I examine the vision of nationhood constituted through the narratives of women's experience in Zee Edgell's 1991 novel *In Times Like These*. Written ten years after Belize achieved independence from British colonial rule, the novel interweaves the narrative of Belizean national formation with the story of the central character's struggles to achieve "some measure of control" over her life. Through the perspective of her narrator, Pavana Leslie, Edgell presents a vision of national

identity that recovers the displaced narratives of Belizean women and, in doing so, presents a compelling alternative to masculinist concepts of nation and national identity. Indeed, the novel demonstrates that attempts to displace or repress women's narratives not only reinforce the inequalities perpetuated by colonial rule but also undermine the emancipatory and democratic ideals of anti-colonial struggles.

Before looking at Edgell's novel in light of the question of masculinist definitions of nation and national identity, I will consider the terms of the debate over the nature of nationhood in the disparate regions and peoples that make up the Caribbean. In his recent work on nations and nationalism in the Caribbean, Stefano Harney provides a succinct outline of the questions posed and theories propounded concerning a Caribbean "identity." Harney locates a primary tension between the idea of a nation as an independent, unfettered political whole, and the idea of a nation as a "people." Harney quotes Rex Nettleford, who, in the inaugural address on the tenth anniversary of independence in St. Lucia, stressed that

what is important is the Caribbean product from the process of cross-fertilization over time, since it is this that will cut across old imperial boundaries which still attempt to hyphenate the region into Anglo-this, Franco-that or Hispanic-the other, etc. . . . The ideal is to be able to find definitions of the region largely in terms of its inner logic and cultural consistencies. (17)

Harney goes on to laud "these recent visions of the Caribbean as a single region, sharing a single historical condition, a single creative ethos — being, in fact, a national community with a sense of peoplehood" as representative of "the new thinking on identity by intellectuals and artists in Caribbean nation-states and protectorates" (17). Harney calls "liberating" the notion of Guyanese poet David Dabydeen and critic Nan Wilson-Tagoe that "cultural consistencies," rather than the "external logic" of British colonialism or the short-lived West Indian Federation, form the basis for West Indian identity (19).

The Nigerian critic Simon Gikandi, however, raises questions that complicate the notion of the Caribbean as a "national community with a sense of peoplehood." In his provocative study

entitled *Writing in Limbo: Modernism and Caribbean Literature*, Gikandi points out the linguistic ambivalence that arises from the attempt to posit the autonomous Caribbean self through a “radical reconceptualization of its territorial and social spaces”:

Both the self and its community have to reinvent themselves using the language and cultural symbols borrowed from the colonizer, because only such a language and such symbols are seen as adequate for synthesizing the often antagonistic ethnic and class differences that define the new nation. Although individual and national identities need to harness such differences and ambivalences to subvert the colonial machine of domination and its neocolonial successor, the question of rewriting the allegory of the nation once the colonizer has departed still dominates Caribbean discourse. (218)

Gikandi points out what he sees as a tension between nationalist discourse stressing unity and the diversity of Caribbean experience, a tension further complicated by the problem of the continuing domination of colonial models and metaphors for national identity. Following Frantz Fanon, Edward Said cautions, in *Culture and Imperialism*, that

orthodox nationalism followed along the same track hewn out by imperialism, which while it appeared to be conceding authority to the nationalist bourgeoisie was really extending its hegemony. To tell a simple national story therefore is to repeat, extend, and also to engender new forms of imperialism. (273)

Sharing the spirit of Gikandi’s skepticism and Said’s caution about engendering new forms of imperialism, *In Times Like These* rewrites the “simple national story” of which Said speaks and complicates notions of a unified Caribbean identity, through an explicit interrogation of the gender dynamics underlying the discourses of national and individual identity. 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. *In Times Like These* frames this problematic by focusing on the sometimes contradictory impulses that make up individual will and thus complicating the notion that the “collective will” of a nation can be clearly charted or articulated.

The novel opens with a scene that highlights the primacy of individual will in the heroine's ongoing struggle for identity: a frightened and confused twenty-one-year-old Pavana is seemingly being forced to have an abortion, even though she insists that she no longer wishes to do so. A British doctor, speaking with the voice of colonial authority, insists that Pavana must submit to the abortion, while Pavana attempts to assert her power to choose, shouting, "I've changed my mind, tell him, nurse, I've changed my mind" (4). The shout awakens the thirty-three-year-old Pavana from what turns out to be a recurring nightmare. She is not a twenty-one-year-old Belizean in London being forced to abort her twins; instead, she is the mother of eleven-year-old Lisa and Eric, and they are sitting next to her in an airplane bound for Belize, the homeland Pavana left fifteen years earlier. Pavana and the reader share a sense of relief that Pavana's control over her body — and her future — has not been taken from her. The scene can be read as emblematic of the experience of colonization, with the helpless Pavana symbolizing the people whose power to control their destiny is taken away by the paternalistic, insidious colonial power. This symbolic opening thus sets the stage for the novel's exploration of how Pavana and her fellow Belizeans struggle to exercise the will necessary for individual agency as well as national identity.

The novel repeatedly represents individual and collective will through the medium of voice as opposed to voicelessness, e.g., Pavana's voicelessness during her nightmare of the enforced abortion. Indeed, the question of whose voices will be heard as the national narrative is being shaped drives Edgell's narrative, from the opening scene of Pavana's dreams as she returns to Belize to Pavana's subsequent recollections of her childhood and the years she spent in London among a group of Caribbean and African expatriates. Most of the novel, in fact, depicts the heroine's remembering of her past, and this act of remembering becomes her means of establishing some measure of control in her life, analogous to the re-remembering of the nation through a collective national memory. Through a series of flashbacks, the narrative pieces together the story of Pavana, who, studying in London at eighteen, becomes infatuated with

a fellow Belizean expatriate, Alex Abrams, and desperately tries to win his love by having sex with him; when she becomes pregnant, Alex breaks off their relationship and insists that Pavana have an abortion. While the plot tends to verge on melodrama, Edgell subtly shifts the reader's focus from the drama of unrequited love to the importance and status of Pavana's will, of her ability to choose:

She had given freely of herself, and the children were the result of that decision, her choice, and 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. (147)

Pavana's choice — figured in the novel as an act of power and responsibility — enables Pavana to sustain her ethical integrity, the basis for her selfhood.

The question of choice, central to Edgell's novel, takes on added significance when examined in light of Renan's comments on will and nationhood. Renan identifies the "tangible fact" of nationhood as "consent, the clearly expressed desire to continue a common life" (19). As Bhabha explains, Renan argues that the "will to nationhood," rather than the prior identities of race, language, or territory, "unifies historical memory and secures present-day consent" (160). Renan also insists that "a nation's existence is, if you will pardon the metaphor, a daily plebiscite, just as an individual's existence is a perpetual affirmation of life" (19). Using Renan's logic, we might see an analogy between Pavana's exercise of will and the collective "choice" involved in the forming of a nation. In effect, by aligning the self-preservation implied by an individual's "perpetual affirmation of life" with the processes of national formation, Renan naturalizes and depoliticizes these processes. Furthermore, as Anne McClintock has pointed out, such discourses of nationalism tend to conceal "conflicts of class, gender, ethnicity, regional and generational difference" and subsequently project "the denial of difference onto a conveniently abstracted 'collective will'" (123).

By showing the complexities that shape individual will, however, Edgell implicitly undermines the force of Renan's analogy

between national formation and individual self-determination. Pavana's choice to have her children, complicated as it is by her desire to win Alex Abrams's love and to pursue her education and career, proves to be an act of both strength *and* submission. The power she exercises is not one of force or domination; instead, it is one of individual strength and acceptance of her freedom as a sexually active woman. Only Pavana's own motives and her subsequent embracing of motherhood distinguish her single motherhood from that of the Caribbean stereotypes of the seduced and abandoned woman and of the mother as martyr.

Pavana's choice, however, makes it clear that there is no natural or right choice, nor is the individual's choice devoid of ideological and political consequences. According to Bhabha, "minority discourse acknowledges the status of national culture — and the people — as a contentious, performative space of the perplexity of the living in the midst of the pedagogical representations of the fullness of life" (307). The choice that Pavana makes to continue her pregnancy arises from the "perplexity of the living" and reflects her lived, bodily experience as a woman. Pavana's crisis reflects a larger cultural stereotype that corresponds to Bhabha's "pedagogical representations": the stereotype of the pregnant Caribbean woman, deserted by a lover and left to raise a child on her own.

We can better understand this tension between the performative and the pedagogical by examining Pavana's choice in relation to the choice made by Miss Junie Silver, a figure from Pavana's childhood in Belize. Pavana remembers Miss Junie Silver after awakening from her nightmare of the enforced abortion. This juxtaposition points to the power of the cultural stereotype exemplified by Miss Junie Silver, as well as to Pavana's attempts to escape the full burden of that stereotype. Pavana recalls that at age thirteen, she witnessed Miss Junie Silver disrupt the wedding of Mr. Edward Kelly, the father of her infant. Enraged by his desertion, Miss Junie Silver walked down the aisle of the church, carrying the infant as the sign of her seduction and abandonment. When Mr. Edward Kelly refused to acknowledge her or the child, she plunged a pair of scissors into the child's throat. Trying to protect the adolescent

Pavana from the horror of the scene and restore the social order that had been disrupted, the elderly Miss Erline told Pavana, "Every day women in this town have babies for men who don't marry them, but they don't kill their babies. They keep their head. Something is wrong with Miss Junie Silver, do you understand me, Pavana?" (13).

In attempting to defuse the act of resistance implied by this display of violence, Miss Erline interprets infanticide as an act of individual pathology, not as a sign of culturally constructed gender imbalance. For Pavana, however, the memory creates a deep sense both of the danger of cultural stereotypes, and of the precarious position that a woman may find herself in once she enters this economy of sexual exchange, where men hold ultimate power — the ability to affirm or deny a sexual liaison that leads to pregnancy — while women are bound by the marker of their gender — the physical and emotional burden of the ensuing pregnancy. In abiding by this logic, Miss Junie Silver's only means of asserting control is self-destructive: in essence, she advertises her powerlessness by murdering her child and then succumbing to madness and death.

Both Pavana's nightmare and the nightmare memory of Miss Junie Silver serve as cautionary tales of the dangers of adult female sexuality and the crucial power of choice that Pavana recognizes is necessary to avoid the self-annihilation represented by Miss Junie Silver. By choosing to be a single mother, Pavana escapes the full force of the cultural stereotype of the seduced and abandoned Caribbean woman. Rather than leading to disintegration and death, Pavana's pregnancy becomes, surprisingly, a means for self-definition and strength: "it had been an act of self-protection, of survival, of trying to continue becoming the person she wanted to be" (148). Working against the stereotypical scenario of motherhood circumscribing a woman's self-development, Edgell instead presents in Pavana a redemptive motherhood that allows Pavana to "continue becoming the person she wanted to be." Edgell transforms the role of mother from passive victim to active educator and guardian, a role Pavana embraces, in part, because of her education and promising career. Pavana chooses to approach her

motherhood as a creative, generative act, a crucial part of her own maturation, and the recovered memory of Miss Junie Silver enables Pavana both to preserve the traces of Miss Junie Silver's frustration and violent response and to shape her own narrative in a different way.

In juxtaposing this memory with the nightmare of the forced abortion, Edgell shows how both of these narratives, displaced to Pavana's unconscious but clearly not forgotten, tell a story of female powerlessness — figured as voicelessness, since the words of Pavana and Miss Junie Silver are not truly heard — and male control. It is no coincidence, either, that both narratives surface at the time that Pavana returns to Belize to work for Belizean independence and to reveal to her children's father that she chose not to have the abortion that he had insisted on: both acts are crucial to Pavana's self-determination. From this "private space" of memory and desire, Pavana finds a language that overcomes silence and, in the words of Caribbean writer Olive Senior, "personalizes the socio-political issues" (Senior 485). Edgell's focus on Pavana's particular consciousness, especially Pavana's insistence upon claiming the prerogatives of free will and accepting the responsibilities of her choice, makes clear the ultimate importance of individual will in shaping both individual *and* national identity.

As Olive Senior has noted, the emergence of the Caribbean woman writer "has opened a completely new approach to the topic of the Caribbean mother and the cultural forms with which she is associated" (Gikandi 199). Edgell continues this revisioning of motherhood by bringing out what has long been ignored in the act of mothering: its power to shape mother, child, and their social and cultural environment. At this point we can begin to see how Edgell reconfigures the relation between will, power, and memory that Renan sets forward in his writings. Throughout his treatise "What is a Nation?" Renan emphasizes the importance of the past in his conception of the modern nation:

The nation, like the individual, is the culmination of a long past of endeavours, sacrifice, and devotion. Of all cults, that of the ancestors is the most legitimate, for the ancestors have made us

what we are. A heroic past, great men, glory (by which I understand genuine glory), this is the social capital upon which one bases a national idea. (19)

Yet Renan's emphasis on the past and the remembering of one's predecessors and their endeavors is balanced by what he sees to be an equally important action, namely, the deliberate forgetting of acts of violence. "Unity is always effected by means of brutality," claims Renan, and to preserve that unity a necessary forgetting (repression) needs to take place: "Forgetting, I would even go so far as to say historical error, is a crucial factor in the creation of a nation, which is why progress in historical studies often constitutes a danger for [the principle of] nationality" (11).

Renan's "principle of nationality," predicated as it is upon this "necessary forgetting/repression," is precisely what Pavana's narrative rejects. The tension between Pavana's approach to career and single motherhood and the masculinist assumptions of her children's father, Alex Abrams, exemplifies this conflict. Trying to explain her decision not to have the abortion and to raise the children on her own, Pavana tells Alex, "all my life, I'd struggled to break free of certain cultural patterns . . . I wanted to be able to stand on my own feet" (149). Alex responds to this declaration of strength by demanding, "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 we are. How can you be so different?" (149). Alex contrasts what he sees as a Caribbean woman's powerlessness with the masculine ideal of power, insisting that as there are two genders, so are there two subject positions: to be dominant or to be dominated. Alex also posits a profound disjunction between what it means to be a boy and what it means to be a man: the man has thrown off the dependence upon and connection to family, especially the mother, and is in a position to exert power over others, in short, to "be a man."

The novel draws a clear parallel between Alex's understanding of what it means to be a man and his political activities on behalf of Belizean independence and nationhood. When Pavana first meets Alex in London, he is young, idealistic, and

without any direct political power. Like Pavana, he has come to London to study, but his studies are eclipsed by his involvement with a group of would-be revolutionaries, expatriates from a number of African and Caribbean countries that share a history of colonial domination. A heterogeneous group, representing various political positions, they share the goal of creating “an economically viable, progressive, creative and just society, a society that would offer the possibility of participation for everyone, and that elections would be free and fair” (35). While in London the members of this group form a strong bond based on the shared ideals of justice, equality, and equal opportunity. But their youthful idealism vanishes when the political exiles become the contenders for political power in their homelands:

It was hard now to watch, in Belize at any rate, a remnant of that London group, irrespective of political persuasion, effectively implementing a policy of rewarding their friends and punishing their enemies. Surely only mad persons made a habit of grasping for political power, holding on to political power, for its own sake, at any cost; not those whom one had admired and loved, not those among whom one has lived, not those for whose professed ideals one has worked. (35)²

For Alex, becoming a man means gaining power, the power to determine not just the course of his own life but that of others. And this process of moving from boyhood to manhood in turn serves as a compelling narrative for a nation’s coming of age, especially in the case of a country and a people clearly dominated by an external colonial force. In an excerpt from Alex’s primer on revolution, Edgell highlights the extent to which this narrative of nationhood has become the dominant: “Revolution is not for moderates. In times of upheaval, hardness is power. From Alexander Kerenski to Arturo Cruz, nothing changes: the man of qualms, of balance, of ambivalence is lost” (144). The “hardness” of political power proves to be antithetical to the bonds created by communal striving — “those among whom one has lived . . . those for whose professed ideals one has worked.” The bonds of boyhood are to be thrown off for a masculine hardness characterized by single-minded, forceful,

amoral action. Alex's story demonstrates how readily the cause of national self-determination becomes intertwined with the battles for political power and influence – what Jean Franco has termed “the male games of rivalry and revenge” (xii) – ultimately leading to a negation of those egalitarian ideals upon which anti-colonial struggles are based.

Edgell's novel charts this process by juxtaposing Pavana's story with the “official story” of national formation: the ongoing struggle for control of the electorate by Alex Abrams and his erstwhile best friend, now become political rival, Stoner Bennett. Their struggle results in betrayal, violence, kidnapping and, ultimately, murder. What also becomes clear is that while Pavana's story will not make newspaper headlines or be preserved in history books, it is precisely the kind of story that Gikandi identifies as crucial to the Caribbean effort to “rewrite the allegory of the nation.” Pavana's rewriting of the struggles for individual and national identity escapes colonial definitions of nation and nationalism by eschewing claims to universality and by complicating the linear, binary logic of Renan's theory of nationalism.

The narrative of national identity that promotes “hardness” as power has no place for stories like those of Pavana and Miss Junie Silver. Edgell foregrounds these women's narratives not to show their difference from the “hardness is power” model, but to reveal how the politics of nationhood are actually inseparable from the struggles of women and mothers. In her position as director of the women's unit of the government's ministry of development, Pavana has little overt political power, but this does not mean that she is ineffectual or impotent. Rather than function merely as a propaganda machine for the government, she hosts a radio program on which Belizean women, even women in rural areas, speak publicly of their struggles to support themselves and their families. From both her own and the collective experiences of Belizean women she has interviewed, Pavana concludes that, “women need to become an integral part of the decision-making process, to make sure that money spent by government is used to upgrade not only the situation of women but their families as well” (214). Pavana's work in the

ministry makes public the reality that Belize is not composed only of male politicians and businessmen; Belize as a nation is created and shaped by these working women, many of them operators of small businesses, virtually all of them acting simultaneously as mothers.

Pavana's story, and the novel as a whole, 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).³ Indeed, the crisis of the novel occurs at the intersection of the public and the private, when Pavana's children are kidnapped in an attempt to blackmail their father, Alex Abrams, into cancelling a pro-government rally. The intertwining of the private and the political intensifies when it is revealed that the instigator of the kidnapping, Stoner Bennett, is the half-brother of Alex Abrams, their relationship kept hidden because of the shame surrounding Stoner's birth — his mother was raped by Alex's father. This act of sexual violence, relegated to the putatively "private" realm of the domestic, proves to be the catalyst for a host of actions, from the explicitly political to the seemingly personal. Yet, as the novel has repeatedly shown, to separate radically the public from the private realm is to underestimate the complexities of the characters' motivations and desires. The public-private separation also creates a space in which female bodily experience can be contained and/or discredited and denied. Edgell, by insisting that female bodily experience and political intrigue share the narrative stage, confounds the boundaries set by the public-private binarism and shows this to be a false opposition.

Like Merle Hodge before her, Edgell adopts a narrative stance that complicates questions of value and identity after colonialism by abrogating the binary divisions (past/present, Carib/creole, etc.) that might make the colonial subjects' choices "easy" (Gikandi 225); one need only choose a side and then chart one's life according to the dictates of that choice. Furthermore, as Richard Patteson has pointed out, *In Times like These* shares with Caryl Phillips's *A State of Independence*, Shiva Naipaul's *A Hot Country*, and Michelle Cliff's *No Telephone to*

Heaven, “the lesson that decolonization does not automatically bring about liberation: If the power structure retains an essentially colonial/patriarchal configuration, the mere substitution of black faces for white ones will not change things very much” (Patteson 74-5).

The climax and resolution of the novel pointedly show that binary oppositions fail to capture the complexity of Pavana’s choices, especially those surrounding her fraught relationship with Alex Abrams. What Pavana had most desired while she and Alex were living in London was a commitment from him, but she rejects his belated marriage proposal, which comes during the crisis of their children’s kidnapping, knowing that such a proposal signifies not a desire to share a life with Pavana and her children but a desperate attempt to recapture the life he shared with his dead wife.⁴ Although Pavana rejects Alex’s proposal, she remains attached to him through the bond of her children and the experiences they shared in London. When Pavana’s children escape their captors and are reunited with their mother, one crisis is resolved, but this triumph is tempered by the subsequent death of Alex Abrams, shot by his own henchmen, a victim of his own political machinations — the novel’s strongest statement on the ultimately self-destructive consequences of the masculinist model of power and nationhood that Alex, like all the other male politicians in the novel, has enacted.

Although Alex has betrayed the egalitarian ideals of Belizean independence and caused Pavana great pain, she still sees his death as a tragedy and feels that she will weep for him, “though silently, for years to come, perhaps for as long as she lived” (306). The mourning that closes Pavana’s narrative, while it seems to reflect exclusively Pavana’s private loss, provides instead what I believe to be the novel’s most pointed commentary on the politics of nationhood. Renan’s theory of nationhood is predicated on two factors: the existence of a “common will in the present” and the importance of a collective remembering and, perhaps more importantly, a collective forgetting. As Bhabha remarks, “Renan’s will is itself the site of a strange forgetting of the history of the nation’s past: the violence in-

volved in establishing the nation's writ. It is this forgetting — the signification of a minus in the origin — that constitutes the beginning of the nation's narrative" (160). Such is the narrative of selfhood and nationhood that Alex espouses — consolidation of power at any cost, including violence and betrayal of one's fellow Belizeans — while Pavana's mourning provides a model of change in which self-definition does not necessarily entail a violent separation from the past. Pavana's stories recover the forgotten and provide a way to imagine change that involves not a forgetting of the past but the creation of a present imbued with traces of the past. Her mourning for Alex, a silent weeping, does not preclude growth or change; she looks forward to her work in Belizean politics and to a union with her longtime friend, Julian.

Pavana exemplifies what Françoise Lionnet calls "the message proclaimed by contemporary art and literature from Africa and the Caribbean": the ability "to stand in relation to the past and the present at the same time," especially in the face of the cultural disruptions of colonial domination (11). Zee Edgell's vision of self and nation, projected through her novel's joining of triumph and mourning, past and present, redefines masculinist narratives of nationhood and foregrounds the importance of communal striving, change, and loss. *In Times Like These* gives voice to the cause of Belizean independence, while insisting that individual and collective struggles for self-determination, especially those of women whose narratives have remained largely absent from the history of nations, invariably exceed the temporal and ideological boundaries fixed by a gendered and thus exclusionary narrative of national identity.⁵

NOTES

¹ In *Culture and Imperialism*, Said is particularly interested in narrative as the representation of power. While his work has a much broader scope than mine, his notions of narrative both as a representation of power and as a resistance to a dominating force support my reading of Edgell's work. Bhabha's works complement Said's, with the addition of deconstructive readings of various theorists of nationalism, from Ernest Renan to Benedict Anderson. Bhabha highlights the distinction between what he terms the "pedagogical" and the "performative," a

distinction that hinges on the idea of “the people” within nationalist discourse. Bhabha explains:

We then have a contested cultural territory where the people must be thought in a double-time; the people are the historical “objects” of a nationalist pedagogy, giving the discourse an authority that is based on the pre-given or constituted historical origin or event; the people are also the “subjects” of a process of signification that must erase any prior or originary presence of the nation-people to demonstrate the prodigious, living principle of the people as that continual process by which the national life is redeemed and signified as a repeating and reproductive process. (Bhabha 297)

My reading of Edgell’s novel highlights the “repeating and reproductive process” that emerges in the narratives of Pavana and the Belizean women who inhabit her narrative.

- 2 In a 1994 interview, Edgell speaks of the “next generation of leaders” (those who followed the first generation under whom the struggle for independence began) as “a disaster” (“One Life” 39). Edgell voices the disappointment occasioned by a generation of promising leaders who go abroad with the material and spiritual support of their people yet return to betray or mislead the same people who helped to make them powerful.
- 3 Assad Shoman notes that women have played an active, public role in Belizean politics, citing the example of the General Strike of 1952, an important event in the agitation for independence and sovereignty for Belize: “The women of Belize City were especially active in picketing, demonstrating and preparing food for the strikers. . . . About a third of the persons arrested during the strike were women” (176).
- 4 The circumstances surrounding the death of Alex’s wife, Helga, reflect the novel’s concerns with women, choice, and children. During an argument in which Alex and Helga quarrel over whether to have children (Helga wants children, Alex does not), Alex crashes their car into a tree, and Helga is decapitated. I read this episode as emblematic of the struggle over an assertion of will, a struggle resolved only through a violent silencing of the dissenting female voice.
- 5 I would like to thank Susan Scheckel for her insight and advice in shaping this article.

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