

The BET Connection:  
Social Imagination and Creolization within the Life Histories  
of Urban Belizean Youth  
by  
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## ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to explore the local life stories of five youths in Belize City, Belize as they experience satellite mediated programming from Black Entertainment Television (BET). It illuminates the manner in which social imagination plays a role in the liberatory practices of the Kriol youth in Belize City, Belize by documenting their life histories in relation to their interactions with BET. The study addresses the following: a) the ways that Kriol youth in Belize make sense of international cable programming; b) the degrees to which these negotiations result in liberatory moments. The study investigates the stories the youth in an through narrative inquiry research methods that can expose how, and to what degree local experiences in the Caribbean can help individuals employ their social imagination for personal growth. Readers of this text may become empowered to adopt the identities of others as their own, and may as a result witness the world from a fresh perspective, perhaps even experiencing moments in which their own life stories are altered. The contextualized categories involving popular BET programming emerged based on how power was distributed and organized in the every day lives of the informants. Empirical examples of hegemonic levels of interaction arose from within the stories. An analysis based on the works of Caribbean scholar Rex Nettleford (1978) was used to study relationships between these levels. There emerged from within the narratives four kinds of hegemonic power negotiations based on degrees of social: Dependence, Impulsive Resistance, Conscious Subordination, Leverage, and Creolization.

## DEDICATION

This doctoral thesis is dedicated to Claudia Mae Green, Calvin Alexander Richards, Sr., Pearl H. Richards & George Green. May the stories you have told throughout the years continue to provoke, teach, and challenge us now and for generations to come. I love you.

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## INTRODUCTION

It all started after a particularly long bout of time spent indoors while visiting Belize. The rainy season had come, and a four-day tropical downpour suspended all of my outdoor activities, confining me to the rooms in my grandfather's home in Belize City. Like most Belizeans of his generation, my grandfather was fond of TV; in fact, many aspects of his life revolved around it: death announcements, news, politics and entertainment. There were television sets in his in each of the three bedrooms and an additional television set in the recreation room where my granduncle, my cousins and I frequently lounged and talked. I remember observing times when my cousins were deeply engrossed in the many mini-series and American reality TV shows, and other times when the television noise was reduced to background as we chatted. Initially thinking that my cousins were graciously allowing me to watch what they believed I wanted to see as their guest, I told them they could watch whatever they wanted. I thought I was then going to sit with my cousins and watch a bit of local television. I thought to myself that it would be interesting to see how television programming evolved since the last time I had visited Belize in 1988. I was shocked when they informed me that not only did they watch American television, it was what they watched *every day*.

After the rains relented and I finally left the house, I was surprised how much I had to re-adjust to my surroundings. I had been in the country for over a month. Nevertheless, it took me a long time to realize that I was no longer in Phoenix, Chicago, or Los Angeles, but in an entirely different world. I was in a world of hibiscus and the salty sea, of "johnny cakes", and Belizean tortillas... a different lifestyle and a completely different way of being.

Belize is a vibrant subtropical country that is located in Central America. It is bordered by the Caribbean Sea to the east, Mexico to the north and Guatemala to the west and south. Internally, Belize is separated into districts that are comprised of vastly different



landscapes and histories, and as a result, a surprisingly varied array of races and ethnicities can be found within its borders. These districts are (from north to south) Corozal, Orange Walk, Belize, Cayo, Stann Creek, and Toledo. The Belize Barrier Reef located 5 miles offshore provides a safe haven to tropical fauna and a number of small habitable islands called *cayes* (pronounced *keys*). These small tropical islands provide the historical background for events that shaped the racial composition and national identity of the small country.

Back in 1988 when Belizean independence was but seven years old, television programming and its commercials were mainly local. The 1980's were a time of radio airwaves as opposed to digital cable or satellite beaming. In 2006, however, instead of local programming, I observed that American reality television and music videos programs were abundant referents in Belize City. Watching American programming in Belize easily transported me back to the familiar neighborhoods of Chicago. I was familiar with the American spin on the words the actors recited because I had lived in the United States. I knew many of their nuances. I knew who or what was the referent in many of the current double or triple entendres created in mainstream American media, and I used in much of the programming we watched in my grandfather's parlor with my peers or family members in daily conversation in the USA.

The space television offered me during my time waiting out the tropical storm was encapsulating; so completely enrapturing at times that I was transported back to the U.S. I was not, however in Phoenix, I was in Belize City. Belize was a space whose economic, political and social atmosphere was completely different from the world brought to our Kriol parlor through the internationalization of media programming. The States was a different place with different people. Much of the material we watched in Belize was originally intended for people in Phoenix, or other American cities. Yet, we were watching American programming in Belize City, and our little Belizean living room was transformed

into a center where we could disseminate cultural bits and pieces of America and digest them in bite-sized narratives.

Once again, perhaps my cousins were only trying to be polite, but nevertheless I began to wonder how mass-mediated cultural products had influenced Belizean reality. Unlike me, the citizens of Belize who had not traveled out of the country had no real referents to what was being portrayed on the television but their own life experiences.

The episode left me with questions. Some cultural theorists (hooks, 1994) have suggested that agency plays a role in libratory experiences at the individual level. Yet, I wondered, in the case of Belizeans, to what degree? To what extent had global media products influenced their local Belizean lives? In the context of a globalized “post”, and neo-colonial Caribbean, what kinds of experiences resulted from Kriol youth interacting with globalized satellite cable programmers like Black Entertainment TV? I recollected that there existed evidence in the literature confirming creolization and agency at work in the other parts of the world as well. Cultural scholars such as Stuart Hall (1988), Homi Bhabha (1981) and Rex Nettleford (1965; 1976; 1978) have discussed the ways in which resistance against a multinational colonizer can develop into agency in local cultural circles despite poor conditions and education resources.

Certain notions from my days in seminars at Arizona State came flooding back to my memory regarding the way powerful multinational corporations manipulated through the media (Giroux, 2004b, duGay et.al., 1997; Molnar, 2003). The vast majority of television programs telecast in Belize originated from abroad. In fact, the majority of products consumed--food, clothing, and entertainment ultimately originated from countries other than Belize (Pisani, 2007; Bolland 2003). In Belize District, there were only three local channels, yet the typical cable network offered 90 to 125 channels. These channels generally have their origins in the United Kingdom, China, India, Lebanon, Syria, Jamaica, but mostly,

the United States. I wondered about the senses of reality that resulted from Belizeans learning about international consumer products from globalized spaces like satellite-mediated television programming?

After some casual questioning of some of the Kriol youth in Belize, I confirmed that North American cultural products were pervasive in the Caribbean through television media. Indeed, American foreign policy toward Caribbean nation-states has helped to enable the proliferation of media imagery and programming not only in Belize, but also in nearly all of the nations within the region (Best, 1994). Nevertheless, simply saturating the Caribbean market is seemingly not enough. Cultural scholarship regarding media influence suggests that the contexts of human experience are necessary to mitigate meanings created from mass-mediated simulations (Hall, 2003; 1993; Nettleford, 1978; Johnson, 2001).

The government of Belize is especially concerned about the influence of globalized media on its youth (Ramos, 2010). Many public servants in Belize City have blamed the city violence on the influence of international culture such as cable programming (Centaur, 2009, BTL, 2001). But, what does the content actually mean to youth in Belize City? Moreover, does Black Entertainment Television actually influence the youth here, and if it does, to what extent? Indeed, might the experiences be in some ways beneficial to them?

I became even more curious about the meanings derived by Kriol Belizean youth from such mass mediated products and the connections between international programming the lives of some youth in Belize City. I wanted to analyze the lives of some Kriol youth in Belize to investigate the extent to which global television programming influenced the realities of Belizean youth. Additionally, I became very interested in the ways that interactions with cultural forms presented through satellite-mediated networks produced results that were liberatory for them. This kind of analysis, if presented from within the local experience of a life history, might serve to reveal ways which Belizean youth were involved

in larger global trends. Satellite mediated cable programming was one of the most widespread forms of globalized cultural forms used in Belize. Internet existed in Belize, but during the time of this study, it was neither cheap, nor was it readily accessible. Radio frequencies were local. International publications were prohibitively expensive. I focused my dissertation on the experiences with preferred international cable programming by recording the interactions of urban youth living in Belize City.

### **The Situated Researcher**

As someone who comes from an Afro-Caribbean heritage, I realized that I possess specific sorts of limitations as well as advantages as the researcher when I embarked on this journey of understanding. Perspectives from my African American mother and Caribbean father allowed me to view cultural phenomena from dual lenses. That is, I have a view of an outsider while comprehending the lifestyles and culture of a member of a minority group. Growing up in Chicago I located nuances found within American programming that may not be apparent to Belizean youth. As a fluent speaker of Belizean Kriol, it was easy to move about within Kriol social circles in Belize and gather data in situations other researchers deemed as outsiders could not. This ability was advantageous in helping the reader to understand various foreign contexts under analysis. Still, this advantage was also a limitation, since full immersion in American culture sometimes made it difficult to step outside of the situation where a dual lens may have been useful. I assume, therefore, the stance of an “informed outsider”. This is to say, although I shared many cultural similarities with my Belizean informants in this study, and some of my roots are undeniably Belizean, I was raised in another country. While collecting data, my knowledge of the field had to be re-established, rapport had to be rebuilt and alliances had to be re-forged during my stay in Belize City.

Raised with dual culture and language in a relatively big family, the second child of

six, I had the opportunity to observe and participate in the rearing of younger siblings through their adolescent and young adult years. My experience as a high school teacher and university instructor enriched my understanding of young adults and the problems they face in modern society. The youth I instructed during my years in practice came primarily from families of lower socioeconomic status, teenagers considered “at risk” by definition of the education system and American society. The widely-held perspectives of some of my colleagues that these youth would never reach acceptable levels of achievement compelled me to matriculate in an academic program that would afford me the opportunity to study phenomena associated with the behaviors of young adults. Ultimately I chose to study the Kriol youth of Belize because they represent the historically marginalized periphery, and I was curious about the coexistence and relationship between them and the mass-mediated forms of globalized products they seemed to favor.

### **The Purposes of the Study**

This study collected and analyzed the stories of Belizeans using a Pan-African cultural studies approach and narrative inquiry methods. In it, I co-constructed and analyzed localized life stories with Kriol youth in Belize City as they experienced satellite-mediated programming within the context of Pan-African globalization. I explored the degree to which experience played a role in the interactions between the Kriol youth in Belize and the multinational satellite cable network Black Entertainment Television (BET).

This study had two purposes:

- 1) The study documented the manner in which certain globalized cultural forms were negotiated in the lives of some Caribbean young people.

The cultural forms under investigation were broadcasted in Belize in programs of the multinational satellite network Black Entertainment Television. The people whose experiences are the focus of the study are young Kriol adults who live in Belize City, Belize.

2) The study analyzed these negotiations from a scholarly vantage point in order to ascertain the degree to which these negotiations resulted in liberatory moments.

Cultural studies literature often calls for more studies that investigate how experience and human agency influence the meaning derived from local interactions with international products (Bennett, 1993). This dissertation explored the contexts and nuances involved in these interactions between the globalized forms of culture telecast from satellite mediated networks, and the local youths of Belize City, Central America in order to determine some of the ways these youths negotiate global spaces, and the degree to which these negotiated realities can be emancipatory.

The study relies on the writings of Rex Nettleford and his contributions in cultural studies. In a world of global communications where multinational corporations encourage the packaging and global perpetuation of North American culture --what bell hooks (1994) calls “the colonization of the mind”--is a dangerous reality for many of the Kriol youth in Belize City. These youths are particularly prized and targeted in with in the “global niche marketplace” of which the Black Entertainment Television (BET) network is an active participant.

### **Market liberalization as Cultural Imperialism**

When I visited Belize in 2006, children and adults alike were listening to music via MP3 players and Motorola phones, and Internet cafes were becoming common local venues. The liberalization of certain markets via the World Trade Organization (WTO) agreement within Belizean telecommunications opened its borders to the world markets. There seemed to be, however, a price to pay. As I researched the literature, a set of systemic problems surfaced: *neo-liberal ideology* and *structural adjustment strategies* can and do act as economic and political influences.

Market liberation (known in this study as *neo-liberalism* ) can be described as the

political and economic idea that a healthy market is one that operates with minimal outside regulation. This because it is thought that the market could regulate itself in the “survival of the fittest” environment that would ensue absent regulation. But neo-liberal tactics enhance the reach of goods and services, particularly those of industrialized nations, who in turn seek to spread its influence. Such influences are often enough to weaken a developing nation-state’s ability to defend itself against product saturation from multinational corporations (Black, 1990; Bolland, 2003; Bauman, 1989).

An over-saturated market is dangerous for internal market innovation because price-production ratios are locally at a disadvantage (Best, 1990). In 1997, Belize became a signatory to the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) an international treaty that governs the worldwide trade of goods and services. Services in particular comprised a substantial part of the agreement. This is due to services becoming increasingly valuable because of technological upgrades. In 1991, services accounted for 25% of the global trade and 60% of the United States GDP, (90 billion of which were exported) (Senuas, 1997). The services portion of the GATT treaty was specifically treacherous to negotiate, considering the terms of agreement that bound signatories. Once a service agreement was reached between two member nations, all member nations could take advantage of the same agreement. This of course meant increased penetration into developing nations for services such as the telephone, digital and satellite services.

These kinds of economic influences exposed countries such as Belize to disproportionate amounts of international products. Structural adjustment, known as the systematic lowering of trade barriers and currency devaluations, serve to further erode Caribbean independence. Caribbean nation-states must compete to maintain industrial production levels, while simultaneously battling other Caribbean states to attract multinational corporate business. The notion of a market free of regulation where only the

strongest survive suggests a type of economic Darwinism pervasive in the Caribbean and other parts of the world. The concept of neo-liberalism and its influence over decision-making processes at many levels is important to understanding how and why Kriol youth interact with international products such as BET.

### **The Rise of BET as Globalized Simulacra**

I started this study with the intention of focusing on music videos. However, when I arrived in Belize, I soon discovered that many Belizeans were not more loyal to music videos than they were to entire networks of programming. It soon became clear to me that Black Entertainment Television (BET) was a television station that held significant cultural value. In my preliminary interviews, the subject of BET and the programming it provided were topics of great interest to the Kriol youth.

African American businessman Robert Johnson began BET in the early 1980's after the cable boom of the 1970's indicated that niche markets were lucrative and competitive in the world of cable operators and programmers. Although Johnson has his master degree in public administration, he entered the cable industry through the cable-lobbying sector of Congress. The times surrounding the inception of BET was tumultuous. The proliferation of cable channels and an increased viewership brought the idea that only channels that could target a specific audience could be economically viable (Eastman, et.al., 1985).

Niche markets were indeed lucrative, and many markets were untapped in the late 1970's. Smith-Shomade, (1995) provided these statistics:

Black American viewers watch TV an average of 70 hours a week versus an average 48 hours for whites. The Black audience made up nearly one-eighth, or 12 percent, of total American viewers. Yet, even in those, cable's boom years of the late 1970s, no network had committed to programming specifically to that niche. (p. 178)

According to Johnson, a deal was made with cable executives involving more than



\$500,000 from Telecommunications Inc, a major systems builder and cable operator, and BET was born. Smith-Shomade reports that in 1980:

Black Entertainment Television made its two-hour cable TV debut by showing an old, all-Black cast movie, "A Visit to the Chief's Son." Some reporters have said that the service could hardly be called a network, since it only aired for two hours every Friday night, on a channel that was normally used by another network. Nevertheless, that first transmission reached 3.8 million homes in 350 markets. (p. 179).

Despite some difficulties, BET posted its first profit in 1988 and became lucrative as ratings improved due mixed investments in magazine holdings and pay per view ventures (Chapelle, 2003). In 1991, Johnson became a millionaire when he took the company public on the New York Stock Exchange. BET expanded its programming. It became popular with music and culture aficionados with the debut of *106 and Park* in 2000. This music video program features various popular artists in the hip-hop, soul, and rap music genres. The artists count down the top music videos daily in front of a live studio audience. It is the network's top show with the highest ratings since its debut (BET, 2009). The success of the network brought it to the forefront of ideal acquisitions, and in 2003 Cable giant Viacom International, Inc. acquired BET for three billion US dollars. Smith (2002) quotes Johnson explaining the rationale:

The time is now where strong African-American brands with tremendous value should put themselves in league with strong general market brands that can add even greater value. . . . I see this as a positive development . . . and I hope one day there will be other African-American companies that create the kind of value created at BET (Chapelle, 2003. pg. 3)

Cable programming networks such as Black Entertainment Television joined larger,

international networks like Viacom International Inc., which then leased expensive satellite transponder time from satellite networks like RCA or PanAmSat, Inc, that in turn beam their client's networks to a local cable operator, which in turn bundles the networks together to deliver via coaxial or digital cable networks in Belize City. The establishment of satellite cable networks figuratively reduces the space between New York and Addis Ababa to a cable connection and the flick of a remote switch. The liberalization of services like these by World Trade Organization (WTO) treaties facilitates satellite cable operators and distribution services to reach Belize City.

These kinds of technologies along with BET itself are found in the urban areas of Belize. Initially, cable operators in Belize had unrestricted access to downlinks provided by satellites without a subscription. The regulation of proprietary information from interstellar objects such as the satellite went unregulated in Belize for two reasons: 1) The establishment of cable operators in Belize City preceded its regulating body, the Belize Broadcasting Authority. 2) The size and population of the country was so small that big media conglomerates did not waste their time with pursuing renegade Belizean cable operators. Those privileges become more and more restricted with the advancement of market liberation and structural adjustment strategies, discussed in the following chapters. Nevertheless, globalized forms of mass mediated programming which had been packaged and repackaged for international consumption was fully integrated in the Belize infrastructure by the mid 1980s, and ever since, the general public has been using forms of cable networks both in direct and in the coaxial forms.

### **Significance of the Study**

The discovery of BET's influence on the youth of Belize allowed me to narrow the level of analysis to products of the BET network. I also realized that the consumer products that Black Entertainment Television offered represented what I wished to study. On one

hand, BET is packaged and sold to African Americans despite the fact that black Americans do not own it. While BET may appear to have the best interests of African Americans in their programming, ultimately, they are accountable to their shareholders and their bottom line. Stereotypical images of black people living in the United States are simulated in reality shows and popular music video countdowns, packaged and beamed to satellites to be added amongst a parade of simulacra. In Belize, these depictions of reality challenge traditional and local identities. This betrayal of black interest is neo-liberal in form: is designed to fit a niche market and compete for a market share of global viewer-ship for Viacom International. The insidious nature of the hegemon may be rendered invisible by the “black face” of BET. Belizean youth ages 19-25 are most vulnerable to the predatory nature of advertisers.

Yet, Nettleford (1978) states that in an oppression-laden neocolonial environment such as the Caribbean, darker skinned people like the Kriol youth in Belize City have historically been exposed to systematic marginalization from the North. This Caribbean subjectivity, immersed with specific historical and socio-political contexts, has been theorized as capable of resisting the dominant influences and practices that accompany the colonizing structure (Nettleford, 1978; Hall 1993). Human ingenuity could break the bonds of what originally was meant to colonize through a form of cultural imperialism. Black Entertainment Television is a product of the American cultural machine, designed to extract consumers from its niche market, regardless of location. Its interaction with youth in Belize, however, was situated within insular Caribbean contexts by the subjectivities and experiences of the youths in the story. Perceived with a certain time frame, and used for a specific purpose, these interactions cannot be separated from the historical contexts from whence they originated and that validate their meanings (Borg, et. al., 2003; Giroux, 2003; Nettleford, 1978). Post-colonial cultural studies such as this one can shed light on the deterritorialized spaces where the power plays, reconstitution, enforcement, rejection, coercion and

subversion of the popular are taught and enacted.

How Belizean youth make meaning from international programs and the degree to which these meanings could be considered to be liberatory may contribute to understanding the ways adolescents from Belize, an insular Caribbean country, negotiate African American imagery. It may be useful to those interested in fathoming the complexities of international relationships within the African Diaspora. Acts of resistance may help shift the balance of power in the Belize City in favor of the people who reside there (Nettleford, 1978). The patterns of interactions that I disclose in this study also suggest the degrees to which experiences with media are emancipatory. Indeed, this study addresses a gap in the literature by revealing the power relations of cultural studies through stories of specific personal experiences.

The problem analyzed in this dissertation concerns the globalization of media images. Through the advancement of technology (satellite, cable, digital technologies), media imagery from other countries possess the ability to cause horrific cultural subordination via the process of cultural imperialism. Due to trade agreements and global economic restructuring strategies such as structural adjustment and neo-liberalism, media messages such as those from BET and other media conglomerates easily crossed international borders, particularly between Caribbean nations. These media messages, far from being realty, were representations of representations with no real referent, insofar as producers and directors began with a simulation of reality (Baudrillard, 1994).

### **Pan-African Rationale**

This dissertation is a study of the individual effects of globalization on a localized population. It investigates the degree of globalized cable influence in the individual lives of Kriol Youth in Belize City. The Creole (or known in Belize as “Kriol”) of Belize are descendants of West Africa, European colonists, and Native Americans. Many, but not all

of the ancestral Africans arrived in Belize due to an increased need for labor in the lumber industry and security against the Mayan uprisings that plagued early English colonists. The influx of slaves from Jamaica caused the African population to swell to a majority that was maintained until the late 1990s when the Mestizo superceded their numbers. Kriol contributions to the social structure of Belize are strong in the areas of public service, politics and tourist trade. The Kriols are particularly dominant in the maintenance of national identity. The Belize Kriol English is the lingua franca of the country. In 2009 they comprised 24.9% of the population.

Belize was chosen as the study site partly because of my familiarity with the country, the language and the culture. As a result, I was able to gain access to places and individuals that would otherwise be inaccessible. Additionally, I am a Belizean, who is interested in the ways that my small country is connected to larger, global themes. This is an urban study of Kriol customs and traditions and, as such, other rural ethnicities such as the Mennonites and the Mayans, though discussed as their stories mesh with those of the participants in the study, are not central to this dissertation. Logistically, Kriols are most suitable to this study, as they are the most indigenous group to Belize within the urban environment. They are also representative of the insular Caribbean and Pan-African heritage. The age was chosen (19-24) due to the availability of these ages within the population I frequented.

This dissertation sought to address gaps in existing literature by providing ethnographic snapshots of local experiences with satellite-mediated cable programming. Again, the study addressed the following: a) the extent to which Kriol youth in Belize use BET cable programs in their lives, and b) the degree to which these creolized cultural forms are liberatory. To accomplish this task, I explored the lives of five Kriol youth in a (auto) biographical fashion through narrative research methods. This kind of research has the potential to expose the ways in which local and global spheres interact on individual levels,

and reveal how, and to what degree cultural imperialism have become situated in some local Belizean communities. The research design and methodology selected are meant to connect the lives of these individuals within the larger contexts of global and Pan-African interconnectivity.

The study is designed to illuminate the cultural forms that young Kriols select within the Belizean popular culture and mix with what they see on international cable television. Studies have theorized that hybridized artifacts or creolized practices may be useful in overcoming imperial domination (Bhabha, 1994). This study explored the ways in which global forms of cultural imperialism are negotiated from the local perspectives of those living in the Caribbean, adding to studies of television programming, in Asia, Europe, the United States, and other places in the world.

There are other negotiated forms, no doubt, that also contribute towards the personal growth and enrichment of the lives visited in this dissertation. Mapping degrees of colonization with an eye towards local artistic creativity allowed for endless combinations that invoke the imagination and encourage us to perceive libratory curriculum mindful of spaces of domination often hidden by the banal and the ordinary.

Rex Nettleford (1973; 1978) in his work regarding the concepts of indigenization describes Jamaican agency at the institutional and individual levels. He maps the institutional themes and genres of Caribbean artistic expression resulting from interaction with a colonial other. Nettleford argues that through this process, Afro-Caribbeans have found ways to resist and even create new forms of culture. I extend Nettleford's thinking to search for similar examples of individual agency within the lives of Belizean Youth. I hope that the stories captured in the dissertation hold significance in the fields of Pan-African Diaspora Studies and African American Studies and help to open dialogue about the current state of globalization.

The study provides individualized accounts of localized negotiations with globalized imperialism, and is meant to contribute to the advancement of the study of globalization in the Caribbean within a Pan-African cultural studies framework. Indeed, the situated accounts of cultural imperialism are designed to be useful in helping to see how real people use cultural forms *across* cultures and political lines in the contexts of globalization. The cultural studies framework keeps in mind the complexities of popular culture while highlighting the extent that individuals may use agency in real and perhaps liberatory ways.

Some scholars like Ricoeur (1985) think of self-identity in terms of a story that is achieved over the course of a lifetime of experiences. This idea of self involves the unification of a series of events into a plot. Barone (2001) explains that Ricoeur's notion of self-identity as a plot "provide[s] a degree of coherence to our self-identities, a semi-stable view of who we think we are (and who we think we are not) in relation to people and things in our universe" (p.134). This study is meant to raise questions in the minds of readers as they confront the emplotted narratives of Belizeans, and perhaps promote an empathizing with them. Temporarily empowered to adapt the identities of others as their own, a reader may see the world from a fresh perspective, perhaps even experiencing an "epiphanic moment" in which their own life stories are altered.

### **Organization of Chapters**

This dissertation is organized into six chapters. Chapter One contains research parameters, as well as the guide to key concepts and definitions. Chapter two introduces the theoretical framework provided by Rex Nettleford, and takes a look at the extent globalization is connected to Belize via Pan-African perspectives, through which scholars explore pertinent socioeconomic, historic and political conditions relevant to the arrival of television in Belize. Chapter three presents methodological considerations necessary for the study, along with methods for narrative collection, construction and analysis. Chapter four

contains the reconstructions of life stories of selected participants as they relate BET products and personal experiences I recorded while in the field. They are stories as they relate to the participants' interaction with BET in the form of narrative vignettes co-constructed by the informants and myself. Chapter five systematically analyzes the co-constructed narratives. I evaluate of the life stories, teasing out themes that emerge as a result of the selected framework and contextualizing the stories that emerge from chapter 4. Chapter six then considers implications and significance of these analyses for the youth inhabitants of Belize, in addition to orientations for future research.



## POSTCOLONIAL PERSPECTIVES AND PAN-AFRICAN CULTURAL STUDIES

Thinking of the Caribbean in terms of its insular context helps to guide and constrain the meaning of the word *Caribbean* as it is used in this study. A Pan-African perspective is useful mostly for its sensitivity to socio-historic contexts crucial to understanding the “Caribbean experience”.

Different perspectives can be observed through the types and memberships of regional organizations throughout the Caribbean. An example of a relatively exterior perspective of the Caribbean is seen in the definition ascribed to the region by President Reagan of the 1980’s with the creation of the Caribbean Basin Initiative (CBI). The initiative defined the Caribbean as all nations that are washed by the shores of the Caribbean Sea, which would include both Central and South America. At the time, the purpose of this definition was to extend the powers of the United States southward following the Oil Crisis in the 1970’s and the emergence of supra-national tools such as structural adjustment, used to subvert third-world economies (Girvan, 2001; Baker, 2007).

Other interpretations and perspectives of Caribbean identity deal with cultural aspects originating within Latin and Hispanic contexts. *El Gran Caribe* defines the Caribbean in terms of its Latino heritage, aligning Spanish-speaking countries in the region such as the Dominican Republic, Mexico, Colombia, Venezuela, Puerto Rico & Cuba. In addition, *El Gran Caribe* maintains the highest language population density despite the majority of Caribbean nation-states being English-speaking entities (Girvan, 2001). Another definition of the Caribbean encompasses only the islands (the Antilles and the Greater Islands) that lie in the Caribbean Sea. Still another definition of the Caribbean describes identities and lifestyles that are ethno-historic: that is, its members share common value systems that are

forged by common experience. This is the definition of the Insular Caribbean, which includes the Antilles, Belize and the Guyanas of South America.

In the 1960's native scholars offered a rethinking and reinvention of the Caribbean, holding that the similarities between history and culture outweighed differences in language or colonial power. Girvan (2001) quotes renowned economic Caribbean scholar Lloyd Best as he problematizes the previous definition:

Certainly [the Caribbean] includes the Antilles-Greater and Lesser and the Guyanas...But many times the Caribbean also includes the littoral that surrounds our sea...what we are trying to encompass within our scheme is the cultural, social, political, and economic foundation of the 'sugar plantation' variant of the colonial mind (Best, 1993 p.4).

I select the insular definition as a contextual guideline with which to understand and to investigate the contextual surroundings of Kriol youth in Belize. The youth that I study identify themselves as "black", and resonate with subjectivities similar to other Caribbeans touched by the plantocracy and colonial imperialism. Chapter 2 investigates Belize's Caribbean Experience as it relates to the insular Caribbean of the larger African Diaspora. This chapter looks at the English Empire in the Caribbean and colonial governance as it relates to the black experience in the Caribbean. The chapter then reviews Pan-African thought regarding the black experience and identity within the African Diaspora before discussing the significance of the theoretical frame used in this study.

### **Colonial Influences in the Afro-Caribbean**

The experiences recorded in the narratives are influenced by history and culture. The youth studied are products of a culture wrought from generations of colonial hierarchies based on skin color. Particularly adept at colonization, the British Empire played a key role in the economical, political and indeed social formulation of its colonies in the Caribbean.

Colonizing “new frontiers” and seizing land from Spanish control, British influence in the Caribbean quickly took hold. It expanded from St. Kitts to acquire Barbados (1625), Antigua, and Montserrat (1632) in the Leeward Chain (Brown, 1999; Hamshere, 1972). After the British wrested Jamaica from the Spanish in 1655, the influx of African slaves reached a feverish pitch. Due to the large amounts of labor required for sugar production during colonial times, the African population of Jamaica hold a solid majority of 90.1% (Higman, 1995).

By 1807, over six hundred thousand Africans had been brought to the island. Most of the Africans purchased through the transatlantic trade routes were from established forts on the Gold Coast, the Bight of Benin, Lonango, Melimba and Cape Benda. Upon arrival on the island, the Africans were taught skilled labor trades such as masonry, shipbuilding, and plantation maintenance.

Many slaves did not stay in their country of origin, but were shipped to other colonial islands such as Antigua or Trinidad, or as far as the United States. High amounts of labor required to work the sugar fields demanded a slave population many times that of the colonialists. In 1790, for example, the number of English colonists on the island was 23,000. The number of slaves was 256,000, roughly eleven thousand slaves to one English settler. This uneven ratio was the root of slave revolts that was a part of colonial reality in Jamaica (Hoetank, 1967).

Most of the Caribbeans today have some claim to African heritage. Many of the Africans arriving in the New World were freedmen (such as Pedro Alonzo Niño the captain of the Spanish explorer ship *La Niña*,). Many arrived as slaves. Unlike other colonialists who insisted on the conversion to Christianity by their slaves, the Spanish allowed the African slaves to retain their music, dance and other aspects of culture that were not detrimental to the production of sugar (Stinchcombe,1995)

The slaves, nevertheless, were deculturalized via language and cultural shift (Gardner,1993). This method of deculturalization was effective to the extent that slaves ultimately lost any connection to past generations. Still, most cultural practices were indeed conserved by the slaves in the colony, especially amongst the rural poor.

In the Dominican Republic, as well as in English colonies, the rural poor today live in the hillsides deep within an island's interior, and are descendants of escaped plantation slaves and workers (Higman, 1995). It is here that many of the social practices of food preparation, dance, and matriarchy are still prevalent. Although in terms of sugar production, the Dominican Republic produced less sugar than some other colonies of the Caribbean (such as Jamaica), the amount was enough to justify a slave population that vastly outnumbered the ruling class, a phenomenon that can be seen in the majority population today.

### **Belize in the English Plantocracy**

Such was the introduction and subsequent roles of Africans throughout the British West Indies. In the case of Belize, British mercenaries and investors began logging ventures into the Belizean rainforest in the middle of the 15<sup>th</sup> century. Raw materials such rubber and hardwood were prized and were extracted to exhaustion by black slave labor. In the 16<sup>th</sup> century, the rising profits caused by lumber exports such as mahogany and other hardwood sparked the war that culminated in the Battle of St. Georges Caye in 1798. This famous battle between the Spanish and the British marked the turning point in the war, leading to British victory. The region afterward was officially named British Honduras and was recorded as an English Colony.

With the British Empire endorsing the abolition of slavery, post-colonialist points of view became even more manifest. This is due to the fact that although some scholars state that anti-colonialist practices existed from the time colonialism was conceived (Young, 2001)

there remains the argument that the concept of freedom as a protracted experience that has been constantly negotiated and renegotiated by the descendants of ex-slaves (Hamshere, 1972; Higman, 1995; Vickers, 2003) This point of view mainly comes from the historical accounts of land delegation and the attempt to control means of production.

For example, although slaves in Belize were emancipated with the British decree of emancipation of all slaves, the distribution of land was basically decided according to the amount of capital produced. In other words, wealthy landowners who controlled the production of raw materials such as sugarcane and mahogany were allowed to maintain control of huge amounts of land, while slaves were given land unfit for cultivation of cash crops (Butler, 1995; Yew, Vickers, Daniel 2003). This type of social contract assured that control of the land, and subsequently of the ex-slaves, remained firmly in the hands of those who traditionally maintained colonial power. This is not to say that the newly emancipated did not receive any benefits from emancipation. The newly freed slaves began to receive wages where previously there was none, in addition to the right to own property, however poor.

### **The Rule of Segregation**

In order to assure that power remained in Europe, the Colonial Office in London established a number of laws that effectively foreclosed the emancipated slaves from true democratic participation. Acts executed by the office included the probation to grow cash crops and high salary requirements in order to vote in elections.

Scholar and activist Walter Rodney (1981) has calculated that in Guyana, for example, the salary requirements needed to vote far exceeded the salaries made by ex-slaves, ensuring that only the white minority would vote, thus consolidating the power of many to the hands of an exclusive few. This trend was true in Guyana as well as most colonies under British rule (Rodney, 1981).

Ideology that was sympathetic to the plight of colonialist merchants and capitalists ran rampant throughout the newly emancipated world. This was a one-sided view of capitalist ruination stemmed from the fact that most of the newly emancipated could not read or write and therefore could not properly countermand or defend themselves from scholarly attack. Another reason could be attributed to the white male history writers sympathetic to the potential financial ruin of the colonialists. Colonial scholars such as Carlyle (1849), Trollope (1860) and Froude (1897) expanded and reinforced commonly held ideologies that discounted the socio-political atmosphere that excluded blacks from directly competing with the colonial elite.

“Quashie” was a pejorative term used by colonial land owners to describe the perceived laziness of the ex-slaves was conjuring up imagery of the lazy negro “happily consuming pumpkins” while the sugar industry languished (Carlyle, 1850). He and other scholars have located the problem of economic downturn in Europe within the framework of emancipation laws. Caribbean labor was nevertheless revitalized with the influx of Chinese and Indian indentured servants. Incorporating notions of white supremacy garnered by the popular historians noted above, and Charles Darwin’s (1859) scientific writings, the rationale of colonialism justified European control over the non-white majorities until the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, often to the vexation of free black men.

At this point, it is important to integrate the struggles and scholarly thought of those who fought the same kinds of oppressions within the United States and the African Diaspora. This investigation becomes important because as argued by Harlan (1966) and Young (2001), dialogue and contact between writers and activists within Africa, the Caribbean, and the USA was diverse and considerable.

As observed by Gilroy (1993), it is impossible to separate the Black Atlantic in terms of political history. Indeed, the histories of blacks within the Americas are tied inseparably

to the fate of Africa, and vice-versa (Gilroy, 1993). Even though there were differences between the Caribbean and the United States, such as population levels (the Caribbean blacks held the majority while blacks in the United States formed a minority), the basis by which these two black groups were oppressed in the beginning was relatively the same. That is, although slavery was legally abolished, racism was interwoven into the fabric of society. Power was granted through a complex system based on color: clearer the skin color; the higher the status that could be achieved.

### **Pan Africanism : Racial Solidarity and Identity**

The beginning of movements toward racial solidarity can be traced to the work of Booker T. Washington (1901). His initial works were widely read by many scholars and initiated the debate regarding whether blacks should integrate into society as it existed or form a separate society exclusively for blacks. Washington believed that in social matrices, blacks are as “separate as fingers” from other cultures, “yet as one like the hand in all things essential to mutual progress”(Washington, 1901). It was Washington’s philosophy that strengthened black ideologies toward a “separate but equal” paradigm that called for the separation of blacks to preserve culture and instill values that were inherently African American.

Many black leaders in the USA ultimately echoed Washington’s words. As a prominent black educator, Washington was often invited to Africa to administer consultations to colonialist governments such as South Africa. He was often invited by colonialist officials to tour their colony in order to “...report on the best methods to ‘raise educate and civilize the black man’” (Harlan, 1966). His advice almost always prescribed civil and economic subordination:

Since the blacks are to live under the English Government, they should be taught to love and revere that government better than any other institution. To teach them

this, they should receive their education and training for citizenship from or through the government. (Harlan, 1966, 176)

In a famous speech known as the Atlanta Compromise, Washington lobbied for greater social mobility in agriculture and trade labor while simultaneously submitting to the traditional roles of Africans within segregation. His speech received acclaim from whites in both political parties of Congress (Harlan, 1966). Booker T. Washington believed that more opportunities for black labor in factories were worth more than the right to spend “money at the Opera”. The Atlanta Compromise is a little known but very powerful speech that made Washington’s doctrine one of ‘common sense’ throughout the United States and elsewhere.

The words and writings of Washington inspired and provided the impetus and motivation for a plethora of international anti-colonial movements throughout the world, formulating what is known as the Pan-African Movement. Beginning with the convention in London (1900) at the behest of Trinidadian Henry Sylvester-Williams, the ‘problem of the color line’ was investigated by W.E.B DuBois (1911; 1989), who paid great attention to the issues of blacks within the Africa as well as the American and European diasporas.

Other pre-war conferences followed: The Universal Races Congress (London, 1911), and the International Congress on the Negro (Tuskegee, 1912). Dubois, after earning his doctorate in 1909, he started the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. After emancipation, some blacks thought that it would be good to go back to Africa. Politicians concluded after the Dred-Scott case that African Americans had no future in America, while other people argued that blacks should stay. Two camps emerged. The idea to stay, but remain separate (culturally, economically, and politically), held by the black separatists of the 1960’s, and evidenced within the thoughts and actions of Stokely Carmichael, Malcolm X, Angela Davis, Bobby Seale, and Huey P Newton. The second ideology stemmed from thoughts that would integrate blacks with the majority population.



The activism of separatist Marcus Garvey after World War I was one catalyst for the African diaspora in the 1920s. Moving away from the prominent integrationist perspectives of the prewar era, Garvey taught black separatism throughout the African diaspora of the United States and the Caribbean. He was introduced to Pan-Africanism through an encounter with Duse Mohammad Ali (the author of *In the Land of Pharos*) in England (Young, 2001), ultimately leading him to believe that blacks must wrest power from the colonists. After reading the Washington's book, *Up from Slavery* (1901), Garvey went back to Jamaica to start the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA), which was aimed toward uniting the people of Jamaica based upon the principles of pride and economics. Strongly believing that blacks needed to free themselves through education, he went to Harlem to talk to a group of people who had just travelled from the south to live there. Spreading the belief that blacks should stop worshipping a white god, he was seen by most whites as dangerous, and other black intellectuals thought he was crude.

Within the UNIA he created The Black Star Line, a shipping business designed to move goods and people throughout the diaspora. His activism became renowned to the extent that the scholar C.L.R James, recounting the story heard from Kenyatta expounded upon how:

In 1921, Kenya nationalists, unable to read, would gather around a reader of Garvey's newspaper, *The Negro World* and listen to an article or two or three times. Then they would run various ways through the forest, carefully to repeat the whole, which they had memorized, to Africans hungry for some doctrine which lifted them from the servile consciousness in which Africans lived ( Greaves, 1992, p.300).

Because of his capitalist praxis, Garvey was critical, even hostile to leftist movements that included Marxist ideologies. It was for this reason, perhaps among others that Garvey found many faults with the praxis of DuBois up until Garvey's arrest and

subsequent deportation in the United States for investor deception (Young, 2001). Although the capitalist ventures ended mostly in disarray, he is primarily responsible for sparks of resistance during the 60's in addition to the red black and green flag as a symbol of African liberation and African solidarity.

Within the integrationist position, there were some who believed in integrating from a position of self-independence, but while the other side of the integrationist position said that blacks should be accommodating to whites in exchange for social mobility, a thought that could be seen in the praxis of Booker T. Washington (Harlan, 1966). DuBois originated from an integrationist position although he thought that blacks should assimilate from a position of power, and that such power was based in learning about oneself (DuBois, 1989).

W.E.B DuBois was more about education, while Washington was more about economics and vocation. Believing that black Americans could not liberate themselves on an individual basis, panafrikanism would become necessary in terms of collective support. The situation was that although blacks were not out of bondage, they were still oppressed under racism and classism. All radicals shared the same objective, although with different ways of approaching it. DuBois and other black leaders began to organize people such as the NAACP by the end of the 1800 to combat oppression.

The first panafrikanist movements were organized by NAACP efforts with DuBois as its leader. It was during the first Pan-Afrikanist movement where DuBois broached the problem of the color line. According to DuBois, the color line was a problem that contributed to the disparity experienced by blacks in a post-slavery society. The color line notion resembled the "glass ceiling" analogy made popular by feminism in the late 1960's. The concept of the color line is important to black existentialism due to its ability to visualize conceptually the rationale as to why blacks, although emancipated, were still experiencing racial discrimination on the basis of color. It is instrumental in the

understanding of disparities, in wages, employment, segregation, violence against blacks and the overall ideology of how whites viewed blacks and how blacks viewed themselves in a white society.

Du Bois was also responsible for the concept of *double-consciousness*, that addressed the psychological aspects of self disempowerment perpetuated by blacks in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Blacks, argued DuBois, living and operating in a white society, are subjected to a aspect of cognitive dissonance that stems from a consciousness that wishes neither abandon neither its African roots nor its ability to learn under the guise of operating within a white society. DuBois expounds upon this concept further:

After the Egyptian and Indian, the Greek and Roman, the Teuton and Mongolian, the Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world,—a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.

The history of the American Negro is the history of this strife,—this longing to attain self-conscious manhood, to merge his double self into a better and truer self. In this merging he wishes neither of the older selves to be lost. He would not Africanize America, for America has too much to

teach the world and Africa. He would not bleach his Negro soul in a flood of white Americanism, for he knows that Negro blood has a message for the world. He simply wishes to make it possible for a man to be both a Negro and an American, without being cursed and spit upon by his fellows, without having the doors of Opportunity closed roughly in his face (DuBois, 1989).

Yet through it all, the economic prosperity of Europe and the Americas were fundamentally based on slave labor. While this is true, especially in the US and the Caribbean, the double conscious black man and woman, torn by the need to aspire to greatness in the eyes of former slave masters, while at the same time maintaining a sense of Africaness, would be regulated to a position of the second class citizen, perpetually caught within the throes of servitude, living a life led primarily by the tacit rules of racial and class segregation.

In the Caribbean, in a similar analysis of double consciousness, C.L.R. James discusses the Negro problem. *C.L.R. James on the Negro Question* (1947) examines the phenomenon of doubleconsciousness from a Caribbean perspective:

Briefly, the idea is this, that the Negro is "nationalist" to the heart and is perfectly right to be. His racism, his nationalism, are a necessary means of giving him strength, self-respect, and organization in order to fight for integration into American society. It is a perfect example of dialectical contradiction. Thus, side by side with his increasing integration into production which becomes more and more a social process, the Negro becomes more than ever conscious of his exclusion from democratic privileges as a separate social group in the community. This dual movement is the key to the Marxist analysis of the Negro question in the U.S.A. (Grimshaw, 1992).

Other scholars have questioned the logic of James' scholarship, stating that in many ways it is not possible to separate the experience of blacks in the Americas with the experience of capitalism in which they find themselves. Benjamin Greaves (1998) for example, laments: "But how can 'blacks in the west' (as Gilroy has it) achieve a 'national' collective subjectivity or agency when their displacement in the west circumscribes them within the 'national' limits of American capitalism" (Greaves, 1998)?

However, as explained earlier, the experiences of blacks in the West cannot be divided neatly into the experiences of the U.S., the Caribbean and Africa. In fact their perspectives may not be derived through capitalism at all. This Caribbean dedication to Marxist notions of community is a thread that runs through the attitudes of Caribbean scholarship, mostly due to the oppression experienced through capitalism and the availability of Marxism as a viable alternative to what is seen as systematic global oppression of many by a select few.

With the collapse of Garveyite capitalism, the focus within the Caribbean schools of thought became decidedly labor orientated. Trinidad became the locus of West Indian Marxist thought with the introduction of George Padmore, Eric Williams and C.L.R. James (Meeks, 2001). Marxist thought became attractive in the Caribbean basin due to its affinity for the proletariat and its linking of the slave experience with that of the recently "emancipated" West Indian worker.

Marx explained that the primary difference between the slave and the proletarian is that the slave is sold once and for all, while the worker must sell himself according to the hours of the day. Although the slave experience is a wretched one, his existence is more readily assured, and therefore is able to secure more of a secure working condition, even if that working condition is only in the interest of the slave owner (Rius 1976).

The concept of race could not be completely eliminated from the praxis of Marxist

thought in the Caribbean, and it and often became the basis by which traditionalist versions of Marxism were radicalized. This reworking of Marxist tradition and its translation from the European versions to the contexts of West Indian Marxism can be also seen in the works of Fannon's (1965) *The Wretched of the Earth*.

### **Theoretical Framework: Pan African Cultural Studies**

Fannon (1965) delved into the phenomenon of cultural imperialism in the Caribbean region from a Pan-African and cultural studies perspective. His work raises questions about what watching black television manufactured abroad contributed to the cultural experiences and the construction of identity for adolescents of color in the Caribbean. In this study, I decided to use a cultural theory of post colonialism that provided some examples of imperial forms of culture particularly as they related to the lives of the black youth in Belize City.

Upon review of the literature, I was validated in my belief that a cultural studies framework would be the most fitting frame to guide the theoretical premises of this study. My research interest dealt not with economic determination, but rather with the social and intimately personal day-to day interactions of Kriol youth in Belize. A cultural studies framework allows for the investigation of a variety of situations and circumstances that comprise human experience and learning. I selected this kind of frame for this study because it does not presume that economic superstructures fully determine human interactions and experiences. The absence of such an assumption, I believed, would be helpful in understanding the ways that Belizeans of color perceived forms of foreign culture. I believed this in part because cultural studies include the possibility of human agency.

While the theoretical understandings of other academic scholars are varied, most cultural studies do not take into consideration the historical and insular contexts of the

Caribbean, especially as related to race. Caribbean culture is historically distinct and is culturally different from other types of colonialism in the world. I chose Nettleford's understanding of cultural negotiation over that of Aceton (1982) or even Stuart Hall (1980) partially because of the geographical location upon which they focus. Though Nettleford's (1978; 1971) study of Jamaican artistic creolization I was able to see hope for a more self-directed and emancipating progress toward efficacy, esteem, and dignity in oneself.

Nettleford's Pan-African understanding of the popular atmosphere provides a guide for visualizing and mapping cultural imperialism in the Caribbean. His theoretical musings suggest what the struggle for meaning could look like in the Caribbean. Nettleford's theory accepts that the creolization of globalized products is not only possible, but also that its evidence can be observed both at the individual and institutional levels. Evidence of creolization at the institutional level was strong in Jamaica (1978); the same may be true of the country of Belize as well. This is because young black Kriol Belizean youth consider themselves not to be a part of Latin America, but of the insular Caribbean and its shared heritages.

I adopted this cultural studies framework with the aim to not only to interrogate the manner in which that Belizeans make sense of the cultural forms within BET television programs, but also to look for a kind of creative imagination which, for Nettleford, holds the key to the creolization of the colonial mind. Indeed, the results of this investigation invite the reader to consider new categories of hybridity and rethink the meaning of *'liberatory interactions'*.

In his book *Caribbean Cultural Identity*, Nettleford (1978), examines the concept of *creolization*, a synthesis of colonial and local cultures in ways that help to decolonize the colonial mind. Nettleford (1976) focuses on black culture in Jamaica as a case study of international forms of imperial culture in order to give examples of that which has been

successfully "creolized" by local citizens. From Nettleford's point of view, creolization indicates a certain kind of agency capable of culturally nationalizing forms of imperial culture and traditions of colonial Europe to suit the needs of the locale. Nettleford traces some noteworthy products in dance, literature, Rastafarianism, religion, drama, and language in Jamaica resulting from the creolization of the colonial. He examines the role of national identity in the postcolonial Caribbean, often drawing the conclusion that national identity is an essential part of decolonization—economic or otherwise. Additionally, says Nettleford, the creation of internal innovation that promotes self-efficacy and agency may also be generated by the creolizing process (Nettleford, 1979).

Nettleford (1972; 1978; 1981) examined various sectors of the Caribbean economy, looking for ways in which Jamaicans and other citizens of the insular Caribbean invoked their agency to create a national identity for themselves at an institutional level. In *Caribbean Cultural Identity*, Nettleford (1978) focuses on the rise of indigenous arts programming manufactured and distributed by Jamaicans.

Nettleford takes into account the historic Pan-African subjectivities and the colonial contexts that helped co-construct what in means to be a Caribbean. Nevertheless, surmises Nettleford (1978):

The vault-like ascent by the society from slavery into freedom and then from colonialism to constitutional independence is yet to be matched within the society by a corresponding progress from cultural inferiority of the vast majority to cultural self-confidence (pg. 80).

Brutal exposure to both the colonial plantocracy system and its economic influences have left the Caribbean with an identity inferiority complex of sorts. The negation of the African Presence in countries like Jamaica served as the norm, and often resulted in the suppression of local culture. I was curious as to why Belizean youth found BET so popular,



and what they learned from it. Self-confidence, and a greater sense of national identity, through creative creolization of colonial culture is the ultimate goal. Nettleford's theories regarding creolization, social imagination, and the African Presence provided a guide for the study.

### **Nettleford, Social Identity, and the African Presence**

Scholars interested in the Caribbean often discuss progress in terms of development, and in so doing look for models of success among "more developed" countries. Nettleford (1978) however, warns that culturally imperial influences:

...[are] persistent forces that would seek to perpetuate the domination of...North America. It also continues not only in terms of economic dependency, but also in terms of an abiding [Americanism] which puts everything North American in a place of eminence and things of indigenous (i.e. native born and bred) or of African origin in a lesser place. This breeds cultural cynicism, suspicion, disrespect and a hankering by Caribbean peoples after values alien to the realities of the Caribbean cultural experience (pp. 4-5).

In his writings on Caribbean social change, Nettleford (1978) situates creativity as the means to challenge Eurocentric domination and idealism. This imagination, Nettleford argues, can originate in the shared experiences and cultures of the African Presence, that should never be denied or short-changed. The African Presence unites the collective experiences of the Caribbean, most of which have not been pleasant, as Nettleford (1978) noted in the passage below:

The enemy here in the Caribbean is a combined entrapment of age-long dependency (economic and psychological) born of colonialism, and the persistent denigration of the African (and some would add all non-European) presence rooted in slavery and

indentureship. Historical consciousness has been to hold the oppressed together at other times and in other places. Why not now in the Caribbean? (p. 61).

Although scholars who investigate the concept of neocolonialism profess to offer means to resist, and possibly means for revolution, Nettleford criticizes some Neo-colonial thinking for its determinism and for its exclusion of the notion of race. He admonishes that:

Race (and ethnicity) must be worked into the Marxian dialectic to meet the realities of Caribbean existence...[It] is a responsibility serious Caribbean socialists must face. That the privileges of the exploiter class including the rights and power accorded on the basis of race and color, have not been surrendered voluntarily nearly one hundred-forty years after Emancipation (p. 8).

Nettleford (1978) cites the development of the Rastafarian movement of the 1930's (which culminated in the 50's and 60's) as well as the black consciousness movements brought to Jamaica in the seventies, as reservoirs of awareness among people of color. These waves of consciousness came in the face of high criticism of all things black both in the Caribbean and the United States.

Nevertheless, while in Jamaica, 80% of the population was unmistakably black and 95% agreed that they had some African ancestry, there remained a high correlation in the Caribbean between blackness and low –status (Nettleford, 1992).

He explained that:

There are of course, sizable numbers of evolved blacks in the middle and high status...but many are virtually recruits to the hegemonic Eurocentrism in terms of the received cultural values measured against the cultural expressions of the impoverished masses (Nettleford, 1972, p.35).

Nettleford (1978) believed in the celebration of that which is uniquely Caribbean. The Insular Caribbean with its African influences can present alternate ways of meaning in addition to offering a wealth of new experiences and resources.

Nettleford takes account of the pain of the insular Caribbean, and also speaks about the fruit yielded as well:

The African Diaspora continues to be an invaluable source of inspiration for a world-view alternative to the one that would label as inferior all that the victims of the Diaspora have created or achieved. The Rastafarians of Jamaica have attempted such an alternative with not insignificant or rewarding results for themselves. But the old struggle...continues in ways that force contemporary Caribbeans to identify with the anguish of even the great United States of America, which despite its military power and might, is yet to admit of its creolized reality and to liberate itself from its Eurocentric bondage (p. 213).

Nettleford (1978) suggests the need to increase the visibility of the “African Presence”. He places a premium on experiences in the insular Caribbean resulting in the unification of forces working on behalf of Caribbean heritage. This unifying African Presence should not be viewed as seeking to homogenize the various cultures that exist in the African Diaspora, but as a force that challenges Westernized culture as the often invisible yet “confidently assumed space at the apex of the pyramid” (Nettleford, 1978).

Nettleford (1965; 1978) writes extensively on African unity through his concept of pride in African Presence. Nettleford believes that to ignore or deny the power the African Presence would be folly on behalf of Caribbean people because “in diversifying, the full consciousness of one’s own cultural heritage remains crucial to the absorption rate and capacity with respect to outside forces” (Nettleford, 1978, p. 202).

### **Creolization, Creativity and Social Imagination**

For Nettleford, creolization is a creative process that can carry great reward for those who take up its mantle. According to Nettleford (1978), the ability to create newness out of the rote world of neocolonial thought is precisely what is needed to counteract that which seeks to subordinate human beings in the name of international consumerism.

Netteford writes that:

The constructive act of articulation of the collective self in terms of the variety of experience that is the inheritance of the vibrant, resilient people though still bombarded, people who had come to terms with a hostile environment in which they found themselves—a people who have had to take initiative in... the dynamic process of shaping a new and serviceable mode of existence in which we might secure a sense of place and purpose (p. 182).

Indeed, Nettleford does not believe that economic influences directly determine cultural identity. Although the economic factors do indeed influence, Nettleford, characteristic of cultural studies scholars, believes that cultural experiences cannot be separated from the contexts where they are created. Proponents of globalization through structural adjustment, market liberation, and other tactics argue that culture is generated from economic activity. Nettleford (1978) cautions, however that

this, hopefully, is not an argument to deny to cultural values the possibility of an existence separate from their economic base, nor the independent dynamic force that can have in development even to helping to bring about economic betterment for many from the masses” (p.55).

Netteford, calls this independent and dynamic force “creolization” which is the local hybridization of previously imperial cultural forms. These kinds of forces have long been in play in the Caribbean. According to Nettleford, the people of the Caribbean have

always have been involved with the process of rejecting Eurocentrism and Americanism in favor of a national cultural identity of their own.

### **Social Imagination**

Nettleford (2009) discusses the role of imagination within the indigenous culture as a very important resource. Within an indigenous culture, he emphasizes living subjectivities that are capable of impacting and changing their worlds for the better. Moreover, argues Nettleford (1978), Caribbean should not be subordinated to patriarchal forms of Eurocentric culture still intent on maintaining colonial empires.

The description of creolization specifically highlights the use of self efficacy in creative imagination to spur emancipatory action. Even so, Nettleford also cautions proper stewardship and care with locally created cultural products, lest they too become malicious pawns within niche and for-profit schemes of consumerism.

Nettleford (1977) puts it thusly:

The articulation of the Caribbean aesthetic is indeed part of that struggle for cultural identity. But there are awkward problems other than those earlier mentioned. In poor societies like our own, some of the violent consequences of an inherited socioeconomic system that sanctifies venality, are already evident among our partners and cultural agents. Poor artistic expressions become part of the syndrome of private ownership to be bought and sold and traded for-profit to the highest bidder. (p. 223).

Nettleford (2007) is specific regarding the adoption of Westernized culture at face value. According to him, the propensity of some Caribbeans to prefer cultural forms with Eurocentric undertones has much to do with a need to maintain what he calls the ideological façade that "...cover[s] up social injustices of induced poverty among black the black masses and ...continu[es] to entrench privileges of the Eurocentric few" (p.4). The persistent habits

that follow slavery and the perseverance of a colonial status operate against indigenization and a sense of national unity.

To combat such insidious cultural imperialism, Nettleford recommends black solidarity with Africa because such solidarity could provide a base for an original creativity (1972). In the case of this dissertation, the issue is complex and nuanced. For example, the images most favored by the black youth living in Belize are actually African American. At the same time, there are also imperialistic messages wrapped within fictitious representations of Afro-American culture presented in the name of niche consumerism. Cultural scholars like Nettleford (2010; 1978) wish to expose specific threads of creativity that lead to a creolization of neocolonial agents into new creations of which the Caribbean people can be proud.

Creolization to Nettleford is a tool locals can use to free themselves from the lesser places reserved to them within the matrix of North American dominance.

Nettleford (1978) writes:

There is a grave responsibility on our part to create a society and bequeath a civilization in which future generations of Caribbean men and women will enjoy cultural confidence as a matter of course and have their creative potential actualized in the crafting of cultural products of excellence that will in turn enrich, elucidate and celebrate life. (p. 228)

### CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND METHODS

*In the design of a useful tool, form follows function. Similarly, the formal qualities embedded within a useful evaluation or research text should flow from the intended function of the inquiry, the purpose that it is designed to serve (Barone, 2001, p. 151).*

In the previous chapter, cultural studies scholars identified creolization as a processes to generate new kinds of local counter-hegemonic cultural forms. According to Rex Nettleford (1978) studies on the globalization of popular culture revealed a propensity for locals to creolize international products to fit their local needs. Chapter 2 also highlighted a lack of narrative forms of research that take into consideration the role of experience. This chapter proposes a rationale that justifies the use of narrative inquiry in this dissertation, and describes the means by which the inquiry itself is conducted. Chapter 3 is divided into four sections. The first part of the chapter reviews prominent issues in narrative methodology, and examines the role of experience within narrative inquiry. The acquisition and cultivation of the relationships cultivated with participants were crucial in completing this study. I present the means of data collection, rapport building, and narrative co-construction with my informants in sections two and three. Finally, the methods used to analyze the hegemonic interaction in the lives of the completed narratives are discussed.

#### **Methodology**

In order to investigate the ways in which these youth in Belize City incorporate mass mediated cultural forms into their lives, it is important to recognize the role of experience. The concept of experience as defined by Dewey adds a dynamic that is otherwise absent in those perspectives on media that disregard subjectivity. The acknowledgment of the role of experience helps to set the methodological parameters for this study that expand the

possibility of human agency. This consideration of the concept of experience propels the study towards subjectivity, and often ambiguity. That is, the research design development employs methods that are flexible in nature and sensitive to the fickle nature of human experience.

Dewey (1933/1960; Simpson, 2001) believed that educative experiences came about through active thinking. Dewey wrote that in active processing of current situations, the individual must be willing to accept a certain amount of ambiguity, due to initial doubt and uncertainty, ongoing reflection and suspended conclusions. It was through this reflection and confrontation of uncertainty that individuals could continue to grow. For Dewey, (1933), educative experiences are those enabling personal and social growth. When Dewey wrote of social growth, he referred to those social experiences that benefited the individual in the environment where (s)he resided.

How, then, does one uncover and disclose experiences of any kind? The narratives included here are constructed based on these Deweyan principles. The principles can be used as a basis to create scenarios that can be then emplotted into a form of biographical narrative. The experiences in the narratives are then evaluated for hegemonic interaction via the study's cultural framework.

In order for this work to be useful to readers, it is important to comprehend the subjective nature of narrative research. There are many narrativists in education (Miller, 1990; Barone, 1980; Tierney, 1993) who subscribe to an understanding of truth not as an inflexible fixture toward which all should aspire, but as a marker of a changing state of affairs in an ever-shifting society. Focusing on individual experience requires methods guided by the premise that beliefs, as beliefs go are faulty and are subject to modification by multiple vantage points. Barone (2001) discusses the potential of narrative research methods:



Abandoning an obsessive quest for certain and total knowledge that transcends a fallible, human perspective, they opt for an epistemology of ambiguity that seeks out and celebrate meetings that are partial, tentative, incomplete, sometimes even contradictory, and originating from multiple vantage points (p. 122).

Chapter one explains that BET, in its role as a form of satellite-mediated programming, has serious potential as a tool for cultural imperialism. Narrative inquiry can be used as a subjective point of reference to help comprehend the complexities and nuances of media messages from multiple vantage points. Researchers have already surmised that forms of mass-mediated entertainment are often miseducational (Chomsky & Hernan 1992; Attick, 2001). This study looks at the individualized life experiences that arise from interactions with satellite products of an imperialistic nature. Some of the major narrative perspectives used by researchers is summarized by Polkinghorne's (2001) "storied narrative".

In agreement with Barone's line of thinking, the writings of Donald Polkinghorne (2001) on narrative give discusses framing and presenting the data collected. Polkinghorne writes that stories are capable of expressing forms of knowledge, and researchers often use story as a tool to uniquely describe human experience. To capture the experiences of Kriol youth as accurately and contextually situated as possible, this study relied on the Polkinghorne's methodological description of analysis of narratives. According to Polkinghorne (2001), stories can be equated with special discourse :

A story is a special type of discourse production. In a story, events and actions are drawn together into an organized whole by means of a plot. A plot is a conceptual scheme by which the contextual meaning of individual events can be displayed (p. 7).

This allows for deeper exploration into the contextualized environments that surround the intersection between present interaction and past experiences. Narrative accounts capture the interactions of cultural forms as they arise in the informant's life stories. In addition, narrative inquiry has the capacity for capturing the fullness of experience, complete with the historical and socio-economic contexts that make Belize unique. Polkinghorne (2001) explains that: "A storied narrative is the linguistic form that preserves the complexity of human action with its interrelationship of temporal sequence, human motivation, chance happenings, and changing interpersonal and environmental contexts" (p. 9).

As such, narratives can be both sources for and containers of data used in qualitative research data. The use of plot within the concept of story is key, as it a) provides a temporal space that marks the boundaries of the narrative; b) provides the criteria for selection of events in the story; c) orders the selected events into a flow that culminates into a climax or conclusion; d) makes the meaning behind the contributing events explicit. Information regarding the thought or action resulting from Belizean youth interaction with BET will be extracted diachronic data and interwoven into the plot, with all periphery information providing a background. Polkinghorne (2001) describes:

Narrative cognition configures the diverse elements of a particular action into a unified whole in which each element is connected to the central purpose of the action...Narrative cognition gives us explanatory knowledge of why a person acted the way he or she did; it makes their action, as well as our own, understandable (p.14).

Polkinghorne's work includes discussion regarding paradigmatic cognition versus narrative cognition. Traditionally, according to Western forms of knowledge creation and communication have traditionally relied upon reported evidence, and systematically formed

conclusions formed by pre-conceived categorical data sets (Polkinghorne 1988; Olson 1990). This discourse was deemed rational and appropriate for scholarly writing and presentation of data. This is what is known as paradigmatic cognition. Paradigmatic cognition is powerful, because it “brings order to experience by seeing particular things as belonging to a category” (Polkinghorne, 2001). The kind of narrative research that employs this kind of reasoning is called *analysis of narratives*. In this approach, the researcher collects stories in the form of diachronic data from informants, which are then analyzed by preconceived theoretical concepts. In this case, the data takes the form of storied narratives, which are then paradigmatically analyzed by the researcher. In the following passage, Polkinghorne (1988) remarks on the importance of diachronic data in narrative experiences:

The [diachronic] data describe when events occurred and the effect the events had on subsequent happenings. The data are often autobiographical accounts of personal episodes and include reference as to when and why action was taken and the intended results of the actions (p.10).

The particular kind of diachronic data used in analysis of narratives is the storied narrative. That is, the data is emplotted, complete with a beginning, middle and end. In this study stories focused on the interaction between global culture and Kriol Belizean youth. The results of these interactions were then analyzed using Nettleford’s understanding to hegemonic struggle.

Some researchers believe that narrative research should only incorporate stories that have been observed and recorded. These recorded and observed “field notes” are then subjected to various literary forms, to be later discussed using paradigmatic analytical tools. This form of narrative analysis is the most popular form of narrative inquiry used in a variety of disciplines ranging from anthropology to sociology, and from psychology to nursing.

Others however, espouse the notion of the narrative as a single construction that is in and of itself, a work of art. In this instance, the researcher arranges certain themes into a well-constructed narrative as an initial analysis. These kinds of narratives can stand-alone and often speak for themselves, neither needing nor benefiting from outside theories.

It is important to remember that paradigmatic kinds of narrative methodology can promote the reduction of uncertainty and potentially undermine monopolies of dominant discourses. Ultimately, the purpose of this project is to raise questions about how Belizean Youth make meaning from interactions with Black Entertainment Television from a cultural studies perspective. In the field however, the lines between narrative construction, and analysis of narrative become less distinct. There were times when the stories of informants were interlaced with other information, and other times when they were not aware of some of the meanings implicit in the stories they recounted. The co-construction aspect of the methodology became important in order to sift phenomena that were pertinent to the purposes of the study from those that were not relevant.

### **Data Collection**

I now turn to the research methods used in this study. Due to the great variety of globalized cultural forms available in Belize from afar, I relied upon the interviewing process to help narrow the types of satellite-mediated programs of interest to the youth in this study. That is, the globalized cultural forms studied in this dissertation emerged based on participant preferences. A questionnaire focusing on informant activities helped me to collect data related to the manner in which globalized cultural forms were used and situated in the lives of Afro-Belizean Youth. This data was then shaped into the form of contextualized stories and then critically evaluated using Deweyan notions. Initially, before the initial proposal of the dissertation, I only wanted to use one or two participants in my study. I knew that I wanted to study the kinds of experiences that resulted from Belizean

youth interacting with global media, yet early on, I was not entirely sure which media I was going to study.

It wasn't until I began my initial interviews with the Belizean youth in Belize City, that I began to notice that the youth I interviewed were very interested in Black Entertainment Television. It soon became apparent that the black network contributed greatly to the Belizean youth culture. I thought it would be interesting to expand my study in order to investigate other perspectives and Caribbean experiences resulting from BET-based imagery. Over time, the study came to focus on the degrees BET images were negotiated within the lives of the Kriol youth informants. The focus of the inquiry sharpened to involve the thoughts and interactions between Belizean Kriol youth and BET, and sought to illuminate the actions resulting from exposure to the satellite mediated imagery presented on this cable network.

The purpose of the questionnaire initially was to determine popular trends existing in the local Belizean culture that related to imagery found in global mass media. As the initial interviewing sessions revealed a strong affinity towards BET, I discovered that potential participants were more excited about talking with me about programs on BET. They also wanted to talk to me about their perceptions of American life based on these programs. As I investigated further, I found that Black Entertainment Television was a major phenomenon at the very least in the lives of the individuals I studied.

I located self-defining Kriol youth between the ages of 19-25 in order to collect what I called “interactive data” for a period of five months. This kind of data was generated through the use of a pre-approved questionnaire sanctioned by the Dissertation Committee (see appendix B). The questionnaire’s purpose was to extract synchronic data related to the habits and thoughts of my informant-volunteers. This preliminary data was analyzed for patterns in the interactions that could be later connected to historic and social contexts. The

resulting experiences of the informants are exemplary of the global situations with which the informants experienced imagery from BET, and the grounded, local histor(ies) in which past experiences were situated. This continuity is crucial, as it also provides the substance against which the current situations were evaluated and course of actions chosen by the informants.

I initially interviewed more than the required amount of participants for 5 to 8 life histories needed, anticipating attrition arising due to commitments, interests, changes of mind or other unforeseeable circumstances. Since the purpose of this study was to provide cultural workers interested in how members of some local communities negotiate interactions with globalized forms of satellite mediated programming, I focused on exploring the thoughts and actions of selected participants by through multiple interviewing sessions, and limited participant observations. Follow-up interviews were conducted to extract supplemental information as evidence of themes that emerged within the life profiles and between them. Patterns of interaction and continuity in the lives of the participants emerged from multiple interactions and observation. The resulting themes then enabled me to reconstruct how and to what degree globalized cultural forms are situated within the unique life stories of the participants.

Informants came from Belize City, Belize. It was my experience that youth gathered at community youth centers established by either the state or the church. It was my intention to volunteer at a variety of these centers in order to achieve access to the target group. However, due to administrative scheduling and suspicions of my motives, I was denied access to many venues on my initial list. As a contingency, after-school programming provided by schools initially afforded a pool of participants, although this pool offered a limited sample of the adolescent population, since school cost is prohibitive in Belize. Ultimately, during this time I expected patterns to emerge, and use those patterns as themes in the life story of the participant. Data collection was initially slow, but picked up pace

with time and experience. I began as directed in my dissertation proposal with the solicitation of youth centers and public youth services in Belize City. In Belize, there are not many service-oriented institutions that are public. That is, most “public services” are initiated by the church or by foreign private charities or ministries. There were however, a few: Youth for the Future Inc. (YFF), a youth based initiative funded by the government of Belize agreed to sponsor my study for a period of four months.

Administration of the questionnaire was at first done street-side until the Youth for the Future Organization approved my proposal and invited me into their community center. YFF is a government initiative for at youth intervention in the Belize City. The Organization has units for HIV prevention, crime prevention, counseling, and tutoring for all the youth in the city. Community outreach and technical vocation courses are run in a computer lab that all youth could use free of charge. During this time, I had access to the center and its facilities. The youth center consisted of a drug and gang rehabilitation center, an AIDS awareness clinic and counseling center, a computer lab complete with tutoring service says and teaching modules for people of all ages, and political administrative offices primarily used to lobby and conduct business as political advocates for Belizean youth. When the computer lab was not used for teaching, school students could make use of the center's facilities. I used the computer lab as my center for operations, coming to the computer lab during the times when it was open to the public. After receiving permission from the center's director, I began to solicit for participants.

The variety of programs and depth of low cost or free programs attract youth from all over the city from all walks of life. YFF allowed me access to their facility during times of the day when their computer lab was open to the public. During this time, I attempted to make initial contact with them and to schedule a date to meet at the facility in the future.

The second meeting with the informant normally consisted of familiarizing informants with

the rules and regulations of the university Institutional Review Board, and the initial questionnaire which was usually audio-taped. The third meeting occurred either to complete the questionnaire, or to ask additional questions for clarification. The meetings after the third one were sporadic, and occurred after initial analysis determined that the informant had sufficient interactions with satellite-mediated programming for a story.

There were a total of 32 people interested in the study, from whom I conducted 17 initial interviews. The numbers of informants interested in the study was high, yet the rate of attrition was also high. Many would-be informants dropped out as anticipated. Some informants would schedule with me, never to be seen again. Others were unreliable, and fickle with their appointments. Yet, through the wash of interviewees and informants, I was able to establish a strong enough rapport with six informants to complete the co-construction process and member checking discussed below. I met with each of the final informants a minimum of twice a week for at least thirty minutes per session. The sessions were often longer, but never shorter.

Because of the nature of the data, time was necessary to develop relationships with participants deep enough to foster a rich life story. I soon learned that the art of rapport building is a subjective process. The interviewing and observation process, approved for six to eight week per life history, expanded to twelve weeks per life history. The shortest cycle of this duration was twelve weeks and the longest was fourteen weeks. The time spent together was based primarily on their interest in my project. One informant felt the need to get his story “out there” and spent more time interviewing than other less interested informants. Many would start the process only to decide that they did not trust the situation, due to my American accent and mannerisms. A couple of candidates dropped out on the issue of pay, which I could not offer.



Each potential participant showing an interest in the study was given a flyer detailing the specifics of the narrative inquiry. If the participant showed further interest in being a part of the study, we scheduled a time to take the formal interview. This interview was comprised of a questionnaire consisting of 25 pre-selected questions determined by myself and my dissertation committee during the proposal stages of this study. After interviewing 17 potential participants, I began to feel confident about my selection of the black cable station. I then began to schedule callbacks to my participants for a second round of interviewing. In the second round, I screened my participants for experiences that would help to shape their opinions of the images seen on Black entertainment television.

Potential participants that had the opportunity to physically experience American culture directly were not included in the study. Additionally participants who worked directly with tourists, or ex-patriots were excluded from the study. The informants of the study had to be born in Belize and residing in Belize city at the time of the interviews. Also, my potential informants had to be between the ages of 18 and 24, mostly due to restrictions imposed by the institutional review board. Although these research specifications served to limit the pool of eligible participants, the pool narrowed even further during the second round of the interviewing process. It soon became obvious that observation of potential informants at the youth center was not as powerful as observing and participating with them on the street, “in their element”, so I reserved the youth center strictly for initial contact and first interviews, and spent most of my time with the participants in the Belizean public spaces.

### **Co-Construction and Member Checking**

In education, the narrative research has become a widespread phenomenon. Beginning with Pinar & Grumet (1976), and other reconceptualists, there has been a push to use narrative to study educational experiences (Barone & Eisner, 2006). Storied narratives

such as the ones constructed in this dissertation are designed to compel its audience members (interested individuals, cultural workers, educators, historians, literary and cultural scholars) “to reconceptualize the education process through intimate disclosures from the lives of individual[s]” (Barone & Eisner, 2006).

The underlying ethics surrounding narrative ownership rights to specific works are important to consider in this sort of research. As a researcher, I choose not to pretend that somehow I could separate myself from who I am in order to be an objective evaluation instrument. I cannot escape the fact that as much as I empathize with the people I am studying, I am ultimately both similar and different from them. I come from a different place and time, and I possess a different biography. I choose to acknowledge the fact that, as primary researcher, I serve as the ultimate gatekeeper for all decisions made in the field, and the ambitions that drive the study. I do have aims. I hoped that this research project would promote discussion and thoughts regarding the public pedagogy of American programs in faraway places. I hoped to complicate the “grand narrative” surrounding what it means to be “educated” by such media ads programming generated by Black Entertainment Television. These goals motivated me to go into the field to interact with my Belizean informants. Simultaneously, however, I must remember that the stories constructed through the course of this were a *mutual endeavor*, initiated by me, but maintained by a joint effort between my informants and myself.

The course of interviewing, note taking, observation and participant observation consisted of 6 to 8 separate meetings with the participants, comprised of a combination of in-depth interviewing, and participant observation. The amount of time between meetings varied tremendously between subjects mostly due to logistics and scheduling. The final meetings were comprised of member checking and other collaborative writing efforts, yet this was somewhat confounded by time and participant interest. It had not occurred to me

that the process of interviewing potential participants would be filled with false starts, high attrition, and general lack of interest for my topic of study. I found that as their life stories became more apparent, actions and experiences resulting from interaction with certain programs on the Black entertainment television network became visible. All of this I packaged within the aesthetic of Belizean everyday life. To document the banality of everyday life in Belize, I accompanied my informants on daily errands such as trips to the market. These everyday activities as performed by the characters in the narratives helps to contextualize what people in Belize consider to be the “public”, the “private”, the “mundane”, and the “strange”. It is within the framework of these everyday experiences that the stories were co-constructed.

In order to establish a relationship with the participants on a level deep enough to obtain such information, I tried to arrange frequent and informal visits “off-site” throughout the city of Belize. Sometimes, the participant would meet me for lunch and in-depth questioning regarding specific themes I had identified in previous interviewing sessions. I also attempted to connect historical experience with decisions made into situations regarding globalized media. I asked historical questions, such as: “tell me about your life.” I also attempted to ask questions about the nature of their decision-making, such as: “why do you think you believe that way?”

I looked for ways to solicit their hopes and dreams for their own future, as well as their thoughts on the way they use media. I hoped that these lines of questioning would yield more detailed information regarding how images wrought by global mass mediated programming is situated in the everyday lives of these Caribbean adolescents and young adults. I constructed questions that would promote discussion regarding what the participant and I thought the finished story should look like. If this task was tedious and often frustrating to both the participant and myself mostly because of the fact that the story had to

fit within the parameters of the study, which did not necessarily fit within the sometimes whimsical desires of the informants. Member checking was also difficult due to logistics and the general fickle nature of young people.

Field notes and participant observation in this study were normally executed together usually with participant observation occurring followed by note-taking and audio recording. The participant observations were useful in many cases to determine the everyday lives of the participants, in addition to observing the moves, emotions, and reasoning of the subjects I studied. Through observation, I was able to place the participant within the context of Caribbean culture, which of course is connected to even larger themes within cultural studies and education.

The interactions were arranged in chronological order, and then used as emplotted actions in the fabric of the narrative. The subsequent data collection revolved around filling in the gaps and connecting these global images with the localized continuity. In order to accomplish this, I attempted to integrate myself into the setting. I used local dress, and local mannerisms as much as possible in order to garner the trust of the informants. I went to their houses when I was invited, I hung out on the street with them. I walked with them to work. I discussed their histories. I participated in as many life events as I was allowed.

The process of co-construction of the life narratives was often complex and arduous. Once I had spent a about four to five weeks with the informants, I would question them about the themes they saw in their stories, and we attempted to develop those themes as they related to everyday occurrences. Although the informants participated in most brainstorming activities and, provided valuable information that certainly helped formulate their individual storylines, none of them were interested in writing. As outlined by documentation submitted to the Institutional Review Board, informants were made aware that although they would receive credit for the narrative co-constructions, I would retain

ownership and control of the narratives. In exchange, I required that the participants review the developed drafts for accuracy before I left the country. Three out of six informants participated in member checking. The other three were unavailable for member-checks before my departure from Belize.

### **Aesthetics and Narratives of Struggle**

It is important to understand the potentially transformative nature of the storied narrative to advance the educational purposes of culture workers. It is also perhaps equally important to underscore the aesthetic component of the narrative. The way narratives are formatted and presented carry power, and can be used to locate power within vernacular discourse and local identities. The purpose of the dissertation is to connect with those readers interested in understanding how youth in local environments make meaning from global interactions. It is possible for aesthetic design elements, format, and presentation to combine with the emplotted content to create an environment where epiphanies may develop for the reader (Denzin, 1989; Barone & Eisner, 2006).

Concerning the aesthetic presentation of data, bell hooks provides some guidelines that inform the way in which the narratives of struggle "...speak[s] about the way the individuals in repressive, dehumanizing situations use imagination to sustain life and maintain critical awareness" (hooks, 2001). In particularly oppressive situations, hooks believes that " the ability to construct images in a reality not present to the senses may be the only means to hope". In Belize, where government corruption trends high and representative legislation is virtually non-existent, the imagination may be the only place to turn. Trade agreements ensure that the multinational corporations receive benefits for doing business in Belize, while local talent and business ventures are left to flounder. These multinational corporations in the mass-media, can create cultural forms that inundate the

local media markets. The road to understanding reality is paved by experience and imagination.

There are many ways a cultural worker may perceive satellite-mediated forms of globalized culture made by BET. Take the change in language habits that may accompany a multi-billion music video branding campaign launched by one of BET's advertisers that is sold to an international syndicate, for instance. Some workers may see language shift as a result of popular culture as "the way it is" and follow the international crowd. Others may not be so inclined to support international ventures, and yet others may make local and international connections that can service a population. Of course, it is important to be careful that within the aesthetics of writing about cultural imperialism, the narratives themselves do not become instruments of the same cultural imperialism about which I am writing. Discussion and reflection about the cultural value of the stories included requires the reader to imagine the Belizean living and working conditions. These conditions are connected to larger contexts that can resonate with readers, and reveal our interconnectivity. We may then imagine new forms of pedagogy, new ways of informing society about culture and literacy. hooks (2001) explains in her essay that "to imagine then, [is] a way to begin the process of transforming reality. All that can't be imagined can never come into being".

Intermingling theory and practice, hooks also prescribes narratives of struggle as a way for readers of research to invoke imagination as a liberatory practice. The writer of the narrative can use elements of style such as language choice in an attempt to subvert, decenter or challenge existing hegemonic discourses. hooks writes that styles of language can identify specific audiences (e.g. Belizeans) as well as subjects within the text itself (hooks, 2001 pp.56). Readers must not look at the selection of a specific audience as exclusion,

“...rather, it alters the terms of inclusion... Readers of a critical fiction cannot approach a work assuming that they already possess a language of access, or that the text will mirror realities they already know and understand” (hooks, 2001).

As the subjects in the text must come to terms with cultural forms of global media in their local Belizean lives, so must the audience face unconventional ways of thinking and knowing through engagement with a critical narrative. The reader of these kinds of narratives must learn to perceive the world differently if they are to understand the work. "[Readers] must shift [their] paradigms and practice empathy as a conscious gesture of solidarity with the work" (hooks, 2001, p.59). The reader in this case must give up general notions of what a text should entail and how texts give information. This may include assumed privilege, oppression, and/or domination that may have been rendered invisible due to hegemonic practices. Narratives of struggle offer the reader vicarious participation in lived practices of struggle.

In the trial and error stage of data collection, I found that narrative storytelling is not so much comprised, *either* analysis of narrative *or* narrative construction, but a combination of *both* analysis *and* construction. Although the research design and conceptualization primarily belongs to me, the emergence of effective narrative involves a co-construction process between my informants and the author/researcher.

### **Data Analysis**

The experiences were recorded through combinations of structured and unstructured interviews, field events, and participant observation as a set of actions. These sets of actions are the result of past experience and a current situation all of which can be summarized as human experience. The experiences can be emplotted via a participant's past experiences into a story. This story is a developed narrative experience that I critically

analyze for emancipatory agency based on Nettleford's theory (1978), discussed in chapter two.

Nettleford often discusses the conscious creative artist in the Caribbean as an important asset to the liberatory struggles within the Insular Caribbean society. Nettleford, like hooks, appraises the value of creative imagination, yet Nettleford (1978) locates this struggle within a Caribbean context:

It is our *knowledge* of our capacity to create...take off our spectacles and inspect them—in short our capacity to innovate, reflect and evaluate—that will enable us to understand the dialectical process expressed in the struggle between the forces of colonialism and liberation, between domination and the spirit of self-determination. Whether he be reggae artist, or calypsonian, choreographer, playwright, poet, novelist, painter, or sculptor, the Caribbean creative has confronted the contradictions of Caribbean life (p. 219).

As stated earlier, my purpose in this research endeavor neither to generalize nor generate essential conclusions about these global influences that impact Afro-Belizean Youth, but celebrate the diversity of local Belizean experience. The goal is to generate discussion about the ways that globalized culture is disseminated, resisted, subordinated, transformed, internalized by participants both to their educative benefit, detriment, and whatever may lie in-between. The actions of the protagonists can be connected to larger themes of globalization and cultural imperialism in the Caribbean and wherever cultural workers reside. My work does not end with the recording of a life story. “Educational critics must explain the educational significance of what they have described, illuminating the potential consequences of practices observed and providing reasons for that account for what has been seen” (Goodson, 1995). It is important to the enhancement of multiple meanings to mediate narratives with theory, critique, and social commentary that consider



the social contexts where they originated. The themes emerged through an expanded variety of participant observations, field notes and interviews, after rapport had been established with the participants. I attempted to connect these themes through the situational experiences within the participant's life story. The depth of information I received from the participants depended on the depth of the rapport I established.

The analysis of data was conducted from a post-modern lens located in cultural studies. The analysis sought to complicate the interactions and meanings produced through the use of the narrative. The analyzing lens was ultimately informed by a neo-Gramscian concept of (counter) cultural imperialism via Nettleford's interpretation of cultural imperialism as it relates to the Caribbean. In such an analysis, acts of creative imagination as described Nettleford are important to the paradigmatic categorization customary to analysis of narratives.

The stories were analyzed for instances where Afro-American imagery interacts with past life experiences of informants as they relate to the purpose of this dissertation. The interactions were subjected to Nettleford's theories on the process of hegemonic creolization, to understand the degrees to which Kriol youth participate in the process and to determine the nature of the spaces created upon negotiation of these interactions. Once this was determined, I searched for interactions where imagination was used to modify the meanings of BET messages in an attempt to comprehend how the informants utilize imagination within the newly negotiated spaces. Sections of Nettleford's theory that emerge as relevant to the narratives were connected to the actions of the informants as they illuminated instances of domination or liberation. These connections are situated within the contextual analyses that inform the life events of the participant in order to produce a rich and robust investigation of the narratives presented in chapter five.

## CHAPTER 4: NARRATIVES

### Monica

Wake up every morning,

And I go to work from day to night.

(Every morning I go to work from day to night)

Nobody to get fi pay,

An' no money deh

All a fi mi pickni de stray

But you have a good day. Good morning Belize!

While the're troubles our way, Good Morning Belize!

Monica Stephens was annoyed.

“Gal, dis da Belize ya no. Weh you tink you wan find Baro fa tree dallas?”

The merchant, putting her hand on her hip, glared at Monica for about half a second before turning her attention to another buyer.

“Rite ‘chya da Belize. You crazy?”

The merchant, busy weighing Snapper for another customer, did not bother to look at Monica. “Me no no weh part you wan find dat, but you go deh. you no ‘ear gal? Five dallas a pound ya!”

Infuriated, Monica considered what she should do next as the bystanders within earshot began to discuss current fish prices. A few remembered three dollars being the local price, but the consensus was that ultimately, the fishmonger was correct. Even if she did know of any places where barracuda was sold at three dollars a pound, which she did not, she did not have the time to go there. It was already eleven o’clock in the morning. Dinner was going to be late, and she would have to answer to her mom for that.

“OK, OK! Mek I get wan weh smalla den, Lord,” Said Monica in exasperation. She had hoped that the merchant was feeling a little generous, which she sometimes did on occasion.

As the side discussion about fish prices reached a loud climax, Monica slipped the woman the money. “Weh happen gal? No discount today then?” She said in a low voice. The merchant woman looked at her, as if seeing Monica for the first time. She suddenly looked very tired.

“Gal, nuttin de happen right now. I need all me money today. Times rough ya know, eh?”

“A-haa. I understand. Me back deh against de wall meself.”

Both women nodded as the merchant handed a much smaller bag of barracuda to Monica. The woman looked at Monica for a second longer, and then was swept away by another customer demanding her attention.

As she turned from the fish market and crossed Orange Street, the sun peeked from behind a huge storm cloud and bathed the main street with light. The Belizean day was in full swing. People moved with purpose up and down the narrow sidewalk on both sides of the street. Orange street itself was particularly clogged. This morning, a force of nature that could be described as a maelstrom descended on Belize City, flooding the street. Motorists, cyclists and pedestrians alike all proceeded with utmost caution. The smell of fresh corn tortillas and tamales wafted over from the corner, and the familiar sound of price negotiation was refreshing to her ears. She had arrived at her destination.

It was Tuesday and the Pound Yard Market was abuzz with life. Fresh produce lined the front of every cart and wooden display box. With practice ease, Monica wound through the throng of people toward her set of favorite merchants. Onions: two dollars a pound. Sweet peppers: three dollars a pound. Coconut milk: two dollars and fifty cents a can. Four pounds of rice: five dollars. Monica's face soured as she gave her last dollars for the bag of rice. The male Honduran merchant looked her, and as if reading her mind smiled bitterly and said, "No worry babes, tings hafta get betta." His gaze scanned her briefly from head to toe, taking account of her simple, worn clothing and bare feet. He seemed to pity her.

Monica's face screwed up into a sneer. "No true? Seems like you wan hafta wait less time than me!"

"No believe dat, gyal! Me got pickni just like you."

"Just like me?" Monica looked incredulous. "Me no tink dat da fa you pickni eva hafa worry bout weh feh eat, so no come wit dat!"

The merchant man continued as if he did not hear her. “Yep... just like you darling.. see you got more for braata.”

The merchant unceremoniously dumped two more onions in Monica's grocery bag, and hurriedly busied himself by helping another customer. Most Belizeans would be happy to receive the free onions, but Monica knew an insult when she saw one, and felt like telling this merchant exactly what she thought of him and his fat well fed children playing in the market, but said instead, “ Bwoy! Mek I go from ya!”

She walked from the produce market, ruffled by the merchant’s words. She knew all about the good country life. It wasn't long ago she herself never had to worry about food. She reminisced about her family farm, where she had acres upon acres available to her. For a moment, she longed to be there with the sights and sounds of the countryside.

The past life she recalled were simpler times, as a planter deep in rural Cayo District. She and her family lived on a vast farm that sold local produce. Her family started the business when land was awarded to them by Queen Elizabeth II after service in World War II. The family grew eventually building separate homes on the land, but there was still enough land to provide plantains, coco, cassava, potato, crabu and mangoes to the local market in Belmopan. Life was simple. There was no radio nor television. Kerosene was used for light and heat, and food was prepared outside on the fire hearth. Plumbing in rural Belize is a luxury, as the government has yet to run lines into her village. Pipe water was drawn daily from a community faucet a few miles from the farm for washing and cleaning. Rain water collected from the various zinc rooftops in the yard provided more than enough drinking water for cooking and drinking. Meat was provided by the land. Her father and neighbors hunted and trapped deer, gibnut, wari, picary, armadillo, duck, wild turkey and quail. What was left over was sold in the Belmopan market to buy flour, gas, oil, sugar, and

other household necessities. Everyone had their chores, and once they were done, all of the children were free to play in the yard and with other children in the village.

Although they could do practically whatever they wanted, it was not without restrictions. Pickni was to be seen and not heard, and this rule was enforced in her home and throughout her village. It was nothing to get flogged or at the very least, cussed out and embarrassed for interfering in the affairs of grown people. In fact, every effort was made to keep adult affairs behind closed doors.

Monica smiled wanly. In her house, this was not always possible, as quarreling between her parents often lasted long into the night. Nevertheless, the adults took pains to not show anger, smoke nor drink in front of pickni, as this was the way of normal life in the farming village. The village was greatly influenced by the Catholic Church and the two schools serving her area were Catholic. Monica went through the first six standards of elementary school with no problems academically, and finished four forms of college while at the farm. At the time of her completion of college she left the farm for Belize City, where she encountered another life.

The scenery, sights and sounds of the city was nothing new to her as she had come to Belize countless times with various family members. She was used to the vendors with buckets full of hot tamales and dukunnu. She was accustomed to the snarling traffic, the fishermen, the swing bridge, and the city accents. What was new to her was being away from her family, away from the farm and the chores and traditions that come with a planter's life.

What was particularly disconcerting to Monica after within a few days of actually living in the city were the pickni...nobody no deh feh tek care o deh. They were always the street, alone, by themselves, dirty and hungry. Where she came from, such a sight would be intolerable. It was nothing for a distant neighbor to come to the farm to beg for water,

bread, tools or anything that was needed. It was nothing for Monica and her brother to travel equally as far to beg neighbors for the same items. Sharing was the way of life, and do on to other as they would do onto you. This was not the way of the city, as she soon learned.

Monica relied on her previous connections in Belize to induct her into city life. These people were mostly Rastas at first. She was exposed to reggae music first on the farm with the guitar whenever one of her parent's friends stopped by. These songs appealed to her because the songs always spoke to the realities of life. Music from artists like Marley, Sparrow, Tosh, & Burning Spear were always covered by local reggae artists surrounding her area. It was common to hear reggae and country music in her village, and radios were very popular before the age of television. Some homes had electricity in rural Belize, and those that did not used battery power or generators if they could afford it. Radio and cassette players always been a part of her life, but because of the scarcity of money, Monica could not afford the luxury of buying audio tapes of any sort, and as a result experienced the majority of her music from the radio.

To this day, the farm home where Monica grew up does not have electricity, and accordingly, Monica did not grow up with a TV in her home. Television was rare in Belize in the early 1980's and only the rich or persons with connections in the USA had televisions in their homes. No one in her village had a television set, so Monica had no experiences with television in her home.

In the capital city, however, the majority of her relatives had not only television, but often paid cable subscriptions as well. She remembered when she was a nine-year-old visiting relatives in distant Belmopan who owned a television set to watch movies or sports like boxing as a family. There were times, however, when she and her cousins were allowed full access to the television while the adults entertained themselves on the verandah.

When Baymen Cable started service in the early 1990's, Monica became acquainted with Black Entertainment Television, and fell in love with it. Right from the start, she loved the thought of a channel that portrayed successful people of color. From her years in elementary school, Monica has always been fascinated with the history of the people from Africa. The Garifuna history was a people of which she was particularly proud, with their bright colors, separate language, and special holidays, Monica was interested in those peculiar Belizeans.

Studying Kriol history, however, left her with a feeling of incompleteness. In her history class, the Kriol culture consisted of the Battle of St. George's Caye only, as if that is all we did or used to be. Today, the schoolbooks were even worse. Now they portray Belize on the map as a part of Guatemala. Spanish influence was everywhere, and so any kind of positive African influence was welcomed in her book. Watching television with her cousins made her aware of black American artists that she previously did not know. Janet Jackson, Patti Labelle, Aaliyah-- she first saw them on BET. There were other music video channels like VH1, but she was dedicated to supporting Africa to its fullest, and when she moved from the farm to Belize, she soon used TV to get her music more than radio.

Monica was careful, however, not to get too involved in technology. To this day, she did not own a cell phone, CD player, nor MP3's. She did not use the Internet. Although Monica knew what these gadgets were, she felt like technology represented the "fast life" of the United States. The kind of life she saw on the BET reality shows and music videos intimidated her. In fact, she was afraid of it. Monica almost laughed. It was an unexplainable fear she knew, but for some reason, she saw American life as too... fast. Basic life was better. You get more foundations in farm life. School and church seem more important there.



Initially, Monica left the farm due to her success in school. Having finished college, Monica was set to go a university. Since Belmopan had no university at the time, she set her goals on the University of Belize in Belize City. When Monica was admitted, she left the farm to pursue her studies in general education, and her life changed.

Hanging out on the street corners of Belize City became her pastime after class. She remembered the group she hung with well, and often still ran into them in the streets. Hanging out mainly consisted of smoking, drinking & dominoes. Over time, she became very acquainted with her surroundings and her company. Day in and out, Monica found herself engrossed in the lives of her friends. Whatever they did, she followed. Unlike on the farm, she had friends here. Together, they formed a makeshift gang that shoplifted hip-hop clothing from vendors to sell on the black market. The group often relied on Monica to do the "cat fighting" for the group, as years on the farm had made her quite heavy-handed.

It was in this group that Monica met her first serious boyfriend and would often go to his house in Belize City and watch 106 and Park together. It was then that she began to learn the lyrics to some of her favorite soul music. While Jaleel was more interested in Rap City, Monica was more comfortable with Soul and R&B. Aside from the conscious lyrics of reggae music, Soul music was appealing because the lyrics seem to relate more with her life love life. Thinking back on her teenage years and Jaleel before he left, she remembered dancing for him in his small rented room. By this time, the idea of attending the university was a distant memory. She only attended classes for a month.

"Don'cha wanna dance, Say you wanna dance, Don'cha wanna dance?" She recited in tandem with Whitney Houston. She would spin and show off her memory of the lyrics. He would call her silly, but he did practically the same thing with his favorite rap artists . His love of rap music soon rubbed off on her, and she began to explore the lyrics of Tupac and Biggie Small.

Tupac was more enticing to her, as his lyrics dealt more with the social wrong doings of the elite and the hard reality of ghetto life. She lamented when he was murdered, because she vibed with the ways in which he used his talent to bring out suffering and injustice for black people. Indeed, especially in the city, where ever she looked, she saw poverty and injustice.

Still, the way the women exposed themselves in some of these videos were appalling. Don't these women have pride in themselves? Do they care who sees them? She for one, had a reputation to keep. No one was going to ever say smutty things about her demeanor. For the time, Monica was swept into city life. Her friends provided a foundation that was new and exhilarating at the same time.

She became pregnant with her first son by Jaleel. This did not initially slow Monica, however from displaying the fierce loyalty she felt for her friends. These displays often ended in her being arrested for battery or assault. The head magistrate warned Monica not to ever appear in her courtroom ever again if she wanted to avoid serious prison time. This ominous warning caused Monica to remember the fate of her father, and she decided to cool her heels for the sake of her child. Her mother, more out of concern for her grandpickni than Monica, moved in with a relative in Belize to help Monica care for the child. Accepting her mother's help was a bitter pill to swallow, but she after Jaleel left, she really had no alternative.

Monica sighed as she continued up the canal side towards her mother's house, and hailed a few acquaintances on the street on their way to the market. Violence was never a part of her childhood. People in rural Belize were at best armed with a machete. Now pickni are killing with guns. Unlike in her time, pickni are seen and heard. They have no discipline, because they are out in the streets and no one trusts anybody. Part of the reason

for this mistrust is that everyone is broke, and looking for a way to make money. Someone has got to help.

She took a moment to look around her environment. Belize was definitely in want for upgrades. It does not look good to have the homeless on the street, particularly when the homeless consist of pickni. The schools do not want them. All of the public schools require payment of some sort: registration fees, schoolbooks and uniforms. As a result, they have no manners, no discipline, no upbringing. It was incredulous in her days growing up to see pickni cussing as they walk down the street.

She chuckled a bit to herself, "If deh pickni meh deh round ina my days, humph! Sista meha tear feh deh rass." But today, teachers were not allowed to punish pickni. Neither sister nor the Mother superior herself could punish them as they did back when she was in elementary school. This lack of discipline in the pickni allows the never-ending cycle of poverty and violence to continue. She cannot remember the amount of times she has seen advertisements appealing for donations on behalf of pickni in the States. There was no suck shelter in Belize City, and there never have been--not even for the animals. Through it all, no one wants to help. Everyone who leaves Belize for the states never looks back--

"Gall! whe part you meh deh?"

Monica turned to see her mother, of course wanting to know her whereabouts. Her mother eyed her suspiciously as she handed over the bag of groceries she was supposed to deliver half an hour ago. Obviously her mother had come looking for her. Monica quickly told her what was in the bag. Before her mother could begin her tirade, Monica cut her off.

"I wan check unnu laytah mummy..."

With that, Monica turned on her heel and walked briskly away. She heard her mother shout something after her, but as she began her street lecture, a huge bus whisked

down the street, drowning out her words. A block later, Monica turned to see if her mother was still standing there, but she was nowhere in sight.

Monica has never really had a good relationship with her mother. Her mother was the one who always seemed set against her. She had two daughters from her previous marriage before meeting Monica's father. Her half sisters were of a lighter complexion than she and her brother, and it seemed that they received everything they wanted from their mother. Aunts and Uncles not related to Monica would occasionally arrive with clothes, shoes and other gifts exclusively for her lighter sisters. They also got preferential treatment from mother, and Monica was sure it was because of her skin color.

It was her father who always came to the rescue. Her father, who was just as dark as Monica, would often chide mother for her callous ways and biased attitudes, but his lectures did little to change her behavior, especially when others were not paying attention. Nevertheless, Monica listened to the words of her father, which were soothing, reassuring her that there was nothing wrong with her. When it was discovered that her father was on crack cocaine, and domestic violence on the farm began to mount, Monica found herself on taking her father's side, even when it was clear that his drug addiction was at fault. One afternoon, her father beat mother badly for money issues. Mother went to the hospital and obtained their written opinion that her injuries were considered harmful aggression. With that, the police came to the farm and hauled father away to Hattiesville Prison.

Monica scuffed a rock and watched it bounce along the sidewalk to eventually plunk into in a small pothole pond in the middle of the street. Back when she was growing up, such a scene between mother and daughter in the street would have been next to non-existent. Children were never to express anger, and much less to authoritative figures such as parents. To walk away from your mother while she was telling you something was at best, a quick death sentence.

She continued down the sidewalk toward the taco stand where she worked. Many creoles balked at the kind of work she did. Some people believed that taco stands were for the Spanish. "Weh you di do ina wan taco stand?" she heard them often say. Let them talk. She was always going to go where the money was, and that included taco stands. The daily expenses could not ever hope to be covered by such a job as this, but it was better than begging. The money helped to contribute to the care of the two pickni. Although her mother disliked her, she was very fond of her grandpickni, and would do anything for them. This was good, because Monica did not have to pay a sitter to watch them, and they always had a place to stay, even if she did not.

When she thought about it, there were other issues where she differed with the people around her. Most of the people around her who were her age were well into hip-hop culture. They wore the Rocco-Wear, the Jordan's, and the Pumas. Some of her first friends in Belize City were deep into Rap music and BET shows like 106 and park, where the latest styles, slang, and hair were displayed in the audience. These fashions were coveted in the street, and Monica and her gang often stole these labels to resell. Monica herself, however, never was into fashion, partially because she knew fabric quality. On the farm, all the clothes are made by hand. She still had and used some of the long farm skirts that her mother sewed. She made most of her clothes in her wardrobe. Additionally, Adidas and Puma did not make most of their labels on the streets of Belize in any sense of the word. These imitations came from Mexico, where entire factories were dedicated to fake hip-hop gear. For her, it was very easy to spot the shoddy workmanship, but to her friends, the only thing that mattered was the label.

As she reached the taco stand, Zuela, her Spanish boss was re-filling the condiments and exchanging gossip with a customer. Monica smiled at the customer and picked up a broom to sweep the sidewalk around the stand. It wasn't the best of jobs, but, it

was work. Monica was old friends with Mrs. Zuela's daughter, and when they fell out, she fired her daughter from the family taco stand. After Mrs. Zuela's daughter moved out of the house, Monica was hired to the stand. Monica believed that Zuela hired Monica in order to keep abreast of her daughter's whereabouts. As long as she had a job, it really didn't matter where it came from. Mrs. Zuela may be a lot of things to a lot of people, but she did pay the people she worked for on time.

Monica grimaced as she thought of Jaleel. She had not thought of him recently, and now that she was, the usual emotions washed over her. When she saw him last, he swore to her that he would arrange everything so that she and baby could come with him to the States. Jaleel never told Monica that he had close relatives living in New York City, nor that he had obtained a visa through those relatives to leave Belize. Jaleel's family had to have connections in order to get the United States to grant Jaleel and his sister visas to visit their American father. Before he left, Jaleel gave Monica five hundred dollars and told her that he would be back. She hasn't heard from him yet, but deep down inside, something kept her from giving up on Jaleel.

Her mind suddenly went to one of her favorite music videos: Angel of Mine. In this video, the singer makes a deep connection with the love of her life in the beginning, and although the man seeks his love, he can never quite get to her. In the end, he finally climbs the fire escape to find her alone in her apartment, waiting for her. In their passionate reunion, the artist sings to her lover devotions of life, time, and happiness. She sings to him that she will always be there. He could always count on her...

She was interrupted by one of the street pickni, begging her for a shilling. She continued sweeping, avoiding him entirely. She knew he was not alone. From the corner of her eye she scouted two more on the other side of the street, waiting anxiously. Yesterday one of the others had come to beg. They worked as a team.

It was this sight, she realized, that caused her to think about the lives of her own pickni, and leave the street corner life. Although she was maintained her friendship with most of those people, she no longer stole or fought for them. She could not stand to have one of hers turn out like... Someone's got to help. She finally shooed him away from the taco stand when he began asking for food. Sometimes, Mrs. Zuela gave the pickni food to eat, but most times, she gave them hard advice: Go and hustle yourself a living, and stop begging.

Mrs. Zuela had reached the crux of the gossip tidbit with her customer, and perhaps instinctively the little beggar knew better than to interrupt. He shuffled across the street to return to his friends empty-handed.

Monica's heart slowly melted. She should be tougher, like Mrs. Zuela, but she could not help it. Pickni should never have to live this way. Her thoughts went back to the ads appealing for donations to the American shelters. Here, there are no donations, because everyone is struggling, and those who find a way to leave Belize, never look back. Youth of today need to be empowered, she said to herself. Empowered to take responsibility for their families.

She smiled sheepishly as she had often envisioned a mini-series produced by her that exposed this very issue. This show would not be interested in showing the lives of the successful. Her show would portray the harshness of ghetto life. The reality show would reveal moral lessons to the audience. It was immoral to reach the top and not "reach back" to help people become more contented in their lives.

Although her mother was very very biased against her, Monica believed that she still experienced a stable and contented childhood on the farm. She really did not understand why it could not be the same for everyone. Belizeans need to come together, but everyone was so caught up in being an individual, social contentment for all seems like more like a

dream. Yet, to have that would be the end of her problems as she knew them, and most likely everyone else's as well. Therefore, it is much better to see a person smile than watch them suffer. Right now, she couldn't do much about that... the suffering that is, but...

Mrs. Zuela and her customer had mutually decided that the gossip was too hot to continue talking on the street, and quickly exchanged phone numbers. Monica was already attending to her first customers when Zuela bid farewell to her informant. She walked over to Monica while her gaze scanned the other side of the street.

"You geh deh pickni someting?" Zuela inquired, eyeing Monica suspiciously.

"No-- Me jus chase deh."

Zuela seemed satisfied with that. She robotically moved to the pot of shredded chicken and began to make gauchos.

"Ah ha. No gi deh nuttin. Me don gi deh wan taco feh tea. Deh no wan nuttin more." Zuela shot another malicious glance across the street, but the pickni had vanished. Her demeanor told Monica that she meant what she said.

"No problem." Her mind was on her mini-series. Before Zuela could begin to recount her gossip, Monica quickly told her about how she felt about the pickni, and how her show could help people to realize the problem. Belizeans needed to come together. Youth needed to be empowered, The community needed to help one another--

"Gyal.." Mrs. Zuela cut her off. "You got ene money feh dis? Weh you wan fine dat?"

Monica paused. It always came to that. She had even once gone to Channel Five Television and Love Television stations to express her ideas. They both gave her the run-around. Love TV told her that she needed more development of her idea, and that they would listen if she had community support. When Monica asked her friends to help, they



responded in the same way: times are rough, time is precious, and Monica would need to pay them.

Monica thought of "Angel of Mine". "I wan fine it. No worry."

Zuela snorted her sincere doubt, but said nothing more.

**Leonard**

(Transcribed snippets from BET's THE MONIQUE SHOW )

Monique: Today we have Lil'W. CEO of Young Money Entertainment. Thank you for coming...you are hard working and successful.

Lil W.: Thank you. My fans are looking for intelligence and I hope that they can look at me in the same light. Yes I do work hard. I believe in work and work NOW.

Monique: Yes. You are a tough businessman. (audience applauds)

Lil W.: I believe that work ethic is important, and then talent, but you can do anything with a strong work ethic. In fact I run a foundation that helps underprivileged kids from the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina.

Monique: See... people who critique rappers—do your homework! (applause)

Lil W.: No seriously, if I wasn't a rapper, I'd be in school. The key is to work hard. As a rapper the work ethic shows in your partying. Working hard... that's what's important to you all anyways. If we look in the paper, we see positive things if "they are working hard"...so we display that image.

Monique: Ummm... Do you let your kids hear what they say on your albums? What do you say to them?

Lil W.: This is 2009. You can't stop what kids hear, and I would rather that she hear it from me.

Monique: How did you come up with such a successful idea?

Assistant: Well one day Lil W. and I were talking on the bus...

Monique: The bus??

Assistant: ...On his tour bus.

Monica: Oh... I was about to say! (laughter and applause)

Leonard sat on the steps of his veranda, trying to decide what to do next. It was 9am, and Mr. Henderson had not picked him up like he said he would. He chewed on the two johnny cakes he just bought for tea, perplexed. Mr. Henderson normally did what he said he would do, unless something had happened. He was always punctual too. Leonard often found Mr. Henderson parked in his pickup on the side of the street waiting for him sometimes ten minutes before their scheduled meeting time. No... something must have happened.

He stared at the empty place in the road where Mr. Henderson normally parked. If he had a cell phone, which he did not, he would not be in this predicament. A few passers-by were on the street, on their way to destinations only they knew. A couple of well-dressed women in brightly colored service uniforms and high-heels chatted on cell phones as they hurried to work—he thought he recognized one of them. He raced off the veranda into the clump of overgrown Sorrisí that awaited below the steps, but by the time he fought to the street at the end of the large yard, the woman had turned the corner, and was nowhere in sight.

Quickly, he crossed the small make-shift wooden plank bridging the deep gutter that spanned to the street, but he could not locate her. The phone she was using could have been handy, He knew Mr. Henderson's number, but Leonard dared not leave and risk missing his ride. A feeling of frustration washed over him. "Eh no hafa be so..."

His mind strayed to his father, and he immediately banished the thought. This was not the time to be thinking about him. He knew that his father would not come to his aid, no matter how much Leonard wanted him to do so. After all that had happened, his father turned a blind eye to him. He no longer seemed to care about his whereabouts like before. Things had taken a turn for the worse between them, and the only thing Leonard could do is wait for his opportunity. He had to keep his eyes and ears open for that chance he knew

existed out there—if he could only recognize it. There had to be a way out of here, and into the company where he belonged.

Leonard popped the last of the Johnny-cake into his mouth and turned back into the yard. He and his sisters had treaded a pathway leading from the gate to the steps leading up to the veranda. He observed the house his mother left for the family when she died. The house was big, surely more than one hundred years old, and sat off Eyre Street in a more developed part of Belize City. The house did not sit on the main street, however. Its gates faced the alleyway like many of the coach houses in the area.

In the case of Leonard's family house, the grand Victorian that faced the street in front of the two-story coach house had long since been torn down, having suffered the full brunt of Hurricane Hattie in 1961. Although he had not been born at the time, his parents had recounted the devastation and the death toll. That was when many people left the country "...cuz-- tings meh bad-bad" his mother often told him. Today only the coach house remained, and has been in disrepair since his mother passed away. The house was recently painted blue, but thinly masked structural decay assailing the gutter and parts of the foundation. The huge yard was choked with weeds and dangerous mud patches. He hated living there.

Just as he was re-entering the yard, a face poked out from one of the side windows -- it was his sister. He had told her that he was going to work. The face said nothing, but after a moment contorted into a most horrible and malicious glare. Leonard and his sisters barely tolerated each other. The reason mainly came from the fact that they had different fathers. Leonard did not remember much of his own father in the early days, because he stayed with his mother and his sisters from another relationship. His stepfather Bernard could barely make money to feed himself, yet alone support a family. In fact it was not unusual to find Bernard in the streets searching for work just like him. Leonard could

remember many times in his adolescence when he would come home with more money than Bernard, but his sisters adored him nevertheless. They shared one father while he had another, and they spared no opportunity to tell him so.

“Bwoy, no kuh ya with fa you rass!” They jeered, “...or else I wan get my pa fi put you out!”

Naturally, Bernard would never kick him out of the home, because the house actually belonged to Leonard’s mother. Bernard was in effect, only a visitor at best in his opinion, and he had no real power. This sibling rivalry often got serious, particularly when Leonard’s father came to Belize. His natural father gave him everything...clothes, shoes hats, straight from the States. Their dad gave them nothing. It did not help matters that he was named Leonard Jr., after his father, and Leonard Sr. rarely brought things for the girls, if ever. When it came down to it, the clothes and other items he got from the States deepened the rift between them.

The glare on his sister’s face deepened into a scowl... in moments the face would be talking. He would not give that glaring face the satisfaction of saying anything.

Quickly Leonard turned on his heel and crossed the alley, heading toward Queen Street. It was late already. It did not seem like Mr. Henderson needed him after all. Perhaps he found someone else. Most likely Mr. Henderson did not need him and, having no way to contact him, moved on with his work. Construction was a tricky business. Mr. Henderson himself once told him,

“Bwoy dem kontrak deh? Man noh memba who di werk fa ah —wen time com fi peay”

When there was money to be made, why pay when you can do it yourself? Leonard quickened his steps, and smiled bitterly. Of course, he could empathize with Mr. Hendy’s perspective. Yet...if Mr. Hendy was not going to give him a job, then he better

find it elsewhere, and quickly. One thing he learned about this life was that one could get nowhere without hard, hard work. Consistency was key also – the early morning hours were the best time to land work for the day.

The peak of the morning had passed with the nine o'clock hour, and day wages dropped significantly with each passing hour. He already had on his work clothes—old worn jeans, and even older tennis. He wore swimming trunks underneath his jeans as a habit. Maybe he could catch one of the diving boats if he hurried. He also needed to make sure that Mr. Henderson did not need him. He knew just where to get a phone... and maybe even another job if this one fell through.

Leonard half expected to hear the acid tone of his sister peel out after him. Thankfully, he did not. He shot a baleful glance toward the blue house as he turned the corner onto Queen Street. He had to get out of there. Although he had his own room there, Leonard knew that he would never find peace at his mother's house. They were too jealous of him. His father saw to that. They could scarcely afford things to eat; yet alone the lavish clothes his dad showered upon him while he was in school.

Leonard often from his mother that his father Leonard Sr. was able to take advantage of the opportunity extended to citizens of Belize by the United States. After the devastation of Hattie, Leonard Sr. was granted a visa to visit relatives in the States. The U.S. was generous during those days, and opened their borders to Belizeans who had relatives living in the States. This move proved to be a huge windfall for Leonard Jr.

After Leo Sr. gained permanent residency in the States, he came back to Belize on frequent visits. Leo Jr. remembered the first time he set eyes on his father when he came to the house with boxes and crates of new clothes, hats and shoes... all for him. Naturally his sisters felt put out, as they got nothing. By this time, Leonard was in standard 6. The better

he did in school, the more clothes he got. He soon began to feel like those Americans he saw on cable...well almost.

Black Americans on television were always dressed to kill. On BET, Leonard was able to match his clothes he got from the US with what was worn “out deh”. Back then he watched programs like Teen Summit to get the latest fashions. When the show ended, he switched to 106 and Park. The gear his father bought for him from the States was enough by itself to make anyone envious, as most caps and shoes he got could not be obtained in the local stores. Often when he watched Black Entertainment Television, often he marveled at the success of Black Americans.

“Deh oanli like wi en latta-latta wais.” Even so, there were stark differences as well.

Their culture, their style, was distinct and they looked neat all of the time. He knew they weren't, but they *looked* it. Their clothes were top of the line, much like the clothes Leo Sr. shipped to him. The black people kept themselves looking clean and nice. It made him feel proud to be black. “There is beauty in us – worldwide.” The way of life in America is distinct... anyone could see that. The African Americans had their style, and it was unique from the Mexican Americans, which was in turn separate from what the Native Americans did. Belize... well... Belizeans have no real style. Belizeans are a little bit of everything. The best a Belizean could hope for was to be seen as a Belizean with an African American style. Television for his was like sight seeing. It was tourism without really going anywhere. It helped him to compare what he saw in Belize to everyplace else.

He took a look around him. This part of Queen Street was located Outa Town, and as such, many businesses, boutiques, record stores and restaurants lined both sides of the street. Wooden and cement structures, these businesses were painted bright colors: yellows, pinks, lime greens and stark whites. In the distance an officer stood in the middle of the street, directing traffic. Queen Street was busy, but most of the business workers had

reached their destinations and the street congestion had somewhat dissipated. The breeze was crisp and brought the smell of the salted sea. There was not a cloud in the sky.

Everything seemed in order, but at the same time, things had a run-down feel to it. Sure there were many upgrades in Belize City since he was young – there are more hospitals, prisons, schools, sidewalks, housing—but there were many more things that needed upgrading. Looking down one alleyway revealed mounds of trash....and then there were the homeless. Belize was definitely in need of development if they were ever going to compare with the likes of the USA. He looked at the rags he had on now, and wanted to sigh. He shoved that idea away and reminded himself that he had a purpose today, and he surely could not get it accomplished wearing nice clothes.

As Leonard passed the Queen Street Police Station, he spied a shirtless figure hard at work washing a car in the parking lot. Another car waited after that. The man moved quickly, pulling back windshield wipers and spraying side-view mirrors.

“Gilbert!” Shouted Leonard as he passed the parking lot on the other side of Queen Street.

The man looked up, and smiled, revealing a gold capped tooth.

“Bwoy! You lait! Yu see weh happen wen yu lait? Aarait. Gud.” With that, Gilbert went to washing the vehicle almost as if he had not even spoken to Leonard. Gilbert was right. 8am had gone a long time ago. That was the time he had to be there to claim that spot to wash cars during the morning hours. This spot was competitive, and if he wanted to work that spot, he was late indeed! There were always cars to be washed. He always made decent money when he worked that spot washing cars. Still, customers had their favorites, and many of them held out for Gilbert or one of the other bali. Let him have the spot today. He was headed on the other side of the Swing Bridge to the water taxi terminal.



There he hoped to meet some of his fishing and diving friends... if they were still there. He had not run into Mr. Hendy either. Two job opportunities missed this morning.

Leonard picked up his pace, moving toward upper Queen Street by the Swing Bridge. He passed a man on a cell-phone and suppressed a pang of frustration. He could not afford that sort of technology these days. If he did the right things and worked hard, he would have a cell phone and more. He just had to show Leo Sr. that he was ready to come to the States. Convincing his dad of late was a particularly difficult task, being that he hardly saw much of Leo Sr. these days. None one knew his telephone number... or so they said.

Just as he reached the bridge, he caught a glimpse of who he was looking for. On the other side of the harbor by the water taxi, sat the Fisherman. He was barking orders to a crew that did not seem quite together. Perfect.

"You no gon yet, Fisherman?" Said Leonard from the top of Swing Bridge.

The Fisherman stopped to see who was calling him.

"Juni! Whe yu di u? I di luk fi sumbody fi haul dis fish we'an catch bak da market feh sel. We dun got wan catch redy feh tek."

Leonard only pondered this offer for a moment. He would rather be diving with Fisherman, but selling his catch for a commission was also just as good. For the first time today Leonard Jr. smiled. This was potentially more money and less work than the other two jobs combined. "Ya mein! I me deh jost kohn fi heil yu! Mek I sel deh fish, no sah?" Quickly, Leonard crossed the bridge and entered the dock building to emerge dockside were Fisherman was waiting. The crew moved, and soon produced a medium sized chest.

Fisherman came down from steering to starboard side to watch the crew open the cooler.

"Deepwata Snappa," Fisherman eyed Leonard suspiciously. "Mek sure yu get market prais with da Chiney deh. Ah no how much pounda fish de ya. Yu memba wehpa?"

Leonard nodded and unloaded the ice chest from the boat, and Fisherman took out a wad of Belizean cash, and handed Leonard five Belize dollars. This was lunch money. Leonard took the money and shoved it into his pocket. He was officially hired for the day. Taking a moment to peer into the fishing boat, Leonard noticed that there were five other empty chests similar to the one full of Deepwater Snapper he carried. Fisherman must have gone out earlier this morning to come back into harbor with this morning catch. Fresh fish at this hour of the day was difficult, and many restaurants were desperate. Leonard put the ice chest full of Snapper on a portable dolly and shook the Fisherman's hand in parting. Fisherman was probably going to be away most of the afternoon, arriving in harbor right before sunset to sell what he caught for teatime at Vernon Street.

As Fisherman and his crew floated down the harbor into the Caribbean Sea, Leonard turned down Regent Street toward the first Chiney shop, towing the fish behind him. The catch was very fresh, and therefore should sell rather quickly. The amount he sold would determine his pay at the end of the day when Fisherman tallied sales. Today he was lucky that he caught Fisherman. Jobs like these were usually gone before sunrise.

The sun continued to trek its way through the mid-morning sky. Once again, he thought of his father, and this time, he allowed himself to remember. Yes, there was a time when Leo Sr. was very proud of his son. After all, entering first form, Leonard was close to the top of his class. Leo Sr. constantly talked about bringing his son to the States. He had started another family in Texas, and when time was right, Leo Sr. would introduce his junior to the world. Leonard only had to keep his grades up in school. The clothes kept coming.

Cable television became intense during his years in first and second form. Rap City and 106 and Park became shows he watched daily. He was amazed at how different people on these shows were to Belizeans. He loved TV for that-- the images. The Caribbean news

often feature islands like Dominica or Antigua with the same buildings, roads, and scenarios like Belize.

It was easy for Leonard to imagine what life was like for the people there. In the same way, it was not a big stretch to imagine how life must be in the States. He could figure it out for himself. Not everyone could be focused enough to see the similarities, and get an idea. It took a smart person to imagine how the U.S. would be without being deceived. It was not a bed of roses all of the time. He knew that he would have to work, and work hard to get what he wanted once he got there. His father taught him that, but—if only he could get his attention these days!

Over the course of the morning, Leonard sold the snapper to the downtown restaurants. He sold in many cases above market price, and pocketed the surpluses. There were many, many Chinese restaurants that used Snapper for their fish dishes, and often relied on delivery boys such as himself to make it through the day. It was easy to sell them above market price when Leonard WAS the market. Some of the Chiney refused the fish prices flat out-- most did not.

Leonard paused for lunch in the Centennial Park where he ate a hot meal of rice and beans, stewed chicken, potato salad and fried plantains. Today he could afford it. He followed the old proverb: Eat well today. Who knew where your next meal was coming from? Today he was making money. His father needed to see this. If he saw him working, then he would believe that he was ready. Then Leo Sr. would invite him to the U.S. and he would be successful. He would work hard and get his cell phone, his clothes, his shoes and have money to give his friends when they asked for it. He ate quickly, put the now half empty ice chest on the dolly and strode out of the park. Today, he was doing well, but this kind of success was a far cry from what Leo Sr. initially had in mind for his son.

When Leo Jr. was in college, his father sent him to school with the money to pay for his coursework, books, and uniform. By the time Leonard had reached third form, he had begun to spend his tuition money. Most of the time, the money went to more clothes and shoes. Leo Sr. found out he was no longer going to school when he met Leonard on the street during school hours. At that time, Leo Sr. was a successful real estate developer in the States and had connections in Belize.

“Yu no wan go tu skool? Yu wan werk den.”

His father told him, and there was no arguing. The next week, Leo Sr. pulled some heavy strings and landed his son a security job for the Government of Belize. That was a fantastic job. More gear came from the US with letters promising a sure visit to the States soon. Leonard was instructed to save his money and wait until the time was right...if only they had not performed that background check.

The dolly rolled over a huge rock in the sidewalk, and the ice chest lurched violently to one side. The contents shifted, but did not overturn. Leonard paused, vexation overcoming him.

“Weh haad werk di du fa wi eena Belize?” He he said bitterly.

Hard work did not seem to be valued here in Belize, and hard work did not mean promotion and advancement like it did in the United States. The best he could hope for here was a messenger position for a law firm, and that was if they did not need a police record. In Belize, the police crack down hard on marijuana smokers. One time, he was caught and convicted with drug possession. He was fined and released, but his life changed dramatically after that. A few months after getting hired for the government, they approached him. It appeared that he had been arrested and convicted of possession of weed. They proceeded to explain to him that he could no longer work for the City, and that

employment with them was rescinded forthwith. One of the employees, a good friend of Leo Sr. shook his head at Leonard as he was being escorted from the office.

“Yu let fa yu pa put fa hi neim out on da line fa what?!” The man was livid.

It took him quite some time to realize that his father’s reputation was ruined as a result of that fiasco. He did not figure this out until long after the clothes and gifts stopped coming. The communication between them dwindled to practically nothing. He had not seen his father much at all since he lost that job. He did not have to be told that his father had completely lost faith in him. It was up to Leonard Jr. to win it back.

The sun was threatening to disappear over the tallest of Belize’s apartment buildings in the west by the time Leonard finished visiting all of the restaurants in the area. By now, the restaurant buyers were venturing to the fish market, as the fishermen were now coming back with catches fresher than what he had in his ice chest. He went to the Vernon Street Fish Market where he met Fisherman and his crew. He exchanged the rest of fish in the chest for thirty Belizean dollars. From there he walked to the Chinese corner store where he bought four cigarettes, a pound of flour, a pound of lard, baking powder, two pints of grape Fanta, and a pound of butter for nine dollars, and headed home.

When he reached the house, it was pleasantly empty. He thought about the day’s events while he prepared hot flour tortillas and warmed a pot of stewed black beans he had made two nights prior for tonight’s evening tea. After eating, he turned on the television while he changed his clothes. His working clothes served a purpose, but they would not do when he hit the streets to hang out. Hip-hop clothes were good for him, especially when hanging out after work. Nothing would be on television worth while on BET until after nine in the evening. 106 and Park came on later. That program gave live coverage of all of the rappers, the music videos, the clothes, everything that was in style. He could imagine the African American lifestyle by looking at these images.

Sometimes a rapper or entertainer from Jamaica or other island from the Caribbean made the top ten on 106 and Park like Collie Buds or Gyptian. He was filled with pride anytime he saw them, because he was able to identify with his roots. The lyrics for example were more familiar. Collie Buds talked about legalizing weed, the root of his current woes. The roads, buildings and the people in his videos were so familiar to him that Leonard swore Collie Buds was stationed somewhere in Belize. The only thing that betrayed Collie's location was his Jamaican accent. The accent was similar, but different... he could not explain why, but he often found himself using that Jamaican accent with people he did not know on the street, especially tourists. Only those people who knew him would know that he did not natively speak Jamaican Patois. Besides it was a trend in Belize. He had heard many local men his age use it.

The noise of the television was refreshing in the background while he rummaged through his clothes to find something suitable to wear. Leonard maximized the clothes he received over the years thanks to television. He watched 106 and Park religiously every night. The audience was wise in their sense of fashion as they counted down the best music soul and rap and videos, and many of the clothes he had gotten later as an adolescent were still in style. He had long sold the clothes he had outgrown or did not fit with "the times". Inspired by the success experienced by the black people portrayed on 106 and Park, Leonard watched intently. Rappers such as Bow-Wow, who had made it to the top after coming from nothing, fascinated him.

"Whenever you put haard work ina whateva you wan be, you can be it."

It looks good... the lifestyles of the rapper. America is a much more developed place. Naturally, things like that could not happen here in Belize. Of course, money could make it happen, but money was always tight. The money needed to buy the creativity of talented individual could not be found in Belize. He made a sour face.

“Dem bwoys mek one song and sell ten billion copies throughout the whole of America!” He said to the television. “After that, deh no hafa sing no mo’ for a while!” The television kept blaring the local news, unconcerned. Leonard sighed as he put on his Dickeyes with a striped brightly colored orange and white Polo along with his carefully conserved Timberlands. Although he did the impossible to keep the shoes looking their best, they were frayed along the ankle. The sole was also showing signs of wear, and he had replaced the shoelaces three or four times. Still he was proud of his shoes. To this day, no one in his crowd could afford them.

Leonard thought of Bow-Wow and his success. He thought of his cars, his house, his clothes and jewelry he had seen on the various segments on BET. Surely he didn’t have to work after going platinum, but they keep working hard...partially because the money made from a CD gets shared out to the artists. Leonard was sure the entertainer made something small, something like thirty-five percent, but still, that adds up as an individual. There would always be support for that kind of music in America.

Leonard nodded. As long as the support was there to buy, people can be productive. In Belize, such a venture is difficult. Different cultures, different music, different ethnicities, from different corners of the world combined with a very small population all take away from a united Belizean effort.

Local artists from Belize can’t make it unless they are in America. Who would want to support a local from Belize? What was Belize to them? No—you had to go there...to the States. Only then can you make anything out of yourself. Rap music has support everywhere there. He saw the awards shows on BET where big dreams were being fulfilled, and then they turn around and give to the communities. That is why they have support.

He suddenly wondered what kind of support he would get once he convinced his father that he was ready. He felt he was ready for anything...he only had to keep his mind and ears open for the opportunities.

After finishing his house chores, Leonard left the house to venture outside. Queen Street was alive once more, but with a different kind of crowd. Gone were the professionals, the sleekly dressed and carefully made up women of the morning hours. The tourists had also disappeared. These were locals in all of their fullness. He passed one of the local fisher boys who had gone with Fisherman this morning on the corner of Queen and Eyre Street. They were still dressed in the fisherman rags of this morning. He clutched a Belikin in one hand and a cigarette in another. Their eyes narrowed slightly as they scanned Leonard. One fisher boy nodded a greeting, but said nothing. Leonard nodded in return and kept going.

Let people think what they want. They always thought he had money. They always thought he had connections. He did, but in the end it was about lifestyle. Dumb people could do it too if they got the correct thinking and understanding. He had the understanding... he was just waiting for his chance to apply it fully once he got to the States with his dad.

Leonard contented himself with these comforting thoughts. He bought himself a Belikin Stout and disappeared up the street in search of a local game of dominoes.





## **Weezie**

*Moses Michael Levis aka Shyne was deported last Wednesday back to the Jewel after spending close to ten years in prison in the US. Since then he has moved out of the Radisson Fort George and has kept away from public eye. That brief hiatus was broken today as he begins to rebuild his image after prison life. He made his first public appearance at his old stomping ground and at least for now, he will remain in Belize. News Five's Jose Sanchez was at the school when the rapper addressed the students:*

“I came up on the streets you know with guys who were gang banging and into criminal activity and those tools never worked. You either end up spending the rest of your life in prison or sleeping in a grave for the rest of your life. I’m just like you. I grew up on Curassow Street you know. When I was coming up we didn’t even have toilets. And one of the things my uncle Finnegan and my father Prime Minister Barrow implored upon me was an education, education, education. I was like yeah alright education, whatever. But as I came up, my music being Shyne, being able to go from Curassow Street to United States and sell millions of records, the only way I was able to do that is because I used to be at my Uncle Dennis’ house and read the dictionary in a corner. I would fail all my class but English. You know I would pay attention. And if it wasn’t for that I wouldn’t never any records and be able to call Jay Z on my iPhone. And I wouldn’t be able to live the life that I live.”

*Deportation has not kept him back, and reports in the hip-hop community say that the rapper has signed a seven figure deal with Def Jam Recording. His uncle, Housing Minister Michael Finnegan confirmed the online reports. Though the exact sum has not been revealed, no matter if you count in U.S. or Belize dollars, the country’s most famous deportee is making millions of dollars. Industry giants such as Doctor Dre and Jimmy Lovine have been part of the bidding war for the man who is considered one of the few remaining gangster rappers, Shyne has been collaborating with Kyambo “Hip-hop” Joshua, a veteran manager of a company called HipHopSince1978. In addition to Shyne, the company also manages artists such as Drake, Young Jeezy, and Lil Wayne, who is considered one of hip-hops largest money makers.*

Weezie pedaled quickly down Central American Boulevard towards Cemetery Road, whizzing past the gridlocked traffic and the occasional fruit cart. The merchandise was already at canal side, waiting for him. A buyer was also on his way to the street market too. He needed to get there fast, so he borrowed his friends' bike, telling his friend that he was going to the store.

“I di com right bak!”

In a way, he was. As he sped, he wished his brother wasn't so efficient at his job. He had gotten merchandise from Corozol much faster than anticipated. Apparently he was successful because he called Weezie before two o'clock this afternoon. His brother knew that at that time of the day, Weezie was still working his day job. Nevertheless, the transaction could not happen without Weezie. Only he knew the buyer. The buyer just called him at two-forty to tell him that he was making his way to the market via car. This time of day, traffic could be gridlocked, and it would take the buyer some time to get there. The Belizean black market was hot—much hotter than the retail market, since no one paid retail price for anything. Retail was for tourists.

Defly, Weezie steered past a pothole while navigating traffic. It would not do to splash muck on his white tennis. His straight leg jeans and white T-shirt complimented his dark skin and his Charlotte college fitted cap he just bought for cheap off the street. He whizzed past the Shell gas station onto Cemetery road, passing the food stands, and uniformed school children as the traffic thickened on the way downtown.

He wished that this transaction could have been done on one of his days off, but there was nothing that could be done about it, and he really needed the money. He promised his woman a gift for Christmas, two days ago. He had an excuse for now, as he got paid on the Christmas Eve and all the stores have been closed for Christmas Day and

Boxing Day. Weezie would not have that luxury today, and he could not tell her that he had already spent the money on other things.

He grew up on those streets of Belize City from the time he was five years old. Weezie lived with his mother, his grandmother and his three sisters in a small apartment off of Raccoon Street. His father was long gone, addicted to crack cocaine for as long as he could remember. His mother worked as a teacher and all of the money she got went to her three daughters. His grandmother gave him food, but the streets provided the rest of his needs.

When father owed money, men would come around and backhand his father in the face in the presence of his children. Those things enraged Weezie, these things made him want to kill those men. Yet he never killed them, partially because he had no love for his father, either. Weezie could remember as clear as day his father's erratic behavior started. He was in first form. Weezie's father would disappear for days at a time. He would give his mother money, and then would come back for it. If Weezie's mother did not wish to give him the money, or if she had already spent it, he would beat her, sometimes for hours. Things of value in the house often came up missing.

Weezie almost chuckled. He noticed that his mother over these times became distanced from him. He was sure it was because his father and him were practically identical. That hurt him...that would hurt anybody. It is hard but Weezie tried not to judge his father because of what he did. When he was 11, his father left his mother and his sisters for good. Weezie had to dedicate himself more to the household, and was forced to hustle harder. His mother could not say much when he stayed out all night if he came home with cash.

Nevertheless, the distance between Weezie and his mother became even more pronounced. When he came in after a night out, she often did not talk to him, even if he put hard cash on her hand. Sometimes his mother did not speak a word to him for a week. It

did not matter if he was not getting any love at home. He was 13 at the time. Let them ignore him. He had his street family. He hung around with the people who gave him the most attention... those that demonstrated the most love for him. He would do anything for them.

It was the streets that gave him his little brother. He was hanging out one time when we was around 16 years old when he noticed that a young boy had been following him. After a few weeks, the young boy approached Weezie, telling him that he was his biological brother. Weezie did not have to look into the boy's brown eyes for long to know the boy was telling the truth. He was a replica of his mother.

Later, when he asked his mother about it, she responded curtly,

“Bwoy, no mek ah slap fa you rass. How you luk di ask me deh tings deh?”

The look she gave Weezie told him not to inquire ever again in his adolescent life, but later on, his father confirmed that what he has heard was true.

“Dat? Da fa you ma dat.”

Charles lived with relatives three blocks away, but he, like his brother, grew up practically on the street. They were not alone, however. They had each other and two other boys who shared the same fate. Stony and Maurice were unrelated, but they were always together. He found them while ditching school one morning. They showed him love from the beginning. Together they stole clothes from various markets to resell in the black market for a profit mostly on the weekends, when certain merchandise was scarce. They would wait until then when the market was at its lowest, and then set up their own stall just outside the market entrance along the canal-side. These profits are what they used to eat, buy clothes, alcohol, weed and various necessities.

Weezie scanned Vernon Street as he reached the canal, stopping at the corner. The market was in full swing, with carts lined along both sides of the street with the canal flowing

down the center. Small bridges spanned the canal, facilitating shopping and access to the market from all sides. He did not see Charles his client's car. He was early.

“Ah kud have one shilling please?”

He turned to see one of his neighbors, Isaiah, on another bike looking anxiously. Isaiah's eyes shifted from one side of the street to the other, as if half expecting to make a hasty getaway from an enemy. In his hand he had a bottle of overproof rum mixed with water. Isaiah's clothes were ragtag: an old pair of nameless jeans with a stained white polo shirt. He had on his signature red cap and ancient, worn sandals.

“Ah no got no shilling mien.” Said Weezie, giving the neighbor a cold stare.

“*Yu* no got shilling?” Said Isaiah under his breath as he pedaled past, but he got louder as he pedaled further away. “One *big* workin man like yu? Cho!!”

Weezie's face screwed into the most horrific of snarls, but said nothing as he stared past the foolish neighbor back down Vernon Street. He could see that four busses had turned into the terminal since he arrived at the corner, all them arriving from the north. Charles would be on one of them. No sign of the client, as the vehicular traffic on Cemetery and Vernon ever so slowly approached gridlock.

He could not afford to thrash Isaiah like he wanted. This was not the time—and Weezie kept up with the Times. His neighbor looked local with his out of time raggedy-ann dress. Everyone knows *local* style -- plain shirts, shoes from the 90's old jeans, and picky hair. You can't be seen as local and get anywhere, because locals never went anywhere, ever. Hip Hop—now that is where it is. He watched shows on cable from the states to get his hip-hop. BET 106 and Park, for example can always be used to keep up on the times.

Anyone who watched that show can keep up with the latest fashions – things. What's came out as 'new'—what's in style was important because in Belize, you did *not* want

to be left behind. The latest slang, clothes, and music, everything like that: Hip-hop culture was up ... yeah, up to the Times.

If Weezie was not into that style, people saw him as a local, and that was a shame, because the style was what got the bitches...the ones he didn't care about. Come out in public looking local, like Isaiah, and everyone will look down on you. You can't be out in the streets looking local, and you most definitely cannot do street business legitimately like that. The ugliest person can be successful, as long as the person dresses flashy, people will think that there is money. They don't even have to know if you have money or not. None of that really mattered, as long as he was up to the Times.

The refined women –the ones who wear apple bottom jeans won't go for the locals. British Knights, LA Gear...ungh..you need a straight leg jeans proper T shirt, a nice chain, hair done. That is the way of a successful businessman. That is what 106 and Park showed all of us. The women, the rappers, the entertainers... fresh. They look *nice*. Isaiah would never compare.

Weezie dismounted and began to walk the bike to the place where he always met his brother. He walked with a swagger of confidence. Weezie knew he was fresh... yes, that swagger will definitely get more bitches.

Weezie snorted. If he was stale, he will maybe have one girl from elementary school, and that's it. It's all about dress in Belize City. He picked up his pace as he saw his brother coming. Charles appeared to see Weezie and also walked a bit faster. They met just outside the bus terminal. Looking from the terminal, the vehicles on Cemetery Road had come to a complete halt.

“Weh di gowan my bwoy?” Said Charles.

“You tell me- bitch,” Weezie responded half-jokingly in an American accent. They clasped hands.

“How many yu get?”

Charles smiled. Two of his teeth were capped in gold. He had on a orange checkered Sean John button-up with a crisp white shirt showing underneath. Charles also wore dark jeans that draped graciously over his tan Timberland boots. He pulled the knapsack off.

“Bwoy! Da wan seta nice fones I di bring down! Watch ya... Ah kud only get eight” Said Charles. Weezie’s breath caught as his brother pulled out one of the cellphones. It was bright blue case with chrome edges and a bright quartz face correctly displaying the date and time. Charles, still smiling, slid the quartz face to the side to reveal a chrome texting board with red letters engraved on the tiny touchpads.

“Oanli eight!” He hoped that would be enough. BTL or Smart?

“BTL.”

Now it was Weezie’s turn to smile. He nodded his satisfaction. BTL phones were worth more these days on the street since Smart has been experiencing technical difficulties as of late. It was not as if people instinctively trusted the government controlled BTL, it was that it was less likely that Belize Telemedia Limited would experience a major technical issue that would ultimately end up with services cut to customers. Smart, however was competitive with no contracts.

Busses continued to pour into the Novelos bus station. Weezie checked his phone. There were no messages. He cast a sidelong view at Charles. His brother seemed lost in thought. He wondered what deal he cut to get his hands on such nice phones. The less Weezie knew about it the better. Charles’ merchandising deals have gone bad before.

There was that one time during the holiday season when the street family was out drinking at a club. The four of them were on alert because word had already reached Charles that one of his deals in Orange Walk had not gone as planned, and they were



coming for him. During their drinking, Charles informed Weezie and Maurice that he had spotted one of the thugs from Orange Walk in the bar. They watched as Charles walked over and shouldered the bali. The visitor did indeed appear to be looking for Charles, because a swift set of angry words was exchanged between them. It was then that Weezie walked up to the man and lashed him alongside his temple with a pint.

He smirked at that memory. He rolled with his street family all the way. They were like wolves; all for one. It was late in the evening, and that night the entire family was drunk... gone. Weezie could have cared less what the consequences would be back then. No one came looking for his family. That was the reason why 'eh got stoned ina di face.

He remembered how the li bali staggered backwards under the crushing weight of the local pint before crashing dramatically to the floor. The bwoy cut out, while the rest of the guests in the club looked at them. Weezie's face twisted with contempt as he remembered their faces. Because they came from a certain area of town, they got blamed for everything.

He returned their stares defiantly, daring them to say anything. Better to do something and own up to it instead of doing nothing and getting blamed for everything. A few more cold glances were fired his way and the club crowd nervously began to resume the party. Even if they had done nothing, the mere fact that he and his family were in the vicinity would be cause for suspicion in the mind of some people. He remembered shrugging and ordering another pint of Tropical. It would be a few hours before Weezie and his family would face any real challenges.

Weezie was brought out his recollections by his brother's voice. He was pointing up the street.

“Dat man no di hail yu, Weezie?”

The Vernon Street vehicle traffic had come to a complete standstill, as the rush hour traffic reached its Zenith. Cycle traffic however, continued its feverish pace. A bus, cut short of its final destination by the bottleneck, opened its doors and uniformed school children of all ages poured onto the street. The children made straight for the vendors set up alongside the road by the bus terminal, selling rice and bean, stewed chicken, and potato salad. There was a man standing on the other side of the street Weezie recognized as Tolliver. This man was the owner of an expensive electronics shop on Orange Street. Tolliver was also Weezie's client.

"Ya. Let's go." Weezie walked his bike through the choked traffic across the street to greet the man, and proceeded to a parked car. There Charles, Weezie and Tolliver struck a deal to sell the businessman six phones for ninety dollars Belize a piece. The phones, as it turned out, still needed to be programmed, which is an additional expense. That fact knocked down their street value, but for electronic shops like Tolliver's that specialized in reprogramming and resale, these phone were still worth ninety dollars. The price was good because he could reprogram them and sell the phone to the public for one hundred and twenty Belize dollars. When they left the car, Charles gave his brother one hundred and twenty Belize dollars.

"Eh." Weezie snorted "Dats all?" Charles turned on him.

"Whe yu mean *dat's all?*" Charles said, backing away from Weezie. "Ah hoae dis muni right now. I got to go. Hah--"

Chuckling, Charles tossed one of the phones to Weezie. "Maybe you kud mek Tolliva program ah free." Weezie caught the cellphone, and put it in his pocket. Yes. That was exactly what he would do later. Charles nodded his goodbye and turned on his heel down Vernon Street. Weezie hauled his bike the other way against traffic and headed back

to Cemetery road. His brother had clients of his own. He suddenly kicked himself for not asking for a jersey or polo.

Weezie suspected that Charles had also gone to the Free Zone, which meant clothes. If he had any, they would most surely be the first to go to the coolie people and East Indians selling clothes on the downtown thoroughfares. He was sure to see his brother later that evening around the house, and hoped that would not be too late. Everyone knew the power of clothes... the power of looking nice. Gang bangers as they rob somebody they go and buy clothes. The same clothes they see on 106 and park. Weezie lived the philosophy: *get what you can now, because maybe tomorrow you will not be here.*

Weezie rode back toward Central American Blvd to return the bike. Get what you can. Maybe a family man would see it differently, but for him, alongside the sex, its about living for today... getting today's thrill. It was thrill seeking that got the family into many brawls.

Weezie continued to recall that particular holiday season when drinking – he hit dude in the face with a pint for Charles. Later that same evening the angry bali came back with his friends. Stony stepped up and whopped the leading man with a cue stick, and ended up biting the bali on his hand. The other man who had been previously beaten by Weezie, rushed, and tackled Weezie in a fury of arms and legs. Other people began to stomp at Weezie, and dashed heavy local beer pints at Weezie's head. The police came and burst shots in the air, and the crowd scattered. Weezie and the family escaped through back alleys, and were eventually questioned by police, but there were no witnesses.

Weezie continued to pedal, reaching the roundabout at Central American Blvd. That holiday scene wasn't as serious, some other after club scenes involving life or death. How was the family to make ends meet otherwise? Weezie and his family have always done

it together. All for one and one for all. If people thought they were out to play, they were mistaken.

He thought back to Isaiah, and thanked God he did not flog his neighbor on the street corner. Where Weeie lived, there existed neighbors who held nothing but contempt for him. When his security job laid him off for a couple of weeks, they smiled and slid over to him. The more Weezie tried to get someplace, the more they hated him for it. When he was not working, they applaud. Weezie had to laugh to himself. There are some kinds of men who did not want to be around him when he was successful. Not through his alley.

Whenever he had money, the neighbors became vexed. When payday came for him they keep their distance. They were so envious, so treacherous, that Weezie had to keep his attention focused on them. Dweebs, Geeks, Nerds, Spaz... he had names for all of them.

Weezie's face twisted into a frown. He blamed society for that... he specifically blamed cable television. TV had us messed up. Watching TV gave us an image to strive toward. Oddly enough, anything that was black however was considered NO GOOD. His mother and the other women in his family never viewed the images of black women on the television as favorable. His mother was a not black woman, but a brown skinned creole. She always disassociated herself from anyone much darker than herself for as long as Weezie could remember. The way his mother watched TV and the way her family talked about black people made Weezie and his sisters believe that anything that was black should be avoided. Anything that was dark skinned was not good. Dark was the bottom.

Arriving back where he began, Weezie delivered the bike back to his friend. He had been gone for roughly two hours and the owner was not at all pleased. He bought the man a half pack of Colonial, which seemed to satisfy him. Weezie spent another hour smoking and drinking Red Stripe until he began walking up the dusty Boulevard towards Fabers Road to

see his woman. His mother definitely approved of his new girl of eight months named Paula. Yes, Paula was her type 100 percent. Nice and clear.

He had a dark girlfriend once when he was 15. Her name was Darla. She was so sweet, and even a little intelligent. Darla would often come to his yard to hail him, and spend time after school. One day, after getting into an argument at school with one of his sisters, who were shades lighter, his mother came out while Darla was in the yard, took one look at her and went back inside. Shortly after he heard his mother's voice peel out.

“Bwoy! Get dat fuckin black skrag outa me yard, and no mek ah come back!”

Dark skin needs an “upgrade” his mother told him when he protested later. She glared at her son scornfully.

“You black,” his mother said, scanning him from head to toe. Her mouth screwed in a sarcastic grin. The words barely sounded civil. “For yu head barely could grow hair. Why go and breed another dark girl?”

Weezie stared back at his mother, and saw in her the problem. They did not want anybody looking down on them. She would be looking for an upgrade. Something more refined.

She pressed him to find a woman with more refined color—more refined features, clearer, smooth. “Black on black do not really match.” Thinking on those words, Weezie knew it was true. It is what the TV showed us...it is what the society told us. He was black, and he hung out with black people but could never date a dark skinned woman.

From that time on he never dated a dark skinned girl. He always went after the lighter skinned kind. Weezie sighed. He made sure that he was good at seducing them. The ironic thing was that the darker skinned women had him looking weak all the time. When he had them where he wanted them, they would ask to meet his sisters or his mother, and Weezie would be forced to deny them. He could never bring them to meet his blood family.

Everytime he tried to bring a dark skinned woman home, his mother would simply glare at them both and walk away, silent. His sisters were of no help. It was difficult to keep them after that.

Interestingly enough, the opposite would happen if Weezie brought a clear colored woman into the house, no matter the race. “Well... I hope you treat this one good!” His mother would exclaim, winking at the young woman. If his mother really liked the woman, she would take her on an outing with the rest of her daughters. The light skinned woman would blend right in.

When Weezie pointed this out, his mother would say that the intelligence levels of these dark skinned women left much to be desired. This of course was in the face of red-skinned and caramel colored women who never finished high school were obviously inferior to many dark skinned women who did. “Me no care...” She said, and that was it. He would definitely pick up a red skinned woman one over a dark one, even if he liked the two equally, and it seemed like he was right in doing so-- That’s what the TV told him...it was what society told him to do.

When his mom came from visiting Jamaica, she would come home with Jamaican films. She would often travel to Jamaica and bring DVDs to watch. Everyone watched them in the house. We we saw was more of the same: beautifully sexy successful brightly colored clear skinned people. These are the grade of people who will produce beautiful grandchildren. All of the women in town wanted what those women had: bling, cars, money, and fame, and if he wanted those women, he had to know how to get those items.

Weezie got a five dollar fried chicken from the Chinese, and crossed the Boulevard at Farber’s Road. Two big semi trucks without trailers rolled freely down the dusty road toward the docks. When they came back this way, they would be beleaguered with freight.

The freight would be carrying merchandise from the sea, mostly things he surely could not afford on his measly pay.

These were some of the reasons why he paid attention to hip-hop lyrics as well, because, well, they talk about the things he wanted to get. He often listened to what rap artists say in interviews. They say that they get what they get by working hard... that's bullshit. You can't get what those rappers have working hard. How can anyone get the things those rappers and entertainers have by simply working a 9 to 5 job? His little security job could not compare. How was he to make money speaking Kriol? Kriol was what he knew. Kriol was easy. English however... it was difficult to talk proper English.

Weezie sucked his teeth. He would only try to speak English if he had to speak to a foreigner, or when he was looking for a job. He found that if he tried to speak English, he would get hired quicker. They hire people who speak much English quicker than those who relate a raw dutty Kriol.

No...not Everyone in Belize wanted to live like the rappers on the street. Not everyone craved the cars, the woman the clothes, the bling... rap music. The people who relate to them come from the same backgrounds.

When the artists rap about the harshness of life, Weezie relates easily. The drugs, the oppression, the haters, the hustles of the street are unique. It's hard not to be envious, because at the same time, Belizeans want what rappers have. Weezie wanted it, and sometimes it took robbing cheating or stealing to get it. When you are hungry, you will rob anyone. If Weezie was in need and his family did not have it, he had to get it somewhere. Why go out and beg for someone to look you in the face and tell you that they don't have it when they know they do? Working a 9 to five in security was not going to suffice. Some people make more money thieving than working in Belize.

He believed that if his woman ever needed anything, its best to get it for her. If she was happy then he could be happy. If not, she may do something rash that could result in her getting killed. Crime in Belize was a relatively easy occupation, but with heavy consequences if on the rare occasion one was caught red handed. Weezie tries his best to accommodate his girlfriend. Sometimes women act like bitches and they need to be put in their places too.

Lil Wayne was his dog, and his lyrics were always the best to help him manage his women:

*I hate that women lie so I lie to them back.*

*Got two bitches in my pants quiet neither them that,*

*A lot of bitches want dick, I give a lot of them that.*

*Let's do a pill I can fuck you for an hour with that`*

*And to the KIDS DRUGS KILL I'm acknowledging that.*

*But when I'm on the drugs I don't have a problem with that.*

*And my niggas got guns the size of toddlers bitch*

*And we aiming right at your fucking collar bitch.---POW*

“Bwoy!”

Weezie looked up to see his girlfriend on a bike riding up to him. “Weh happen pet? Weh yu di think bout so haard, eh?” She punched him playfully on the shoulder.

Weezie looked at Paula’s cute clear features and took her hands into his darker ones. “Hah.” He said. He then reached into his pocket and pressed the cell phone Charles had given him into her unsuspecting hand.

“Happy holidays babes.”





## **Empress**

*Boom Buk*

*Love the way you wop me... Make this gal stop—*

*Climb up in the cabin...Of the big truck!*

*Have me on the tarp*

*Even though you bruk. [expletive]*

You don't understand,

What yo woman needs from her man,

While you deh pon the streets all the time,

You should bear this in mind—

These streets don't love you like I do!

You need to know that

*Every day by herself,*

*The Mommy cried and cried,*

*But at night she smiled, when Daddy was by her side*

*One night she almost told him,*

*It almost broke her heart, But she forced herself to hold the secret*

*That was tearing her apart.*

*Mommy kept the family together the best way she could*

*Cuz she knew that in this case the truth would do more harm than good.*

*What Daddy didn't know didn't hurt him,*

*He'd have no cause to fret*

*And that's as close to "happily ever after"*

*As anyone can get.*

*Songs by TANYA STEPHENS*

Empress and looked over at the clock to realize that it was after eight thirty in the morning. The position of the sun filtered through cracks in the top of the wall, making little specks of dust visible as they floated through the air. She looked at the window. The light outside told her that it was still early morning. The pale light was not yet bright enough. There was movement below and the sound of water running somewhere in the building. Gilbert was nowhere in sight. It was good she was awake. She had plenty of work to do.

She frowned. Her tight micro-braided curls disheveled after a night's sleep. A quick sweep of the small room told her that her boyfriend was not inside. There was a pot of boiling water on the hot plate. She hated that he did that, and no matter how much he told her that nothing was going to happen, she was afraid of having the hotplate on while she was sleeping. He would just look at her with a face that said,

“Da wehpaa yu fram?”

It wasn't as if she and her family had pretended that they were too rich to use hot plates in cold weather as a heating device for long winter nights. She thought it was just as dangerous in a wooden room then as it is now, but no one paid her any mind. The room was big, as bachelor rooms went; it was spacious enough to accommodate both of their wardrobes, a bed and some boxes. She had seen some rooms that could only fit a double bed. After a year of living with him, she could never get over how much he worked. He was often gone before seven in the morning, leaving her alone in the room. She got up and turned off the water and grabbed a clean towel began her morning.

She looked around the room in satisfaction. Every thing had its place now, not like before she moved into this room with Gily. Things were neater and much cleaner. The laundry was done. Food was on the table for him everyday, and he brought in the money. Granted, there were those other women, but she lived with him and not them. There were always women in competition with her, because Gily made money. If they could, they

would come in here and throttle her in her sleep, take her gear, her man, her place and her reputation. Tentatively, she walked to the window and peeped outside. He would most likely pay for leaving her alone here. . “Da weh you wan, deh fi rape me, noh?” She would hiss at him when she saw him on the street. If he was busy he would ignore her or chase her off, but if he wasn’t he might take her in his arms and give her a wad of cash.

You had to have money to be with a woman of any stature in Belize. These days she was getting a lot of cash, but no real attention from him. Today he would notice her. *These streets don't love you like I do.*

Sometimes, she thought that her life was one big Tanya Stephens song. It seemed that everything that Tanya sang about ended up in her life in one way or another. Empress particularly found that she resonated to what Tanya said about relationships. Her family was rife with some of the same devastating secrets sung about by the artist. If only she could get her mother to acquiesce to some of those secrets.

Empress believed that she never would. Her mother was staunch and headstrong about guarding what dark things she knew about the family, and would take such things to the grave to her. Mummy would ask, “Weh yu wan no dat fah? Yu musi wan heet up fi yu hed no? So she kept them-- just like in Tanya’s songs. Tanya especially spoke to Empress in reference to her love life. Tanya Stephens was absolutely right when she sings about the negative ways women were treated.

In one video, the street-baller with loads of cash, friends and influence on the street disrespects his girlfriend, who then stops protecting him. The video shows that without her protection, his whole enterprise comes to a screeching halt, crumbling into a heap of shambles. He ends up in jail, the feds seize the cash and the car, and someone else takes over his spot and prestige on the streets. Empress chuckled. She was just as sure that was exactly what would meet Gily if he did not play his cards right with her.

She smiled as she thought of her boyfriend. The way he came to her when they first met:

*I ratha be n-i-g-g-a*

*So I can get you drunk and smoke weed all day*

*No matter if you don't love me baby*

*You need a thug in your life*

*Them bustas aint loving u right...*

It took her a while to realize that he was rapping to her, but nevertheless thus began her strange love triangle relationship with Gily, and Tupac Shakur. Day in and day out, he listened to his rap artists, Lil Wayne, The General, Dr. Dre and Jay Z. Rap City and 106 and park were the shows he watched. The local radio stations were more interested in playing 80's rock, Reggae/Reggaeton, Spanish or Church music, so Gily looked to cable and the internet when he could afford it. Biggie Small and Tupac were life blood to Gily. Rap made up his world. It was who he was.

He dressed the way Biggie and Tupac told him: White Pumas, straight leg jeans, a jersey from the NBA, bling and a starter cap. Sure, those kinds of clothes cost him, and along with her clothes, the whole venture was expensive, but right now they could splurge a little. Business was good for him. Most of the weed moved on the streets fast. This was December, and tourist season was in full swing. They always filtered down from the cruise ships, off the islands, in from Central America and through to Mexico, and they always seemed to find Gily. He could sound just like them with an African American style. He was always rapping...always rapping, and the television was always tuned to BET. She guessed BET had much to do with who she was in more ways than one herself if she gave it a thought, but that would make her sad; and right now, she had work to do.

She grabbed the shower-pan, bathed, and after a breakfast of Belizean flour tortillas, stewed beans, eggs, pork chops and coffee, Empress methodologically selected her clothes. Today, being an audition day, she chose a sexy ensemble: white leather boots with a half wooden inch heel, Levi skinny jeans, white Timberland belt with silver buckles, and blue a wife-beater tank-top and white leather jacket. Silver accents-- rings, bangles, and hoop earrings adorned her body and gave her movement a musical sound. Looking at herself in the mirror, she suddenly thought back to the hostess she saw on *106 and Park*: Brown skin, lovely, and attitudinal. Empress could read the woman's style, the way she talked, the manner that she carried herself, the way she tossed the curly twists of her locks all the while looking at the camera through the rose tinted mirrored *hater blockers*. It was the clothes. Empress put on her fragrance and observed herself. Yes, most definitely.

That woman on the BET show knew how to be fashionable. They were always in their designer jeans, and were professional. They never seemed to make mistakes. Neither the dancers, nor the announcers ever faltered either. The African Americans did what they did well. The women of all sizes were given a place in the audience, some of which were even more flawless. Empress felt that as an up and coming fashion designer, she needed to watch people and know how people would feel when they are wearing certain clothes. Empress saw that women on *106 and Park* had no real bling. Of course, she would, and had to add her own touches of the silver to make the outfit pop. It was her style of clothes: a little hip-hop, that's all. She knew that if she was going to step out like she had to this afternoon, she had to "luk dam gud!"

She walked over to her journal book and picked it up from the nightstand and cleared the dishes from from last evening's session of watching the TV shows. Mariah Carey had made it to the video countdown once again. She began to recite the lyrics. Her smooth alto voice filled the small room easily:

*I didn't know nothing, I was stupid, I was foolish I was lying to myself—*

*When you left I lost a part of me,*

*It's still so hard to believe*

*Come back baby please*

*'Cuz we belong together...*

She checked the lyrics in her book and was pleased to see that she had gotten them right. Last night she had double-checked them when the video came on. One of her favorite things to do was kick back, relax with a snack and watch the show. Her journal was full of lyrics she had copied down. She particularly enjoyed the Wild Out Wednesday dance contests. The groups were polished, and professional. The moves the groups invented were inspiring. Literally, she could watch all day. Today however, she could not watch the reality shows that came on in the mornings. She had to finish her preparations. The local cable station was holding auditions for the Karaoke Show, and she was certain to win. She could do anything ...her childhood taught her that. Why shouldn't we aspire to reach our goals? Belizeans are like that. "Da sayhn ting deh Americans deh du pon TV wi ku du tuh!"

Empress picked up her purse and looked at the mirror once more. Decisively, she picked up a white beret and styled it on her head, and pranced out the door clicking the heels of her boots every step of the way.

The ocean breeze from the Caribbean Sea was damp and heavy today as a tropical low pressure system made its way across the Central American subcontinent. Although all was dry, there was a sense of rain in the air. The sun was momentarily brilliant as it peeked out from the clouds, illuminating Empress in her white boots and beret, her shining silver adornments and dark skin against the dull cracked façade of her building.

Then the ragtag clouds came once again, and outside became lost in a frame of greys, whites and blacks. A moderate sea breeze kept the palm and coconut trees in constant

sway. The dark blue outline of the Belizean flag in the distance could be seen from the set of duplexes where Empress was standing. Many passers-by on the street hailed her, on their way to accomplish unknown goals.

Empress and her boyfriend had been fortunate to find a cheap room this close to the downtown area. That was where all the tourists were, and with that came more money. It was nothing for Gily to make one hundred U.S. off the tourists, and much more on a good day. The money Gily brought home to her impressed Empress. Sometimes he would give her 200 U.S. and tell her to go shopping which afforded her and a few of her friends a great wardrobe, shoes, and spending money to spare. Gily treated her good, and she dressed for him. Prior to living with Gily, she had lived with another man for three months, and before that, she lived in her mother's house on Euphrates with her two sisters. She had no brothers. Life there was anything but a bed of roses for the aspiring artist. If anything went wrong at home, she was blamed for it, and she was sure it was because of her color. Her sisters told her so on many occasions.

Empress smirked at the memories as she crossed the plank that covered the deep street gutter and stepped onto King Street. She looked towards Albert Street and saw that the morning was in full motion. Reggae music poured from various music shops and record stores that lined the busy King Street commercial area. Familiar smells wafted to her. Smells of coconut and cinnamon, milk, and sweet pastry. She instinctively crossed the street to pick up a coconut tart from the local restaurant, and began her trek toward the BLISS Center.

She continued smirking as her heeled feet hit the stony pavement. The tropical winter was chilly against her skin, as the air had not quite warmed to normal temperatures. Small potholes half full of water told her that it had rained last night. The ragged clouds billowed and roiled from the north at a rapid pace. A stiff breeze snapped her neighbors'



clothing on the laundry line. Somewhere, a baby wailed. Stray dogs wandered around the piles of garbage just hidden from plain sight. She paid it all no mind, because she knew where Belize was going: to the tourists. She was going to get out of here. She could do anything, she kept telling herself.

“Empress? Cohn ya darling.”

She turned back to the restaurant where someone had called her name. It was the cashier, calling her from one of the service windows. “Wehpaa fi yu sista deh? Dat da di reasin why I no cut nuna unu wan brek, I tel unu tu jeez!”

Empress was scandalized. She had no idea which sister the cashier was referring, but Empress did not talk to either of them. “Weh yu di call owt ya fa? After yu no I no taak to nuna deh! Weh happen? Da which wona deh di abstrak yu so?”

The cashier looked incredulous. “Which wan yu tink darlin owta the treea unu? Tel Suzette stop pley, an I wan mi moni now.”

“Gyan yu no I no even luk pahn deh. I wan mek mummy no den.” Empress shot a glance down the opposite side of King Street, toward Euphrates Street and her mother’s house. The poor cashier. If her sister Suzette owed her money, she may not ever get it back. The loan sharks were after Suzette after she got a loan that she could not repay. She rarely saw Suzette when she visited her mom, but Karen was always there.

Empress felt less contempt for Karen, mainly because she was the only one still with her mother. High pressure and high sugar had debilitated her mother’s body over the years and it was important that someone was there at the house with her. If Karen was not there, it was most likely that mummy would not have anyone to go to market for her, and would eventually waste away watching television. Her mother used the television to get music, news, obituaries, and local events. Although she rarely used cable, she managed to keep the television on the whole day.

Empress remembered the television there for as long as she could remember. The family yard on Euphrates was located on a sizable lot in the city, with several smaller houses scattered around a bigger historic home once owned by her great grandfather. Empress came from a long history of free creoles that were once banana traders in the Caribbean. She could never get the story straight, but it was believed that her grandmother also worked the trading boats, and the family earned enough to purchase property and build close to the canal. The main house was long in need of repair, with peeling white paint and a red zinc roof. The smaller houses in the yard were in various conditions, from a government funded plysem house to a dwelling made primarily of cement block and zinc roofing. Empress, her mom, and her two sisters all lived in a small cottage of wood that sat high off the ground on pillars of wood or “piles” toward the street side of the property. It was there where she went to the Anglican school around the corner and learned how to become a good Christian like everyone else. The first six standards of school were the best for her. Her teacher constantly sent her home with notes of commendation. She remembered one time the family quite by accident met the standard-4 school teacher on the street. The teacher praised Empress for her reading and her math abilities in front of her mother and sisters, and they never forgot it. Whenever Suzette or Karen failed a test or needed counseling of any kind, their mother would direct them to Empress, who was the youngest of the three.

“Da wehpaa unu tink unu gwehn without mat? Eh? Luk pahn fi yu sista... I noh memba laas taim ih mek mistake pah di taim teabls deh. An ih younga dahn unu! Oy!” Her mother would chastise Suzette and Karen constantly, many times in front of company. Empress felt on top of the world, as if she could do anything. In fact, her mother often told her “yu ku du eene ting yu wan, pet...ene ting.”

This left her sisters full of contempt, which surfaced in the form of hurtful and shameless teasing. Empress recalled that words such as “daakie”, “Sootiefoot” or “blackie”,

were often used to describe Empress when mummy was not around. They would double-team her in the most horrible or taunts on the way home. how many uniforms she demanded her mother buy her, she was always seen “as not quite beautiful” by her sisters. Some subjects were taboo to discuss with mummy, and the subject of paternity was by far one of the worst. Over the years the sisters were able to glean from their mother that there were two dads, but identities were carefully hidden from them. The fact that there were two dads deepened the rift in the small family. Whenever the older sisters had an academic problem, they would reluctantly, begrudgingly go to Empress for help with reading and math. Her mother’s encouragement and her sisters’ humiliation made her believe that she could do anything, but all around her she saw that her sisters may be right. The darker skinned had a harder time in Belize-- anyone could see that. It was the topic of adult conversation for as long as she could remember.

The TV showed her otherwise. While in college, Empress saw how the young black people of various shades were successful doing many things on cable. She became fascinated with the dance, singing and rap contests that were won by amateur groups. Prior to BET, she could remember talent shows on local cable stations like channel five and seven, particularly around Christmas time. The Queen of the Bay pageant one of the more popular televised shows. The local talent, however, paled in comparison to the kinds of talent on BET. Their moves were always in step. They were always in sync, professional, and black which gave her hope. If they could so it, Belizeans could do the same thing. Her mother or grandparents never restricted her because she always got good grades in school. So when she began to frequent karaoke nights at the local bars, they did not object.

“Humph, ah ope yu wan mek heas bring ome some moni... da play yu di play, tru?” Was all her mother said. Like most Belizeans, her mother was interested in anything that could improve the household cashflow. So Empress began to practice karaoke in the bars

and youth centers of Belize city. Her favorite songs to cover were Tanya Stephens songs. Empress felt that Tanya had something special to say to the women of today. Empress had always admired Tanya from the time *These Streets* came out in Belize. She remembered that most Jamaicans were proud of her. Some of her Jamaican friends would often put Jamaican stars like Stephens against Belizeans. “Belize no got nuttin pahn Jamaica!” She heard her friend Ruby’s voice in her ears over and over. Empress did not know what to say against her friend’s accusations. Empress herself often thought of herself as Jamaican sometimes. She would often use a Jamaican accent or represent Jamaican colors. They did have some of the best music and athletes in the Caribbean. Once upon a time Belize enjoyed the huge popularity of Marion Jones. A native Belizean, now crushed under controversy—Belize did not even have her anymore.

Nevertheless, everything about Jamaica attracted Empress. She hoped that one day she would get the chance to travel there and see it for herself. What she knew about it came from her Jamaican DJ friends and the television. The radio made use of many, many Jamaican DJs, and Belize city was flooded with music from that island. Tanya Stephens was one of the best female artists, and talked about the reality in these streets. She wanted to be an artist like Stephens, or like the ones she saw on 106 and park, but in order to do that, she needed a break.

When Empress turned 17, she moved out of the yard to become the boyfriend of a bass player in a reggae group. She was promised by the band steady work covering Tanya Stephens songs while their back up singer toured Mexico with another band. The relationship lasted for three months, and after a rough initiation period on the streets with her boyfriend, she left him for Gily.

Her first boyfriend Dennis was never really interested in her as he was in having a free escort. He nevertheless taught her a lot. Although she played on the streets as a child

until well after dark, and although she knew her city like the back of her hand, she was still sheltered by her mother most of her life. Never had Empress worried about what she was going to eat the following day like before Dennis. She never had to do as a man told her before. She and her sisters when they were little often fantasized about what they would do to any man that dared to lay a finger on any of them. They imagined taking turns stoning their perpetrator with heavy rocks while their male friends utterly thrashed him. In reality, at least with Empress, none of the scenarios came to pass when he became aggressive with her. He never paid her anything. Sometimes he would disappear for days leaving her with no money or food, but she was never broke or hungry on the street for long... she looked too hot for that.

When she left Dennis for Gily, she instructed Gily to convince some of his friends to beat Dennis, but Gily resisted her demands. He would only would look at her and say, “Yu beta walk the chalk line, or dat da weh yu wan get from me too!” Empress normally pushed him away with disgust. So far he has not tried anything like that. He told her he believed in her. He often inspired her to be whatever she wanted to be. He told her that he would support her. So far he has done that, but he spent far too much time on the streets trying to do it.

Empress tossed her micro-braids and walked with greater confidence. She would see to it that she would be successful. The click-clack of her boots was satisfying as they echoed through the narrow street. Just to the west of her was the one of the deep ghettos of Belize City. She was sure Gily was down one of those alley ways trying to make more money playing dominoes. Sometimes he would win, but Gily was never the type to bet all of his money. She fixed the beret on her head as she passed a window. She wanted to take a picture of this beret so she could put it on her Hi-Five account.

She continued to walk east on King Street toward the Sea. “Dat hi-five wan mek muni fa sure-sure!” Her plan was to start a fashion boutique from that account, and sell her image to her fans. All the styles she wore, the ensembles she put together would be advertised on her Hi-Five blog. She knew that she had to know exactly how it felt to wearing the stylish clothes, so she described how she felt on the webpage. She found some clothes here in Belize that was one of a kind. Sometimes the girls would wonder where she got her things. She hoped to resell some of her clothes on the web once she got a better camera, because the one on her phone was not good.

Instinctively, she fished in her purse for her MP3 player and her earplugs, only to find the device dead.

Turning the device over, she discovered the batteries missing. Empress sighed in exasperation. She knew that Gily had removed the batteries to use in his MP3 instead of buying his own batteries. Most of the time, it was because he needed them after hours when the Chiney wasn't open. She seemed to remember that the commercial played on Channel five and Love TV. She was to bring two audition songs. She was supposed to audition one song and if the judges approved she would sing the second in front of the producers. She had seen the process before when the show first came out. The show became a hit overnight. Her friends went crazy over some of the singers. She delightfully texted a vote for her favorite duet on her Smartphone. Empress herself had not heard of the televised competition last year until the show was well underway, and was unable to compete, but she sure voted! This year, however, the show was not just for duets. Someone had told her that the show was auditioning today, and she was determined to win a spot on the show. If the Garifuna were involved, they would come with their drums and instruments which could take a long, long time to set up and break down. It did not matter what they did or how

much time they took, though, she would always love and admire the Garifuna people and their culture.

The Garifuna were a very proud group of people, and all Belizeans are drawn to their music, and their culture. Most of the winners of talent shows were Garifuna dancers or drummers. Her lips pursed. The Garifuna were always competitive. They came with their language and their flags. They always came with their songs and their punta music. She loved their punta, and she loved their holidays. Yet, deep down inside it made her long for her own holiday. She wished that they had a Kriol holiday. She wanted a Kriol holiday that could be all theirs...a holiday all for her. She wanted it, yet through it all, she could not figure out what it was they would celebrate. Kriols had their food, but what else? There really was no real culture that Kriols from Belize could claim for themselves.

Ay...sometimes she wished she could be Garifuna!

A horn blared loud in the distance, as traffic thickened in the city. Right now, she needed batteries fast, because the auditioning started at noon, and she had no intention of standing in line the rest of the day.

She turned down the last alley before the main street to the Sue Ming Shop. There were several people standing out in front of the shop, which told her that it was later than she thought. It must be close to eleven in the morning, because Su Ming also sold very good fried chicken for a lunch special. Like all places with good food, they only get a certain portion of chicken a day. When they are sold out, there would be no more until the next day. She wove her way through the crowd to the window where a young Chinese woman stood taking orders. People stood shouting over each other for the young woman's attention. The Chinese woman did not look at them, but wrote down orders furiously. She could not wait for a crowd of people. This Chinese woman knew Empress, and so she should easily be able to jump the line. She was running late.

She reached the edge of the crowd. There were a few people waiting for food, but the vast majority were trying to get the Chinese woman's attention. They shouted their orders.

"One five dolla chicken breast, no-chop up, with fried rice, Chiney!"

"One three dolla chicken fries and one Ripple, You got that? Yo CHINEY!"

"Yu di 'ear mi Chiney? No mek ah git rude owt cha! One fried shrimp, me don tell yu dat long time!"

"One pak double-A bat-tree, Chiney!" Said Empress quickly.

The Chinese woman, hearing her friend's voice quickly snatched down a pack of AA batteries and looked out at the crowd of people.

"Ah. One double A bat-tree." Says the Chinese woman in impeccable Kriol.

As Empress moved the rest of the way through the crowd to claim her batteries, she felt a shove.

"Yu no see the resta we deh rite cha di wait?"

Empress turned around to see an older woman glaring at her. This older woman knew that the Chinese woman and Empress were friends. That was the only reason why she was getting preferential treatment. Quickly, decisively, Empress turned away from her.

"Miss, no start dat, cuz me no got no time fa yu rass tudeh!" Empress angrily shoved the ten dollar Belize bill through the metal grate. "If yu wan stan-up ya an luk fool-fool dat da fi yu problem!" Silently, and swiftly the Chinese woman made change and she handed four dollars to Empress. As she got the change, she turned on her heel and strode defiantly away.

"Yu too bloody upstart and goddam fiesty!" The older woman shouted after her. Empress ignored her. Let her shout. There was a time she would have cared what the woman said about her. There was a time when she would have been concerned about what



this woman would possibly tell her mother later. That was during the time when she didn't know who she was. That was another time. She was insecure back then. Now she was confident in who she was and what she wanted to become was not going to be changed by anyone, and that included old women and their set ways. Back in the day she was insecure for a number of reasons. She was happy and proud that through it all she learned that she could do anything.

Empress had made it onto Albert Street when she received a text from one of her karaoke friends who was to meet her at the competition. She stopped in her tracks.

--GYAL CALL ME DIS SHOW 4 SPANISH ONLY— was what the text read.

“Weh yu *mean* da fa Spanish oanli?” Empress was beside herself. She was running a little late, so Cherette would have already been in line. What did she mean--?

“Yes gyal. Dis show da fa de Spanish deh.”

Empress' heart sank. “Gyal...¿ hablas español?”

Cherette giggled. “Yo no hablo español”.

“Ay!” was all Empress could manage. They giggled a bit more and Cherette hung up the phone.

She suddenly remembered something about the talent show being about Latino, but she certainly did not think that the show was going to be in Spanish! “Ay! Deh Spanish di luk fi tek ova.” She must have mis read something somewhere. There was a show auditioning for English or the Garifuna soon she was sure of it. If it was not this week, it most certainly was next week. She only had to find it online. Whenever it was, she was sure she was going to be ready.

She checked her pockets. She had four dollars Belize. The library has internet services one fifty Belize.

Tanya Stephens blared in her ear. She texted Cherrette, "MEET ME @ LIB OUTA TOWN. I WANT SHOW YOU SOMETHING."

Empress closed her flip phone and smiled. She was sure Cherrette had not seen her new beret.

## LeWayne

Look at the situation, they got me facing,  
I can't live a normal life, I was raised by the state.  
So I gotta be down with the 'hood team,  
Too much television watching, got me chasing dreams.  
I'm an educated fool with money on my mind  
Got my ten in my hand and a gleam in my eye.  
I'm a locked out gangsta, set tripping banger  
And my homies are down so don't arouse my anger.  
Fool, death ain't nothing but a heart beat away,  
I'm living life do or die, what can I say?  
I'm twenty-three now, will I ever live to see twenty-four,  
The way things is going I don't know.  
Power in the money, money in the power,  
Minute after minute, hour after hour,  
Everybody's running, but half of them ain't looking  
It's going on in the kitchen  
But I don't know what's cooking.  
They say I gotta learn  
But nobody's here to teach me.  
If they can't understand it, how can they reach me?  
I guess they can't,  
I guess they won't,  
I guess they front,  
That's why I know my life is out of luck, fool! (Coolio, 1996)

Leaving work was a breeze on days like this, particularly when a holiday was in the air. The October day was warm, and although a tropical wave was threatening the coast from the east, the sky was clear. Weather called for tropical rains this year for Pan American Day. There would be no school, so traffic was light at the computer lab, which meant there would not be many tech issues. Nevertheless, most of the stalls in the small Internet café were occupied. Students and businesspeople busied themselves with computer related tasks and often took advantage of the shop's faxing, printing, copying, and packaging services. As the technician, on a normal day, his schedule would be overflowing with work; now it was just a breeze. The holidays were near.

Miss Carmen had fried snapper with Johnny cakes with some fever-grass for tea and shared some with him, so he was content. He hoped he would get invited for Sunday dinner again. The ladies made the best rice and beans this side of the Sibun River. He probably still would still buy something from the street vendors when he went home. Miss Carmen and her sister Miss Thelma were good people... when other people did not believe in him, they did. He nodded his head and smiled. They hired him when everyone else shunned him, they did not, and for that, he would work any holiday for them.

Wayne checked the virus upgrades for the networks and found them all to be satisfactory. Miss Thelma told him earlier that a piece of software had arrived that he ordered from the Internet. This was good, because he would then be able to generate one-time codes to give to customers with a specific time stamp. He would install the software over the weekend, and then train the ladies on it. If he understood it correctly, they would just need to click and give the customers a code to input. The code was supposed to shut off the customer once a specific time limit is reached. Such a system would cut the amount of staff time spent monitoring customers and streamline the business. They would be pleased with that, especially since he had convinced them that the program would be worth

their while. He researched the software on the Internet, and he was certain it would fit their needs.

LeWayne always used the computer to educate himself in his field of expertise. Everyday something new comes out, and he used the Internet to search out the things that are new to the field to get an idea about it, hoping to get an edge on the competition. Most of the other gadgets they sold or used such as the printer the camera and the copier, he learned to repair by reading the online manuals. Sometimes people came into the shop to get advice on how to operate newly purchased equipment. If for example, someone bought a new camera, it he would have a good idea of how it would work by looking at new models online. Thinking about his work, and how he came to get his computer skills made him marvel about his life. It was amazing how out of bad, horrible events often came good things, and lessons a person can use for a lifetime.

He left the café checking his phone for the time. It was four thirty in the afternoon, meaning that the games would be starting down the street. He unlocked the bike from the dusty, worn bike rack. He looked at the building where he worked, the light yellow plaster building was faded with the years of salt and sun. A small head peeked from behind the *verandah* on the second floor, and quickly disappeared again. Surely, it was Miss Carmen's little niece that occasionally visited from northern Belize. The family that owned the building were from East Indians from Orange Walk, and they were successful. Miss Carmen was the heiress to the entire building when her father eventually passed on.

He pedaled away from the I-café, toward the Bel-China Bridge and Freetown Road. His low profile job allowed LeWayne to wear what he thought was comfortable, and he was most comfortable in hip-hop gear: big striped shirt, fitted baseball cap, baggy jeans and black Jordans. He was fortunate and glad that he did not have to wear the uniform of the service industry, another thing for which to thank his bosses. His short hair was currently in the

early stages of dread locks. The sisters on the street had twisted his and hair and it had begun to lock. He has long locks once, but he cut them while looking for a job, and since finding the technician job, he had allowed his tresses to grow back. LeWayne's carmel brown color and light brown eyes made his attractive to the ladies in town, but he never let them get too close. He was a loner, and he was not looking to settle down with a family just yet. His family all lives in Belize three little sisters and six brothers. He kept to himself most of the time, but the family was big, and his parents already had an overabundance of grandpickni.

He owed a lot to them—his family. The way he dressed came from his older brother. LeWayne's brother and his friends would dress a certain way, and LeWayne always wanted to follow them. He always wanted to go where they went. They were idols for him. American clothing was not bad. Yes, it was very expensive, but outside of that, he saw nothing wrong with wearing it. As a thought crossed his mind, he wanly took a look at his "Made in Guatemala" shirt. Le Wayne chewed on his lower lip, his mustache temporarily hiding it from view. LeWayne wished that the government or somebody would invest in tailors instead of importing clothing all the time for Belizeans. It was sad to continuously rely on Guatemala and Mexico to make clothes for Belize. The Guatemalans hated Belizeans, so what was the point in supporting them? LeWayne's features twisted in contempt. The government, however, just didn't see it the way he did.

"Belizeans, da wi feh mek fi wi own cloads." He said, lost in thought.

Hip-hop style was what was worn in Belize. Girls walked around half naked and boys hang around with their saggy jeans, and they think they are cool with their Jordan's and their Airforce Nikes. Most of the people did not get their shoes from stores anyways. They usually got their clothes from relatives and friends who live in foreign countries and send

clothes to Belize. Sean Johns, Rocca Wear, long shorts, throw back skirts, all come from shipments abroad.

LeWayne always thought people who wore labels like that were looking to fit in society. Everyone wanted to fit in, which was the whole reason why he did the things he did. It was not good to be left out; he wanted to stay in with the crowd. Even older people did not want to be left out. People had a right to express the way they dress. He hated classifications, but everyone in Belize had a reputation to keep, and Belizeans were classified according to their reputations.

Wayne continued to through the streets. The Sorrosi bushes were just beginning to flower. Their bright yellow blossoms reminding him that he was thinking about purging soon, and he would use them and the leaves of the Bukut tree for cooling. He turned on his MP3 player, and the lyrics of Notorious began to flow through his earphones:

*I could have been one of the most notorious*

*I got saved by the king and his grace is so glorious*

*I could have been one of the most devastating i got saved*

*By the king and his love is everlasting*

*Burn away the wicked lifestyle and the wicked image and the wicked man dem profile*

*Im so happy to be rastafari style and me ova come the wicked with just a smile*

*Den me start to live my life and do worth while*

*In a love and harmony i try not to be vile*

*now bove the well salasi will provide*

*And my conscience is clear me na nuttin a hide rastafari*

He could have had it all yes. He smiled as he remembered his past. The song made him feel like he felt like back in his teenage years, before his incident, when he was labeled as one of the most notorious out gang bangers out there from Bakatown. This gang was well

known gang from “the back of town”. His friends and LeWayne made much money in the streets as thieves, gamblers, pimps and drug pushers. Some people kept a job to keep up appearances, but most did not bother. When his mechanic friends needed spare car parts, they would steal a similar make and model, take it into the jungle and strip it to its shell. He had received his cut from tourists looking for “a good time” from local women. The young people he knew would all sell themselves to a tourist. It made no difference if the client was male or female; the sex was very lucrative in Belize. He normally played the role of bodyguard for the women, occasionally he found a female tourist of his own to shower him with money and gifts in return for sex. He felt that if he kept up his lifestyles as they were then, he would have most definitely been rich. Those times were now behind him, and his main focus was being happy.

He turned right on Freetown and Douglas Road and pedaled through the rush hour traffic. The busy street was lined with carts. The streets were choked with bike, auto and pedestrian traffic alike. There were fruit vendors from the market that sold the most popular fruits and vegetables: soursop, picadilly, cocoroot, and cassava. There were food vendors selling dukunnu and Belizean tamales.

Many friends called out to him, but he could not hear them due to the reggae pounding in his ears. These days Wayne was much into the conscious mind. He often wished that the television for a twenty-four hour channel that featured pure conscious music. Love FM and MORE FM radio came on television with their musical selections, but there was no pure reggae channel. He remembered that there was such a station that existed before, but now he could never find it. KREM now played conscious videos and music off and on.

The conscious music of the Ras-Tafari has always been an influence in his life from the time he could remember. The older men of the neighborhood where he grew up were



very adamant that he knew the teachings of the Rastaman. He was only a youth in standard four when he wrote his first song about the Rastas coming to take their place among the people of Judah, and that the walls of Babylon would crumble under the weight of the Lion. The message that he has heard over the years has not changed. The strength of Babylon was increasing throughout the land, and it was up to the youth to be strong and overcome the evils of the world. He followed Rastafarianism for a year his life changing events, but switched to non-demonination, as he fell out of practice. Nevertheless, LeWayne found that he was continuously drawn to the Rastas and their messages. The soothing words of Notorious continued. The beat of the music matched the cadence of his pedaling:

*Easy to squeeze lead in ya fore head*

*But we know solution is not blood shed*

*Positive action to the vermann*

*Well yet the school, let the stool, let us persue*

*I better to be a part of the strong side*

*The right side coulda been the wrong side*

*Im lock tell yu say from yu can avoid avoid*

*Stick with the king then you know u shall slide...*

It was not that long ago when conscious music was not his first choice. In his early teenage years Wayne liked gangster rap and dancehall music. The kinds of gangsta rap that came from foreign entertainment shows on cable. LeWayne suppressed a shiver. That kind of music brought back all kinds of demons from the past. The times in LeWayne's past when he and his friends hung out and got high. He smoked back then for pure recreation. Those were times when he would listen to a little 2 Pac and Dr. Dre while drinking Tropical Brandy. Those were times when LeWayne was much different. He could have cared less about people, as long as they did not oppose him. 2 Pac and Dre always made him good;

they were his friends when he had none. In fact, he liked all of them: 50 cent Naz-- they spoke about the real importance of making money. They talked about the harsh reality of the streets. They rapped about making it, surviving, and handling reality. They spoke of loyalty, of their homies, women and what happened to people who ever stood in their path. Sometimes in a rough world, you had to do what you had to do, and the music seemed to blend right into that reality. It was what he saw every day.

Growing up, he liked money. He saw that it ruled the world—nothing would seem to come out right without money. His parents long told him that if he wanted anything in life he would have to save for it, and he did, but that really never seemed to be enough. LeWayne often remembered his aunts and uncles teasing him because he loved to save money as a small child. In Belize Money went fast, and since it was necessary for everything, his father was always on a fast hustle. He learned how to hustle to make ends meet from his father and the men in his neighborhood. It was not long until LeWayne was making money for the family by selling panádes with his sister.

Yet, the money they made never seemed to make ends meet, no matter how many panádes they sold or how much his father hustled. Soon the family was lagging behind, and LeWayne felt that he was a burden. Making fast, quick money was the best way to stay independent from the family. If LeWayne had money, he could do what he wanted with it, and no one ever bothered him. He soon found out that hanging out and being in the right place at the right time, in order to take advantage of a situation was one of the best ways of making a quick buck. Crime was significantly less, however as a child, but that was because back when he was growing up, there was no television.

Television in those days was not as big as today. Not everyone had television. Wayne had to think hard to remember if his household even had cable. If anyone asked him, crime did not become a huge concern in the city until cable television came with

foreign programs. LeWayne could think of many ways the foreign has touched and altered the Belizean way of life. Reality shows on BET for instance influence many of the things that happen in Belize. The people today want to be like the stars that they see on television, and they will do anything to get the things the stars have. Who doesn't want to be like Jay-Z? They don't know how he got the things he got, but still they want to be like him. There were even occasions where the older women came out of the house looking just as scandalous as the younger girls with their backs out and thighs revealed.

In Belize, he honestly believed that the country was heading toward one global system in music, fashion and morals. LeWayne had a saying he told people at the café: "The people we worship, the people we listen to, make us who we are here." The music was a prime example. Before television, when he was in primary school, LeWayne and his friends looked forward to Punta music playing for the holidays. Now it's much more of a dancehall genre that everyone goes to hear at the club. These days Beyoncé, Rhianna, and regional reggae artists like Colliebudz will play all night on Belizean holidays like St. George's Day, Boxing Day, or Independence Day. The talents of Black Chiney, Al Principal, and DJ Dolla kept the dancehall music flowing from Jamaica. LeWayne frowned, wrinkling his smooth Caribbean features. Here in Belize there was no celebration for Kriol cultural heritage. Sure, there were national holidays for all Belizeans, but he personally never really celebrated anything that was Kriol, because frankly, the Kriols did not really have anything to celebrate. Unlike the Garifuna celebrations for the nineteenth of November, there is no specific holiday to celebrate in Belize. The entire country flocked down to the capital of the district of Stann Creek on the eighteenth of November to usher in the nineteenth with food, drumming, dancing and celebration throughout the night.

LeWayne spat on the ground. There was nothing noteworthy about Kriol heritage, so he it was best to celebrate his heritage in an African way.

He zoomed past some city workers in the gutter who were half-heartedly picking through the gutter. A crew of young men and women in orange reflective vests and armed with shovels and rakes picked through the deep gutters of Belize. There were never enough jobs these days, his mother often complained, and talked of easier times long gone. When there were no jobs, people had to survive one way or the other, and one of the easiest ways to make money out in the street is to sell drugs, especially during the high season. When LeWayne ran low on cash, he would go to the Cayes to sell ganja on the beaches. He honestly could never bring enough. When they made extra money him and his buddies would party it all out. They would buy expensive Black Label and *high-grade*. They would go to clubs and buy expensive hip hop clothes, and other foreign labels.

Everytime he went through this ritual, which was often, he heard the music playing:

*For my niggas who be thinkin' we soft*

*We don't.. plaaaay*

*We gonna rockin' til the wheels fall of*

*Hold up-- heeeey*

*For my niggas who be acting to bold*

*Take a.. seeeeat*

*Hope you ready for the next episode heeeey!*

LeWayne shook his head as he parked his bike by a Chiney shop to buy some rum bitters and some rice wine and a half pack of *Colonial*. The problem with a lifestyle like that is that once drugs came into the picture, then crime will start, because envy takes hold. People start to trip on the person who makes the most money, and has the highest grade, because they will have the most things. Someone working this way on the street can make much more than someone working for hourly pay in Belize. In the low “meager” season, back in the day, LeWayne made an excellent thief. He was never interested in small spoils

like purses or wallets. LeWayne and his gang often targeted other gang members after they made a huge drug sale. The islands were the perfect place to perform such a plan. LeWayne would send one of their girls over to the rival gang members to entice them to drink. When they were stumbling down the street in a drunken stupor, LeWayne would strike quickly with a threat and a flash of a gun. Sometimes a robbery like this could yield hundreds of Belize dollars that the unfortunate victims could not report to the police.

LeWayne bought his *Grafitti* and pedaled off onto Freetown Road. Some people in Belize take envy to the extreme when they begin to scheme ways to eliminate others, and push them out of the way. One of LeWayne's gang friends got shot by a group of boys they had robbed a few weeks earlier. A week later, the gunman was found with his head bludgeoned with a crowbar in a barn outside of the Northern Highway.

Police efforts traced the party responsible was always hampered by the public fear of gang retaliation, but evidence and unidentified witnesses placed LeWayne and three of his friends at the scene of the crime. The court magistrate referred the case to a grand jury that later found LeWayne and two of his friends guilty of attempted murder and conspiracy to commit murder. All three were sentenced to life in prison. Outside of prison, the street hunt was on for the witnesses who had given the police information, although they suspected that rival gang members gave the police most of the information. This was how gang wars were maintained on the streets.

Meanwhile his life has been transformed to a scene out of that video where Rap star 50cent raps on top of a heap of destroyed twisted metal in a junk yard at night. As he entertains, the scene switches between the junkyard and maximum security where is chained hand and foot, dressed in orange, surrounded by white security guards who escort him to a jumbo carrier plane. He then continues his rapping strapped to a chair behind bars inside the plane while it carries him to an unknown destination.

He was a person who would do what was necessary in order to get what he needed. Before this incident, he felt that really wanted to be rich in life. He wanted to have the finest things he saw the rich people had. It was not until much later that he and realized that he did not need to get rich. That kind of thinking landed him in jail, and through that experience he found out that he did not need to be like anybody, and he could be himself.

That journey was not pleasant.

In 2003 when he went to prison, he quickly had to adjust to the harsh life of Hattiesville. Some of the things he did witnessed there, he did not care to revisit. It was a dark, dark part of LeWayne's existence to know that he would be in jail for a long time with a life sentence. He read the bible and meditated and came to a conclusion that he did not need to get rich to be happy, he could be happy without being rich he could be just the way he was. Vanity turned out to be nothing but destruction.

His family believed his innocence and fought the decision. It was not until four years later when new fingerprint evidence forced Samuel's confession. LeWayne's family then appealed his case on the grounds of evidence, and when the court finally reviewed the case, it found that there was not enough evidence to charge all of them. There was also the question of LeWayne's age. He was seventeen at the time, but was tried as an adult. Faced with mounting evidence against his, guilt, the court reversed the conviction and released him. Afterward, however, no one would hire the young man following his time in prison.

There were many, many hungry days. There were days when he, like the orange clad youth he just past on his bicycle, labored daily in the hot sun for a meager living. When he thought about if all of the suffering worth his past experiences, he had to answer no. Vanity was not worth the amount of trouble it was cause. Most of the things he did in his youth was so that he could keep a reputation and maintain his image in front of those who admired him. He could still remember the feeling he got from gangsta rap, and seeing the music

videos. The life of a gangsta was scandalous, but there was money to be made, money that was out of his reach today. Gangsta rap... when he heard it, it feels like he was still a part of those days. It was tempting to go back there. Life was often hard, and when things were down, the ways he used to live before appealed much to LeWayne. He often found himself critiquing the way criminals handled their business on the six o'clock news. If he could just go back to those times and make a little more money than what he was making at the computer lab would be good... in fact it would be great.

Now, he hardly ever listened to gangsta rap, but...the reality of the situation was that going back could quickly spell the end of his life. Going back could mark the end of everything. That fear was what kept him focused and looking toward the positive. While in Hattieville and at the lowest times of his life, he was often gripped by anger. A great deal of the crime he saw occurred particularly because people did not have what they needed. It was hard to talk about doing the right thing when you were hungry, or if you needed new shoes, or if your friends "de hate pahn weh yu di du."

It was hard not to get angry at the intervening police that denied making a living because they knew where their next meal was coming from. Sometimes it was difficult to keep from grabbing the machete or a gun and blowing someone's head off. Doing things like that-- going back to that life would only lead to two outcomes. He would either go back to jail, a place where he did not ever want to return. He was in jail for four and a half years in the Hattieville prison system, and he vowed never to go back there again. The second option wound up in the burial ground. It was very easy to wind up there if LeWayne got shot at a crime scene, or anything like that. He shook his head

Meh no deh pahn dat.

LeWayne pedaled past a truck on the outside as he approached the bank and picked up speed as he approached one of the smaller roundabouts in Belize City. A courier

whizzed by on LeWayne's outside and headed out into the rotunda. Apricots and whites of the plastered walls, trimmed in white whirled by him in an array of blended colors. Intricate designs of cement flowers, painted white, perfectly aligned, adorned the tops of block fences on Freetown.

He admired approvingly. To mold plaster takes skill. Skills like that, including what LeWayne knew as a technician, were skills prisoners learned at Hattiesville. There were many types of specialties available: welding, carpentry, tailor, mechanics, and plumbing. Even so, it was very hard to get a job, especially with the government after being released. Although he was acquitted for the crimes he allegedly committed on the record, he was put on an endless line of waiting lists. He never gave up. It wasn't until Miss Carmen and Miss Thelma had heard his story and decided to give him a job as the computer technician did his luck change for the better.

The lifestyle he was living back then was years behind him now. LeWayne these days was much more interested in watching the local news on channel 5 and 7 than anything else. The music no longer took the same shape either. LeWayne hip-hop now meant "stress free" in his world—it could allow him to express himself without snapping and killing real people. His family frowned on gangsta rap, themselves being much more conscious listeners. They preferred the Rastaman over the gangsta any day. LeWayne's family listened to music such as rhythm and blues and soul, but rap was never truly appreciated. Back in the nineties when he was involved with the gangs, the music complemented the violence. Now, when he listened to the gangsta rap, it gave him a way to express himself through the lyrics. When *balis* pissed him off, he recited one of his best lines to himself or to the perpetrator:

*Pistol play ricochet, see where the victim lay*

*Slumped over bleeding J.F.K*



*Hays K to your chest plate cave*  
*I ride to the death, do you rep that way?*  
*Forever ima be a Shady 7-4 gangsta*  
*Plus I survive everything you got in that chamber*  
*I thrive off of danger, jumpin in all beef*  
*You keep talking shit now the squad called me*  
*Enough holdin back the steam, Em let off a magazine*

LeWayne discovered that internalizing the lyrics was a way to free himself from the stress of this world. He found that if he could rap his frustration, his tension eased. Although LeWayne had never killed anyone, he was often involved in the violent gang rings that gripped the urban parts of Belize City during the 1990's.

Le Wayne wondered briefly about that researcher who came by to ask him questions, who got him thinking about how much of that violence came from abroad. He just recently saw *Boyz in the Hood* on a Black Buster movie rerun the other day. He thought the movie was very negative, but in the end there was a positive message to it. The movie revealed that the gang problem in the black community is rampant in urban areas, and if black people don't change, at the end of the day all that will be left is pain and sorrow.

LeWayne nodded his head silently as he pedaled. The end of that movie featured a sequence of scenes and a storyline with which he was all too familiar. The brother of the main character dies, he himself ends up in jail and all of the character's friends move someplace else, out of sight, out of mind, out of the community. Meanwhile, his mother is left broken and alone without her sons, with one of them dead and the other in jail.

LeWayne had seen *Boyz in the Hood* many times played out on the local news almost every day. He was certain that those movies were used as role models for gang society in

Belize. The Crips and the Bloods did not exist in Belize before those programs were introduced here, and today they are one of the primary regimes on the street. They sometimes used famous street names like Crenshaw or local names like George Street, but their basic premise remained the same, colors, drugs, and guns for money and territory. In Belize, the Crenshaw and George Street came together recently to form one gang. The ironic thing was that this was the same thing that the Blues and the Reds did in Los Angeles after the L.A. riots and the Rodney King debacle. He remembered watching a teen program on BET about that, but he couldn't recall the name of the program.

The evolutions that brought about these kinds of alliances had much to do with the availability of guns in the community. Rumor had it that these guns came from across the Mexican border. Le Wayne's brow furrowed. Back in the day, when he was little, it was inconceivable that guns would ever comprise a part of his lifestyle. Guns were not a part of his vocabulary at all. It was once a time when no one ever had to lock their back doors. No one had a gun, and if there ever was a beef between neighbors, the machete was used to settle any violent accounts, and *everyone* had a machete. It was the best tool with which to chop the yard, bush, and defend the home from intruders. In rural Belize, it is still used to this day. In the city, however, it was a different story. Part of the conditions for his release from prison was to produce three firearms to surrender to the Queen Street Sub-station. He had only one gun, so he had to get two more from off the street to assure his unconditional release. It was impossible for a Belizean to get a gun when he was younger. Now, he only had to ask his friends. They always seemed to know the fast and easy way to death and destruction.

LeWayne spat again into the gutter. He was hoping he was going to do more. He had received word that he had landed the position at the city youth program as lead technical instructor. He was sorry he would eventually have to tell the ladies that he would be leaving

them in a month's time. They would be sad at first, until he told them how much more he would be making.

LeWayne grinned as turned off Freetown Road down a cross street and through a local alley. The domino games that were played daily in the yard were fierce. Mostly men, but often women would gather for a few hours to drink a little bitters and talk a lot of trash. The small street was full of people who did not have to work tomorrow. Conscious music blasted from the verandahs of the second story Victorian and colonial style wooden homes. There were no shops or restaurants here, only the coach houses remained of once grand estates, with the larger homes subdivided for businesses on the adjacent Freetown Road. On the corner, a small crowd gathered around the local Chiney to buy beer. LeWayne waved to some of the crowd as he passed. There were a few coolie ladies he liked, who were standing around. The size of the crowd would be a good size tonight. After this, it was home to TV. He recognized some of the players from the yard where he was going. He hoped his partner was there, because he would spin less time arguing and more time winning.

## CHAPTER 5: ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

This chapter turns to the analysis of BET imagery and the local themes present in the stories. The purpose of this chapter is to examine the experiences as described and reconstructed by the researcher and his informants for evidence containing interactions between BET programs and the life experiences of the informants in this study. The contextualized actions involving popular BET programming are divided into categories based on how the programs were negotiated, and organizes of levels of interaction that arise from analysis of the stories. It also explores relationships between these levels. There emerged from within the narratives five types of interaction outcomes with BET programming: Dependence, Impulsive Resistance, Subordination, Leverage, and Creolization.

**Dependence.** At this level of interaction, power remained firmly on the side of cultural imperialism. Here, instances of hegemony represented narrative outcomes that are for the informant, least powerful and most oppressive. Such a dependent position represented a dehumanizing existence where most, if not all power was been stripped from the informant in the situation. The informant is generally unaware of the fact that (s)he is subject to the will of repressive consumerist messages and the ideologies that they serve.

**Impulsive resistance.** This level categorized the outcomes where the protagonist in the story resisted the dominant pull of cultural imperialism in BET programming. Resistance in this study represented a more empowered stance, but still signified an impulsive, less than conscious reaction against perceived adverse and hostile environments, or hostile agents.

**Conscious subordination.** was an outcome that represented a conscious awareness of foreign cultural invasion, yet the informant saw no real solution but to continue a

subordinate relationship. In this situation, the power normally remains with the colonizer. Conversely, the informant may not see the opportunities and be left to stagnate in an endless cycle.

**Leverage.** Some of the informants were completely aware of the insidious role of cultural imperialism in Belize, and made use of images produced by BET for leverage in or over a life situation. Protagonists willingly traded or leveraged their knowledge of these globalized cultural forms in exchange for something they wanted or needed such as status love or fame.

**Creolization.** This was the most advantageous of the negotiated experiences for the informants portrayed in the narratives insofar as they maximize the use of creative imagination to overcome oppressive situations. This kind of negotiation transforms potentially oppressive forms into new forms of culture that are consistent with their own personal growth, indigenous cultural identity sets the stage for social agency and change.

### **Monica: The Dreamer**

In Monica's story, there were local themes that arose dealing with the prevailing assumptions about life in the United States. Monica's ties to the US were mostly economic. She saw the industrialized country as a way to ease the financial hardships she believed to be at the core of Belizean struggle and unhappiness. She constantly discussed the worthlessness of those Belizeans who leave the country without "reaching back" to help fellow Belizeans at home (p. 75). Jaleel had left her and her kids to go to the United States through the coveted travel visa, and suddenly, her boyfriend threatened to become that which she despised and feared. She resonated with the video "Angel of Mine" as she discussed Jaleel, because it shows that no matter what, "she could always count on her man" (pg 75).

The imagery Monica employed while recalling her favorite portions of the video reflects devotion, loyalty and commitment. The appearance of these ethics came as no

surprise, as Monica's childhood story was riddled with vivid images suggesting such values. Ultimately, Monica waited for a sign from that Jaleel would send either remittances or for the whole family to live in the States (p. 72-74). Her remarks, and personal stories suggested that Monica believed that those who "made it to the States" had a responsibility to support family and friends in Belize. Monica's opinion was not one that is solitary, as other informants (LeWayne, p.111; Leonard, p.88; Ras J, Personal Communication, September 18, 2009) also indicated an emigrant's financial responsibility for Belizeans families.

Monica does interact with US imagery, but her participation is far from wholehearted and one hundred percent in favor of American cultural imagery. She stresses ambivalence towards the use of electronics and gadgets other Belizeans her age would call "up to the Times" (Weezie, p. 120). The slow paced life she knew at the farm was sharply contrasted against the instant information highway that represented the USA in her life . Although she could not explain her fear and intimidation, Monica uses "Angel of Mine" to assuage her fears of both never seeing Jaleel again, and not getting a remittance. In this case, the video entraps Monica's imagination to focus on help from abroad, thus relegating her to *dependence*.

Perhaps Monica should have taken heed of her unsettling feelings about the USA. Monica's family history instilled values and ideologies that are fiercely aligned with Rastafarianism and indeed all things African, which she admits influences how she views reality

Imagery stemming from children's charity commercials on BET inspired Monica to imagine ways that a charitable stance could be adopted for life in Belize. Indeed, Monica often interacted with a BET commercial asking for charitable donations from its US audience. Her opinions on the plight of the city children as well her own family's values can be seen throughout her story. Monica evidenced deeply rooted convictions regarding

traditional forms of family life. Even though the traditional canon of Belizean child rearing where Monica grew up called for “children to be seen and not heard”, it also called for the children to be protected, loved, and to experience a happy childhood before they were eventually forced to contend with the harsh realities of adult life. The theme of local child rearing in Monica’s story is seen primarily in her recollections of her childhood, and in her horror at the plight of the homeless children that roam the streets of Belize City “on the street alone, dirty and hungry”. The recollections of Monica’s childhood contrast with city life in Belize. She recalls a strict, almost militaristic quality to the way discipline was administered on her farm. In addition, families in the Belizean farms cleared out of jungles were a close-knit group. On occasion Monica remarked that she found these differences between her childhood and those of the disadvantaged children of Belize City to be intolerable.

The crisis of the street children, in Monica’s view needed to be ameliorated. Unlike many other informants (Empress, p.129; Leonard, p.97) and despite romantic dreams of leaving Belize, Monica seemed more committed to staying in Belize. The charitable commercial with its harsh realities, in contrast with her own childhood experiences, opened up new imaginary spaces for her. She imagined local programming that would teach the public about the homeless situation. She envisioned a show that not only presented the realities of childhood poverty, but that also informed the public of the “proper way” to emigrate from Belize.

Miss Zuela expressed doubt at Monica’s ability to raise enough money (and interest) to see her project through to the end. Monica was hopeful that things will work out in the end, but the story ends with a feeling that Jaleel would (and very well should) come to the rescue with remittances. To rely on remittances in this instance was in itself debilitating. Waiting on money, Monica remained in a passive position. Nothing gets done in regards to

her public service project, and the homeless *pickeni* problem continues unabated. In this instance, the process of indigenization was reduced to dependence on outside resources that may never arrive, and on the actions of others like Miss Zuela.

John Dewey (1916) makes note of the relationships between thoughts and actions. “Our conscious thoughts, observations, wishes, aversions are important ...they fulfill their destiny in issuing, later on, into specific and perceptible acts. And these...are important because they are our sole escape from the dominion of routine and blind habit” (p.8). Monica’s interaction with BET commercial programming inspired her to rethink why things were they way they were. This “budding, inchoate” activity is fertile ground for ideas and future plans of action. These future plans of action may constitute a step away from the rote, ready-made hyperreality of simulacra and a step towards personal growth and self-realization.

In a less positive direction in the story, Monica had a brash encounter with some of these immigrants who are more successful than she conjuring themes of race, and class. The global trade market controls the prices in the local market. Scholars have revealed that Caribbean nation states need to produce goods and services from within so that they can overcome dependency on industrialized nations (Best, 2001; King, 2000). Nevertheless, Monica’s story implied that achieving this kind of production may be extremely difficult. Goods and services in the Belizean marketplaces are mostly imported. Agricultural products are imported on a lesser scale, yet there are still sizable amounts of produce arriving from Mexico and the United States through trade agreements. The high exchange ratio of the Belizean dollar (2 BZD: 1 USD) combined with Belize’s friendliness towards Spanish speakers make the country a high target for emigrants from Central American countries like Honduras, Guatemala and El Salvador.



The successful immigrant farmers were of a lighter complexion than Monica, and for her, this fact signified a social preference towards people of a lighter color (p.73). The evidence was further strengthened by Monica's perception of the preferential treatment given to her lighter siblings over her lifetime. She did not have good relations with her mother, primarily, according to Monica, because of her skin color. Monica believed that the reason her parents could not agree, and the reason why her lighter aunts and uncles ignored her came from issues of skin color. Monica's perception of preference on the basis of color also came from others. Kriol citizens shunned Monica for working at a taco stand because she worked a job reserved for "the Spanish" (p.74). The theme of race is one that permeates not only Monica's story, but also the stories of other informants in this study.

What Monica saw in the story was influenced by what Monica has experienced in formal schooling. Books printed outside of Belize were used in private religious schools throughout Belize. Many of them, like the history book described by her (p.72) did not recognize Belize as a sovereign country. Other recollections of schooling offered by Monica portrayed a sense of incompleteness. She lamented about not learning more about her heritage and that of the Garifuna.

Once again, Monica's preference toward "all things African" came to the forefront. Her story conveyed a sense of pride and hopefulness in the images she consumed of African Americans. Here, Monica seemed to invoke not only the ethnicities residing in Belize, but the African Diaspora. Monica did not truly talk about African countries and customs (with the exception of those cultures brought by the Garifuna). However, she placed most of her optimism in what she has seen through interaction with black cable programming including BET. In general, she marveled at the ability of the African Americans to be "successful".

Her past experiences recorded in her story suggested that her regards from African Americans come from her family's ties with Rastafarianism. This was revealed in Monica's

fascination in watching black people on television. Her loyalties to African based cultures were deeply rooted in her family history, particularly in the revolutionary music of the Rastafarians, and vicariously imagining the success of all black people important for her. Not considering the hegemonic nature of BET, Monica unconsciously negotiated her solidarity to BET imagery as *impulsive resistance* on behalf of collective black power.

But Monica found the portrayal of black women in the African American mainstream to be appalling. She drew a moral line when she indicated a dislike of “smutty way women expose themselves”, and declared that she “had a reputation to keep” (p.73). In this instance, Monica objected to the misogynistic portrayal of women as a result of her farm traditions. She made her own clothes—a skill she learned from her mother—and the creation of traditional farm apparel acted as a response to what Monica believed to be inappropriate feminine values, and was also an *impulsive resistance* to imagery infused with Western values.

It did not appear out of place, then, for Monica to use her knowledge of African American pop-culture to gain status, because everyone in her circle of city friends also subscribed to integrating African American cultural forms into their lifestyles. One notable instance in Monica’s story concerned the relationship between herself and her boyfriend Jaleel. While Monica used what she learned from Whitney Houston to demonstrate her knowledge of African American pop culture, Jaleel responded with Tupac, whom Monica learned to love, because he often rapped about the reality she saw on the street everyday.

Monica was fully versed on the kinds of hip-hop clothing worn by Belizeans on the street, and used songs, rap music, and popular African American dances to show loyalty to her gang and her boyfriend. In this instance, Monica used her hip-hop and R&B knowledge as *leverage* to get what she wanted (her boyfriend’s attention and respect). Although overall,

Monica appreciated the creative and revolutionary value of the regional music and culture, she had no problems exchanging that value for what she feels she needs to survive.

University dreams behind, Monica became like her gang members in many ways but she did not subscribe to actually wearing hip-hop gear. Being a seamstress herself, she was able to recognize that the quality of clothes imported were sub-standard, and did not reflect the quality she expected from clothing labels like Rocca Wear, Addidas, and Puma. She knew that the imposters came from the Mexican market, which sold the clothing in Belize at a hefty profit. Although Monica once shoplifted the imported gear on a regular basis, she rejected the imports for herself, preferring instead her traditionally made dresses with no shoes.

Monica saw subtle cultural threats to the sovereignty of Belize from Guatemala, Honduras, and Mexico, and yet African American culture was treated differently. Monica admired U.S. black cultural experiences. Monica's past experiences were grounded in music and Rastafarianism. When Monica was lost in the city, she relied on the Rastas to give her initial guidance. The past experiences of black solidarity in her family interacted with the representation of successful black people on BET to create a space that Monica used to give her hope for her Belizean people. They empowered her to think about how she could help emigrants to see how they might send remittances to Belize. Monica used African American imagery to move upward in the eyes of the people with whom she interacted in Belize City.

She may not have known nor cared that what was seen was only a representation of African American life, fabricated by editors and producers in the hopes of drawing a niche audience and a profit through advertising and shareholder gains. The Belizean viewer, within the decontextualized, space of viewing international images, was divorced from the meaningful historical contexts used by American consumers to decode the intentions of the program or advertisement.

Nettleford recommends black solidarity with Africa; as such solidarity could provide a base for an original creativity (1978). Monica resonated with the image of success for the black Americans, yet, how real was that portrayal of success? Monica's admiration of all things African perhaps blinded her to BET's capitalistic nature that often did not foster empathy or solidarity with her Pan-African ethics.

Monica's admiration of successful African Americans relied on her perceived notions of African-Americanness, wealth, and an implicit belief that Belize could ultimately benefit by continuing to depend on outside, industrial forces for help. Monica adopted the black image to enhance her own status in the local Belizean environment. Her use of Whitney Houston to gain purchase with the local city crowd created a space where Monica exchanged the local for the global, often disregarding her traditions and customs in order to achieve a particular gain. Monica's knowledge of textile quality and her skills as a seamstress helped provide her *leverage* in the street, yet in this particular instance, she did not recognize opportunity to create new business using her knowledge and connections.

How "free" are the spaces created by these interactions? Nettleford's understanding of social imagination reveals creativity in Monica's story. Her use of the Houston story did not provide any new desire to transform, and advance, and toward a more decolonized mind. In this case, Monica often became entrapped in simulacra at the expense of her traditional culture. Monica also let the "taken for granted" blind her to the ways that were. The imagery of "the clothing label" was one that Monica saw as false in Belize. She knew that most of the clothing was not authentic, and she knew she could make quality clothing of a better quality. As it stood, however, Monica's could not or did not wish to perceive these possibilities, because as far as she knew, Mexicans have always manufactured clothing for the Belizeans, so why should they not continue, regardless of the shoddy workmanship? This inability to imagine other-than-what-already was classified this instance as *impulsive resistance*.

Failure to recognize all of the fertile spaces of creolization may be damaging in so far as it “keeps [people] from breaking with intellectual, or physical or social confinement” (Greene, 2000). Nettleford, indicated that the spaces Monica created are valuable but are not the creolized spaces ideal for Belize to advance its national identity. On the one hand, Monica’s story illustrated that while action was needed to complete the process of indigenization, there was inherent value in what Monica perceived when interacting with BET. While Monica’s dreams may be of freedom and personal growth, her lack of concrete emancipatory action meant that they fell short of being fully educational.

### **Leonard: Unfulfilled Imaginations**

In Leonard’s story, themes of traditional labor interacted with BET imagery. Belize’s economy was influenced heavily by the tourist and service industries in the story. While most Caribbean islands had minerals such as bauxite to sell to the global marketplace, Belize’s natural resource coveted by the global market (mahogany) had been shipped away to Western Europe centuries ago. Hard labor such as manufacturing was not plentiful in Belize. Women dominated service sectors such as finance and customer service. Men with education worked “good jobs” in civil service such as the police or the Belize Defense Force. Unskilled laborers were left to do odd, temporary jobs such as fishing, boating, construction, and security.

There was an overwhelming presence of poverty in Leonard’s story. The family home was in serious need of repair. There was a lack of richness in the relationship between himself and his sisters. There existed ominous pressure for Leonard to produce money to support himself on a daily basis. He had no steady job, and his next meal was dependent on his resourcefulness and creativity. Daily, for Leonard, there had to exist more than just “plan A”. One might sense that Leonard’s employment issues in the story could have been caused by Leonard’s late start in the day. When Mr. Hendy failed to appear, he had other

options available by which money for the day could be made. This kind of day laborer was indeed very popular in Belize City. Indeed, both the public sector (e.g. the Belize City Council), and the private sector made use of day labor, as this industry could employ as demand dictated. Leonard's story indicated that there were many more day laborers than available jobs. The competition for limited prime spaces and premium customers was great in Belize. Even though the population of Belize was relatively small, there was not full employment. The social and industrial sectors of the Belizean public pulsated with life, but it was quite different from what was experienced in most areas of the United States. For example, in Belize there were independent contractors like Fisherman and Hendy who hired and trained young day laborers in the field under loose agreements of apprenticeship on a daily basis.

Sectors of the economy that utilized day labor had their success stories. Belizean merchants and contractors, having a greater knowledge of the local terrain, were able to sustain themselves and successfully competed for international tourists on a local scale. The training of the apprentices created less of a reliance on multinationals such as international hotel conglomerates or financial services. In this way, the tourism industry, originally meant to exploit Belizeans, actually achieved a degree of creolization. There were many local operations that looked past the social and economic determinism towards the creation and ownership of agency and perhaps new creolized traditions.

Leonard used his limited experiences with the United States gained through his father and direct interactions with African American imagery to arrive at the conclusion that America had much more to offer him than anything he could ever do in Belize. This perception in turn relegated Leonard to a role of *dependence* on what America produced for him. The manner in which Leonard perceived black Americans on programs like "Teen Summit" and "106 and Park" set up a contrast between his culture and that which he

experienced through satellite mediated cable programming from the U.S. He described the process that he used to imagine places he had never seen before via the imperial space created by the television. Leonard used images of places seen on TV, for example, to create a mental picture of other Caribbean countries. He explained that while watching the regional news, he perceived similarities between Belizean streets and buildings and those televised in other Caribbean countries. Leonard used this same process to imagine the “reality” of the black people in the USA, which could be a form of *creolization*.

But, Nettleford’s description of the process of creolization specifically highlights the use of creative imagination to spur emancipatory action. Therefore, Leonard’s use of his imagination to recreate the represented status quo of a foreign country did not serve the goals of creolization, but rather spent towards self-oppression through *subordination*. Here is why:

Leonard constantly compared and contrasted his life against what was seen on BET in terms of personal grooming (“African Americans always looked neat and clean”), clothing brands (“their clothes were top of the line”) and environment (“black Americans live in a better environment”). When he compared this to his own life conditions, his view was somewhat negative. The clean sidewalks and newly laid asphalt of Hollywood were contrasted in his mind with mounds of trash in the alleyways of Belize City. Leonard, in want of the things he has imagined to be abundant and within the reach of people of color in America became dissatisfied with his local surroundings. However disgusted he may have been by the options presented to him, Leonard did nothing. This sort of acceptance of his surroundings as unchangeable was a fatalistic experience for the young adolescent. Leonard would only hope that he would soon find favor again with his father so he could begin to execute his escape from Belize City to the “good life” of the USA. This led to further *dependence*.

The glamour of the chic and highly finished products released by Viacom International was not lost on Leonard. Although watching the representations of black America made him 'proud to be black', it was clear that his pride lay indeed with representations of African America, and not Belize. Leonard seemed to use African American cultural forms as leverage to get what he believed will provide him with the good life, when in actuality, he was only deepening his *dependence* on the consumption of products not made by blacks. Evidence of the erosion of Leonard's perception of traditional culture was apparent. Leonard confided that he resented that Kriols had "no real style" of their own of which to speak. He even stated that the best thing for them to do would be to acquire an "African American style. These instances of solidarity with Afro-American culture were pervasive in Leonard's story.

Outside of BET, black American style was perpetuated and proliferated by the emigrants who sent remittances to Belize. The family interactions between Leonard's brother, sister, mother and father were similar to those described by other Kriol youth in the city. Leonard's family, originally separated by hurricanes, was now further separated by discretionary remittances from Leonard Sr. Leonard was well aware of the social preference given to those who receive remittances from the industrialized nations. He was not the only one in his family to recognize the value of the remittances.

The fact that the boxes that arrived from the U.S. were for Leonard Jr. and him *only* exacerbated the jealousy and division between siblings in Leonard's household. Nevertheless, Leonard described with pride the articles of clothing given to him, and paid close attention to how the articles should be worn by watching the studio scenes of *106 and Park*. The Caribbean unity that Nettleford (2000) discussed in his writings was hardly similar to Leonard's household. The value placed on US items within Belizean popular culture and



enhanced by BET and Leonard's father, *subordinated* his actions to achievement of his dreams through hard work.

Indeed, Leonard's story showcased the theme of hard work in the form of manual labor as a prized ethic for Kriols. The laborers seen on the street working for a living had become equivalent to daily success stories that involve squeezing a living from nothing. But Leonard imagined an America where futile "manual labor" was quite different from the concept of rewarding "hard work". Leo Sr. reinforced the idea that hard work equals happiness by providing his son with the latest clothes in exchange for Leonard Jr.'s achievement of good grades in school. Both men hoped that good grades would provide a good job in one of Belize's market sectors.

To discourage drugs in the tourist industry, the Belizean government adopted a very hard stance towards marijuana consumption, with penalties ranging from stiff fines, to loss of civil privileges, to imprisonment. When Leonard's formal schooling and budding career at the Port Authority failed, he once again compared his life with what "could be" in America. According to him, the manual labor in Belize only begat more manual labor without any possibility of advancement. (p. 87). Seeing his future as bleak, devoid of rewarding work, Leonard decided to bide his time and wait for his "opportunity". Here, Leonard's *dependence* on outside interventions became apparent. His interactions with black America through cable and his on his past experiences with his emigrant father convinced Leonard that the United States would be much more suitable to his goals that mostly seemed to revolve around "making money and being successful". Even though Leo Sr. no longer wanted anything to do with his son, Leonard worked at manual labor only to prove to his father that he would once again be deemed trustworthy to emigrate out of Belize.

Leonard used African American imagery found on BET to help transform his traditional ideas about work. He analyzed the notion of 'hard work' from the perspective of

the rap artists in the USA, and surmised that they do not have to work hard at all, partially because of the 'support' given them. He took note that they continue to make money because America will always buy what they produce, and due to huge reinvestments artists made into their own businesses. Leonard did not believe that such public support for art could ever take place in Belize because of its fragmented, insular nature. That is, Leonard made the point in his narrative that different ethnicities in the country with a small population combined to make 'coming together' an ethnic impossibility. *Subordination* occurs in this case because Leonard believed that because Belizeans would not support such an artistic endeavor, he could not imagine another way out but to leave. A criminal record and an uncooperative father, however, ensured that the subordination persisted on a cyclical basis. The lack of faith in Belize's worth from the informants' perspectives surfaced here in Leonard's story (and again in Weezie's narrative).

Leonard noted with pride that most people could not afford the clothing his father had bought for him. He pointed out to me on many occasions the way he thought the public perceived him and his clothing. In his story, we saw his preoccupation with what people thought about his designer wear. Leonard believed that not only the clothes themselves, but also *how* he wore them influenced how his friends thought of him. The fact that people thought he had money when he did not, suggested the power that name brand clothing has in Belizean society, and the amount of *leverage* Leonard wielded on the streets. Leonard's story interacted with the images of Afro-American style on *106 and Park*, creating spaces where hip-hop clothing could signify money or connections to the States. This kind of space was one that emphasized the American and the international, and diminished the Belizean and the local.

Through his obsession with the way things are in the US, he abandoned hope in Belize's future. His understanding of the value of America in his life influenced Leonard to

look down on his country, and he scorned it in the hopes ultimately leaving it one day.

Leonard in particular reserved his pride not in his own country or himself, but in America and what American materialism could do for him in the short-term.

The transformative power to indigenize international neocolonial messages in Leonard's story became subverted when he *subordinated* his imagination to BET fashion. Although Leonard claimed he was not fooled by what he saw on television, outside of relying on his father's support he did not have a plan for the success he believed he would achieve upon emigration from Belize. The themes that surfaced in Leonard's story revolved around the notion of the American Dream for foreigners. Unlike pursuers of more or less the same dream by people living on American soil, Leonard's dream was fueled by the decontextualized, spaces created by viewing international simulacra.

A good example of this kind of *subordination* occurred when Leonard suggested that the support rappers received ultimately came from 'working hard and giving back'. Yet consider this example: The Englewood neighborhood in Chicago was brimming with artists working just as hard and with more determination than many mainstream artists, yet they continued to barely subsist in the ghetto, waiting for the same opportunity Leonard believed he would have once he arrived to the States. The difference between them and Leonard is that the Chicago artists understood the realities of life in the United States, because they resided there.

In Leonard's case, the solidification of American values such as work ethics and dress choice strangled any inclination to think outside of the American box. Leonard believed that he accumulated the social capital that earned him respect when he patterned his clothing after American television shows. Indeed, his story indicated that his friends and relatives give him grudging respect because of his American connection. Yet, as Nettleford

(2006) argues, this sort of temporary gratification ultimately acts to maintain a status quo of poverty in Belize City and in many underdeveloped Caribbean countries.

The reliance of imported goods and services into this little Caribbean country hampered its development. While Kriol youth such as Leonard decided to mimic the televised images of African Americans, the coffers of foreign companies often continued to grow. The more business a multinational corporation did with Belize, the less duty they had to pay, and the less public revenue was made, which contributed to the seemingly never ending cycle of poverty.

Leonard often incorporated the consumer imagery at face value, with the exception of language. The Jamaican Patois and Belize Kriol are similar, but not identical. Leonard mentioned in his story Jamaican Patois when it related to the Afro-American cultural forms. He was filled with special pride when he learned that contemporary Jamaicans achieved success in American music. This sense of pride deepened his perception of the USA as a place of economic and social success. Indeed, when interviewed, he often used either an African American or Jamaican accent. I asked him about this, to which he told me he did not know why he did it. After I pressed him more on this point, he simply replied, “It’s a trend.”

Nettleford (1978) points out that in many ways, Jamaica acts as a hub for cultural production for most of the Insular Caribbean. Jamaican music was especially prevalent in Belize in terms of music. Many radio disc jockeys from Jamaica, or carry Jamaican accents. The vast majority of music deemed “local” came from Jamaica and other islands in the Eastern Antilles.

Many public celebrations that are historically Belizean in origin made use of Jamaican music, often adopting it as Belize’s own. Leonard listened to popular regional DJs such as *Al Principal*, *DJ Dolla*, and *DJ Tambran*, who spinned dancehall and Reggae music for

the Belizean youth seven days a week. This kind of exposure made it inevitable that Belizeans would be bombarded by Jamaican culture and language patterns. The combination of American success with a familiar language such as the regional Jamaican Patois provided Leonard with great incentive to seek the opportunities that will land him in the United States.

The linking of African American imagery with financial success served Leonard's ability to imagine a United States where blacks were always "clean, neat, and well dressed". Such a space surely contained people who wore and appreciated clothing labels such as those sent to him by his father. The status quo of *dependence* continues, leaving Leonard to fight for his life in a world that is not made for him, often without making the important modifications to accommodating the local Belizean contexts.

### **Weezie: The Times Keeper**

Weezie's story tells us about "the Times". The "Times" for Weezie represented all that was up to date, and in style within the sphere of popular culture at any given moment. He had an idea that the Times were constantly changing, and therefore to be with the Times, one had to strive for it, and keep up with it. His story provided examples that demonstrated Weezie's perceived rewards of keeping up with the Times.

The story showed the way that clothes (particularly American clothing) were entrenched within the fabric of Belizean Society. This point was preeminent in the story in the encounter with the neighbor/beggar. Filled with contempt, Weezie, like Leonard, used his clothes to justify his position of superiority. This feeling of superiority was largely fostered by "live" and "unplugged" black programming like *106 & Park*, idolized by Weezie and other Kriol youth his age. It was ironic that to not be not up to the "Times" was to be

called a *local* by Weezie. Anything local, from Weezie's perspective was best left to die a lonely death on its own.

Broken down, worn, and tired, *the local* was the epitome of all things unwanted. From a Nettlefordian perspective, this rejection of the local is an embrace of foreign ideas that did not have the best interests of the Caribbean at the forefront of operations, forcing a *dependence* upon which was foreign, colonial, and ultimately, self debilitating. The reduction of local customs in turn gave space to that which sought to replace it. What Weezie referred to as cutting edge technology and new customs effectively replaces the "stale local atmosphere", and the salient trends became the "new common sense" within the banality of the local. Such a replacement then rendered the cultural imperialism an invisible and seamless entity, while simultaneously securing future experiences of *dependence* in Weezie's story.

Between what Weezie perceived as a stale local existence and the fresh newness of the Times helped to explain Weezie's preferences for that which was manufactured in the image of an African American capitalist machine. Ironically, the representations adored by Weezie were images that had been conceptualized by a largely white American elite for the purpose of capturing black niche markets for their goods and services abroad.

The notion of "Times" in Weezie's story was complex in its promises for newness and successful creolization of some aspects of international popular culture. Keeping up with the "Times" afforded Weezie extra cash and merchandise to live more comfortably. Weezie's past experiences with his street family taught him how to survive early in life. His use of the black market was a common phenomenon in Belize. Everyone, including Weezie and his clan, searched for the greatest possible deal on everything. Armed with his knowledge of what it took to keep up with the Times, Weezie's street family created a local business where regional merchandise was traded or bought for cheap at the Mexican border,

then resold in the city for a profit. Weezie and his brother dealt in what sold: the American clothing labels. It was true that these quick sales made under the table by retailers earned middlemen such as Weezie and his street family extra cash in new ways, seemingly taking steps towards *creolization*.

Weezie and his street gang turned a profit from resold merchandise due to the existing market for the essence of “North American-ness”. Weezie was quite aware of this hunger for North American-ness as it related to his local existence. He saw the relationship between the stale local existence and the global freshness associated with the African American imaginary as a binary where the lackluster local existence paled in comparison to the luxurious, the coveted newness of the Times represented in African American programming. His thoughts and actions sought to capitalize on Belize’s social obsession with Hip-hop. His understanding of the subtle fashion trends within Belizean popular culture, afforded him a certain amount knowledgeable *leverage*. Weezie seemed to be successful in his feats severely undercutting the retail price in the process. The same shirt a retailer would sell in the boutiques of Belize City for \$60BZ, Weezie would sell on the street for less than half the price. This is profitable considering that, on many occasions, Weezie got his shirts for free or nearly free.

Weezie resonated with the long lamented need for Belizeans to generate wealth internally. Might the sale of the merchandise, which creates revenue for the little street gang, be considered a *creolization* of traditional market flows? It is unlikely that the designers and producers of the clothes, the phones, and shoes would have planned for this Robin Hood style of capitalism where the profits (and therefore the power) did not remain in the hands of the elite. It was people such as Weezie who cajoled middle class merchants in Belize to adjust their retail prices. In this fashion, *creolization* can be said to have taken place through a economic shift of power from the largely elite retailers and manufacturers located outside of

Belize, to local merchandisers, buyers and middle men who worked hard to get name brands accessible. This kind of economic maneuver lay within the process of indigenization not as a rudimentary *subordination* to foreign values, but rather a rejection of sky high prices for cheaply made clothing manufactured at US textile factories in Mexico.

Did the creation of a middleman where there was none require a certain ability to think innovatively, to imagine possibilities where once there existed none? In this instance, the negotiations expanded the possibilities for Weezie. He took the negative neocolonial reliance on the textile industry to generate income for himself and his street family. Taken by itself, this negotiated space shows promise in easing personal constraints due to a lack of income.

But if such a space can be a location for personal growth, it is a rather narrow one. The results of the mercantile exchanges by Weezie were a far cry from full- fledged *creolization*. Weezie viewed local style as something to be abhorred. Simultaneously, while Weezie earns more revenue with each newly fabricated item from North America, his perception on local conditions constrain his ability to see any real value in the local, except where money is involved. Within this diminished view of the local potential as “stale” Weezie re-negotiated his previous *leverage* for *dependence* on what was produced by the multinational African American imaginary. The “Times” in Weezie’s world replaced Belize’s traditional modesty in clothing and fashion with what was sleek and provocative. Western designer labels replaced traditional notions of dress.

Weezie did create a space that could be fertile for personal growth. The space however collapsed back into more of an unconscious state because Weezie, seeing no other way to survive, must make a living by replacing his own culture instead of enhancing it. There was little imagination in way the hip-hop materials were used by Weezie. Although



there was a sense of *resistance* that could indeed germinate into creolized space, it was made less likely by Weezie's negation of his local culture.

Additionally, within Weezie's perceived masterstrokes of "cultural upgrading" lay very corrosive and insidious ideology that sought to expand and maintain the Eurocentric within neo-liberal forms of African-American simulacra. The interaction between satellite-mediated Afro-American images of style and Weezie's past street experiences showed *subordination* in so far as Weezie appeared to be unwilling to recognize or was unaware of the potentially damaging effects of adopting elements of consumer culture at face value. In effect, the cultural adoption of African American values was exchanged for money. But in Belize, monetary windfalls from American clothing labels tended to be spotty, unreliable and subjected to supply line interruptions. This meant that Weezie's cash income fluctuated on a daily basis.

In addition exterior pressures from global organizations such as the World Trade Organization pressure the Belizean government to embrace global trade agreements such as GATT. These agreements negotiate extremely low tariffs for multinational corporations that diminished revenues to the extent that public services cannot be administered at full capacity. The black market brokered by Weezie represented a form of *resistance* to structural adjustment pressures brought to Belize by outside influences and their oppressive imperial ideologies. However, the consumption of Afro-American images in exchange for a cultural "upgrade" from the local Kriol tradition often acted act as a double-edged knife capable of reinscribing situations of *dependence*, and inflicting the same manifestations of generational poverty that Weezie sought to avoid.

Themes of race arose in virtually all of the lives of informants in this study. The racial themes in Weezie's story were especially remarkable in a variety of ways. For Weezie, one great reward for keeping up with "the Times" was female attention, which implied that

women were prizes to be had. In Weezie's interactions with me, he often mentioned women in conjunction with financial success and happiness. Women were idolized as prized possessions and objectified as sex symbols in Weezie's story.

Two BET images in particular seemed exemplary of the kinds of misogyny displayed by Weezie. The first dealt with the way Weezie treated women, such as when he made use of misogynic lyrics Lil' Wayne to show his sexual, physical and cognitive superiority over women. He reported that the lyrics made him "stand up to a woman". Weezie often used the word "*bitch*" to describe the women about whom he is referring. He seemed to indicate that the word "bitch" was used in conjunction with the "fresh" Hip-hop clothing to signify that he is up with the "Times". Although I heard this word used throughout my stay in Belize, the word "bitch" is certainly not a word from the Caribbean. Weezie negotiated these African American cultural forms as a form of *leverage* in order to acquire women that were attracted to hip-hop modes of dress

Weezie took steps to prevent the woman he considers to be "his" from seeing another man, lest he would have to kill her! Weezie's use of Lil' Wayne imagery *subordinated* women as objects to the subjective desires of men, and solidified colonial gender roles where the woman was nothing more than an unsophisticated apparition of a human being, objectified furniture, a "*bitch*".

Still, while Weezie viewed women as prizes to be objectified, something else lay underneath the storyline. The themes of race and race relations boiled just below the surface of Weezie's story for some time, before they made an ugly appearance in an exchange with his mother regarding his much darker-complexioned girlfriend. Weezie believed that the television had most people (including himself) brainwashed into believing that dark skin was something to be depreciated and avoided socially. Weezie's mother used the same set of ideas to judge women in his life. This was an acute instance of conscious *subordination* where

in Weezie was fully aware of the fact that cultural imperialism was partially to blame for his often self-destructive perspectives, yet he did not understand how to circumvent them.

The dynamic nature of the color line at work was clearly seen in Weezie's interactions and musings. Weezie appeared to believe what his mother told him regarding the quality of black Kriol woman, yet he simultaneously viewed such thinking as abominable. He blamed his mother for his prejudice towards light skinned women, but did not take any steps toward changing his prejudices. In fact, Weezie believed that his own dark skin marked him as inferior. He asked me once while explaining his preference toward lighter skinned women: "Why would I marry someone my color (dark)? My hair can barely grow, and my skin is black black black."

He also took note, of the lack of dark women gracing the BET sets. There were black people, granted, but Weezie perceived that there were only *certain* shades of brown were represented. He informed me that this was the reason why there was color preference in Belize. Weezie's own preference for lighter skin was itself a blatant reflection of prominent Belizean attitudes on race. Black was reality, but not seen as a desirable characteristic in Belize City.

Weezie's position regarding issues of skin color was conflicted. On one hand, Weezie wished to exchange globalized images of African Americans for of his own culture and traditions. On the other hand, Weezie was loathe to internally confront the responsibility of action that came with making conscious change and in so doing, Weezie avoided an inner struggle by placing the blame on his mother and society. This kind of interaction negotiating *subordinated* many aspects of race relations to the will of producers and designers driven by neo-liberal intentions. He was conscious of the situation, yet he could not free himself.

This was more complex than just blind *dependence* or impulsive *resistance*. Weezie was aware of the presence of cultural imperialism, yet he knew not how to escape it, so, he simply succumbed to it. His statements were revealing, because they indicated that he may not be inclined to just go with the flow of imperialistic forms of misogyny and materialism if he only knew how to release himself from the double consciousness he experienced.

The feeling of living in a world that was hostile to one's existence while simultaneously wanting to be a part of that world is a complexity discussed by Pan-Africanist Caribbean scholars interested in the effects of colonialism on the existence of the colonized. In Weezie's story the dynamic of the "double consciousness" was seen in the manner that he idolized "reality television". Once again, Weezie blamed what he sees as reality in the streets of Belize City on what was seen on TV. He talked about the fact that gang bangers and criminals considered hip-hop clothing as a necessity. He also discussed how Kriols often lived outside of their means to get what they otherwise could not ever afford. This desire for the "good life" was powerful. Weezie wanted more than his living could afford, and came to the realization that he could never earn an honest living in Belize and simultaneously live the good life.

Weezie was a realist, his sense of imagination hampered by the difficulties experienced and witnessed over his lifetime. The high lifestyle represented in BET's *The Game* was something to which he dared not aspire. In this sense, Weezie resisted the lure of the show because he deemed that could not be real for him. In his world, there was no real success like what he saw on *The Game*, where super-rich black athletes and their families lived the lifestyles within the upper echelons of African America. His mind balked at the possibility of the average Belizean black person in mansions with white butlers, and he dismissed such scenarios as nonsense. Weezie could not imagine such a place while his

Kriol friends were gunned down in innocence, and while he had to work a full time job and hustle the black market for side money.

This was an instance when Weezie's creative imagination was stifled by the hard realities of daily living in Belize City. In Weezie's case, the unfortunate events he experienced in his life had a negative impact on his ability to imagine something other than his perceived sense of reality. He remained, therefore, *dependent* on the existing imagery that produces consumer exploitation. Weezie's thinking remains pragmatic, logical, and was confined to his current version of reality. The possibilities for using imagination to attain spaces for personal growth were limited. Weezie could not entertain the success portrayed in *The Game* because for him, this would involve imagining something that lay outside of his realm of reality. Indeed, he refused to share his most intimate imaginations, and informed me that he has "blocked them out" because he believed them to be unattainable.

For Weezie, the reality of death and failure blunted once vivid dreams and aspirations, and the will to bring them into reality was lost. Thus, many fertile spaces in which creolization could occur were reduced to superficial acts of resistance against an unseen oppressor.

### **Empress: The Creolizing Enigma**

The story of Empress, as it relates to African American imagery was different from the others in the study. Out of all of the stories, Empress' story offered the most hope. She was a resourceful, tenacious and creative young lady who felt that she could do anything to which she set her faculties. This belief gave her story an adventurous quality, as Empress converted messages and into something useful, so that she might advance in her life toward her personal goals and ambitions. Empress expressed shame for the state of her country, but she attempted to realize change in Belize through her own agency.

Themes of cultural pride and national identity permeated the narrative of Empress. In many of her recollections, she cited her mother and her teachers as a constant source of encouragement in the face of racial disparity. Indeed, with her curly hair and dark features, Empress did not escape the problem of the color line. During times when her sisters were brutal and relentless in their teasing, Empress relied upon her teacher's confidence in her abilities to face the everyday problems of life in Belize. Her mother's encouragement added to her ability to realize that she could do anything to which she set her mind. Her mother reinforced her value as an intelligent young dark skinned girl. Despite her sisters taking advantage of both her academic skills and her perceived social status, Empress over time persevered.

Empress had a desire and determination to be successful. The BET imagery portraying successful people of color made an impression on her. The fact that she wanted to be a fashion designer, a singer, a dancer and choreographer suggested that Empress saw herself mirrored in the black dancers and performers on the BET network. Their professionalism and high levels of achievement inspired her to find local ways of expressing her own version of global representations she witnessed on BET. Her endeavors as a karaoke singer and participation in artistic performances of song and dance made use of her natural talents while hybridizing BET refined products with the tradition of Tanya Stephens. The result was *creolization*. It was difficult to know whether or not Empress believed the programming to reflect the reality of people in the United States. However, the imagery utilized in Black entertainment television, particularly those images used in *106 and Park*, served as a creative inspiration for her.

Empress told me on many occasions that, "Anything that States can do, we can do much better". This attitude supported many of Empress' activities regarding income. The sleek, well-polished products presented by music video programs like *Rap City* and *106 and*

*Park* were models to which Empress aspired, providing fuel for imaginative negations that often resulted in *creolization*. Empress made welcome use of local resources as well as those that she acquired from global television. The clothes she modified and posted on her social networking account were inspired, for example, by the worldly fashion advice and attitudes of Tanya Stephens and the female hostesses and DJs on the video shows, , who were *local* talents. Her ingenuity with representations of African American fashion was capable of interrupting cultural imperialism of product over consumer, of global over local. Instead of assuming the role of consumer in a never-ending cycle of American dependence, she *creolized* the products to her personal and economic advantage, and made use of the Internet for publicity and advertising.

Empress tapped into what Nettleford called the “African Presence” when she used aspects of BET imagery to further her own success, power and achievement. Although influenced by the culture of American television, much of Empress’ imaginative capabilities were inspired by the cultures of Belize. The music and imagery most closely associated with Empress’ story came from the familiar spaces and appearances of her neighborhood. Singer and entertainer Tanya Stevens located her music videos within the daily occurrences of everyday Caribbean life. Her lyrics addressed issues of hunger, the complications of drug dealing and other ills of Jamaican society. Empress resonated with Tanya’s lyrics. In much the same way that Leonard vicariously experienced the feel of other places in the Caribbean through regional television programming, so Empress also experienced Caribbean lifestyle through the influence of Jamaican music. The music addressed some of the most pressing issues in her life, such as love, money and family. This was not an unusual occurrence in popular culture. Indeed, Jamaican influence was experienced throughout the Caribbean and the world. Jamaica was a model for many Caribbean cultural forms, as Nettleford pointed out with his writings about the creolization and formulation of Jamaican cultural identity.

One part of Empress wanted to be Jamaican. She used Jamaican accents, and their national colors when she felt “Jamaican”. The success and fame enjoyed by the Jamaicans appeared very real to her. Indeed, there was a sense that Empress thought of Jamaican patois as superior to her own. The ways in which she incorporated Tanya Stephen lyrics into her life and the manner in which she used Jamaican patois suggested possible tensions between her national and her regional identities.

Her divided feelings towards her language identity echoed larger discussions regarding Caribbean identity. Would there be a need for a “regionally accepted” form of patois if the region were to unite? Belize, like many other countries in the Insular Caribbean, was caught in a struggle of regional/national identity where the benefits of national pride, sovereignty, and exclusive trading right to national resources were weighed against regional trade protection afforded by regional governance of statehood (Bishop & Payne, 2010). The points of tension felt in Empress’ story can be metaphorically connected to the regional struggle of a Caribbean collective versus independent national sovereignty.

Similarly, the cultural extravagance of the Garifuna group left Empress feeling culturally inferior. Her story revealed mixture of pride and contempt for the fact that she and the Garifuna shared a Belizean identity, while only the Garifuna observed ethnic celebrations and holidays. Empress confessed to me that she wished she could also be Garifuna, marking a distinction between that ethnic group and the Kriols. The conservation of traditional Kriol culture in Belize was especially seen in dances such as the “Kriol wine” and “bruk-down”, and in every day foods such as Kriol bread, potato pound, Johnny cakes and ducunnu. Still, perhaps due to lack of television exposure, many participants in the study complained about insufficient Kriol cultural representation in their lives, even if they could readily identify cultural aspects of other ethnicities like the Garifuna.



Just as insidious dominant Westernized culture became invisible to detection within the localized contexts of Belizean popular culture, so might also the traditional forms of Belizean life assume a state of transparency to the point that Empress could not consciously identify with traditional aspects of Belizean culture. Much of Empress' rich cultural influences remained unarticulated in the story. The inability to articulate elements her culture were replaced, however, by an impressive awareness of aspects of foreign culture (such as images of Tupac from Rap City). In this sense, Empress needed to be careful that her creativity did not regress to a *dependence* on commercial images of black culture through a sole reliance on foreign forms.

Although Empress never stated that she wanted to be African American, she did aspire to become an entertainer and designer. She often spoke highly of Hip-hop fashion. When looking at music video programming provided by BET, Empress used her past experiences of being a "invincible dark child" to challenge herself to transcend traditional barriers. Whereas Weezie blamed BET for the proliferation of racist, misogynistic material, Empress regarded the BET performances as enlightening. She believed that Belizeans could accomplish the same things she saw on television, only better. She went to karaoke bars, and participated in local talent contests to prove just that. Empress described cultural scenes where she participated in *creolized* Belizean versions of *American Idol*, where she covered songs from Tanya Stephens and Mariah Carey clad in flawless Gucci adorned with silver accents available exclusively through her Hi-5 social network account.

What is interesting is that Empress located and used Nettleford's classical sense of *creolization* at the institutional level. Before she received a text message from her girlfriend, Empress was going to the Bliss Center for Performing Arts for auditions for televised talent. The Bliss Center is a national cultural center in Belize City, constructed by funds bequeathed to the people of Belize by Baron Henry Edward Earnest Victor Bliss in the 1920s (Channel 5

Belize.com, 2000). *Duets*, the local singing contest that interested Empress was filmed there, along with many local theatre and musical performance projects in Belize. The Bliss center was considered a cultural *creolization* center, as many Western programs like *American Idol* are hybridized and presented for local Belizean enjoyment.

Even though Empress' is an exceptional story, filled with instances of hybridity, there were experiences described therein that could be termed *miseducational* (Dewey, 1918). The desire for American products portrayed in both Jamaican and African American culture compelled Empress to look for more ways to make money. That desire often led to misogyny. Like many girls living in the Caribbean, Empress had worked in the sex industry with tourists in order to make money. A 2008 survey of young adults by the local newspaper revealed that 62% of sexually active female teenagers interviewed saw nothing wrong with performing a sexual act with tourists in exchange for cash (Amandala, 2008). The clothing worn by Empress accentuated the body, and she admitted to "dressing for her man", who was also influenced by BET Rap and Hip-Hop music videos. Empress regarded the relationship between herself, Tupac, and Gily as a "love triangle". When I asked her to elaborate about the "love triangle", she giggled, but said nothing more. Later, I observed that Gily used many African American cultural forms, revolving around clothing labels and language. In this instance the "love triangle" enhanced materialist dimensions in their relationship, *subordinating* their spending habits to the purposes of corporate America.

Empress' clothes simultaneously suggested both her creativity *and* subordination to consumerism with both patriarchal and modernistic values. That is, overall, the clothing choices represented creative agency within the midst of subordination. Empress' borderline contempt for other ethnic groups within Belize motivated her creolization by challenging herself to achieve greater levels of recognition for her Kriol group. The money provided by her boyfriend allowed her to buy clothes normally too expensive for someone of her social

economic status, yet alone alter them. Complex interactions like these represented the manners that regional contexts were subtly used by Empress to inform the way she made sense of BET programming in her everyday living.

During the time I observed Empress, Gily often spontaneously recited rap lyrics that were either downloaded to the couple's Mp3 player or repeated from television. Much of the money made by Gily on the streets was spent on designer Hip-hop clothing for himself and for his girlfriend. In fact, the \$250 BZ pair of designer Levis was equivalent to the cost of the monthly rent (Fn: 11,30). Empress owned several pairs of these jeans and I once observed Gily in a pair of True Religion Jeans, valued at \$300.00 US. As much as Empress was creative, she was also prone to *subordination* by the same products she *creolized*.

Gily declined to fully participate in this study, and references to him only serve to suggest the manner in which imagery from BET programming was situated in the life of Empress. The money made by Gily supported Empress to the extent that she was free to work on her own business ventures, and afforded her capital to do things many young Belizean women could not afford (such as disregarding formal schooling and severing family ties). The Belizean society at large did not appear to have a strong appetite for African American Hip-hop, because most local radio stations were keenly tuned in to Belizean Punta, regional Caribbean dancehall (such as Rihanna), Spanish, or Reggae music genres.

African American cultural forms appearing on BET, however, greatly informed Empress' sense of who she was. Despite the dominant influences in Belizean popular culture, Empress chose to modify *Hip-hop* trends seen on BET reality shows and music video programs. She talked about *106 and Park* as the basis for much of her creative energy. Nevertheless, although Empress made some modifications to some of her designer clothes for discounted resale over the Internet, the majority of the clothing Empress wore during my observations mimicked boutique-style Hip-hop clothes.

### **Le Wayne: Rastafarian Re-imagining Tupac**

Le Wayne, the young man in the last story, like Monica, spoke of being influenced by Rastafarian cultural forms. For example, Le Wayne loved *Grafitti*, a popular Rastafarian local drink made of rum bitters and alcohol. He described the reggae music as “conscious”, and its rhythms as “flowing”. Le Wayne’s story, like others, also suggested tensions between traditional Belizean and global cultural forms. The lessons taught to Le Wayne by elders and their extensive knowledge of Rastafarianism in his community represented an education toward the local. But the lyrics of reggae music, as shown in the life lessons learned throughout Le Wayne’s story, suggested sensitivity to the realities of cultural domination and daily oppression by the global.

Nettleford (1977) discussed the Rastafarian existence in many of his writings:

“Needless to say, the Rastafarians broad “dread” defiant ex-theory or mass protests against Caribbean sufferance from the centuries old crimes committed against our people. But this red exterior also conceals a firm in her commitment to peace, love and a quiet determination to guard their own and mankind self-respect and dignity. (p. 187).

These Rastafarian principles were passed through word of mouth from elder to young people, and Le Wayne’s story helped to provide examples of the kinds of Rastafarian knowledge that could have possibly been passed on to him by village elders. The basic of Rastafarian values have been kept dormant by an economically and socially unjust society. Even though Le Wayne talked about the heavy influence of gangsta rap in his younger years, the music often found in his Mp3 player consisted of Rastafarian lyrics against bloodshed and negativity.

He spoke of Rastafarian music being soothing, most likely because the message carried by socially conscious Rasta music has remained consistent over the years. Since Le Wayne was a young child, the Rastafarian lyrics honored African values and ethics (such as those found in the music of the reggae artist Notorious). Although Le Wayne was acquainted with other forms of religion and their cultural influences, he admitted that he was constantly drawn to Rastafarianism for ways he could not fully articulate.

This feeling of peace and belonging, however, was juxtaposed with another kind of perception that stemmed from a resistance to what the Rastafarians sometimes referred to as “Babylon”. To Le Wayne, Babylon represented all that is oppressive in the lives of black people everywhere. The mention of Babylon suggested a deeper connection to other religions such as Judaism, which was intricately linked to Rastafarianism through lines of the Ethiopian King Selassie I. In Rastafarianism, like Judaism, Babylon was considered the enemy. Indeed, anyone or anything of Babylon was considered oppressive, and of ill will. Yet, ironically, in Le Wayne’s story, the police, who are mostly black in Belize City, first and foremost represented sell-outs to Babylon.

In Belize, and most of the Insular Caribbean, the police force is mostly comprised of Creoles and other darker skinned people. Payne and Sutton (1991), among others in the Caribbean, write on the tendency for blacks to be employed by the public service sectors of the economy. However these services, such as education and police are the first to be cut in a hostile economic environment, with the current (2010) minimum wage standing at \$2.70 BZ. In Belize City, the Kriol youth were less educated and therefore less skilled due to the fact that secondary education was not free. Most parents, caught within a vicious cycle, cannot afford the fees, books, and uniforms of private school, and the public school system only takes those that pass the British Qualifying Exams. In 2009, only two out of five high school age students were enrolled in secondary schools.

In Le Wayne's family the smartest went to school and the rest worked. As a result, many of the privatized or internationally subsidized jobs went to the lighter skinned races, such as Chinese, "Spanish", or Arabian (Smith, 2001; Sutton & Payne, 1997; Bolland, 2006). Le Wayne does not truly question the larger racial trends. These racial trends, according to Nettleford, are insidious, colonizing trends that influence the reasons why "blacks feel the need to look down on the latecomer East Indian and Chinese whose pedigree of indenture may even be made into a liability rather than an asset" (Netteford, 1978, p. 206). Le Wayne, however, focuses more on the ways in which blacks worldwide seem to weaken their political positions by selling themselves out for personal gain. Le Wayne considered the police to be a part of "the system", and the people who are employed by them as sellouts to Babylon. The rejection of Babylon, the meager accommodations at home, and the lure of money motivated him to move out of home and onto the street.

Le Wayne's resistance to European control and domination was fed by gangsta-rap imagery in the United States, mainly along racial lines. These actions align with those of Empress insofar as both turned to music for solidarity. In Le Wayne's case, he turned to the African American images of Dr. Dre and Tupac. When I asked him why he felt solidarity with these artists, he spoke about how he resonated with their artistry regarding the politics of making money on the street, and opposing "the system". Imagining a society without white oppression, Le Wayne felt a sense of unity with African American hip-hop discourse. LeWayne appeared to blend the imagery of the Rasta and the gangsta-rapper to *impulsively resist* Babylon.

The contexts surrounding Le Wayne's interactions with Tupac were complex. Nettleford (2004) argues that black *resistance* against neocolonialism is instrumental in the formulation of newer, creolized forms. Le Wayne's hatred of Babylon in earlier adolescent years merged with Tupac's imagery of cop killing, moneymaking discourse, and gang rivalry.

He engaged with gangsta rap as a form of *resistance* to the systems of oppression as he learned in his past from his elders.

There was also evidence of Le Wayne using gangsta rap imagery of rivalry with other gangs, including robbing members of other gangs. These uses of gangsta imagery came directly from the *Black buster* cinema BET program. Le Wayne and those with whom he associated seemed to depend upon these images to generate new ideas for police *resistance*. Yet *resistance* in many cases provoked more problems than it resolved. Le Wayne's shift from the *leverage* solidarity of social justice to *dependence* on organized crime imagery to thwart the police represents a shift wherein power was retained for global interests that stripped local traditions of their meaning.

Because Le Wayne held money in high esteem, the hip-hop obsession with "cold cash" was especially appealing to him. Early in his youth, Le Wayne used street imagery from US to inform his local operations. During of our conversations, he talked about his involvement in the local street gangs of Belize City and his experiences with gangsta rap. The sound of the music alone transported Le Wayne back to his early youth where he made money stealing and participating in local gangbanging. He related to the music video *You Don't Know* to describe the emotions he experienced while gangbanging on the streets of Belize. Le Wayne's felt invincible upon listening or watching hip-hop cultural forms. The imagery of twisted metal, shackles, flames, and police presence were inspirations for, lunacy, and violence and resistance to the police. The way Le Wayne perceived African American gangsta-rap changes through out his life, shifting from a space of pure *resistance* to experiences more contributory to his sense personal growth in the future.

Despite Le Wayne's original intention of using BET imagery for Rastafarian purposes, he admired Tupac as a street businessman and gangbanger (despite other benevolent lyrical contributions made by Tupac regarding poverty and social justice). The

youthful Le Wayne valorized instances of misogyny, money chasing, and gang violence, in Tupac's music, linking it to the hard life of "making it", surviving, and coping with daily reality in Belize. Le Wayne performed this negotiation often in his Belizean gangbanging. The *dependence* on the images above fueled Le Wayne's impulsive *resistance* to the system, but the side effects were often violent ones. It was logical for Le Wayne to remember a time when television influence was negligible in Belize City, since the access to television in the 1980's was considered a rare novelty in Belize. But, Le Wayne could not recall Belize as a violent place before the advent of television, which further suggests the rise in Belizean violence with the increasing public availability of cable.

According to Nettleford (2004), to subscribe to the colonial agenda was to take steps backwards from the benefits of a genuine national or regional identity, such as that of the Rastafarians, to those produced by BET which were ultimately meant as cultural images to attract niche marketing. Le Wayne's use of BET programming to support local gang activity represented a form of *resistance* to elements of the prevailing social order, especially the police. The tragedy of Tupac Shakur was a result of African American gang activity in the Western United States, most specifically, the Crip gang sets of South Central Los Angeles (United States Department of Justice, 2002). These cultural forms influenced Le Wayne, despite the fact that they did not serve the economic interests of local Belizeans. Instead, these cultural forms served the interests of cable operators in Belize such as Central Cable Vision (the earlier Baymen Cable), who bought bundled packages from satellite distributors full of niche programming.

Le Wayne's perception of clothing and fashion did not directly include popular African American hip-hop labels, yet his mode of dress was indirectly influenced by African American genres. He admitted that his brother was his inspiration, who no doubt was himself at least partially influenced by hip-hop cultural forms. Although, as noted in the



story, some of his articles of clothing were made in Guatemala, Le Wayne identified his mode of dress as hip-hop. He was ashamed of the fact he was wearing clothes made in another country, one perhaps he perceived as having a status lesser than his own.

Belize contains within its political borders more than three ethnic groups. These are classified as “modally segmented pluralities” (Smith, 1991; Bolland 2007). In 2010, the Creole (or Kriol in Belize) were a large minority in urban centers of Belize with 44 percent of residents in Belize City coming from Kriol origins. Until recently, however, the Kriols were the majority. This led to some privileging of Kriol customs (history, myths, stories, legends, food, dress and banal ways of life) as national Belizean identity. However, new global directions in services such as tourism and manufacturing resulted in mass migrations to Belize from more impoverished Central American countries such as Honduras and Guatemala to Belize.

The “world-class” tourism industry in Belize, combined with the country’s pegged currency (.50 USD = 1 BZD), made the country an attractive environment for jobs. The influx of non-English speaking Mestizos from Latin America added another dimension to Belizean culture. Still, the Kriol language remained the lingua franca of Belize, (although English is learned in the school and used in business). Many Kriols continue to believe that their country should remain an Afro-Caribbean English speaking country, while Mestizos and Spanish speaking Mayan believe it is time for the British favored Kriols to abandon their colonial influenced dominance.

Le Wayne showed disdain for the Guatemalans on many occasions, and his comments in the story regarding the lack of Guatemalan love for Belizeans point to historic political tensions regarding the sovereignty of Belize. All nations recognize Belize as an independent nation, but Guatemala has had border issues with Belize since the colonial

period. (Hence, the depiction of Belize as a territory of Guatemala in Monica's story, and further references to border tensions in Le Wayne's story).

These issues with the border, along with the strong Belizean dollar, are factors that played a role in the immigration of Guatemalans as well as Salvadorians, Hondurans, and other Central American countries to Belize. The fact that people from Spanish-speaking nations received preference in Belizean society is a fact not lost on anyone. It is thoroughly documented in literature, particularly with Marxist and neo-colonial scholars. And, indeed, Le Wayne thought that it was best for the government or Belizeans to make their own clothing.

But Le Wayne used what was affordable to mirror hip-hop genres, and it was the "made in Guatemala" label that drove Le Wayne to think about business ventures for textiles. Once again, the possibility of making textiles arose within the narratives told by the young Kriols in this study. But Le Wayne and others did not seem aware of the fact that the government was locked in trade agreement battles that prohibited it from protecting its citizens from the constant bombardment of international consumerism.

Structural arrangements in the form of WTO agreements forced Belize and other spaces in the Insular Caribbean to engage in regional trade agreements that would "look attractive" to international business. This kind of dynamic made it difficult for the government to come to the financial rescue of its citizens. Local Belizean entrepreneurs interested in textiles, (Monica and Weezie) were mostly required to play the middleman between foreign clothing makers and local consumers. In Le Wayne and Leonard's case, the particular label did not matter as much as the way the clothes were actually worn. Nevertheless, it appeared that if Le Wayne could have found a way to not *subordinate* his image to African America using Guatemalan clothing, he would have done so.

Perhaps one of the most telling consequences of global television in Le Wayne's story was the perceived "disappearance of native culture". This outcome in fact was expressed by most of the informants in the study. Le Wayne and nearly all of the other informants conveyed a sense of longing for a native culture the Kriol youth could call their own. Le Wayne, could not "see" dimensions of the native Kriol culture around him—the language, the food, the mannerisms, and other cultural features that made Belize what it was and what places like Guatemala were not. So ingrained were the local customs that Le Wayne was scarcely aware of the connections between one certain holiday and Belizean history. Belizeans call October 12<sup>th</sup> "Pan American Day", which is the traditional American Columbus Day. The 12<sup>th</sup> of October for Belizeans is important, marking the influx of Spanish culture and Roman Catholicism into Belize from war torn Mexico in the 1800's and commemorating the overall "discoveries" of Columbus in 1492.

The manner in which Pan-American Day is celebrated in Belize further demarcated racial lines and exemplified how Belize was caught between the past experiences and current, popular influences. Nevertheless, Le Wayne was happy to be away from work, but did not seem aware that Dominoes and rum bitters on the night before were also representative of local Kriol tradition. Le Wayne and other informants were also not able to identify other Kriol cultural features, such as Carnival, beauty pageants, servicemen traditions (black military and police lodges), local food products and language.

Another consequence of the onslaught of global TV concerned the issue of violence. Consider Le Wayne's allusion to *Boyz in the Hood* as a leading cause of violence in Belize City. That movie for Le Wayne, (and perhaps for Weezie) although set in Los Angeles, resembled Belizean street life in many ways. Le Wayne attributes the deterioration of Belizean urban lifestyle to the power of the Blood and Crip meta-narratives that came to dominate the Belizean street scenes. Like the Bloods and Crips, the Belizean gangs (one of

them named after Crenshaw Street in Los Angeles) were once allies, but began to war in the streets over drug territory, and guns and drugs poured over a porous border on their way toward the United States, Mexico, Cuba, and Colombia (Bolland 2006).

The representation of African American cultural forms in movies such as *Boys in the Hood* has influenced elements of Belizean culture such as clothing, language, and branding. Le Wayne's adoption of the gangsta thug paraphernalia represented an *impulsive resistance* to traditional forms of domination such as the police. The black on back crime associated the gangsta thuggery, however, threatened any budding semblance of organized resistance of the "powers that be" represented in the imagery of the police.

The interaction with imperial forms of globalized culture from African American programming that portray gang wars in the Black United States greatly influenced Belizeans in this story. Even Le Wayne admitted that part of the reason was because he wanted what everyone else wanted: American products seen on television. From Leonard to Le Wayne, the majority of informants cited the sheer popularity of American products as reason for wanting them. But the death and destruction of another human being for a percentage of advertising capital is anathema to Nettleford's (1978) theory of cultural indigenization. For him, this kind of mimicry was close to the mindless robotic artificial intelligences wrought by the dehumanizing oppression of *dependence*. This struggle for meaning for Le Wayne did not turn creative until after four and a half years of incarceration and the threat of a lifetime in prison.

This prison experience for Le Wayne seemed to rehabilitate him to think of other ways to internalize his appreciation for gangsta rap music. Through a resolution with himself, Le Wayne decided to return to the locally conscious music of his younger years, allowing him to use the lyrics of the gangsta to become "stress free". Whether or not Le Wayne would have eventually used his love of hip-hop and gangsta lyrics to show other

youths how to manage their anger is unclear. The presence of an imagination that can allow someone to *creolize* gangsta rap lyrics, using them as a mechanism for personal growth rather than a tool for violence was nevertheless remarkable. Even though times remained hard for Le Wayne, he continued to strive toward using lyrics to reduce his anger and raise his social awareness.

Le Wayne chose less violent means of expression and resistance in the end, but his life story, although filled with poverty, was not completely riddled with violence. Le Wayne was incarcerated, and this certainly played a role in his rethinking of his way of living. But it may be the capacity to re-imagine one's self and not the cause of that re-imagining that is most intriguing. In the beginning, Le Wayne succumbed to the pressures to conform to Westernized culture, yet later as a 24 year old, he learned to *creolize* those cultural forms into something useful. Nettleford (2009) calls for increased investigation into the nature and manner of development of a social imagination that can lead to the overcoming of colonialist forms of oppression through this process of indigenization.

So do I.

Writes Nettleford (1978):

The fullest possible exploration of that process which draws on the individual and collective creative imagination is indispensable. And whether for escape, or protest, or confrontation, the exercise of creative imagination remains a major instrument of liberation in the Caribbean cultural and political experience (p.216).

## SIX: ONGOING CONSIDERATIONS

In the previous chapter, personal experiences were analyzed for learning outcomes that arose from Kriol youth interacting with Black Entertainment Television. I wish to remind readers that the purpose of this study was to gain clearer insight about the meanings Kriol youth harvested from BET, and also to determine the manner in which these experiences resulted in libratory moments. In this chapter, I explore some of the assumptions underlying this study, and the implications of findings for future study.

In the previous chapter, the stories presented in chapter four were analyzed for levels of creolization. Rex Nettleford would perhaps be surprised to find that the spaces where the Kriol adolescents made use of their imagination in 2010 was not as robust as in the 1970s. The interactions with BET were not solely examples of the kind of creolization through creative imagination that Nettleford celebrates in his writing. Rather, the results of BET influence were varied, and stratified according to levels of creative imagination both within individual stories and across the narratives.

The interactions shifted within various life situations of the Belizean informants. Moreover, the narratives were but snapshots captured within certain spaces in time, and therefore embedded within certain historical contexts. It is important to not see these interactions not as generalizations of how all Kriol youth interact with Black Entertainment Television. In fact, the shifting levels of hegemony and cultural imagination evident in all of the narratives were indications of the highly individualized yet temporary nature of meaning negotiations.

The levels of creative imagination that lie between creolization and dependence help demonstrate that indigenization is not a stationary process. Instead, the process is a dynamic one dependent on the experiences of the individual and the social contexts that surround

them. The circumstances found within each story were individual accounts, yet they often spoke to larger themes of national and regional importance such as race and national identity. These regional themes are central to studies of the African Diaspora in the cultural studies work of Nettleford, and Pan-Africanist scholars. The fragmented, brittle and amorphous experiences of Kriol youth with the black cultural forms represented on BET invoked these larger themes at a variety of levels in all of the narratives presented in this study.

Previous studies of the impact of cultural imperialism on audiences suggest programming and marketing tactics aim to reduce their audience to mindless consumers. Likewise, many of the narratives in this study suggested that this was the case. Nevertheless, there were instances in which the protagonist in the narrative was able to overcome the insidious nature of cultural imperialism. The work of Nettleford (1989; 2006; 1978) takes into consideration the social imagination needed to effectively transform what is oppressive into something beneficial.

In this study, instances of liberation often revolved around three themes of creolization, social imagination, and racial solidarity.

### **Nettlefordian Assumptions and Questions in Education**

Rex Nettleford's (1978; 2004) understanding of how Caribbeans made sense of colonial messages assumed that the Caribbean youth were actively participating in the creolization of the European message, and those of the United States. He painstakingly took measures to map the use of action via creative imagination to creolize popular forms of British and American cultural forms in Jamaican society, contributing to a stronger sense of national identity. There are stark differences between the time Nettleford's theory was conceptualized and the time when these present interactions were recorded. The end of the 1970's marked a time of personal pride and inspiration for all people of color. The Civil

Rights movements in the United States, and other Pan African intellectual discussions that followed worldwide, helped to stimulate an imagination in the people that set regions ablaze with enough creativity to inspire nations. In Jamaica, the late sixties marked a period of unrest and upheaval as the country struggled to recreate itself. Thus, the processes of decolonization were fresh in the minds and the spirits of the Jamaican people.

Belize is in a different geophysical location from Jamaica, and moreover, although the cultures are similar, Belize was decolonized in 1981. Time changes attitudes as to how people make sense of phenomena shifted and changed with the contexts of experience. The results of this study align with Nettleford's statement that "indigenisation represents that awesome process actualized in simultaneous acts of negating and affirming, demolishing and constructing, rejecting and reshaping. The phenomenon is one of heightened contradiction...and it often raises more questions than it provides answers"(p. 181).

Although the preservation of the native culture is foregrounded in this study, tendencies toward romantization have been avoided. The categories of dependence and subordination were abundant in the stories. Blind resistance to BET's hegemonic messages occurred within all of the narratives. For example, Monica was afraid of the USA and what it could do, even if she did not know why. Empress' determination to be able to accomplish whatever she wanted resisted oppressive racial themes. Nettleford tended to privilege the level of creolization theoretically, but the levels of negotiation evident here arose from within the particular co-constructed narratives, and therefore are unique to the present combinations of situations, experiences, tensions and circumstances presented.

There is an assumption borrowed from Nettleford that hybridization was not detrimental to liberatory moments in the lives of the individuals studied herein, yet some forms of hybridity contained greater moments of liberation than others. The informants often hybridized BET imagery, particularly in the categories of resistance and leverage. Still,



these forms of hybridity did not always yield liberatory moments as defined by the study. The question for these young dark Caribbean youth living locally in a globalized environment then becomes this: which experiences sorts of experiences created environments ripe for creative social imagination?

In his later works, Nettleford describes the epitome of creative imagination:

To the two-thirds of the world's inhabitants, otherwise known as the Third World or the developing world, the issue of national and cultural identity ranks high up on the agenda of concerns. The decolonization of the spirit, which forms part of the ongoing quest for dignity, self-esteem and sense of place and purpose for most who inhabit the post-colonial world, not infrequently finds answers in the exercise of the creative imagination. (p.30).

Liberation, then occurs through a synthesis of creative imagination and energy that enables one to move forward in one's personal quest for self-fulfillment through the decolonization of the spirit, particularly toward of a greater sense of pride and national identity. I resonate with this kind of freedom. Through it one may become fulfilled in terms of dignity, a sense of home, and self esteem. It represents a form of self-empowerment over insidious agents of oppressive simulacra designed to swindle the viewer into false consciousness for the benefit of corporate shareholders.

Nevertheless, it is important to map out not just those experiences that celebrate the successful creolization of potentially harmful imagery from foreign programming, but also those experiences where the informant's experiences ended in failure, subordination or dependency. All of the experiences are important to consider if scholars are to seriously come to understand the psychology of creative imagination in the educational field.

For Maxine Greene (1995), active learning is a creative, artistic experience. This moves beyond the passive experience of "letting things happen". Greene states that

Individuals must make sense of their own situations. It is important to live our mortality as human, and enjoy the existence with all of its insecurities and unexpected situations.

Greene, for example, would not view the minds of Belizean youth as empty vessels to be filled. Instead, she would see these young people as subjectivities that constantly look for ways to make meaning out of their lived experiences. What we read and the things we watch actually affect how meaning is created. In Greene's world, the participants "read" the television programs to make sense of their existence, and thereby achieve greater mastery of the world around them (Greene, 1978).

The focus therefore should not be on the final meaning; but on pondering the situatedness of experience. One cannot simply be whatever one wants; freedom cannot be associated with full autonomy. Each of us seeks meaning, yet we are not alone in doing so. We must be members of a group, and so no one maintains their full autonomy. Still, education is a way to achieve a degree of freedom through imagining with others a better world.

The good society is deeply rooted in a tradition of democratic community. We must assume a critical stance toward whatever community emerges from our efforts to create culture. The values of pluralism and cohesiveness are central. Democratic community is deeply rooted in an existentialist notion of "wide-awakeness". Principles of equality, justice and freedom have to be chosen by individuals who share them with others (Greene 1995, p.56).

Even in places where the voices of youth are quieted within a very small space, Greene (2000) asserts that the mind and the imagination may still remain fountains of hope. Moreover, an aim of education is to nurture intellectual talents for the reconstruction of our society into one that is more democratic, just, and caring. Citizens must be well informed and possess the sensitivities needed to critically examine the world in which we live. Indeed,

one can only be free when one accepts responsibility for his/her experience of the world (Greene, 2000).

Education at its best is a process of teaching people to explore ideas about themselves and the world in which they live, to ask questions about the experience called living and to embrace ambiguity, to notice the unusual without fear and to look upon the ordinary with new eyes (Ayers & Miller, 1998). Greene tells us that in order for the possibility of freedom to take place, they must be imagined or actualized. She wonders: in what manner can a sense of creative social imagination be fostered in young people?

### **The Role of Social Imagination in Liberation**

Nettleford often commented on the value of dialectical synthesis that underpinned the process of creolization in this study. He noted that “the really good and effective creative artist...has a deep understanding of the regulated principles that underlie all change and the crisis which change inevitably brings. His work is nothing more than the product of the simple genius of coping with the dialectical tension of such an existence” (Nettleford, 1978).

Nettleford explained the power of creativity and the art of dealing with the dialectical tensions when negotiating foreign cultural products. According to Nettleford, the conscious Caribbean artist should be well accustomed to the struggle that comes with the creolization of culture. The actions of the creative individual outweighed what is said or thought, “for the Caribbean creative artist has long addressed himself to the negation of that negotiation of self which he knows is the essence of colonial domination. One has to look at the artist action (his work) and less to his rhetoric or testament of his place and purpose” (1978, p. 220). In the case of artistic imagination and creativity, Nettleford assumed that action superceded rhetoric.

Interestingly enough, less imagination often meant greater subordination to the

colonial imagery and neo-liberal agenda of Black Entertainment Television. For example, many of Leonard's interactions with BET-mediated products subverted his imagination toward a more preconceived agenda of consumption, which was congruent with textual analyses in cultural studies that highlight the insidiously hegemonic nature of most media imagery (Bennett, 1982). There were instances in Weezie's story where the chic, well-polished grand narratives about African-Americans arrest his imagination to be re-directed to serve self-defeating purposes. The advancement of technology ensured that market liberation strategies such as structural adjustment continued to create niche markets such as those serviced by BET programming. This kind of programming, specifically *106 and Park*, *Rap City* provided language, sound bytes, and imagery that compelled the Belizean informants to chase the American Dream in Belize City.

Experiences rich with creative imagination, however, often reached beyond the determined existence proffered by producers, writers, film directors, and advertisers, to successfully redirect the subordination to American cultural products in a manner beneficial to the Belizean Kriol locals. The ability to use a creative imagination thereby opened doors of opportunity for some of the youth in this study. The creolized "stress-free coping" performed by Le Wayne combined BET rap lyrics and imagery of black America to provide him with a new way of dealing with the pressures of daily Belizean life, momentarily liberating him from the stress associated with a colonial world made by him, but not made for him. The lessons learned sharpened his understanding of the potentially oppressive nature of foreign products. In so doing, his usage of the global-local dialectic transcended potentially destructive messages and as a result, decisively moved toward the decolonization of the mind. Nettleford (1978) talks of the innovation and creativity which eases material shortage:

What for example, if our natural resources are insignificant in supply, or if our energy base is inadequate, or if our soil or agriculture is poor in our land insufficient, or that climatic conditions are unfavorable? Such realities of Caribbean life summon up the creative effort by those who planned for the better future. (Page 217–218).

### **Future Studies of Race and Solidarity in the Diaspora**

The youths in this story often connected what was seen on BET to larger, more entrenched issues in Belizean popular culture. The concept of race played a significant role in the prevalence of ethnic tensions and conflict in Belize, wherein lighter skin meant greater possibilities. Race was implicated in all of the narratives in the study, and existed at all levels of meaning negotiation. Indeed, the feeling of pride in the images portrayed by Black Entertainment Television often played a pivotal role in the negotiation of the situations encountered. How the participants reacted to this feeling of pride differed greatly. Leonard, for example, felt solidarity with BET images, yet could not imagine the success experienced by the black people in the programming. Monica also experienced great pride at the success of African Americans, but she did not trust American technology. BET imagery also served to instill a sense of self-efficacy within some of the participants. Empress used the success that she witnessed on TV to convince herself that she could do anything. Weezie, however, justified misogyny of women in society through the validation of rap lyrics. Even Le Wayne utilized his understanding of black-on-black violence to realize that he must return to his Rastafarian roots.

There were instances where race helped to instill a sense of pride in local cultural identity. Such was the case with Empress. At other times BET programming assisted in the reproduction of popular yet oppressive imagery, as in Weezie's story. Several of the narratives (Monica, Weezie, Empress) indicated that skin color is a still proxy for Belizean social mobility despite claims of "color-blindness". Particularly within the stories of Monica

and Empress, there existed racial subplots where the protagonists struggled with the consequences of having darker skin. The slogan “dark is bad” was a repetitive theme that inevitably always emerged depending on the past experiences and circumstances of the informants in the study. Nettleford along with other Pan Africanists (see Chapter two) found solace and unity in the African experience of which the Insular Caribbean is a part.

However, advanced colonial marketing tactics often breached this sense of unity with advertising techniques set on the acquisition and retention of a niche (global) audience. The cases of creolization recorded in this dissertation required a great degree of imagination to conceptualize something outside that which currently existed in their realities.

The protagonists sometimes accepted the racial color divide as it was, and did not question its existence. They often did not acknowledge the ways in which that BET may have influenced the how they came to understand relations between the United States and their local spheres. Empress and Leonard admired the images of “successful” African Americans on television. Leonard in particular took the imagery as a guarantee of black success. His obsession with BET’s representation of black success was evident in Leonard’s decision to wait for his father. The remittances of power in the form of clothing labels worn by blacks on BET sent to Leonard by his father in the earlier years fortified and deepened his admiration for the black image, particularly when he earned the grudging respect of his peers. From Leonard’s perspective, the respect he received was worth preserving.

Contrary to popular belief, depictions of black people initially created to serve the needs of consumerism, can be applied by individuals in both oppressive and liberatory matters. Racial solidarity and pride therefore may be a force that can engender a social imagination powerful enough to overcome the neoliberal consumption agenda.

The ways in which social imagination can be invoked by feelings of pride and solidarity, particularly among members of the same racial group, is an area recommended for

future study. Additionally, the manner in which the media influences the perception of race within a Pan-African or diasporic context needs to be addressed more thoroughly. Future studies that revolve around participants' level of media literacy in relation to cultural products portrayed on television would also seem in order. Critical media literacy, particularly knowledge of what Alex Molnar (1997; 2003) calls "the shadow curriculum" could be especially beneficial to understanding the phenomena of racial solidarity expressed via the media.

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APPENDIX A  
INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD APPROVAL LETTER

**To:** Thomas Barone  
ED

**From:** Mark Roosa, Chair  
Soc Beh IRB

**Date:** 10/09/2009

**Committee Action:** Exemption Granted

**IRB Action Date:** 10/09/2009

**IRB Protocol #:** 0908004223

**Study Title:** Global Culture as Situated in the Life Histories of Afro-Belizean Youth

The above-referenced protocol is considered exempt after review by the Institutional Review Board pursuant to Federal regulations, 45 CFR Part 46.101(b)(2) .

This part of the federal regulations requires that the information be recorded by investigators in such a manner that subjects cannot be identified, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects. It is necessary that the information obtained not be such that if disclosed outside the research, it could reasonably place the subjects at risk of criminal or civil liability, or be damaging to the subjects' financial standing, employability, or reputation.

You should retain a copy of this letter for your records.

APPENDIX B  
INFORMANT RECRUITMENT LETTER

## **Global Culture as Situated in the Life Histories of Afro-Belizean Youth**

Date

Dear Participant:

I am a graduate student under the direction of Professor Thomas Barone in the Mary Lou Fulton Institute and Graduate School at Arizona State University. I am conducting a research study to investigate how global culture impacts the lives of black young adults in Belize City, Belize.

I am inviting your participation, which will involve up to five 90 minute sessions. These sessions will include a combination of audio taped interviews and observation. Your participation in this study is voluntary.

You can skip questions if you wish. If you choose not to participate or to withdraw from the study at any time, there will be no penalty. You must be 18 or older to participate in the study. The possible/main benefits of your participation in the research is that it can potentially provide a substantial contribution to our understanding of how global culture affect the local popular culture of black youth living up in Belize City. There are no foreseeable risks or discomforts to your participation.

The investigator, Calvin C. Richards will not use the true names of individuals participating in the study. The true identities of the participants, along with and all subsequent private and identifying information will be coded and placed in a locked file cabinet in the researcher's professional files. No one, with the exception of Calvin C. Richards shall have access to the confidential information. All audiotapes shall be stored via data disk for a period of two years, after which they will be subsequently erased. Your responses will be confidential. The results of this study may be used in reports, presentations, or publications but your name will not be used.

If you have any questions concerning the research study, please contact the research team:

In Belize City:

Calvin Centae Richards, M.A. 501- 601-7752 [calcentae@asu.edu](mailto:calcentae@asu.edu)

In the USA:

Dr. Thomas Barone 1- 480- 965-3924 [barone@asu.edu](mailto:barone@asu.edu)

Scheduling a session with the researcher will be considered your consent to participate.

If you have any questions about your rights as a subject/participant in this research, or if you feel you have been placed at risk, you can contact the Chair of the Human Subjects

Institutional Review Board, through the ASU Office of Research Integrity and Assurance, at (480) 965-6788.

Sincerely,

Calvin Centae Richards, M.A.

Doctoral Candidate

Mary Lou Fulton Institute and Graduate School

Arizona State University

APPENDIX C  
INFORMANT QUESTIONNAIRE



1. Tell me about your life. How did you grow up?
2. What is entertainment for you?
3. How do you know about what lies outside of Belize?
4. Where were you born?
5. Tell me about what you do for fun/work?
6. What do you know about globalization?
7. What does Mc Donald's signify to you?
8. What does hip-hop clothing signify to your friends?
9. Do you listen to Rap music? Where do you get it from? How do you feel when you listen?
10. Where do you think Nike comes from?
11. What are the cool brands of clothing?
12. What television programs do you watch?
13. What do you think about tourists?
14. Do you eat fast food? If so, which ones, and why?
15. What ways do you celebrate your cultural heritage?
16. How do you think Belize has changed since you were a child?
17. What types of technology do you use? (e.g. cell phones)
18. What are the popular radio personalities?
19. How do you feel when someone addresses you with an American accent?
20. How do you use technology in your everyday life?
21. How often do you buy/download music? What genres are cool?
22. What do you/ your friends think of (Beyonce, Jennifer Lopez, the Academy Awards etc.?)
23. What is your favorite music video? Why?
24. How has American clothing influenced your life?
25. Where do you see Belize globally in five years?