

LOCAL IDEALS OF BEAUTY UNDER GLOBAL PRESSURE: GENDER IDENTITY
AND FORMATION IN DANGRIGA, BELIZE

By

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To the Faculty of Washington State University:

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Chair

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Abstract

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Using embodiment theory, this thesis discusses the ways in which women in Dangriga, Belize relate to their bodies and how that reflects the larger social situation in which they find themselves. Globalizing forces, especially the compression of time and space through advancing technologies, such as media and tourism, influence how women in Belize construct gendered identities. Women in Belize generally believe that all women are beautiful and most women reply to the question, “Who do you think is beautiful?” with “I am. I am beautiful.” This understanding of beauty is radically different than the one found in the United States, where beauty is perceived as a competition among women. Feminists have traditionally been ambivalent about the topic of beauty. This study presents an alternative framework for the examination of beauty outside of the customary feminist discussion of patriarchy and competition.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	iii
ABSTRACT	iv
LIST OF FIGURES	vii
CHAPTER	
1. INTRODUCTION	1
What am I studying?	1
Why Belize?	2
Why am I studying this?	5
How did I study this?	7
2. HISTORY	9
3. CURRENT SITUATION IN BELIZE	19
4. LITERATURE REVIEW	31
Theory.	31
Beauty	36
Belize	37
5. FIELDWORK AND METHODS	45
6. DATA	58
The difference between beautiful, pretty, and sexy	58
Hair	68
Body Shapes	80
Makeup	85

Clothing	87
7. ANALYSIS	90
Personal Relationships	90
Economics	97
Globalization	103
8. CONCLUSION	109
APPENDICES	
1. BREAKDOWN OF POPULATION BY ETHNICITY	113
2. BREAKDOWN OF POPULATION BY AGE AND GENDER	113
3. BREAKDOWN OF POPULATION BY RELIGION	113
4. INTERVIEW QUESTIONS	114
5. INFORMANT INFORMATION	115
WORKS CITED	116

LIST OF FIGURES

1. A map of Central America and the Caribbean.	3
2. A map of Belize.	10
3. A map of Belize with population according to ethnicity.	26
4. The Belize Zoo.	46
5. The view from the hotel.	48
6. The river in Dangriga.	48
7. Inside a beauty shop.	51
8. My hair in plaits.	52
9. A Garifuna woman.. . . .	62
10. A young Garifuna woman and young Creole woman.	63
11. A young Belizean Mestizo woman and young Spanish woman.	64
12. A Garifuna woman with short hair.	69
13. My hair in twists.	70
14. A Creole woman with her hair in plaits.	70
15. A Garifuna woman with roly pollies.	70
16. My hair in red roly pollies.	70
17. Inside the hair salon.	73
18. A curling iron.	74
19. A Garifuna woman with chemically straightened hair.	79
20. A Coca-Cola bottle.	85
21. Sponge Bob Square Pants.	85
22. Garifuna dolls.	95

23. Donna's hair in plaits.	98
24. A cement house.	102
25. A wooden house.	102

Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to the anthropology professors of the University of New Orleans,
especially Jeffery Ehrenrich and Donna Bonner.

CHAPTER I - INTRODUCTION

What am I studying?

The aim of this thesis is to examine the ways in which women of Belize talk about themselves and their bodies, using the ideals and perceptions of beauty as the medium. I also intend to discuss how certain aspects of globalization, namely the compression of space and time, are affecting the way women create and maintain their identities. The compression of space involves the ways in which modern technology is enabling humans to travel farther and faster than ever before. In the 19th Century, a trip from Britain to Belize could take months of arduous travel; today, the same trip can be completed in a couple of days. Some of the effects of this changing nature of space are the large transnational migrations taking place and the increase in global tourism. The compression of time also relies on technology. Satellite television, reliable telecommunications and the invention of the Internet have all served to make the transfer of information more rapid than ever before. In the past, information about world events and distant relatives could take weeks or even months to arrive in Belize from the far corners of the earth and could not be accessed freely. People in the colonial government and local elites had vested interest in being Belize's contact to the outside world. As Richard Wilk notes, "In the past, images of foreign culture were received indirectly, with the colonial elite acting as selective agents, the gatekeepers to the outside world" (1993:239). With the advent of new technologies, people in Belize are as likely to be as well informed as anyone else with access to television, telecommunications and the Internet. I will demonstrate that these aspects of globalization affect the ways in which people, specifically women, are constructing their identities in Belize.

Why Belize?

The compression of space and time affects Belize on many levels, from how television and cell phones change the nature of personal relationships to how the international market for citrus affects employment opportunities in the citrus industry. Aldous Huxley wrote in 1934, “If the world had any ends British Honduras [Belize] would certainly be one of them. It is not on the way from anywhere to anywhere else. It has no strategic value. It is all but uninhabited, and when Prohibition [in the United States] is abolished, the last of its profitable enterprises – the re-export of alcohol by rum-runners, who use Belize as their base of operations – will have gone the way of its commerce in logwood, mahogany and chicle” (1984:21-22). Despite Huxley’s dismissal of Belize, even at the time he was writing, Belize was a member of a global community, as reflected by its demographics. This will be discussed further in Chapters II and III. Huxley’s grim predictions for this small corner of what was then the British Empire have failed to be realized. If anything, Belize has become a destination in itself, rather than not being on the way to anywhere. It is particularly appealing to people from the United States because English is the official language, not to mention that it is politically stable, has a warm climate, and is relatively nearby. Because Belize was a British colony until 1981, it is unique as an English speaking country in Central America. Because of its Anglophone nature, Belize is often grouped with former British island colonies in the Caribbean. In reality, Belize is a mixture of Central American and Caribbean influences, as illustrated by maps that group Belize in different areas.



Figure 1 A map of Belize in Central America and the Caribbean. Adapted from Virginia Kerns (1983:18).

As discussed in Chapter II, Belize has historically been a haven for diasporic peoples. This has created a diverse population with a number of distinct ethnic groups. Despite its many different ethnic groups, Belize has been shaped predominately by Creoles, people who trace their descent from European, predominantly British, settlers and the Africans they forced into slavery. This Creole sensibility has led to a disputed national identity as black, although this is being contested by the large number of Spanish speakers who have recently immigrated to Belize. These historical circumstances have created a country that stands in ready contrast to the United States in geographic size, population density, GDP disparities, amount of time as independent country, and national identity. However, the two countries have much in common, such as once having slavery, being former British colonies and speaking English as a result, and having diverse populations.

Anne Sutherland notes, “Belize has all the elements of a post-modern nation. It is linked to the world through the media and the latest technology, such as electronic

transfers of money and the Internet. It is influenced by strong transnational movements and ideas such as environmentalism, liberalization of the economy, democracy, international tourism, and the international drug trade. But all of this has happened recently, since about 1980 at the most, and it has happened without Belize developing the elements of modernity” (1998:3). This means Belize has not developed a modern infrastructure; it lacks good roads, a good water and waste management system, and the ability to produce enough food to feed the population without imports (Sutherland 1998:3). Part of the reason Belize attracts so many international tourists is that much of the land retains its environmental appeal and many Maya ruins. This move to a postmodern economy is important to my research because it means that all the trappings of a globalized economy have been present in Belize for less than a generation. As Marc Edelman and Angelique Haugerud note, “For many anthropologists, globalization signifies accelerated flows or intensified connections – across national and other boundaries – of commodities, people, symbols, technology, images, information, and capital, as well as disconnections, exclusion, marginalization, and dispossession” (2005:22). Television has been present in Belize for approximately 25 years and the Internet arrived about ten years ago. Both of these technologies facilitate the compression of time. Anthony Giddens notes, “The reorganisation of time and space, plus the disembedding mechanisms, radicalise and globalise pre-established institutional traits of modernity; and they act to transform the content and nature of day-to-day social life” (1991:2). The compression of space has resulted in a large tourism sector of the economy and a greater number of people emigrating from Belize, usually to the United States to find work.

Why am I studying this?

The topic of beauty is important to me as a feminist. Belize presented itself by happenstance. My former professor and current friend and colleague, Donna Bonner, was planning a trip to Belize for the summer and had been working in the region for years. I am interested in concepts of beauty and how they reflect the ways in which women construct their identity. I decided I could study this topic in Belize with the guidance of an experienced anthropologist familiar with the people and the area. This was important for me because it would be the first time I would be doing intensive foreign fieldwork of my own devising. In retrospect, Belize was an ideal place to carry out my fieldwork. Although there is an abundance of literature on beauty, almost all of it is focused on Western European countries or the United States (Banks 2000, Black 2004, Bordo 1993, Brownmiller 1984, Chapkis 1986, Craig 2002, Freedman 1986, Freuh 2001, Furman 1997, Gannon 1999, Gimlin 2002, Holland 2004, Roman et al 1998, Tseñlon 1995). Belize offered me an opportunity to examine concepts of beauty in a way domestic fieldwork could not.

Beauty is a problematic topic for feminists in the United States for a number of reasons. As Susan Brownmiller explains, "In 1968 the Women's Liberation Movement announced itself to a startled public by staging a demonstration at the Miss America contest in Atlantic City, protesting, among other points, 'Women in our society are forced daily to compete for male approval, enslaved by ludicrous beauty standards that we ourselves are conditioned to accept'" (1984:24-25). Beauty was explained as a way for men to divide and conquer women. If women were in constant competition with one another, then there could be no solidarity. Later critiques of feminism pointed out that

discussions of femininity and beauty (among other things) focused on white, upper- and middle-class women to the exclusion of all others. Women began to explore what feminism meant for different ethnicities and classes. This did not make the topic of beauty any less problematic.

I believe the role of capitalism has been undervalued in the popular understanding of what beauty is. Although many feminists critique the role of capitalism in formulating ideals of beauty, this concept has not translated into popular consciousness. Many feminists eschew the trappings of fashion, avoiding makeup and the latest clothing style for practical slacks and comfortable shoes. I applaud their conviction, but this mindset has created a conundrum. Many women like feeling pretty, or sexy, or beautiful. One of my mentors had not worn a skirt or dress in more than twenty years when I met her. She finally donned one for a public ritual while she was doing research and was surprised by how good she felt. The older generation of feminists is rightly suspicious of the tyranny of beauty but a wholesale rejection of it has not solved any problems. Women who are committed to rejecting beauty often feel guilty when they do indulge and enjoy the feelings it creates. Younger women take for granted the incredible changes forged by feminists before them but do not identify with the movement for a number of reasons. One of these reasons is that caring about appearance is often dismissed by older feminists as frivolous or even buying into the patriarchy. There must be some middle ground between only being a pretty face and pretending our bodies do not exist.

Part of my personal motivation for carrying out this research is that I need to understand why the idea of beauty is so important to me. Am I shallow or have I sold out to the patriarchy? I do not believe I am or have; so the question becomes, why do I feel

this way? Although many popular studies in anthropology have focused on how beauty works between the genders (i.e., mate attraction) (Buss 2004:103-186, Singh 2000, Symons 1979), I am following in the footsteps of feminist anthropologists and sociologists by examining what beauty means to women (Black 2004, Furman 1997, Gimlin 2002, Holland 2004, Tseëlon 1995).

How did I study this?

The concept of beauty, because it is perceived as a feminine attribute, often creates female space. In this female space, women work on what it means to be a woman. Paula Black (2004), Frida Furman (1997), and Debra Gimlin (2002) all recognize the importance of female space and its link to beauty when they choose to focus on the beauty shop as an ethnographic site. Black notes that often female space is related to the home, so “one reason beauty salons are so important to women in a vast range of different cultures is that they represent a socially sanctioned meeting place” (2004:87). My original plan was also to focus on a beauty salon in Dangriga, Belize. After a few days, however, I realized that the beauty salon was rather exclusive and that most women were working on beauty in other places. In order to gain entrée to these places, I started getting my hair done. By the time I left Belize, I had interviewed 28 women and acted as a participant observer in a number of ways. Although not everything I learned in Belize can be fully expressed, I was rewarded with something I did not expect: a concept of strong, self-confident, *beautiful* women. It had never occurred to me that a woman could say, “I am beautiful” without being sarcastic, boastful, or qualifying the statement in some way. I will examine some of the reasons women in Dangriga feel this way in Chapters VII and VIII.

In this project, I will examine the history of Belize with a focus on the Garinagu, the people who make up the majority of my sample. The Garinagu are the descendants of escaped African slaves and the indigenous Caribs of St. Vincent Island in the Caribbean. I will then examine the current situation in Belize. By reviewing the literature on Belize and the literature on beauty, I will demonstrate that this research fills a gap in both sets of literature. I will explore the theories currently employed for understanding the ways in which people relate to their bodies and how this relationship reflects larger social constructs. I will review the methods I used to collect data and my experience in the field. I will present the data I obtained and offer my analysis of these data.

CHAPTER II - HISTORY

Belize, formerly known as British Honduras, is a small country in Central America bordered by Mexico, Guatemala, and the Caribbean Sea. It is populated by many ethnicities, including, as Nembhard notes in a Belizean children's text, "Creoles, Mestizos, Garifuna, Maya, Mennonites; and people with Arab, East Indian, Chinese, European, British, or other ancestry, and any other number of combinations" (Sutherland 1998:77-78). Even the origins of the name of the country reflect how different ethnicities conceptualize history. Some say that "Belize" derives from the name of a British buccaneer, Willis, which, through Spanish influence, became "Belize" (Foster 1987:11). Others claim the name is from a Scotsman, Peter Wallace, who gave his name to the river and settlement (Foster 1987:11). Certain nationalists have suggested that "Belize" derives from the Maya term "belikin," which means "towards the east" (Foster 1987:11). Today, interestingly, Belikin is also a brand of Belizean beer. Finally, Eric Thompson, a Maya archaeologist, suggests that "*beliz* in Yucatecan Maya means muddy or muddy-watered [*sic*], a true description of the river during much of the rainy season" (Foster 1987:11). In a country smaller than the state of Massachusetts (CIA World FactBook 2006), so much diversity exists because of Belize's traditional acceptance of diasporic and migrating populations (Sutherland 1998:22). In order to understand the complexity of contemporary Belize, one must look to the past.

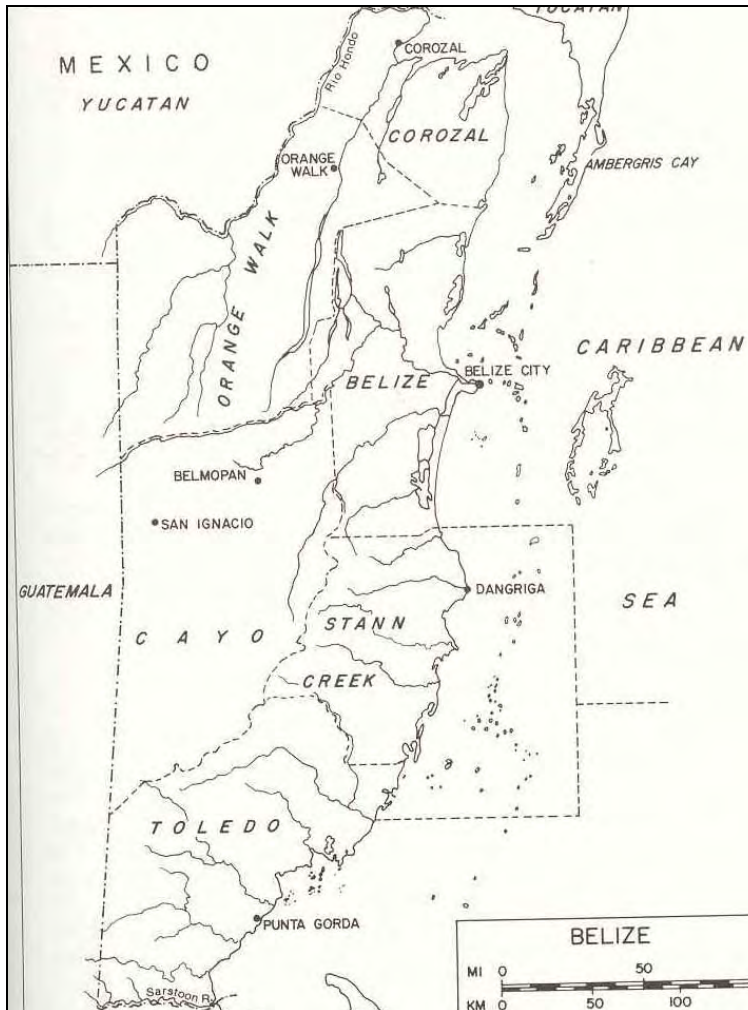


Figure 2 A map of Belize with political districts. Adapted from Virginia Kerns (1983:41).

Although the focus of this study is not the Maya, it is fitting to begin a history of Belize with this group, as they were present long before the British. During the Classic Period (C.E. 300-900), the Maya had trade routes throughout the Yucatan, Belize and Guatemala (Sutherland 1998:14). This complex society had a city-state form of political organization, complex agriculture and a writing system (Sutherland 1998:14). During the period from C.E. 600 to C.E. 900, it is estimated that 30,000 Maya lived on the cayes of Belize and 400,000 lived on the mainland (Sutherland 1998:16). The cayes (pronounced “keys”) are the islands along the coast formed by the presence of the coral reef (Mahler,

et al. 1993:47). Around C.E. 900, the Mayan civilization began to decline for a number of reasons (Sutherland 1998:16). However, Maya population centers such as Chichen Itza and Tulum continued to thrive after this date (Sutherland 1998:16). There is little known about the Maya in the time period between C.E. 900 and contact with the Spanish, some six hundred years later (Bolland 1988:14).

Although many historical accounts of Belize assume the Maya had deserted Belize by the time the British arrived, this is not the case (Bolland 1988:13). The Spanish had no real interest in Belize (at that time called the Bay of Honduras), but historians believe that the Mayan population in Belize may have been devastated by diseases brought by the Spanish and spread through the still functioning trade routes the Maya employed (Bolland 1988:14). After British buccaneers and loggers began arriving around the 1630s (Bolland 1988:15), the British records indicate a less than amicable relationship with the native population (Wilk 1997:54). This proves that the Maya were still present in Belize at the time of British contact. There are also records pointing to the fact that the British kept at least some indigenous people as slaves until as late as the 1820s (Wilk 1997:55). One should make the point that to speak of the Maya as a single people may be misleading, as there are several Maya groups in present day Belize, who vary according to language and culture. The Kekchi Maya have been in or around southern Belize and northern Guatemala since at least the time of Spanish contact (Wilk 1997:57). The Yucatec Maya fled to Belize after the Caste Wars in Mexico in the late 1840s (Wilk 1997:57). Some Mopan Maya fled Guatemala in 1886 to escape forced labor and taxation (Wilk 1997:57). The Maya are still present today in Belize, although

they are often overlooked by scholars in favor of the ruins of the ancient Maya (Sutherland 1998:17).

In 1524, Hernando Cortés marched from Mexico to Golfo Dulce, passing through the Mayan city of Tayasal, marking the beginning of European presence in this area of Central America (Bolland 1988:14). As stated previously, the Spanish had little interest in settling the Bay of Honduras, although a number of missionaries attempted to capture and convert Mayan centers (Bolland 1988:14). The British first settled in the Bay of Honduras sometime in the 1630s (Bolland 1988:15). The first thing that attracted British buccaneers to the area was its fresh water supply, easily accessible fruits and the mangroves on the coast, where privateering ships could conceal themselves from the Spanish galleons upon which they preyed (Sutherland 1998:17-18). As Anne Sutherland notes, “From the beginning, trade in contraband and piracy positioned Belize as a kind of semilegitimate crossroad” (1998:18). One of the important items the British buccaneers plundered from the Spanish ships was logwood (Sutherland 1998:18). In 1655, it was discovered that logwood yielded an important dye for textiles (Sutherland 1998:18). The Treaty of 1667, between Spain and England, which was an attempt to suppress privateering, encouraged the buccaneers or “baymen” to begin cutting logwood for themselves instead of relieving the Spanish galleons of the lumber (Sutherland 1998:18). Nonetheless, these baymen received no support from the British government and had strained relationships with their Spanish neighbors (Sutherland 1998:18). At that time, the primary area of the British logwood industry centered around Campeche in the Gulf of Mexico (Bolland 1988:15). It is important to note that Spain had claimed most of the Southern Hemisphere of the New World with the Pope’s blessing shortly after its

discovery by Europeans; therefore the British had no legal standing to be in any part of Central America (Bonner 1999:125). In 1717, the British were expelled from Campeche, increasing the importance of Belize as a British settlement (Bolland 1988:16).

Sutherland states, “Belize was an economic borderland of the main European powers in the New World. Colonial British Honduras never garnered the attention bestowed on the other British colonies in North America, the Caribbean, Africa and India. Because it was essentially a depopulated area, there was hardly any economic advantage to the British in staying there. Nevertheless, this was their foothold in Central America, and they stayed” (1998:17). After the Spanish lost the Seven Years’ War to Britain in 1763, the British received the first legal concession to their presence in Belize with the Treaty of 1763, which granted the British the right to cut logwood in the area but the land still remained a Spanish territory (Sutherland 1998:18). One of the best-known battles between the British and the Spanish for Belize occurred in 1798 (Bolland 1988:71). During the Battle of St. George’s Caye, roughly 500 British settlers and their 3,000 slaves repelled a Spanish invasion (Bolland 1988:20,71). Even today, this battle is often cited as an example of the slaves’ devotion to their masters (Bolland 1988:20). Neighboring states achieved independence from Spain in 1821, and this led to a territorial dispute between Guatemala and Belize that is still an issue today (Bolland 1988:62). After independence from Spain, Guatemala believed it inherited Spain’s legal claim on Belize. Although the British occupied Belize in fact, the legal status of the area remained in question until it was declared a British colony in 1862 and was called British Honduras (Sutherland 1998:17). The British government issued a coat of arms to British Honduras in 1907 and this has subsequently become the flag of Belize (Sutherland 1998:18). Belize was

granted internal self-government in 1964 and the People's United Party (PUP) ran the country until shortly after independence (Wilk 1995:112). Belize became an independent nation in 1981, although it is still a part of the British Commonwealth, much like Canada (Sutherland 1998:61). Even after independence, British troops remained in Belize until 1993 because of the threat of invasion from Guatemala (Sutherland 1998:61). Guatemala finally recognized Belize's independence in 1992, although there are still problems with Guatemalan squatters along the border (CIA World FactBook 2006).

The nature of the British investment in Belize, logging, led to a system of slavery unlike that found in the rest of the Caribbean and the Southern United States, where the institution allowed for large scale plantation cultivation of cash crops (Bolland 1988:18). Even today, people tell the history of Belize beginning with "the hearty British buccaneering types, who worked alongside and earned the devotion of their slaves (who were really slaves in name only) and who ruled themselves with a primitive but pure democracy, the Public Meetings" (Bolland 1988:13). This myth of the happy slave is belied by the fact that slaves often escaped to the Yucatan, where the Spanish offered freedom to any slave who converted to Catholicism (Bolland 1988:23). There were also at least three slave revolts between the years 1765 to 1773 (Bolland 1988:21). These facts prove that "though the conditions of slavery in the Bay differed somewhat from those on the Caribbean plantations, the slaves in the Bay, like other slaves, rejected and rebelled against their conditions, some of them struggling for a freedom which they may never have experienced but for which they were willing to risk all" (Bolland 1988:25). Although some slaves were born in Belize, most of them arrived via Jamaican slave markets (Bolland 1988:19). Of those slaves, some had been born in the West Indies

while others had only been “seasoned” in the Caribbean (Bolland 1988:19). Others were brought from Africa to Belize, via Jamaica (Bolland 1988:19). Because of the conditions of the logging industry, slaves outnumbered their European masters as early as 1745 (Bolland 1988:20). In 1803, white people in Belize numbered 225, free blacks or “coloured” 775, and slaves 3,959 (Bolland 1988:35). By 1816, there are records of Maroon communities formed by escaped slaves living in the interior (Bolland 1988:63).

A “Maroon” was a slave who escaped captivity and lived outside the settlements (Bolland 1988:63). These African populations, forcibly brought to Belize, along with their European masters, are the ancestors of the present day Creole people of Belize. As early as 1787, there are records of several hundred free blacks or “coloured” people (Bolland 1988:29). These people, including “mulattoes” (people descended from Africans and Europeans), were barred from Public Meetings and were not allowed to vote (Bolland 1988:31). Many of the free black population were manumitted slaves and their descendants (Bolland 1988:56), although some were Garinagu (discussed below). Manumission could be achieved in several ways: self-purchase, purchase by another, through a will, or as a gift (Bolland 1988:56). Even though slaves were overwhelmingly male (because of constant importation), during the period from 1808 to 1830, fifty-seven percent of slaves granted manumission were female (Bolland 1988:57). This suggests that European masters were freeing their mistresses and the resulting children (Bolland 1988:57). Even after the slave trade was abolished (1807) and legally required universal emancipation took place (1838), Belize was still dominated politically and economically by one percent of the population, the elite white males (Sutherland 1998:20). The presence of a substantial number of free people of color prior to emancipation did not

mean that this population was interested in ending slavery. In 1790, the man with the largest number of slaves was a free man of color (Bolland 1988:36). There were also men of color in the military, showing that at least some people of color were attempting to join the system, rather than trying to overthrow it (Bolland 1988:37). At the same time that slavery existed in Belize, another African population was creating a different history for themselves.

The Garinagu, once known as Black Caribs in the literature, begin their history in 1635 (before Belize was discovered by the British) with a shipwreck on the island of St. Vincent (Sutherland 1998:22). In the Garifuna language, “Garinagu” is the noun form and “Garifuna” is the adjective form. In the style of Bonner (2001:94), I will refer to the people as Garinagu when used as a noun. Numerous slaves escaped from two Spanish ships and found shelter with the indigenous people of St. Vincent (Gonzalez 1969:17). Many slaves from nearby islands, especially Barbados, began escaping to St. Vincent soon afterwards (Gonzalez 1969:17-18). The Garinagu are the descendants of the escaped African slaves and the indigenous population, known as Caribs (Gonzalez 1969:17). It is unclear how soon these two populations blended together; records suggest that they saw themselves as two different groups as late as 1700 (Gonzalez 1969:18). Although the French and English guaranteed the islands of St. Vincent and Dominica to the Caribs in perpetuity in 1660, it is unclear whether this treaty was negotiated with the indigenous Caribs or the people known as Black Caribs (Gonzalez 1969:18). It is clear that the British attacked St. Vincent and Dominica in 1683 and several times after that (Gonzalez 1969:18). In 1773, the term “Black Carib” was used for the first time, suggesting by this time the Garinagu were a defined ethnic group (Gonzalez 1969:19).

The British repeatedly tried to confine the Garinagu to reservations on St. Vincent (Gonzalez 1969:19). In 1795, with the encouragement of the French, the Garinagu attempted to regain control of the island for a final time (Gonzalez 1969:19). The British defeated them and decided to remove the Garinagu from St. Vincent to the island of Roatan in 1797 (Gonzalez 1969:19). Around 5,000 Garinagu were forcibly transported to a small island off the coast of Trujillo, Honduras (Gonzalez 1969:20). Most of these people migrated to mainland Honduras along the coastline (Gonzalez 1969:22). There were Garinagu as far north as Belize by 1802 (Gonzalez 1969:22). In 1811, the forty-eight hour rule was passed in Belize City, preventing any Garinagu from being within city limits for more than forty-eight hours without signed permission from the superintendent (Gonzalez 1969:22-23). By the 1830s, there is proof that Garinagu were working as loggers in Belize (Gonzalez 1969:23). In 1857, the lands in Stann Creek were officially leased to the Garinagu, who had been there since approximately 1820 (Gonzalez 1969:24). Today, the Garinagu “maintain communities along the east coast of Central America from the Miskitos in Nicaragua to the Garifuna in Dandriga [*sic*] and Punta Gorda in the south of Belize” (Sutherland 1998:23).

Other groups also have a history in Belize. East Indians, for example, began arriving in the 1870s and 1880s to work on the farms of planters who had fled the Southern United States after the Civil War (Sutherland 1998:24). The East Indians, also known as “coolies,” often came to Belize after their contracts as indentured servants elsewhere in the Caribbean had expired (Sutherland 1998:24). During the Caste Wars (1847-1853), when the Maya rose up against the Mexican government in the Yucatan, many Mestizos (people descended from the indigenous population and the Spanish

settlers) fled to Belize (Sutherland 1998:24-25). During the same approximate time period, many Lebanese and Chinese immigrants arrived and began working as traders in Belize City (Sutherland 1998:25). A large number of Mennonites came to Belize from Mexico beginning in 1958 (Sutherland 1998:25). This religious group was looking for a place to live free of government interference (Sutherland 1998:25). The Mennonites, with their agrarian roots, were important for Belize, which imported almost all of its food prior to their settlement (Sutherland 1998:25). During the 1980s, many people from Guatemala, El Salvador, and Nicaragua fled to Belize to escape civil wars (Sutherland 1998:25). Because of Belize's low population density and the large number of refugees, this migration made Belize the country with the tenth highest proportion of refugees to natives in the world (Sutherland 1998:26). Recently, Belize has seen an increase in the number of expatriate Americans looking for a tax haven or an escape from harsh drug sentences (Sutherland 1998:27). Belize instituted the Economic Citizenship Program, which many Chinese from Hong Kong took advantage of prior to the return of Hong Kong from Britain to the People's Republic of China in 1997 (Sutherland 1998:27). Many Taiwanese also took advantage of this program, where one could buy a Belizean passport for US \$25,000 (Sutherland 1998:27). This complex tangle of ethnicities and histories sets the stage for the discussion of present day Belize.

CHAPTER III - CURRENT SITUATION IN BELIZE

In order to contextualize the lives of the women with whom I worked, it is important to examine the current situation in Belize. International policies affect national policies, which in turn affect aspects of life on a local level. The government, the economy, the ethnic composition of Belize, and the media shape the experiences of Belizeans in an interconnected way. The women of Belize exist within the larger framework of their families, their cities, their nation, and, increasingly, a larger global community.

Sutherland states that Belize is a nation “forming under both postcolonial and multicultural conditions” (1998:59). She notes that in these postmodern times, when space and time are being compressed, the idea of the state is being undermined by the forces of globalization in the form of multinational corporations and transnational organizations (Sutherland 1998:59-60). Belize is involved in a number of international organizations, including Caricom, IMF, Interpol, UN, WHO, and WTO to name some of the better known organizations (CIA World FactBook 2006). Despite the influences of international organizations and globalizing forces, or perhaps because of them, it is only recently that Belizeans have become invested in the idea of a distinct Belizean culture (Wilk 1995:112). An examination of the current situation in Belize it will help contextualize my research.

The government of Belize is modeled on the Westminster system of parliamentary democracy, because of Belize’s status as a former British colony (Sutherland 1998:60). The chief of state is Queen Elizabeth II and the Governor General, appointed by the monarch, is Sir Colville Young (CIA World FactBook 2006). Elections

for the House of Representatives are held every five years (CIA World FactBook 2006). There are 29 positions in the House, all of which turn over in each election cycle (CIA World FactBook 2006). After each election, the Governor General then appoints a Prime Minister, who is generally the leader of the party that holds the most seats in the House of Representatives (CIA World FactBook 2006). The Prime Minister recommends the Deputy Prime Minister and a cabinet to the Governor General, who then officially appoints them (CIA World FactBook 2006).

The second part of this bicameral system is the Senate (12 members), all of whom are appointed by the Governor General, “six on the advice of the prime minister, three on the advice of the leader of the opposition, and one each on the advice of the Belize Council of Churches and Evangelical Association of Churches, the Belize Chamber of Commerce and Industry and the Belize Better Business Bureau, and the National Trade Union Congress and the Civil Society Steering Committee” (CIA World FactBook 2006). Members of the Senate also serve for five-year terms (CIA World FactBook 2006). There are two political parties in Belize, the PUP (People’s United Party) and the UDP (United Democratic Party) (CIA World FactBook 2006). As Tom Barry notes, “Both parties seek to avoid class conflicts and to unite all sectors around their often unspecific and ideologically vague platforms... Having the two parties alternate in office over the past three election cycles did not clarify the difference between the PUP and the UDP; instead their essential similarity was underscored” (1995:11). Currently, the PUP is in power, holding 21 of the 29 seats in the House of Representatives (CIA World FactBook 2006). The Prime Minister is Said Musa (CIA World FactBook 2006).

Since independence, each party has held power for one or two election cycles and then has been voted out in favor of the opposing party (Sutherland 1998:62). Due to the fact that the party in control has virtually unchecked power, reprisals against the opposition occur often (Sutherland 1998:62-62). In fact, “there are many examples of a new government canceling contracts with people who supported the previous government and punishing towns and villages that voted for the opposition by leaving them to stagnate without government support” (Sutherland 1998:62). It is difficult for any long-term projects to be completed under this system and corruption is rampant (Sutherland 1998:62-63). At one point, during the last term of the UDP, one man, Dean Barrow, was “Minister of Foreign Affairs, Minister of National Security (Belize Defense Force and police), Minister of Immigration and Naturalization (customs), Minister of the Media, and Attorney General (courts and legal system)” (Sutherland 1998:64). He was also accused of being closely tied to lawyers who were defending drug dealers who had been caught red-handed with a plane full of cocaine (Sutherland 1998:64). This one example illustrates how Belize, while nominally a democracy, is, in fact, run by an elite minority with ties to many sectors of government and business.

The court system, rather than acting as a check on legislative and executive power, only adds to the corruption. There are a small number of judges and attorneys and they often become ministers when their party is in power, which creates a conflict of interest (Sutherland 1998:65). Furthermore, the police, without legal training, are forced to act as prosecutors even when the defendants can afford expensive attorneys (Sutherland 1998:65). The peculiar result of this system, where over extended police prosecute drug lords with virtually unlimited funds, is a court that, as of 1998, had never

convicted any drug dealers, even when they were caught with large quantities of drugs (Sutherland 1998:65). Matters are further complicated by the fact that the Privy Council in London is the ultimate arbiter of the legal system (Sutherland 1998:65). One judge handed out more than twenty death sentences, only to have stays of execution granted by the Privy Council in each case (Sutherland 1998:65). Belizeans seem to generally favor capital punishment in response to rising crime rates (Sutherland 1998:66). This perspective on how the courts mete out punishment was still very much in evidence during my time there. In an editorial, Bismark Ranguy Sr., a justice of the peace, exhorted Belize to follow the example of General George Ubico of Guatemala in the 1930s by instituting “biblical” laws (2005:5). Stealing would result in the loss of a hand and murders would be forced to dig their own graves before being shot to death in that grave (Ranguy 2005:5). Ranguy warns, “In this precious jewel of ours that we call Belize, if our leaders do not turn to God and His Laws, I must tell this little nation of Belize that we will all be heading, full speed into the jaws of hell” (2005:5). Putting aside the question of the morality of executions for a moment, it is easy to see why this court system, with its corruption, ineffectiveness, and its ultimate accountability to British authority, is frustrating to many citizens.

Belize’s economy, like its government, is shaped by its colonial past and present global forces. Irma McClaurin claims “The country’s ‘underdeveloped’ state is not a ‘natural’ consequence of internal processes but the specific outcome of multiple factors that are historical and modern, political, and economic” (1996:28). Of the number of people employed in Belize, 27% work in the agricultural sector, 18% in industry, and 55% in service (predominantly tourism) (CIA World FactBook 2006). The rate of

unemployment is 12.9% (CIA World FactBook 2006). Going back to the Treaty of 1763, the British were allowed to cut timber in Belize, but not allowed to build any fortifications or practice agriculture (Sutherland 1998:18). Even after Belize was declared a British colony, settlers were deterred from agriculture by the inhospitable climate and the inaccessibility of fertile soils (McClaurin 1996:28). Until the Mennonites arrived in the 1950s, there was no appreciable agriculture for Belizean consumption and most food was imported from Britain or the United States (Sutherland 1998:25). It is important to note that the Maya have been engaging in farming for subsistence and small scale trade since they arrived in Belize (Sutherland 1998:86, Wilk 1997:7). The government is actively trying to expand the agro-industrial sector in order to increase export crops, such as sugar, citrus, and bananas (Medina 1997:150). This policy does not help the country produce food for its own consumption, however. In order to attract international investors in export agriculture, the government keeps wages low and offers these companies tax breaks (Medina 1997:150). This is part of a larger government strategy to develop the economy; foreign investors are encouraged to look to agriculture and industry while the tourism sector is kept for Belizeans (Sutherland 1998:99).

Many larger political forces influence the Belizean economy, both historically and currently. During the Reagan administration, Belize was targeted for investment and political concern by the United States as a point of stability in the Caribbean and Central America (Sutherland 1998:61). USAID provided a substantial amount of money to the Belizean government in the hopes of keeping it from becoming socialist and communist and the Peace Corp had a large number of volunteers in the area (Sutherland 1998:61). When the British troops withdrew in 1993, Belize lost US \$ 40 million dollars

(Sutherland 1998:61). Around the same time, US interests in the region declined (Sutherland 1998:61-62). Today, USAID and the US Information Service no longer exist in Belize and the Peace Corp involvement is substantially reduced (Sutherland 1998:62). Taiwan and Japan both give more aid to Belize than the United States (Sutherland 1998:62). Other aid granting agencies involved in Belize today are the United Nations Development Programme and the European Community aid programs (Sutherland 1998:62). The IMF and World Bank have also placed constraints on the types of development and economic changes that are allowed in Belize (Medina 1997:150). Because Belize relies so heavily on imports, there are few distinctly Belizean products offered, and vice versa (Wilk 1995:111-113). However, there has recently been an increase in awareness of a distinct Belizean culture and with it has come a few emblematic Belizean goods, such as Marie Sharp's Hot Sauce, woodcrafts, dolls, dresses, local juices, and Punta rock, a Belizean form of music (Wilk 1995:113). The consequence of this awareness is that, although the overall rate of consumption of exports has increased dramatically, there is more pride in local goods than there was in the past (Wilk 1995:113).

It is the very lack of development in the areas of agriculture and industry that has created the tourist industry which supports Belize today (McClaurin 1996:28, Sutherland 1998:91). More than half of the country's land has been designated as reserved, which is possible because of the low population density and lack of development, especially in the interior (Sutherland 1998:125). Sutherland places Belize in the middle of the global debate over environmentalism (1998:99). In this debate, humans are seen as detrimental to the environment and ecotourism has been proposed as a partial solution to the problem

(Sutherland 1998:99). By encouraging ecotourism, the tourists will put the environment ahead of their comfort and have less impact on nature, at least according to the theory (Sutherland 1998:99). Sutherland problematizes this solution by noting in the case of the Cockscomb Jaguar Preserve that the Maya who traditionally worked the land in the area were evicted from their land in order to save the jaguars (Sutherland 1998:119-120). After having visited Cockscomb Basin, I fail to see how loud, large groups traipsing through the area, leaving trash and discarded food, have less impact on the environment and the jaguars than the Maya who had established some sort of equilibrium prior to the land becoming a preserve. Sutherland also notes that in order for ecotourism to be successful, it must still generate money (1998:99). This forces those creating an ecotourism experience to cater to the beliefs of those who come as tourists. Since the prevailing attitude seems to be that humans and nature cannot coexist, the Maya had to go.

The July 2005 estimation of the total population of the nation is 279,457 (CIA World FactBook 2006). The major ethnic groups include Mestizo, Creole, Maya, Garinagu, East Indian, Mennonite, and Chinese (Sutherland 1992:6-7). Sutherland notes, “What makes Belizeans unique is not just that you have so many different groups of people. What stands out is the way they interact with each other. Each group is distinguishable by distinct racial and cultural attributes, but they also mix with each other, crossing community boundaries on a daily basis” (1992:7). Part of the reason there is so little tension between ethnic groups in Belize is the spatial distribution of groups; the two major populations, Mestizo and Creole, are settled in different parts of the country (McClaurin 1996:30).

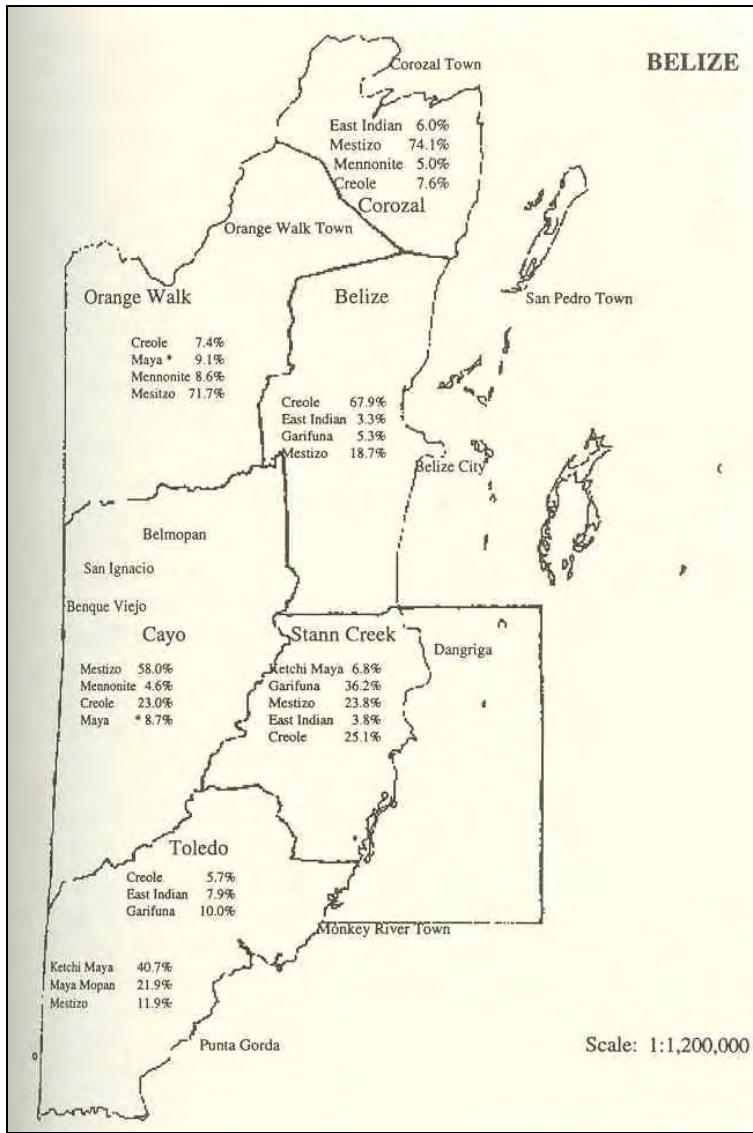


Figure 3 A map of Belize with a breakdown of the population based on ethnicity, from the 1991 census. Adapted from Irma McClaurin (1996:31).

The ages of Belizeans show a preponderance of young people, with 40.1% of the population under the age of fifteen (CIA World FactBook 2006). Although the country had a relatively high life expectancy (66 years for men and 70 years for women), only 3.5% of the population is over the age of 65 (CIA World FactBook 2006). Charts illustrating age and ethnic distribution can be found in Appendices 1 and 2. The CIA

World FactBook (2006) lists a zero net migration rate, but Bonner notes “since the early 1980s, Belize has experienced high rates of immigration of Spanish speakers from Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras, and high rates of emigration of Belizean Creoles and Garinagus to the United States” (2001:82). Almost everyone I met in Belize, Creole, Garinagu, or Mestizo, had at least one relative living in the United States. I also met a number of people who vacation in the United States at least once a year. Many people had plans to go to the United States, although I do not know how feasible these plans were since there were many problems with finances and visas. The drive to go to the United States may best be illustrated by an anecdote. I met a Spanish man who asked me to take on his teenaged daughter as a maid to bring to the United States after I had talked to him for a couple of hours. The request was made with no real expectation of acceptance, however it seems that such requests are made of tourists and foreigners fairly regularly. This shows how strong the lure of the United States is for some people in Belize.

Although Belize has been historically isolated as a colonial backwater, communications have improved dramatically and connected Belize to the larger world. Television came to Belize in the 1980s (Sutherland 1998:176). Almost every household I visited had a television, which was almost always on and being played at pretty loud volumes. Most of the stations are pirated from Mexico and the United States, although Belize has a couple of local stations (Sutherland 1998:176). According to Sutherland, Belize has one of the best telephone systems in Central America and the Caribbean (1998:177). The phone system is monopolized by Belize Telecommunications, Limited (BTL), and was reliable while I was there. However, this monopoly does not allow

international carriers, so phone cards purchased in the United States were worthless and calls billed to credit cards were outrageous. The only way to make international calls for a relatively low price was to get phone cards from the local BTL office. Many people did not have a phone in their house, although cell phones have gained in popularity. For those without cell phones, children and visiting seemed to be the major lines of communication. If I wanted to meet with someone, I went to the house, hoping she or he was home. If they were out, there were generally children around I could leave a message with. Of course, I did not have a cell phone. Telecommunications expanded to include the Internet in 1995 (Sutherland 1998:177). Computers are even more rare than phones in households, but there were a number of Internet cafes. Most of the clientele I observed were foreigners, either tourists or expatriates. Most of the Belizean women I met did not have email accounts or familiarity with computers. There were a number of businessmen who used the Internet, especially in the tourism industry. Most people received their international news from the television and local news from newspapers. While waiting to see if Hurricane Emily would bring devastation to Belize, I had the surreal experience of watching the Weather Channel, piped in the United States, which had a five-minute snippet at the end of each hour about hurricane season. Looking at the calm Caribbean Sea, I realized how bizarre it was to be depending on news from thousands of miles away for severe weather that was churning away practically in Belize's backyard. Belize has several newspapers but reporters do not believe there is freedom of the press because the government is so secretive (Sutherland 1998:180). There was no local paper for Dangriga specifically, so newspapers from Belize City would be delivered once or twice a week. On Fridays, all of the papers would be

delivered to local shops. If they didn't run out, I had my choice among at least four papers. It seemed as if everyone read the papers. Belize has a rate of literacy of 94.1% (CIA World FactBook 2006) and everyone has their favorite newspaper, usually based on their political leanings. *The Reporter* focuses on business and expresses the opinion of the Chamber of Commerce and Industry (Barry 1995:108). *Amandala* is the most independent paper in the country and is run by Evan X. Hyde, who led the 1960s United Black Association for Development movement (Barry 1995:108). Each political party has its own newspaper; the UDP has *People's Pulse* and the PUP has *Belize Times* (Barry 1995:108).

Women's issues have become important in Belize in the last thirty years, partly due to the United Nations declaration of the International Decade of Women, beginning in 1975 (Barry 1995:119, McClaurin 1996:165). A number of women's groups have evolved to address women's concerns, including the Belize Organization for Women and Development, the Belize Women Against Violence, the Belize Rural Women's Association, the Breast is Best League, and the Belize Family Life Association (Barry 1995:119-120). Compared to men in Belize, women are underemployed and have higher rates of unemployment (Barry 1995:120). McClaurin, whose studies women's groups in Belize, believes these organizations have effected change in women's status, including "increasing women's representation in the labor force, obtaining maintenance from fathers for children born outside of marriage, gaining better housing, and setting up job training to prepare women for employment" (1996:165). I met several women involved in women's groups while in Dangriga. One woman, a leader in the community, invited me to a meeting of the United Women's Group, which worked to educate voters on their

rights. I talked to a couple of women who were involved in Belize Women Against Violence. The need for this group became apparent to me when one of the women I became close to divulged that she was in an abusive relationship. The women I met in Belize were strong and independent; however, their lives were far from perfect. By engaging in collective action, these women are improving their own situations.

CHAPTER IV - LITERATURE REVIEW

In this chapter, I will examine the current literature on embodiment theory, other studies involving the body and beauty, and anthropological studies of Belize. My research, which explores how women experience and relate to their bodies through the lens of beauty, is related to many studies that have been carried out in Europe and the United States. These types of studies have not been conducted in non-Western settings.

Theory

There are several approaches to theorizing about the body, ranging from the highly interpretive to the strictly scientific. I will explore a few of these, with special emphasis on how the language used to describe bodily experiences reveals a person's conceptualization of the larger social environment. Because embodiment is a subjective experience, made further so by the interpretations of the researcher, theories on the matter are difficult to articulate without examples. I will also discuss the theories of the body that are grounded in a materialist perspective in that they focus on the physical practices of the body. I will conclude with a brief discussion of evolutionary theory, which concentrates on the body as a product of evolution. Finally, although feminism is not an explicit theory, it shapes much of the theory I will employ. I will discuss how a feminist perspective informs my research and analysis.

Many feminists have used the concept of embodiment to critique and explore larger social issues. However, the theoretical approach behind the use of this concept is not often explicit. Embodiment combines aspects of symbology, materialism, and political feminist critique. Pierre Bourdieu suggests that to embody hexis, a physical way of being, is to turn hexis "into a permanent disposition, a durable manner of standing,

speaking, and thereby of *feeling* and *thinking*” (2004:93-94). A similar perspective on the body is articulated by Sarah Nettleton and Jonathan Watson, who note that “the phenomenological perspective focuses on the ‘lived body’, the idea that human beings and their consciousness is invariably embedded within the body. The human being is an embedded social agent” (1998:9). This view stresses that perception is dependant upon bodily experiences (such as the senses) and therefore the body shapes consciousness and thought.

Some of the best examples of embodiment theory can be explored through their application of the concept. Emily Martin (2006) uses the concept of embodiment to explore how the shifting explanations of the body in medicine reflect larger social understandings. She traces the shift from a “Fordist” model to a model of integrated systems, both of which reflect the types of capitalism present during their conception. The Fordist model emphasizes production under a strict hierarchy, while the integrated system model reflects the globalized nature of instant communication, just in time delivery, and networks. She notes, “I have sketched a transformation in embodiment, from Fordist bodies held by disciplined order in time and space and organized for efficient mass production, to late capitalist bodies learning flexible response in rapidly collapsing time and space, bodies which nonetheless contain (contradictorily) increasingly sharp and terrible divisions. I am suggesting that there are changes afoot in out embodied dispositions, changes that will surely take importantly different forms among different people and groups” (Martin 2006:347). This is an important example of how embodiment theory is applied as a critical perspective. Martin explores how people experience and relate to their bodies through the language they use to explain the immune

system. For example, Martin notes that the T cell of the immune system is masculinized in both popular and scientific literature as active and virile (2006:344). She states, “These descriptions take on a stark significance in light of the fact that HIV is killing off precisely the high-ranking cells, the masculinized T cells, in gay men and minority drug users (the demographic groups now affected most by HIV in Baltimore)” (Martin 2006:344). The metaphors people employ to describe the workings of the immune system reflect larger social concepts, such as gender inequities.

In his discussion of embodiment theory, Michael Jackson (2006) warns anthropologists away from being deceived by linguistic explanation of bodily performance. Because of the ambiguous nature of performances, limiting the language of the body to mere words devalues the manifold meanings of bodily praxis. He notes, “Inasmuch as bodily praxis cannot be reduced to a semiotic, bodily practices are always open to interpretation; they are not in themselves interpretations of anything” (Jackson 2006:331). He draws on Bourdieu’s theory of practice here to understand bodily praxis. This idea stands in contrast to exploring embodiment through language, which is the path both Emily Martin and I have taken.

Michel Foucault (2006) explores issues of the body through power. Although he never uses the term embodiment, the current use of this theory in exploring people’s experiences of and relationship to their bodies owes much to Foucault’s analysis of the body and power. He notes, “Historians long ago began to write the history of the body. They have studied the body in the field of historical demography or pathology; they have considered it as the seat of needs and appetites, as the locus of physiological processes and metabolisms, as a target for the attack of germs or viruses; they have shown to what

extent historical processes were involved in what might seem to be the purely biological base of existence; and what place should be given in the history of society to biological ‘events’ such as the circulation of bacilli, or the extension of the lifespan (cf. Le Roy-Ladurie). But the body is also directly involved in a political field; power relations have an immediate hold upon it; they invest it, mark it, train it, torture it, force it to carry out tasks, to perform ceremonies, to emit signs” (Foucault 2006:353). Foucault stresses that it is not simply the threat of corporeal punishment that grants power over the body to those in authority. There are more subtle forces at play. Every relationship is a power struggle. Feminists have used this concept to deconstruct everything from boardrooms to advertising. It is a logical progression from this critique of power over bodies to using the ways in which people relate to their bodies to understand the larger power structure.

Monica Rudberg (1997) takes the concept of exploring the body through language to a more abstract level by using textual analyses of scientific textbooks and Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*. Rudberg is concerned with the ways in which different bodies are represented and how that speaks to the social order of things. With the exception of news articles from various Belizean newspapers, I will avoid this type of textual analysis of the body; rather, I rely on the spoken language of the women I worked with to discern how their choice of words reflects the social order.

Anthony Giddens explains that in a social environment where people are constantly forced to question their identity (especially because of global influences), “the body is less and less an extrinsic ‘given’, functioning outside the internally referential systems of modernity, but becomes itself reflexively mobilized. What might appear as a wholesale movement towards the narcissistic cultivation of bodily appearance is in fact

an expression of a concern lying much deeper actively to ‘construct’ and control the body” (1991:7). This concern with the body, bodily appearance, and beauty has given rise to a relatively recent body of literature. Kathy Davis (1997) investigates the theories that have framed the recent rise in popularity of the body as a research topic. She traces this increase in popularity to three sources: the creation of the body as a vehicle for self-fulfillment, the conflict between modernist certainty and postmodernist uncertainty, and the body as a political issue for feminists. A number of feminist scholars have explored what it means to women to have a body, be a body, and to be an embodied actor (Bordo 1993, Brownmiller 1984, Tseëlon 1995). These works tend to focus on concepts of femininity and self image, which are “shaped not just by what we perceive our body to look like, but what we see and how we interpret our vision of our body is mediated by our social and cultural context” (Nettleton et al 1998:17).

David Buss (2004:142-148) explores the physical nature of beauty as an evolved adaptation as it affects mate choice. This study focuses on what men find attractive in women. The emphasis is on a woman’s reproductive value. I feel it is important to mention Buss as a representative of the research that is currently taking place on beauty from an evolutionary perspective. Although I am not focused on inter-sexual perceptions of beauty, or the actual physical nature of beauty, evolutionary psychology has framed much work in this area recently. My study employs beauty as the lens through which I am exploring how women in Belize relate to their bodies and their identities.

As Linda McDowell states, “The key aim of feminist scholarship in general is to demonstrate the construction and significance of sexual differentiation as a key organizing principle and axis of social power, as well as a crucial part of the constitution

of subjectivity, of an individual's sense of their self-identity as a sexed and gendered person" (1999:8). I went into the field with the assumption that the experiences of women are different than those of men. Because of limited time and resources, I choose to focus exclusively on women and their perceptions of beauty. Although there has been a recent push to include research on men in genders studies (Chant et al 2005, for example), the preponderance of literature on the body is about women and their bodies. My own interests in feminism and the body led me to follow the structure of previous studies in examining what beauty means to women to the exclusion of men.

Beauty

There are several ethnographies that involve studies similar to my own. Debra Gimlin (2002) presents a study of the self-image of women in four different venues in the United States. By interviewing and observing women in hair salons, gyms, cosmetic surgeries, and the National Association to Advance Fat Acceptance meetings, she explores ways in which the body is constructed (both physically and ideologically) and how that affects the women participating in the activities. Paula Black focuses on beauty salons and the space created by practicing beauty. Frida Kerner Furman (1997) and Linda Gannon (1999) explore the uneasy relationship between women and beauty in an aging population and how aging affects women's understanding of themselves. Samantha Holland (2004) also addresses issues of aging, but among women who define themselves as being alternative, including those with body modifications such as tattoos, piercings, etc. Wendy Chapkis (1986) uses women's narratives to examine the shame that motivates beauty practices. All of these studies show that the body is an important foundation for identity and that, for women, concepts of beauty are a central way in

which women understand and relate to their bodies. Although some of these studies address differences in ethnicity and class in passing, for the most part they focus on middle- and upper-class white women from the United States and Europe.

Sarah Banet-Weiser (1999) takes a more global approach in her analysis of beauty pageants in different national and international contexts. She focuses on how pageants delineate ideals of beauty for women and concepts of nationality. Ingrid Banks (2000) discusses how hair is an important symbol for black women in the United States. Banks explores notions of power through hair as a racial marker. She also investigates how black women compare themselves to standards of white beauty and ways in which black women resist these ideologies of beauty. Banks's study is relevant to my own because it address both issues of ethnicity and the importance of hair for women of African descent. In a similar vein, Maxine Leeds Craig (2002) examines how ethnicity and class intersect in the history of the United States to shape the ideals of beauty for black women.

Belize

The literature on Belize focuses on several areas. The largest part of the literature is taken up by studies on ethnicity, partially because the topic is so complex in Belize. The Maya, in particular, have had a number of ethnographies written about them. Social linguistics has been used to explore notions of ethnicity on a number of levels. Colonialism and post-colonialism also shapes a number of the publications on Belize. Globalization, particularly in the form of media and tourism, has recently been studied in Belize. A few ethnographies have focused on the Garinagu, specifically. These are addressed as a separate topic because the women I worked with were primarily Garinagu. Finally, a few studies on gender in Belize will be discussed.

Because of the numerous ethnicities that exist in Belize, many anthropologists have explored concepts of ethnicity and race in Belize. Ethnicity colors most interactions and is inescapable. C. Thomas Brockmann (1977), in one of the earlier studies done on ethnicity in Belize, outlines how closer contact between ethnic groups in Belize beginning in the 1950s has led to a mostly harmonious multiethnic society. All the ethnicities he discusses existed in Belize before this time, when universal adult suffrage was passed and an elected government formed; however, this nationalist movement brought ethnic groups into closer contact than before. He explores several markers of ethnicity, including job preference, religious affiliation, and most importantly, language. His vision of Belize in the future, barring serious economic downturns, is one of ethnic harmony while maintaining distinct ethnic categories. As far as I was able to ascertain, this vision has been realized. There seemed to be some tension between ethnicities, mostly in the form of stereotypes; for the most part, ethnicity did not seem to be a barrier for friendships or working relationships. Karen Judd (1989) discusses what the term “creolization” implies for different ethnic groups and the uneasy stasis that has been achieved as far as a Belizean national identity goes. Donna Bonner (1999) explores how European aesthetic theory has been used to create, maintain, and sometimes challenge notions of race in Belize.

James Gregory (1976) looks at how the divisions between Mopan Maya and other ethnicities in Belize are changing. He is concerned with the blurring of interethnic group boundaries. The question of ethnicity in Belize is more fluid than it is in the United States, especially as a person’s choice of language is seen as an important indication of ethnicity. For the Mopan, according to Gregory, they have the option of retaining their

indigenous identity by maintaining their obvious Mopan cultural characteristics (including speaking Mopan), shifting to a “neutral” Belizean identity by adopting English or English Creole, or following other Mayan groups into ladinoization (the process of becoming “Spanish”) by choosing to identify with Mestizos and speaking Spanish. The question of language choice as a marker for ethnicity occurs repeatedly in the literature on Belize. Richard Wilk (1997) also initially worked with the Maya in Belize. In the 1970s, he worked among the Kekchi Maya, studying household ecology. His initial motivation was to study a “traditional” society but soon confronted the fact that the Kekchi way of life was changing.

Part of the reason there is so much concern with ethnicity and national identity is the large number of immigrants, both legal and illegal, residing in Belize from its Central American neighbors. Joseph Palacio (1988), a Belizean anthropologist, analyzes data collected during an amnesty period offered by the Belizean government to illegal immigrants in 1984. Using an applied anthropological approach, Palacio questions what the influx of large number of Spanish-speaking refugees means for Belize. Many of the people in Belize illegally are fleeing civil unrest and dire economic circumstances in other Central American countries. Their presence in Belize links the country more closely to Central America, although as an English-speaking nation, Belize has traditionally been associated with Caribbean nations. Donna Birdwell-Pheasant (1985) also tackles the question of language choice and ethnic identity. She, too, worked with Maya, although the group she worked with originally spoke Yucatec. She traces the shift from Mayan language to Spanish, and then to a stable bilingualism with English. She asserts that English will probably not become the primary language of the Maya because

English is identified with Belizeans of African descent. In this multi-ethnic and multilingual nation, which language one chooses to speak says volumes about the ethnic identity one chooses to present. Donna Bonner (2001) explores similar themes of language choice and ethnic identity, but among the Garinagu, with similar results; younger Garinagu are choosing to speak Creole or Standard English in order to identify as more Belizean. One article that addresses language for its own sake is Chad Ryan Thomas's (2000) "Digression and Insertion in a Belizean Folktale." Although he stresses the storyteller's mixed ethnicity (half Spanish, half Creole), he primarily is interested in comparing a Belizean folktale to other folktales from around the world. He concludes that the style of the tale reflects Belize's British, Spanish, and African heritage.

O. Nigel Bolland (1988) addresses issues of colonialism and its effects on the political system in Belize. Joseph Palacio (1976) rails against anthropologists exploiting Belize for their own academic interests without considering how best to benefit the people being studied. He notes that much of the early ethnography on Belize focused on matrilocality to the exclusion of anything else (Gerber 1974 and Gonzalez 1969, for example). More recent works, such as that done by Laurie Kroshus Medina (1997), address topics with direct relevance to Belizean life. Medina explores issues of class within the citrus industry of Belize. Local publishing companies in Belize have also begun to print books by Belizeans about Belize. *The Baymen's Legacy*, by Byron Foster (1987) is an example of a locally produced history made for local consumption. Belizeans are beginning to realize the importance of telling their own history.

Nancy Lundgren (1988) examines the impact of globalization on Belizean children. She argues that colonialism and the world capitalist system have ingrained in

children that they are inferior to white people, especially British and people from the United States. She repeatedly reports that the people of Belize see themselves as black, poor and ugly. This stands in direct contrast to my findings, although I did not work with children. Lundgren works in Belize City, where the majority of people are Creole, so this difference in findings may result from ethnic differences or from the difference in time when we each studied in Belize. Although she mentions the pictures of Christ in churches are all white, the Catholic church I attended while there had a large painting of a black Christ. Richard Wilk has written a number of articles on the effects of globalization on Belize (1990, 1993, 1995). The major thrust of these articles is that Belizeans are developing a national identity in response to global pressures. One of the major global influences Wilk focuses is the medium of television.

Richard Wilk (1989, 1993) explores the connections between television and perceptions of time in Belize. He highlights the ways in which television has created a different sense of time and cultural distance. He argues that satellite television grants instant access to current news and entertainment, thereby breaking the hold of local elites over access to imported culture. This destroys the notion that the former colony is somehow behind the times or backwards. He emphasizes that it is not so much the content of the programming that is important to study, but rather how people talk about television. He also stresses that no one really believes television to be non-fiction. I, personally, had a couple of encounters that lead me to question this assertion. I met a girl of sixteen outside an adult literacy class who asked if I knew Raven or if I lived close to where she went to high school. Raven is a fictional character on the Disney Channel (a favorite among Belizean girls). She seemed disturbed when I told her Raven was not

real. On another occasion, a man asked me if I had my own airplane. He said that he thought everyone in the United States had an airplane. I do not know if he got this notion from television. It is also possible that he was making fun of the tourist. However, he did say he saw rich people on television all the time. While I think many people can distinguish between the real and the fictional, I believe Wilk may have overstated the case. The threat of Hurricane Emily, as everyone tuned into the Weather Channel, proves Wilk's point about the change in the perception of time. People no longer had to hear the news delayed but could watch the massive storm threatening the Yucatan right then. This concern with how media affect people has existed in Belize almost as long as television itself. In 1986, Connie Roser, Leslie Snyder, and Steven Chaffee published an article delineating how mass media influence migration to the United States and form the expectations of those planning to emigrate.

Anne Sutherland (1998) addresses issues of globalization and tourism in her ethnography of Belize. Cynthia Enloe explores how tourism is based on "the inequalities of international trade" (1989:40). Her analysis of tourism pertains to Belize. Enloe (1989) discusses how tourism is touted as a panacea by the state government; tourism is thought to bring foreign investment and currency; it brings prestige and recognition to countries that might otherwise go unnoticed. In reality, tourism, as it is practiced today, often only perpetuates inequalities.

Peter J. Wilson (1973) examines notions of respectability and reputation among English-speaking black societies in the Caribbean. His work helps place the Garinagu in a larger context within the culture area. Nancie L. Solien Gonzalez (1969) initially studied household structure among the Garinagu in Honduras. She focuses on the

concept of matrifocality. Gonzalez (1988), in her later work, traces the ethnohistory of the Garinagu. She explores the similarities and differences among Garifuna groups in Central America with particular attention to what she calls “cultural bases of ethnicity.” As more Garinagu immigrate to the United States, she discusses the possibility of the Garinagu being absorbed into the larger African American population. The same issue is arising in Central America, where Garifuna identity may be subsumed in the black Creole population. This may happen, but Gonzalez points out that the Garinagu have been living with European and other ethnic influences since their inception as an ethnic group. Virginia Kerns (1983) also works primarily among the Garinagu. She studies the ways in which women maintain ritual practices in the Garifuna religion. Her ethnography depicts strong, independent women in Belize.

Irma McClaurin (1996) examines gender and ethnicity in Belize as it relates to women’s groups. Being in Belize more than ten years after McClaurin, I realize the importance of placing ethnographies in time. The concerns she raises, such as husbands not allowing wives to attend women’s group meetings, at least in my experience, were not as important to women. The women of Dangriga felt they had a right to attend such meetings. A couple of women told me how it used to be a struggle to go to women’s groups, but now men knew better than to forbid it. There is still gender stratification, as exemplified by the number of female run businesses (only a few) and domestic violence. There are groups that address such issues and at least some women in Dangriga are taking advantage of them. This trend toward women’s groups reflects larger social movements in Latin America and the Caribbean. Through women’s activism in this geographical area, “women gained victories which, although not specifically addressing

gender issues, permitted greater access to the labor market, higher levels of education, and a decline in mortality and fertility rates” (Lycklama à Nijeholt et al 1998:15).

Although the topics in my thesis have been addressed in pieces in other works, it should be apparent that this work combines several elements into a novel research project. By using embodiment theory, I will explore notions of beauty among the women of Dangriga, Belize. The literature on beauty neglects the experience of many women, especially those outside the United States and Western Europe. The literature on Belize often focuses on ethnicity to the exclusion of gender. I will repair this neglect.

CHAPTER V - FIELDWORK AND METHODS

As the plane landed, I was a bundle of nerves. I had never left the United States before, much less negotiated customs on my own. Once I disembarked, the first thing I noticed was the heat. It was stifling. I looked anxiously towards the airport, where I was sure I would find both air-conditioning and the friend I was meeting. I was disappointed on both accounts.

I struggled through customs, although I must have looked too earnest to be hiding anything. My fellow passengers, returning Belizeans, backpackers, and Mennonites, all seemed to negotiate the process with ease. After having been properly stamped and visa-ed, I made my way into the lobby of the airport. There was one large room with a row of ticket counters. Afraid to put down my luggage or backpack, I dragged them behind me as I wandered around the inside and outside of the building. Cabbies offered me rides while tour groups were greeted by guides with their names on placards. There was no sign of Donna, my former professor, who was supposed to meet me at the airport. I tried to use the pay phone, but the calling cards I had so diligently researched before purchase in the States would not work.

By this point, I was on the verge of tears. This was not the way it was supposed to be. I exchanged some of my US dollars for Belizean currency; the exchange rate was US \$1 for BZ \$2. I bought some bottled water and sat on a bench under a lazy ceiling fan and tried to stay calm, but the dollar coins felt odd in my pocket. Although Belize is officially an English speaking country, around me people were speaking in Creole. Although I recognized some of the words, the meaning seemed to slide past my ears. Then it hit me in a visceral way: I was in a foreign country.

Finally, I saw a white woman in a sundress and realized I was not abandoned. Donna was meeting a group of Tulane students at the airport for the beginning of their summer course abroad. I was hitching a ride with them, first to the Belize Zoo and then later to Dangriga, where I would be doing my fieldwork.

Donna was waiting for a couple of more students to arrive and then we called the zoo. They sent out a driver to pick up the group. We waited for more than two hours. The driver had trouble with the truck. He apologized, but did not seem to feel remorse. That is just the way things are in Belize. On the way to the zoo, an hour's drive, I realized the roads are less than ideal and it might have been a miracle that the driver made it at all. I saw a few houses, mostly wooden houses built on stilts or houses made of cement. Everything was green and overgrown and still hot. I am from New Orleans and had thought I would be prepared for the subtropical heat and the flora, but this was nothing like what I expected. It was beautiful, but in a strange, alien way. I wondered if all travelers feel this way the first time they leave their native country.



Figure 4 The facilities at the Belize Zoo.

I spent a few days at the zoo, to get acclimated and give myself time to adjust to the idea of being in a new locale. Although I had first balked at the idea of staying at a zoo, the facility often hosted tour groups and was quite nice. Donna's group and I left the zoo, which is just outside Belize City, and headed for Dangriga by bus. As I dragged my wheeled luggage down dirt paths, I cursed the day I decided to pack my life into a "convenient" box with wheels. No one had warned me that a giant backpack is the way to go. Wheeled luggage only works in places with even paving.

The bus, a repainted school bus, followed the Western Highway to the Hummingbird Highway through the mountains. Passing the citrus plantations, I could see the dilapidated shacks that served as housing for the citrus workers. The bus was not overly crowded, but it was Saturday afternoon and most people had already taken the bus earlier in the morning if they were going visiting for the weekend. A Mayan woman riding on the bus sold me a beaded bracelet; she was the first of many Mayan women to ask me to "buy goods." Donna had mentioned that since the Peace Corp came to Belize, the Maya always have handcrafted baskets or beadwork to sell to tourists. I regret that these brief encounters were the sum total of the interactions I had with any Mayan women, but most Mayan women lived outside Dangriga and only came to the market to sell produce.

Once we arrived in Dangriga, I rode in a cab to the hotel where I would be living for the next seven weeks. This was one of three car rides I had the entire time I was in town. The sounds of punta rock, a local variety of music based on Garifuna rhythms, blared from houses and people stayed in what little shade there was. From the veranda of the hotel, I could see the Caribbean Sea. The town hugs the coastline; the main streets

run parallel to the sea until they peter out where the mangrove swamps begin. A river runs through the center of town.



Figure 5 The view from the veranda of my hotel.



Figure 6 The river in the middle of town.

When I later walked past the restaurant next to the river, men would call from an alley, asking if I wanted to go to the cayes. The cayes are small islands formed from

coral off the coast. Many men with their own boats earn extra money by ferrying tourists to the cayes. They stopped calling to me like this after I had been in town for a couple of weeks, partially because they got used to me turning them down and partially because lobster season started. Many men also called out, "I like to see your tattoos." I had thought I was being respectful by not wearing revealing shirts; hence, not exposing my rather large back tattoos. I had even worn a septum ring that tucks into my nose so I wouldn't offend anyone with my body modifications. I learned later that these men were referring to the tattoos around my ankles, which I thought were the least worthy of note. A woman later told me that prostitutes and loose women have ankle tattoos and wear toe rings. I never met any prostitutes, or at least anyone who claimed that was her profession, or any Belizeans with tattooed ankles, so I could not confirm this. It did, however, put men teasing me about my tattoos in perspective.

Many children would also approach me on the street and ask for a shilling to buy an ideal. An ideal is a frozen treat like a Popsicle, but in a bag that you suck on rather than trying to inhale the sugary sweetness before it melts in the relentless heat. A shilling is a Belizean quarter and a reminder of the British history in Belize. I learned to occasionally buy ideals for children I knew, but never to hand out shillings to those I did not. Because I have been a student most of my adult life, I had never felt wealthy until I went to Belize. Even on a limited travel budget, I was rich compared to many of the people I met, whose average income was quite low. I still feel conflicted about this. For example, I bought a bicycle after a few days to get around to the outlying areas. People were amazed I would buy a bicycle when I was not even going to be there two months. I

actually found the bike to be a hindrance unless I was going really far, as it was easier to stop and talk to people if I was on foot.

My first night in Dangriga, I went to a bar with Donna and her students. This bar is owned by a woman, which is a rarity. I was struck by the gender separation; men stayed inside the bar (for the most part) while women played bingo outside. Women would occasionally go inside for drinks (mostly sodas from what I could see) but then return to the bingo game. Drinking alcohol was seen as a male activity (and occasionally, a problem) but gambling was seen as a female activity (and occasionally, a problem).

One of the women I met, a rather eccentric artist, drank rum in her home with her male partner and used it in ritual contexts. Women were also drinking at a wake I attended. These two cases seemed to be the exception to the rule that women and men do not drink together. It was not so much that there was antagonism between genders; rather it was as if they existed in two different spheres that occasionally touched one another. I can count on one hand the number of times I saw men and women holding hands or physically acting as part of a couple, at least according to the standards of the United States.

One of the first things I did the next day was walk around town. Everything was closed because it was Sunday. I was struck by the number of beauty shops. Just on the main street, there were at least five stores devoted primarily to beauty and fashion. These were not salons, but rather retail outlets that sold hair products, including hair extensions, bath and body products, and sometimes clothing. Beauty products, however, were sold in most stores. I bought my first tub of hair grease (really a wax type product to flatten hair or keep it in braids) from the stationery shop. One beauty shop had at least nine different

brands of hair dye available in a range of colors that reflected the primary ancestries of Dangrigans, African, Spanish, and East Indian. In the United States, most beauty sections of large stores have a tiny “ethnic” section for hair products and a vast array of products targeted toward white women. It was strange for me to have this proportion turned on its head. In fact, I never located any hair dye intended for white women in any of the shops I visited.



Figure 7 One aisle of one of the many beauty shops on the main street.

In general, I felt intimidated by the whole process of fieldwork. I had decided to make thirty interviews my target, since I only had a few basic questions. I brought with me a number of Polaroid photographs of women from my campus and a few fashion magazines. The plan was to have women do a piling and sorting exercise to determine what, if any, types of women they found attractive. I also brought film for my camera to take pictures of local women for comparison. This plan did not work out for a number of reasons, which I will discuss below.

Because I had devised these plans, I felt prepared but was having a difficult time meeting women. Although it was completely unintentional, I hit upon the strategy of getting my hair braided. Initially, some girls who lived near the hotel started braiding my hair. Through them, I was able to meet their mothers. My sample of women began to expand from there. Women seemed to think it was a bit odd that I wanted to talk about beauty, but getting my hair done was something they understood. It was also easier to frame my research in terms of fashion rather than beauty. Women were willing to talk about fashion with an outside researcher but were uncomfortable if I approached them about beauty. I believe this was, in part, because of the concern with lesbianism. It may also have stemmed from the unexamined nature of beauty among Belizeans. Women did not seem to be overly concerned with beauty as a topic. It was the reverse of my experience in the United States.



Figure 8 My hair in plaits, as done by a girl living near the hotel.

I was also nervous about all the paperwork I needed to have filled out for informed consent purposes. I knew Belize had a high literacy rate, but I did not know how the forms for consent would go over. It ended up being an asset rather than a liability, however. Most people seemed very impressed with the official quality of the process, which lent my research credibility. Although the wording of my questions changed from day to day slightly, I consistently asked the same set of questions of the twenty-eight women I interviewed. A list of the questions may be found in Appendix 4.

One woman served as a contact for many of the other women I met. Iris¹ was an invaluable resource and a kind woman. She was involved in local politics and lived with her four sisters and their children in a house on the beach. She taught preschool and was respected in the community. She was Garinagu, which influenced the sample in that she introduced me to many other Garifuna women. For information regarding age, ethnicity and occupation, see Appendix 5. Overall, twenty-three of the women I interviewed were Garifuna; two were Creole; two were Belizean Mestizo; and one was Spanish. All ethnicities were self-identified. For example, I know one of the women who identified as Garinagu had an East Indian father, but she preferred to identify as Garinagu. Because of the overwhelming proportions of Garinagu in Dangriga, it makes sense they would form the majority of my sample. They are over-represented if this research were to represent all of Dangriga; however, these are the women I could talk to. The women range in age from eighteen to forty-seven. Half of my sample consists of women between the ages of eighteen and twenty-three. Again, these were the women whom I could talk to and who were willing to be interviewed. This does, however, reflect some of the demographics of

¹ All names have been changed to protect the identity of the women who participated in this research. I have tried to reflect the derivation of names; for example, I used alternate Spanish names for women with Spanish influenced names.

the nation, since there are an overwhelming number of young people. See Appendix 2 for a breakdown of the population by age. This is also the first generation raised since television and independence came to Belize in the early 1980s. I point out the limitations of the sample only to be clear that this research does not, by any means, represent all women in Dangriga, much less Belize.

Before Iris agreed to introduce me to people, I had a difficult time talking to women. The best strategy was to have someone I had already talked to introduce me to another woman. Sometimes women would just give me the name and address of other women they thought would like to talk to me. I tried to follow through on these contacts, but often the women felt uncomfortable and would ask me to come back later. I found people were more willing to talk to me if I asked to get my hair plaited. After spending some time with these women, it was easier to approach them about doing an interview. Things became much easier after Iris took me under her wing. She was a long time friend of Donna, my former professor, and was familiar with the ways of anthropologists. Once Donna vouched for me, Iris was willing to introduce me to her friends and relatives. They accepted me on Iris's word.

Women also felt more comfortable with me once they had seen me around town for a while. I made it a point to attend the Catholic church while I was in Dangriga, even though most younger people do not go on a regular basis. This was a way for me to be present in the community without making people uncomfortable. Most mornings, I ate breakfast at the market. An older Garifuna woman sold a variety of food from her small stall inside the open-air market, including fried jack (a type of fried bread), stewed chicken, fried barracuda, and beans. There were several plastic chairs set up around the

stall for people to sit and eat. I attended several graduations, from preschool to adult literacy programs. It was graduation season when I arrived in Dangriga and graduations are major celebrations. I attended a birthday party for a child and a wake for a teenaged boy. Once women could say to me, “I saw you at church (or wherever)”, they were more comfortable talking to me.

I also participated in a number of beauty experiences. I had my hair plaited, put in roly-pollies, cut, styled, and had extensions put in. At the salon I visited, I had a pedicure and my hair styled. I watched women plait and observed children practicing on one another. I spent a number of hours just hanging out with women, on their verandas and in their homes. Because of limited resources, I did not offer the women I interviewed compensation, although I always paid to have my hair done. I also tried to contribute to the household, when appropriate. For example, I brought candy to the birthday party I attended. I also gave gifts to women I worked closely with.

Most interviews took place at the women’s homes, although some were conducted where they worked. Interviews were never private. Often children and other women were sitting on the veranda with us, but one interview took place in the presence of a man. Again, there was no hostility toward men in general; they just were not around the same places at the same times as the women. This semi-public forum worked to my advantage because other women would comment on the questions or answers, giving me an idea of how acceptable or controversial opinions were. For example, I interviewed one woman at the shop where she worked. Although this was not a private venue, there was no one else present for large portions of the interview. This woman felt compelled to tell me that if I asked women who they thought was beautiful, they would not tell me

because they did not want to be perceived as lesbians. She made a point of this so I would not think she was a lesbian. When I asked this question to women in front of other women, they did not feel that they had to make the same disclaimer. Everyone present knew they were not lesbians, so they could talk about beautiful women without anyone questioning their sexuality. Homosexuality was a big issue in Dangriga, although I never personally met anyone who self-identified as homosexual. Many women did warn me that Thursday nights at the karaoke club were a lesbian event, but I never made it to the club on that night. Little girls often giggled about women sleeping with other women and accused each other of liking girls, but Belizean children tend to tease one another about all aspects of their lives. Nonetheless, this topic is frequently discussed.

During my first few interviews, I felt frustrated because my picture exercise did not work out. With the Polaroid photographs of university students from the United States, women wanted to know who these women were and how I knew them. They didn't want to rate them on beauty. The magazines were also a flop; everyone was interested in the clothes and accessories, not the women. Donna had forewarned me against taking pictures of local women and once I was in Dangriga a few days, I understood why. If I asked women in this relatively small town to rate their neighbors, relatives, and friends on beauty, I was bound to create a stir. My frustration continued until one of the women I asked to complete these exercises said she could not tell if the women in the magazines were beautiful or not because she did not know them. This statement explains why this exercise was futile and helped to guide my further interviews and interpretations. Without the exercises, I had to content myself with good old-fashioned participant observation and interviews as sources of data. Fortunately, these

sufficed to clarify some of the questions with which I had entered the field, although the nature of my investigation led me to unexpected results.

CHAPTER VI – DATA

The results of my interviews and participant observation fall into six broad categories: the meaning of beauty, issues concerning ethnicity, hair matters, different body types, feelings about makeup, and concerns about clothing. Each of these categories is involved in the construction of beauty in Dangriga for women.

The difference between beautiful, pretty, and sexy

Three questions were the focus of my research. What kind of woman is beautiful? Who do you think is beautiful? How does a woman become more beautiful? The rest of my topics grew out of the concerns these questions raised. Before exploring what being beautiful means, it is important to distinguish among three similar categories: sexy, pretty, and beautiful. Being sexy refers to both a body type and an attitude. Interestingly, faces were not considered sexy. Hair could make you feel sexy, but was not, in itself, sexy. The body type will be discussed below. The attitude includes the self-confidence to wear revealing clothing. Many younger women wanted to be sexy. Older women generally frowned on sexiness. Iris related being sexy to being a prostitute because it is like giving oneself to men. Even with constant heat and humidity, a respectable woman should not *“show a lot of leg... cover the belly and breasts, and no wear short short-pants [shorts].”*² “Backouts” are worn by sexy women. These are either mini-skirts or backless shirts; people defined the word differently. From this brief discussion, one can see that “sexy” has both positive and negative connotations. Peter Wilson notes, “Characteristically, the woman is most concerned with the domestic realm; her respectability is partly a function of her success there and the propriety of her sexual

² I have chosen to transcribe quotations into Standard English orthography, although I have retained the original grammatical structure. All quotations in italics are taken from interviews.

conduct” (1973:213). “Pretty,” on the other hand, is a positive word that refers to the surface of things. Women are not usually referred to as pretty, though young girls may be. Landscapes and flowers can also be called pretty. Iris said she was misled as a child because she thought being pretty equaled being beautiful, but as she has grown older, she has learned that pretty only refers to the outside of things. The category “beauty” is harder to pin down. It is used to refer to a number of aspects of a person: physical appearance, internal qualities, or spirituality. “Beauty” is a deeper category than “pretty” because when it is used to refer to physical beauty, there is the implication that physical appearance reflects innate, desirable qualities.

When asked, “What kind of woman is beautiful?” many women responded with some version of “Every woman is beautiful.” Although many women stated this as a maxim, later in the interview they often qualified or contradicted this statement. I believe this is an example of how what people say they believe is not necessarily what they practice. It appears to be socially unacceptable to say that one thinks some women are less beautiful than others. The contradictions and qualifications most often arose in response to questions about body type, which will be discussed below. Other women listed non-physical qualities as examples of traits of beautiful women. These qualities include being “natural,” being a role model, having a good job, being kind-hearted, being accepting, confidence, politeness, being God-fearing, being genuine, open-mindedness, flexibility, compassion, having a sense of humor, pride, dignity, intelligence, and patience.

Interestingly, the replies of women providing non-physical traits shifted away from non-physical qualities to physical ones when I asked, “How does a woman become

more beautiful?” Although a few suggested improving oneself, through reading the Bible or being educated, the majority focused on how to change physical appearance to reflect what are considered innate qualities. Such answers focused on dressing nicely, or “respectfully”, and keeping one’s outward appearance neat. Many women focused on hair as a sign of how much a woman cares about herself. I will discuss this further, below. This suggests that, for most women, the corporeal is malleable while the noncorporeal is fixed. When it comes down to it, you either have it or you don’t. Some women gave theoretical counterexamples of women who looked pretty, but were mean or stingy; therefore, they were not beautiful. An article in the *Belize Times* by Aunt Grace entitled “The True Meaning of Being a Beautiful Person” stresses that “beauty is a combination of mind and body, appearance and soul, personality and mindset” (2005:10). After emphasizing how important non-physical traits are to beauty, she goes on to give specific advice about how to care for one’s skin. This illustrates the conundrum between the internal and the external qualities of beauty that the women I interviewed also voiced. There were only two occasions when women mentioned a specific person as being ugly. In the first instance, the woman asked me to stop recording so she could tell her friend whom this supposedly hypothetical example referred to. She did not want to be recorded gossiping about someone specific. In the second case, a woman mentioned a childhood friend as being outwardly ugly, but only to make the point that this same friend is now a respected attorney. This was done to illustrate the internal qualities of beauty.

Finally, the response which surprised me and delighted me the most was in reply to the question “Who do you think is beautiful?” I had expected a list of famous women, such as entertainers, or other local women. Cara, who was the first woman I interviewed,

said, "*Myself. I am beautiful.*" It had not even occurred to me that this was an option. Writing about women in the United States, Wendy Chapkis notes, "This experience of inadequacy means that no woman is allowed to say or to believe 'I am beautiful'" (1986:6). Rita Freedman, also writing about women in the United States, explains, "Belief in one's own attractiveness can be as hard to achieve as physical beauty itself" (1986:23). Obviously, something different was occurring in Dangriga than in the United States. Cara's answer was repeated more often than any other. Dorothea explained, "*I call myself beautiful now. No matter how I look, if I'm a fat person or a skinny person, to me, in my own image [in her mind] I'm a pretty woman. I know, Christ came first, which is God. He is a man of all colors and all beauty. So he would come first before me but any other person ... I am more beautiful than them. I'm a natural woman, I don't wear makeup, I don't wear lipstick; all that I'd do is make sure I take a nice bath, make sure I'm clean. Put a little, like, deodorant under my arms and maybe a little perfume, and that's it. I won't have no makeup, no lipstick, no nothing. I'm just a natural woman. So in my image, I'm a beautiful woman.*" Dorothea incorporated aspects of spirituality, self-confidence, respectability, and naturalness into her definition of her own beauty.

Younger women would often giggle as they said that they themselves were beautiful; older women stated it as a fact. Shayleen shed some light on the uniformity of this reply when she said, "*I don't think anyone thinks they are ugly.*" Perla also offered some insight when she said, "*We should always say 'I'm beautiful.'*" Although some women did admit to feeling conflicted about their bodies, belying their statement that they believed they were beautiful, the number was far smaller than the number of women who contradicted the statement that all women are beautiful. Most women were willing

to admit that all women are not necessarily beautiful, but only a few would admit that they, themselves, felt less than beautiful. Since returning from Belize, I have casually asked a number of my female friends who they think is beautiful. None have named themselves, or even anyone they knew personally.



Figure 9 A Garifuna woman. She said, "I am beautiful."

There were three women who deviated from the standard reply substantially. Engracia, a 19-year-old Honduran, singled out women by ethnicity. She especially appreciated the appearance of "*Spanish girls in the U.S.*" She focused on beauty as appearance. Henrietta, a 40-year-old Belizean Mestizo, did not have to think about her reply. She immediately cited Princess Diana, who she referred to as Lady Di, as the paragon of beauty. For her, Lady Di embodied femininity by being "*polite, shy, elegant.*" Although this may have something to do with Belize's status as a former British colony, I believe Henrietta liked the story of Lady Di more than her status as royalty. Finally, Deliza, a 23-year-old Garinagu, listed three African-American women

from television: Halle Barry, Oprah Winfrey, and the comedienne Monique from *The Parkers*. For her, Halle Barry represented success and beauty and Monique was a positive role model for larger women. Oprah Winfrey, however, was her heroine. Deliza felt she understood Oprah's personal struggle and respected her for all she has done for people, especially black women. These last two examples stress how important internal qualities are for Belizean women when judging beauty, even though they cited women they did not personally know as examples of beautiful women. The one thing these three women have in common is that they are each well traveled. All have spent a considerable amount of time in the United States. This explains the reason my sorting experiment with photographs failed. In order to judge a woman's beauty, Belizean women need to feel as if they know her. Just looking at a photograph is not sufficient to decide whether a woman is beautiful or not.



Figure 10 A young Garifuna woman on the left and a young Creole woman with extensions in her hair on the right.



Figure 11 A young Belizean Mestizo on the left and a young self-identified Spanish woman on the right.

Ethnicity

For all that anthropologists have written about ethnicity in Belize, the term itself is not well known in Dangriga. Striving to be sensitive, I asked women what their ethnicity was. I wanted to avoid the question of race with its biological implications. A few of the better-educated women and the ones who worked for the government knew what I was talking about. Younger women, who make up the majority of my survey, did not understand the term. They did, however, grasp what I meant when I explained, “Like, Creole or Garifuna.” Everyone knew which group she identified with. Interestingly, no one replied with simply “Belizean.” Twenty-three women self-identified as Garifuna. They each used the adjectival form, which is more popular in common speech and is the label used on the national census. Two women self-identified as Creole. One woman knew I am originally from New Orleans and that there are “Creoles” in New Orleans also. She wanted to know if New Orleans Creoles spoke the same as Belizean Creoles. I tried to explain that the term means people who speak a

language derived from three or more other languages, but she did not understand. She thought Creole was the same everywhere. Two women self-identified as Belizean Mestizo. The significance of preceding Mestizo with Belizean is that they were born in Belize and their families had been in Belize for a long time. The term divides this group from Mestizos (the official designation on government documents) or Spanish (the term used to refer to anyone who speaks Spanish as their primary language and not from Belize). Belizean Mestizos may or may not speak Spanish, but they are fluent in Belizean Creole. Finally, one woman self-identified as Spanish. I thought this was interesting because, although she later told me she was originally from Honduras, she did not identify with her country of origin but rather with the language she spoke. All interviews were conducted in English, although sometimes women would use some Creole. If I did not understand the Creole, then they or someone else would explain what they meant in English.

Although ethnicity was not the focus of my study, it did come up in connection with ideas of beauty and selfhood. Dorothea, a 45-year-old Garifuna woman, said *“Oh to be a Garifuna woman, I’m proud of it. I’m happy I’m a Garifuna; cause it’s not much people who are part of their own language which they would be proud of.”* Being Garinagu brings her pride. She feels the language and the closeness of the Garinagu often make others jealous. She works as a cook in a resort and her uniform is modeled on the traditional Garifuna dress. Part of her identity as a strong, valued woman is based on her ethnicity.

There is a contest every year for Miss Garifuna. Iris, whom I mentioned earlier, was once Miss Garifuna. She stressed that Miss Garifuna is not a beauty pageant,

although it is about beauty. Miss Garifuna must be fluent in the Garifuna language, traditional dances, and have a good reputation. Perla, a 38-year-old Garifuna woman, said that all women are beautiful, but especially Garifuna women. This is because they have their own dance and culture and they are not ashamed. Judith, a 44-year-old Garifuna woman, said all Garifuna women are beautiful because they can do a lot with their hair and dress. She also noted that Garifuna women can “show culture” and this makes them beautiful. She then said, *“I wouldn’t say that white people aren’t beautiful, but black people have a different way of showing beauty.”* The women who promoted Garifuna women as especially beautiful mentioned caveats to assure me that they were not being racist. I am not sure if this is because I am white or if it was because there is underlying tension among ethnic groups. The only time I heard racism explicitly talked about was in reference to Spanish people. The murder of a Guatemalan woman in Belize City generated discussions of racism in the newspapers. One local Garifuna woman owned a dog named “Scandalous Deceitful Racist” (Scandal for short). She named the dog this because the dog had barked at her Spanish neighbors when she lived in Belize City. She never explained more than this. Some women made it a point to tell me that skin color is not important to being beautiful. Often, these women would cite religious reasons for not discriminating according to skin color, *“because God made us all.”* Skin color was a concern, although no one discussed it in interviews. Cara, a Creole woman with a Garifuna boyfriend, made a casual comment one night on the way to the dance club. Creoles are usually, although not always, lighter skinned than Garinagu. She asked if I had seen her sister’s children. Her sister was also Creole and was married to a Creole man. Cara said her sister’s children were *“clear, clear.”* “Clear” refers to light skin.

She then said the babies were “*so pink, they should be in the U.S.*” Even though many women hesitated to talk about skin color in relation to beauty, there was a belief that lighter skinned people were more associated with the United States and its connotations of power and wealth.

Finally, the intersection of the media with ideas of beauty also illustrated how aspects of ethnicity affect identity. Deliza, a 23-year-old Garifuna woman, voiced concern about how diversity is depicted on television. She was slightly more cosmopolitan than most of the women I interviewed. She visited Los Angeles about once a year, had worked in Belize City, and was currently employed in a technical design firm and worked with many foreigners. When asked who she thought was beautiful, she named three African American celebrities. She was concerned with the lack of black women represented on television. She said, “*I think television needs more variety, because, especially, especially in the commercials; you know, I mean, the commercials don’t depict real women. And then, when you see women like that, you tend to want to look like them. You know, it’s just natural it’s just human. So you know, I think that they should show more real women, more different, different sizes and all not just the long-haired blonde girl . . . I think they should mix it up.*” The impact of television on identity will also be discussed below. However, since most television programming is imported from the United States and neighboring Spanish-speaking countries, it is not surprising that the programming would raise questions of ethnicity. With the introduction of satellites, it is possible to pick up signals from around the world. There was even a Chinese channel. Although outside the scope of this study, it would be interesting to see which channels different ethnic groups prefer.

Hair

In some of the literature on African-American women, authors stress the importance of hair as a marker of social status and ethnicity (Banks 2000, Craig 2002). Hair is an important symbol for women in Dangriga. Perhaps this seems obvious; hair is important everywhere. Social scientists have been concerned with hair as an intersection between the private and the public since Freud's essay, "Medusa's Hair" (1922). Edmund Leach discusses the public nature of hair in his seminal article, "Magical Hair" (1958). More recently, Jeanette Mageo (1994) has analyzed the significance of hair as a symbol in Samoa. I knew all this before I ever left the United States. Prior to deciding to do fieldwork overseas, I had my head shaved. This raised many eyebrows in my own culture, so once I decided on doing foreign fieldwork, I began to grow my hair out. Once I settled on Belize as my destination, I dyed my hair a neutral brown color. I had heard stories of red or blonde hair causing a stir among local people from other anthropologists. I watched this happen once I arrived in Belize. One of Donna's students had long, blonde hair. Children, especially, would touch and stroke her hair. So I knew, before I even really considered it, that hair is an issue, especially when considering ideas about beauty. Nevertheless, I was surprised by how much time, attention, and money is spent on hair. This was not universal, especially for the older women I interviewed. For example, June, a 45-year-old Garifuna business owner, went to a barber to keep her hair very short, almost shaved. Dorothea, whom I mentioned earlier, kept her hair in dreadlocks. Many women with children preferred practicality to complicated hairstyles. However, many stated that, if they had the time and money, they would style their hair differently.



Figure 12 A Garifuna woman who keeps her hair short by going to a barber.

Getting my hair done was my entrée into the women's world. I had my hair plaited (many small braids, either straight back or in patterns), put in roly-pollies (extensions piled on the top of the head in curls), cut, styled at a salon, twisted, and had extensions put in. The physical experience of having my hair done taught me things I would not have understood if I had only observed these activities. The first thing I noticed was the amount of patience involved in plaiting hair. Even with my hair relatively short, it took at least forty-five minutes to have my hair done. When I got my extensions, it took almost ten hours. In the United States, I run a brush through my hair and forget about it. The first couple of times I got my hair plaited, I was itching to be done after twenty minutes. Finally I learned to relax, although my feet would go to sleep and my neck would get stiff. If I had trouble sitting still for that long, I can only imagine how the woman doing my hair felt. Braiding and twisting hair takes dexterity and hand strength, not to mention standing the entire time.



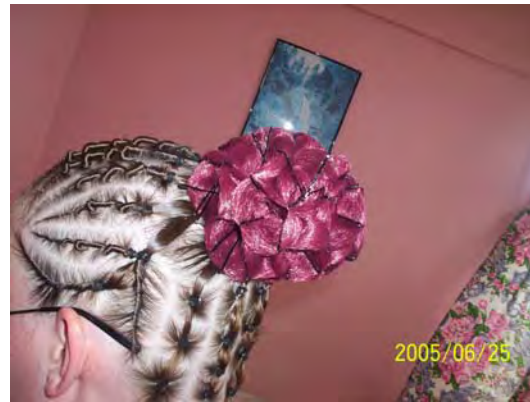
Figure 13 My hair in twists.



Figure 14 A Creole woman with her hair in plaits.



Figure 15 A Garifuna woman with her hair in roly pollies. **Figure 16** My hair in red roly pollies.



The second thing I noticed was the amount of touching that is involved in creating elaborate hairstyles. As Rita Freedman notes, in the United States, “Cosmetic rituals are also valuable in legitimizing the purchase of human touch... We have few rituals that encourage body contact in American culture, but manicurists, hair dressers, and body groomers are permitted to lay their hands on us” (1986:48). I was raised in a family where there was not a lot of physical contact. In the United States, touching is an intimate gesture and there is generally a lot of physical space between people, unless it is between mothers and small children or courting couples. Having someone else manipulate my head, standing really close, leaning against me made me very

uncomfortable at first. It created a type of bond I was not sure about. It took me a while to identify my anxieties about being in physical contact with other women. I had been socialized to associate this kind of touching with intimacy or even sexuality, although there was no sexual connotation in this type of touching. Finally, I was able to understand that this kind of physical contact created a sense of sorority in Dangriga. This gave me insight as to which women decided to do which women's hair. Often girls of the same age would do one another's hair or older sisters would practice on younger sisters. Adult women almost always had their hair plaited by friends or sisters. A mother usually only plaited her daughter's hair until she was old enough to have friends do it for her. The exception to this occurred on special occasions, when hair had to look especially neat. Sometimes money was exchanged in these situations, but often between friends it was not.

I was struck by the public nature of hairstyling in Dangriga. Until I visited Belize, I had only had my hair done in the salon on special occasions. The salon is a semi-private place. Otherwise, I did my hair in the bathroom, in private. It was not since I was young enough to go to slumber parties that there had been more than one other person in the room while I was getting my hair done. In Dangriga, getting one's hair plaited was a social occasion. To some extent, this may have been a function of the heat; as no one had air conditioning, it was much cooler to be on the veranda or in the yard for an extended period of time. The one exception to this for me was when I had extensions put in. On this occasion, I spent the majority of the time inside Sue's house. She had a small child to tend and wanted to watch television while she did my hair. Aside from that, getting my hair done was an occasion to visit with women. Others would stop by or

leave to get food for everyone. Of course, the public nature of my having my hair done elicited some ridicule. People thought it was funny for a white woman to have her hair plaited. It was especially funny when I got roly-pollies. I think this had more to do with my choice of synthetic hair than the hairstyle itself. I had admired the bright red extensions many women wore. As I usually dye my hair bright red in the United States, I thought it would be fun to have this color on my head. Younger women seemed to admire my audacity in wearing that color; older women did not approve. In retrospect, it did look pretty silly. I learned that while it was acceptable for me to have my hair plaited, stepping outside what was considered good taste led to good-natured ridicule. I saw some local women wearing red and black roly-pollies, but no one with just bright red. I believe if anyone had chosen the hairstyle I was wearing, they would have been teased.

There were some tradeoffs for comfort. Having plaits was certainly cooler. Sometimes women would wear their hair in plaits just to give their scalp some air. In the relentless heat and humidity, having plaits is one of the best strategies to keep hair under control. On the few occasions I had my hair loose, it was always sweaty and stuck to my skin. On the other hand, keeping plaited hair looking neat requires wearing a head rag to bed. This is generally a bandana tied over the braids to keep them from fraying while one sleeps. This was not too uncomfortable. Having roly-pollies, conversely, made sleeping difficult. One head rag would go around the head and another was tied over the extensions. However, having a mass on the top of the head made moving while sleeping uncomfortable. Some women would leave roly-pollies in for weeks; mine only lasted a few days.

The last thing I learned from having my hair styled was I felt pretty. I felt sexy. Initially, I felt uncomfortable, like the new kid in school who tries too hard to fit in. After a couple of weeks, though, I enjoyed the feeling of having an intricate hairstyle. Women, men, and children would call out, “*I like to see you braids*” as I walked down the street. I think they were amused to see a white woman wearing their type of hairstyle, but also a bit flattered. After a while, women would critique my hair, complimenting it or suggesting friends who could do a better job. A few of the younger women related that they, too, felt sexy with their hair in braids. Older women appreciated that I was trying to look neat, even though I had a constant sunburn and was always sweaty.

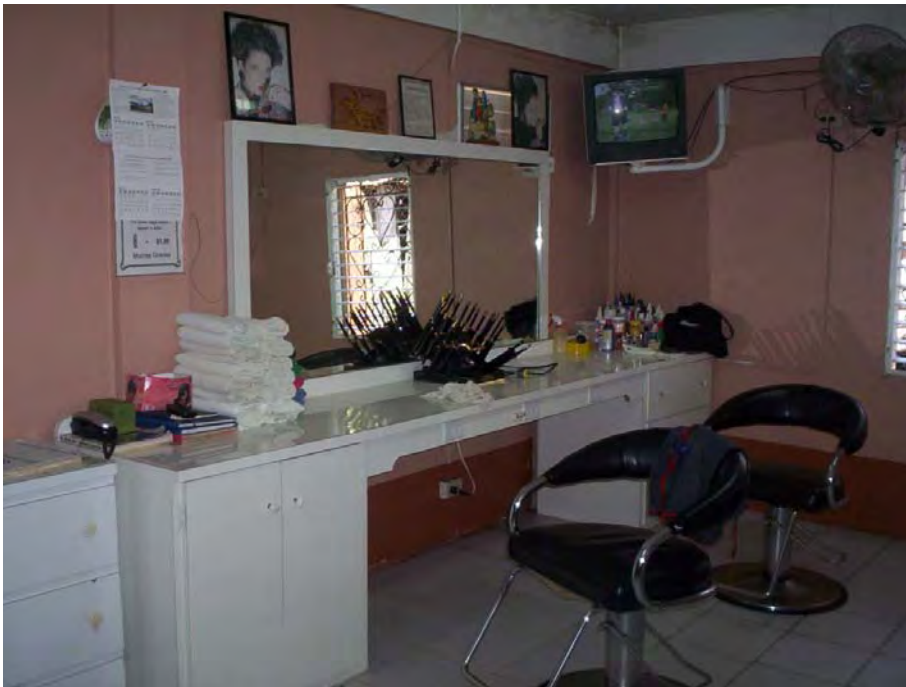


Figure 17 Inside the hair salon.

For all that plaiting is a public affair, going to the salon is a completely different experience. I found three salons within bicycling distance. I visited one particular salon once a week. This salon was owned by Henrietta, a 40-year-old Belizean Mestizo. The door locks automatically and someone inside must hit a buzzer to unlock the door so

customers can enter. Beside the Chinese restaurant, this was the only place I frequented that had air conditioning. I rarely saw more than four or five women in the salon at any one time, including the two women who worked there. I was surprised at how familiar the salon felt. There was a row of hair dryers facing the mirror that ran the length of the wall. Posters advertising hair products for black women covered one wall. Hair products, from shampoo and conditioner to clips and bands, were displayed for sale. A collection of hair ironing tools sat on the counter near Henrietta's station. They were recognizable as flat irons or curling irons, but none had cords attached. In the center of the rack holding the tools was a heating chamber. Henrietta would place the appropriate tool into the heater and remove it when it was hot. She would then use it to straighten or curl a few pieces of hair and then return it to the heater to re-warm it.



Figure 18 The curling iron at the salon.

Henrietta and her niece, Juliana, both styled hair, although Henrietta did most of the perming while Juliana specialized in manicures and pedicures. Henrietta had studied hair styling in Florida for a year when she first became interested in the subject twenty

years ago. She had to ask specifically to learn how to fix black hair since the school she studied at primarily worked with white women. This was an astute business decision because most of her clientele is black. The women in the salon do not braid hair. They specialize in cutting hair, perming hair to straighten or relax it, and coloring hair. If a woman is getting married, Henrietta will do the woman's makeup, but other than that, no makeup or facials are done. I had my hair cut and styled once while I was in Dangriga. It cost about BZ \$30, including tip. The expense of the salon served as a deterrent for many of the women I talked to. Going to the salon was only for extra-special occasions, such as a wedding. Compared to many salons in the United States, Henrietta's was not high end. However, for Dangriga, the salon was a site of privilege. Only a few women were able to afford going to the salon on a regular basis, although some women compromised by only going to the salon for a perm every few months and maintaining their hair at home.

Hair is not just the stuff that grows out of the top of the head. I was reminded of this as I sat with Meg one afternoon. She was a 47-year-old Garifuna woman who lived with her husband, his daughter, and her son. Meg offered her stepdaughter a shilling for each hair she plucked from Meg's chin. I did not see any other women plucking facial hair, but it was considered undesirable. Grace, an older Garifuna woman, had a small beard. She did not seem concerned with her facial hair, but children giggled about it. Interestingly, I did not hear any adults comment about it. She was the exception to the standard of having a hairless face. Grace, however, had an interest in cultivating an air of eccentricity because it lent authority to her role as a participant in the Garifuna religion and as an artist. Meg acted as if she often had her stepdaughter pluck her facial hair, and

the girl did not see anything out of the ordinary with the request. Coming from a culture where depilation is done in private, I was shocked to see a teenage girl plucking her stepmother's facial hair while company was present. I believe this behavior was the exception rather than the rule. Because Meg knew I was studying beauty (and because she was a bit lonely), she wanted to share with me something I might not otherwise see. Some feminists (Chapkis 1986, Freuh 2001) have discussed how facial hair is a cause for shame in the United States. I did notice that women kept their armpits and legs shaved, although no one ever brought up the topic during interviews. As revealing as my experience of hair was (the embodiment of it, if you will), just as important were the ways the women of Belize talked about and related to their hair.

One of the major concerns about hair is neatness. Hair is used to judge whether or not a woman takes care of herself. Cara, a 25-year-old Creole woman, said, *"You know, it's hard to say, what makes a person beautiful. To me, it's how they keep themselves. 'Cuz with someone, you could say someone is beautiful, but if they don't comb their hair or dress nice they won't really look beautiful but all that makes a woman; how they keep their hair, they clothes... [It's] how they carry themselves, the clothes, the hair all that keeps someone looking good."* Hair can be a marker of status and ethnicity. Longer, straighter hair is preferred. Women born with such hair are usually lighter skinned. Iris, whose hair was curly but not kinky (tightly curled), was often admired for her hair. As mentioned earlier, her father was East Indian, and though she does not claim this as part of her ethnic identity, she explains her "good" hair in terms of her parentage. Others (Bonner 1999) have discussed how relaxers reflect a colonial influence. Some people said that the ideal of straight hair was introduced to the Creoles by the British and

the Creoles, as local elites, have foisted this ideal onto other groups. Longer, straighter hair may also reflect a woman's ability to go to the salon on a regular basis, indicating status or wealth. These are my observations, as the subject of hair was usually framed in the context of "manageable" versus "natural." There were also noticeable differences between Garifuna responses and those of other ethnic groups. I will discuss the Garifuna responses first.

Of the twenty-three Garinagu I interviewed, sixteen talked at length about chemically styling their hair. Nine permed or straightened their hair using chemical relaxers. The other seven promoted a natural approach, for a couple of reasons. Older women tended to support the natural look, while younger women clustered around the straightened look. This is not a hard and fast rule, as a couple of women in each age group identified with the opposite camp. Many women in the permed group cited practicality as a reason for having their hair relaxed. The words "*out of control*" and "*unmanageable*" were mentioned when referring to hair that had not been chemically treated. Some women began straightening their hair as children, usually at the prompting of their mothers to make fixing their hair easier. Although both sets of women often put their hair in braids, women with straightened hair had an easier time wearing their hair loose in the heat and humidity. Women who promoted the natural look ran the risk of being called "bushy" and being really hot if they wore their hair loose. Among younger girls, I often saw what is typically referred to as "natural" hair. Ingrid Banks (2000) defines "natural hair" for African Americans as "hair that is not chemically altered or straightened by the pressing comb or blow dryers. Natural hair and styles are often defined as nappy. They are associated with black pride and a rejection of white standards

of beauty among some blacks” (Banks 2000:172). In Dangriga, women still considered their hair “natural” if they used a hot comb to straighten it; the term focuses on the lack of chemical treatment. Adult women either styled their hair in plaits, roly-pollies, or dreadlocks. Many women worried about the effects of chemicals on their hair and scalp. These chemicals are seen as unnatural. Rita, a 37-year-old Garifuna woman, explains, “*I have a lot of friends that say: why don’t you go and perm your hair? Why don’t you put this in your hair? I say, Listen, this is me, and this is the way I feel about myself. Years gone by, I used to wear jheri curl, I wear perm, I wear weave, whatever; but I don’t think of it the older I get; I don’t really care . . . I think you lose the natural beauty of your scalp and that’s the truth.*” Many women combined ideas of natural beauty with practicality. Although the women who choose to perm their hair cite practicality in making their hair more manageable, women who wear their hair naturally cite practicality in avoiding the time and expense of straightening their hair. Cara, a new mother, said she just did not have the time or money to waste on herself after the birth of her daughter. Another aspect of the natural argument is tied up in the “roots” movement, which encourages the use of local foods, traditional lifeways, and embracing African heritage. An article in *Amandala* supports the ideas of going back to “roots” by not perming or relaxing one’s hair. The author, Arifah Lightburn, writes, “Most Black sistas will profess they use relaxers in an effort to make hair more manageable, and this is partially true; but, the truth is that sistas can’t imagine not having relaxed hair because they believe, fundamentally, that without straightened hair they won’t be beautiful or attractive (to men) – which is what most women believe beauty is synonymous with, anyway... Sad too, is that it’s mostly my Black women who give me grief about what they sneeringly

call my ‘nappy, tough, or picky head’ ... I understand, though, my Black women. We’re dealing with hundreds of years of systematic promulgation that we are not beautiful, appealing, or attractive unless we resemble European women. This belief has taken root in us until it’s almost genetic, and has almost completely obliterated our ‘roots’ in so many ways – no matter how innocuous they may appear. Sometimes I think we Black people are born hating ourselves” (2005:7).

Some women made the distinction between relaxing their hair and coloring it, though both are chemical processes. This may be a reflection of the roots movement. Yet another aspect of looking natural is involved in spirituality. Many religious women said that God made them this way and so they should accept themselves the way they are naturally.



Figure 19 A Garifuna woman with chemically straightened hair.

The five non-Garinagu women I spoke with had some of the same concerns. The Creole women worried about putting chemicals in their hair; however, both used relaxer. Kate, an 18-year-old Creole woman, said her hair was too thick to leave natural. She felt

that without relaxer, her hair was too soft and dry. The three other women were of Hispanic descent (two Belizean Mestizos and one Honduran). Henrietta, the salon owner, had her hair relaxed because it was tightly curled naturally and hard to manage. Juliana, a 20-year-old Belizean Mestizo, and Engracia, a 19-year-old Honduran, each had naturally wavy hair and did not worry about managing the curliness of their hair. Both colored their hair often, although I was surprised to note that they kept their hair pretty dark.

Although it is outside the scope of this research, it would be interesting to look at how the presence of a steady partner and whether or not a woman has children affects how she styles her hair. Hair is such an important symbol in Dangriga because it represents how devoted a person is to being neat. It is easily modified but requires constant attention, so serves as a marker of respectability.

Body Shapes

In the United States, body image usually refers to the perception of the shape of the body. Even those of us who would like to reject the stereotypes of tall, slender, fit women find ourselves worried about weight and size. I had assumed that the women of Belize, with all the media saturation, would have the same issues. They do, to some extent. I realized how differently body size is perceived, however, the day a girl who lived near the hotel called me “the fat girl.” I was devastated. I hate to admit it; as a feminist, I felt I should be impervious to such insults. Besides, while I am overweight, I never thought of myself as flat out fat. I told Donna, who was still in Dangriga, about what had happened. She told the girl that calling someone fat in the United States was really mean. The girl replied, “*Why? Being fat isn’t a crime.*” In fact, calling someone

“fat and happy” is a compliment in Belize. “Fat” does have some derogatory connotations, especially when referring to women, although not nearly as many as in the United States. I had still been insulted, although not as much as I had first thought.

When women referred to “big” women, it was generally positive. When they used the word “fat,” it was a negative judgment. So the terminology, at least for larger women, is close to that used in the United States. The range of acceptable shapes, however, is much greater. In the Creole language, there are three types of body shapes: “maga,” extremely thin; “sexy,” curvy, but not too big; and “fat,” which can refer to big women or fat women. Both “maga” and “fat” can be used to tease girls and women. Just the fact that there is a derogatory word for “too skinny” puts Belize in another realm from the United States. I can count on one hand the number of times in my life I have heard women complain they are too thin. Although the range of acceptable body shapes is wider in Belize than it is in the United States, issues of body image still occur. Women worry about being healthy, attracting a mate, and how their appearance reflects on their personality.

Being “*in shape*,” “*having shape*,” or “*having physique*” is more important than being slender. These categories are tied into being healthy. Women also recognize that there is a variety of shapes that are healthy, such as women “*with big butts*,” as Shayleen, a 23-year-old Garifuna woman, put it. Lana, a 21-year-old Garifuna woman, made the distinction between skinny women, who “*have no shape... straight, no buttocks, no muscle, no hips*” and big women, some who “*have shape, some out of shape*.” To be sexy, the category between maga and fat, it is imperative to be in shape. Engracia gave a specific description of what a woman’s shape should be, “*thin woman, nice shaped back*

[buttocks], *big legs, small breasts, thin waist.*” Although she was the only woman to articulate this ideal, this seems to be the ideal of being in shape that everyone else referred to.

Many women cited large buttocks and small breasts as desirable. Deliza promoted being “*a healthy size for you.*” She recognized that some women are naturally bigger than others, but she suggested exercise for bigger women so they could be healthy. Henrietta emphasized that being able to “*carry weight*” and dressing appropriately mitigated being out of shape. From these examples, one can see how muscle tone is important. Younger women were more concerned with being in shape to fit the sexy category. Older women worried more about health related issues concerning body shape. Many people in Dangriga have diabetes and associate the disease with being overweight. It is also considered a personal responsibility to care for your body. Iris said, “*If it is your body, it’s yours. It’s your job to take care of it.*” Dorothea noted, “*Small weighted women don’t feel no aches no pains no nothing when they walk. But we hefty and heavy woman, like myself, with a lot of pain, I’ll have pain in my knees, pain in my heels and it’s because of the weight.*” In a town where walking is the main source of transportation, this is an issue.

Women also distinguished between their own perceptions of the body and what they perceived as desirable to men. Women perceived men as being less discriminating. Rae, a 43-year-old Garifuna woman, said some men “*like very fat, very skinny, medium size.*” Other women focused on one attribute, especially the buttocks. For example, Judith, a 44-year-old Garifuna woman, said, “*Men picks women with big behinds.*” If having big buttocks was attractive to men, the least attractive feature, as perceived by

women, was having a big stomach. The general consensus was that, regardless of how a woman was shaped, there would be a man who found her attractive. However, women believe that men generally find thinner women more attractive. Hazel, a 29-year-old Garifuna woman, noted that it used to be that being big meant being healthy, but now *“it’s turned around, you have to be skinny to be beautiful.”* She went on to add that she hopes it goes back to the way it was.

Many women claimed that the shape of a woman was not really important. Some of these women seemed motivated to say this because they were not happy with their own bodies. Others cited religious reasons, saying things such as *“God made us all, so we all beautiful.”* One woman noted, *“One shape is not better. We all have same thing.”* Iris said, *“Our bodies are sacred, regardless of shape... We carry our children.”* The women who claimed body shape did not matter to them stressed internal qualities, such as compassion, being a good mother, intelligence, and being respected. This same group of women voiced concern about how their physical appearance reflected these internal qualities. For example, one mother worried that she was perceived as fat and sloppy after she had three children, even though she saw herself as a good mother, wife and housekeeper. Although this was the only example of a woman disparaging her own body, many voiced concern over how other women dealt with body issues. Claudia, a 45-year-old Garifuna woman, admitted that she had to *“learn”* to love herself, mostly because she felt short compared to other women. This reticence to talk about personal issues might be explained by a couple of comments women made. Kate, a 18-year-old Creole woman, said, *“Some people don’t like they shape, but nobody would tell you*

that.” Cara, a 25-year-old Garifuna woman, said, “*Everyone should be comfortable with their body.*”

These statements imply a cultural norm that women should feel comfortable about their bodies and are discouraged from expressing doubt about their body shape. Lana noted “*some feel bad because they don’t have good body;*” the implication is that others have this problem, but not her. Before admitting to wanting to be thinner, Daisy framed her comment by stating that women worldwide struggle with weight issues. Deliza, although she said she loves the way she looks, confessed that she is sometimes jealous of thin women because it is easier for them to look “*neat.*” She said they don’t have to worry about their stomachs bulging over their waistline and clothes fit them better.

When asked about the ideal shape for a woman, many women replied that it is good to be shaped like a Coca-Cola bottle. Belize still uses glass bottles and some of the Coke bottles had the classic curvy shape. I had heard this before from documentaries on other countries. Although I cannot verify this, the popular explanation of the Coke bottle is that it is supposed to suggest a curvy, wasp-waisted woman. I thought it was mildly interesting how pervasive this symbol of capitalism and globalization had become in explaining the proportions of women. Vanessa, a 19-year-old Garifuna woman, surprised me because she followed the Coke bottle analogy with another, more novel one. She said that flat women, or maga girls, are shaped like Sponge Bob. Sponge Bob Square Pants is a cartoon character. He is a square sponge and is very popular among Belizean children. I can only wonder if Sponge Bob will become a new standard against which to measure women.



Figure 20 A Coca-Cola bottle, cited as the perfect shape for a woman.



Figure 21 Sponge Bob Square Pants. Image obtained from www.pocket-lint.co.uk

Makeup

I asked women whether they used beauty products, such as makeup, and where they obtained them. I believed “makeup” was a pretty clear-cut category. I defined it as anything put on the face to accentuate beauty. Some women replied that they did not use makeup, only face powder, mascara, or lipstick. I thought all these products were makeup. For many women in Dangriga, makeup refers to eye shadow and liquid foundation, or it refers to wearing a great deal of makeup. The question of beauty products raised an unexpected dichotomy: the difference between “being natural” and “being fake.” In the United States, the trend in makeup has been to achieve a “natural” look. I was raised with the idea that makeup accentuates beauty; it does not create it. It

was difficult at first for me to understand how wearing makeup is a type of deception. It makes logical sense; it had just never occurred to me. Dorothea explained, *“Well, some people who I know like their makeup. They’re people who are looking for more beauty. Because I know myself, my face is natural I don’t need no makeup to consider me a beautiful woman. I have already be a beautiful woman without makeup. So who put on makeups are looking for beauty. That’s the way how I thought it. In my image, nobody can’t take that away from me. They just want to be beautiful by putting on the makeups... They are looking for beauty, in my image.”* Cara observed, *“Makeup is just to help someone look beautiful, especially if they really ugly. ‘Cuz some people, some people, they really ugly that really need some help.”*

By wearing makeup, women admit that they are not confident in their “natural” beauty. This goes back to women’s hesitation in admitting that they feel uncomfortable about their appearance. Interestingly, the same women who did not want to look fake embraced using deodorants and perfumes. These are sometimes considered beauty products but do not suffer the onus of being fake. Deodorant is considered hygienic and is on par with bathing regularly. Using human or artificial hair for extensions or roly-pollies is also considered natural. Some of the same concerns that were raised in regard to chemical hair treatments arose with beauty products also. Sue said she was allergic to makeup and that the chemicals are bad for the skin. However, she perms her hair on a regular basis, so it is not just a small group of naturalists who avoid any “chemicals.” Rather, it seems as if this explanation is employed to justify behaviors established for other reasons. Many women who did wear makeup stated a preference for products from the United States. The general feeling was that products available in Dangriga were of

lesser quality. Henrietta and Hazel used only name brand cosmetics (Estée Lauder and Mary Kay) that relatives sent from the United States because they felt these brands were better for their skin.

Clothing

Clothing speaks to the heart of the respect versus reputation divide discussed earlier. It is the single largest self-signifier of sexiness or respectability for women. Others may not necessarily agree with the image a woman is trying to project. For example, a large woman may wear short skirts and backless shirts. She is projecting a sexy image. Because “sexy” is a body type and an attitude, as indicated by clothing, others may perceive this hypothetical woman as “fat” and acting disrespectfully by her choice of clothing. Women whose body types are “sexy” are still viewed suspiciously by other women if they dress “sexy,” but they aren’t teased nearly as much.

The introduction of retail clothing with standardized sizes has increased body awareness and discontent. Until recently, most clothing in Dangriga was made by tailors for individuals. Some older women still have their clothing made, especially if they are larger. Younger women disparage this practice as old fashioned, although many want unique looks that no one else has. They achieve this uniqueness by shopping in the United States or Belize City. Those who do not have the means to travel and shop outside of Dangriga make do with what is available at the boutiques that line the main street. Even these stores, however, are relatively expensive. Cara suggested I visit the Spanish vendors who work at the market. They would drive in from Guatemala or even Mexico in old school buses filled with clothing to sell. These clothes were considerably cheaper than those in Dangriga’s shops. Cara rued the fact she was a “*big girl*” and that

none of the clothing sold by the vendors fit her. I had the same experience. After I bought a dress and two skirts (all too small for me), I gave up trying to buy clothing from them. Dorothea also mentioned the fact that it is more difficult and more expensive to buy clothing if you are a large woman. This was part of the reason she still went to a tailor. Clothing should fit properly and be presentable. Many women ironed all of their clothing after washing it by hand in the yard.

Because clothing is seen as a reflection of attitude, women considered clothing relevant in their concern about rape. Marjorie, a 18-year-old woman, thought that television was a bad influence because young girls wanted to dress like the women they saw on television and this could lead to rape. Women seemed to feel that rape is a logical result of wearing revealing clothing and that wearing conservative clothing prevents others, especially men, from thinking of a woman as “*a bitch or slut.*” The women who voiced these concerns all dressed conservatively, usually wearing long shorts, long skirts, or pants. Tight clothing, short shorts, and backless shirts were all clothing to be avoided. I had mistakenly believed that the heat would mitigate the implications of skimpy clothing. I had seen 70-year-old women in New Orleans wearing tube tops during the hottest part of summer. It was rare enough to note, but not really a big deal because it was so hot. It was not the same in Belize. Younger women who dressed sexy worried about looking old rather than being raped. They were confident in their ability to deter men from unwanted advances. There was at least one meeting for survivors of rape while I was in Dangriga, so it was obviously an issue. The newspapers published many accounts of incest and, occasionally, rape in Belize City. I do not know of any cases of rape reported in Dangriga while I was there. I never felt threatened while I was in

Dangriga, although many women warned me about the dangers of Belize City. This subject would benefit from further research.

By analyzing how women speak about beauty and related topics, one can discern larger issues at work. In the next chapter, I will discuss how ideas about beauty are derived from a number of sources, including religion, social networks, national identity, and media.

CHAPTER VII - ANALYSIS

Since its discovery by Europeans, Belize has always been under global influences. When I initially began this project, I believed I would be able to trace how “globalization” was affecting the ways in which women experienced and related to their bodies through the lens of beauty. The truth of the matter is that Belize’s geo-political position, both current and historical, reflects how much the world at large has always affected this small part of Central America. Most histories of Belize begin with the presence of Europeans. The institution of slavery and the various diasporas caused by wars and dire economies guaranteed that Belize would constantly be under influences from outside its borders. I have found that a more appropriate way to address the issues I am interested in is through a more recent aspect of globalization: the compression of space and time. Although Belize has been affected by global influences since contact with Europeans, the rate at which new ideas are being introduced, incorporated, reinterpreted, rejected, or ignored has increased exponentially as new technologies have made travel and communication much easier. I have chosen to explore the issue of how women experience and relate to their bodies through the language they use when talking about it. I discuss three major areas: the ways in which personal relationships, economics, and globalization. All shape how women perceive beauty and all bear the traces of the compression of space and time.

Personal relationships

As travel and communications change, the nature of personal relationships is changing also. Many scholars in the Caribbean have noted the importance of teasing in forming and maintaining social boundaries between ethnicities, age groups, and classes

(Wilson 1973:115). I believe teasing is part of the reason women have such high levels of self-confidence in regards to their own beauty and self worth. I had an epiphany one afternoon while visiting Iris's home. Her three-year-old daughter was being teased mercilessly by a teenaged relative. The older girl taunted the toddler, "You look bad; you sound bad; you smell bad." The little girl began to pout. Iris, rather than reprimanding the older girl or comforting her daughter, instructed the three-year-old to tell the teenager, "I'm beautiful." The child put her hands on her hips and muttered, "I'm beautiful." The teenager pretended not to hear her. The child repeated, loudly, "I'm beautiful!" At this point, Iris, the teenager, and the child all broke up into laughter.

I observed other incidents of teasing that did not end so jovially. I saw an eight-year-old girl sobbing to herself on the stairs leading to the back veranda. When I asked what was wrong, she told me her siblings and cousins were making fun of her for having big teeth. Her aunt called from inside the house for her to stop her crying. I was torn because the girl was obviously upset but the adults all ignored her crying. Once her siblings and cousins found her crying, they continued teasing her. I believe the only defense to this type of relentless teasing is to make self-confident statements. Any admission of self-doubt is grounds for teasing.

This not only explains women's self-confident statements but also their reticence to discuss anything problematic. Most of the times I saw this type of behavior, it was among children, although I did occasionally see adults teasing children also. It would be a mistake to assume that this is the way it has always been in Dangriga, but the uniformity of women's replies about being beautiful across age and ethnic boundaries supports the contention that this type of behavior has been occurring for some time. As

the Sponge Bob reference earlier indicated, television has changed the ways in which people are teased. I am unsure of how else this type of teasing may change under the influence of the compression of space and time.

Women's self-confidence is also supported by their independence from men. Many women believe they can support themselves and their children without the support of men, although most would prefer to be in a long-term relationship with one. Ideally, a woman should be in a long-term relationship with a man who supports her and their children financially. Although this is the ideal, many women make do with a number of variations that are less than the ideal. Many women are involved with men in long-term relationships without being officially married, although they often refer to their partners as husbands. Especially among the Garifuna, couples will often have several children together before getting married in the church (Gonzalez 1969:61). In these cases, the man is often involved in the household, especially financially. In other cases, men hold jobs but spend the majority of their money on themselves. In the one example I knew of personally, the man of the house held a job but spent his money on going to the bars with his friends rather than contributing to the household. The woman, in this case, was responsible for maintaining the house and children and supporting everyone financially through her sales of craftwork to tourists. She was willing to do this because it maintained the appearance of the ideal, although everyone in the town knew she worked and he drank. Another woman was involved with a man for a number of years before he emigrated from Belize to the United States. At the time of our interview, he had been in the United States for three years. He occasionally sent remittances to help support the woman and their three children. In a different case, the woman continued to live with her

mother after the birth of her first child. Her boyfriend visited on the weekends. These cases demonstrate the different levels of a man's involvement in the household and that women have successful role models of women who have survived economically with little or no help from men. In the cases where men are not involved, for whatever reason, women often rely on other women in their families for support, especially mothers and sisters.

The question of respectability versus reputation has been explored in the Caribbean, especially among men. Peter J. Wilson (1973) studies issues concerning respect and reputation in Providencia, a Caribbean island off the eastern coast of Nicaragua. He expands his analysis to include English-speaking black populations in the Caribbean. For Wilson, "Respectability has its roots in the external colonizing (or quasi-colonizing) society, though in any given instance its reality depends on the integral role of the colonizing society in the social system of the colony. Reputation, on the other hand, is 'indigenous' to the colony (or quasi-colony) and is *both* an authentic structural principle and a counterprinciple" (1973:9). Wilson claims most women and some men in certain stages of their life use the concept of respectability, to a greater or lesser extent, to judge proper behavior. Reputation is used by men to advance their social status (Wilson 1973:9). Respectability is based on the teachings of the church, especially stressing monogamy, sobriety, and self-improvement (Wilson 1973:100). Reputation is based in large part on a man's virility. Virility has a number of aspects, including fathering many children (preferably with different women), being able to sweet talk women, having access to money for gifts for girlfriends and alcohol for male friends, being able to fight, and being educated or worldly (Wilson 1973:149-159). The distinction between

respectability and reputation is useful and explains some of what I observed in regard to behavior between women and men. I cannot attest to how long the category “sexy” has existed among women in Dangriga. I believe, however, that sexy women are engaging in reputation building, much as men do in Wilson’s study. It is riskier for a woman to forsake respectability for reputation than it is for men, as fewer people are likely to recognize this social capital in women’s lives. Older women were specifically worried about clothing perceived as sexy leading to rape. I suggest that the life stage of women is important when analyzing behavior in the respectability or reputation dichotomy. Admittedly, the opportunity for women to have a reputation is more limited than men and limited by age. It seems that behaviors that are tolerated in younger women (especially those without children) are unacceptable in older women. Most women believed that a concern with sexiness was a phase that young women would grow out of.

Though teasing is important in building up a young person’s self-confidence, it is interesting that women do not see beauty as competitive. One woman stating that she is beautiful does not necessarily detract from other women’s beauty. Many women stated that all women are beautiful. In practice, some women are recognized as more beautiful and others are less. This has less to do with a woman’s physical characteristics and more to do with how she “keeps” herself. In this cognitive environment, beauty is tied to respectability. Rather than trying to be the most beautiful or the most respectable, women aim for acceptance as beautiful or respectable. Being beautiful or respectable does not diminish other women’s beauty but does allow women to judge other women’s beauty or respectability.

Christianity was first introduced in Belize in the 16th Century, but became established about 200 years ago. The Anglican Church arrived in the early 1800s while the Catholic Church came with those fleeing the Caste Wars in the Yucatan in 1848 (Barry 1995:113). Appendix 3 lists the breakdown of major Christian sects in Belize in 2000. There has been a recent surge in evangelical Christianity in Belize, although not so great as in other Central American countries (Barry 1995:113-114). I mention this because so many women framed comments about beauty and the body in reference to Christianity. This makes sense in the context of Wilson’s explanation of respectability. Many women refrained from judging others’ beauty because “*God made them that way.*” Qualities promoted by Christianity, such as love, compassion, and humility, are used to judge a person’s spiritual beauty. Although it was not the focus of this study, it would be interesting to discover how adherents of different religious sects view beauty and the body and how these attitudes intersect with ethnicity, occupation, and age in Belize. Women use Christianity as an explanation to keep from judging others, maintaining respectability in their adherence to Christian principles and avoiding diminishing other women’s status.



Figure 21 Dolls wearing traditional Garifuna dress.

Tourism has put pressure on ideals of beauty, although not in ways I would have expected. Because people have traditionally considered the Garinagu to “have” culture, they have been able to capitalize on cultural tourism. In fact, Richard Wilk notes that when he first began working in Belize in the 1970s, “most people denied that such a thing as ‘Belizean culture’ existed at all... The only people in the country who were generally acknowledged to have culture were marginalized minority immigrants – Mayans, Hindus, Lebanese, Chinese, Garifuna, and Mennonites” (1995:112). Although most Garifuna women have abandoned traditional Garifuna dress, many women now make dolls to sell to tourists. All the dolls wear the traditional Garifuna dress, which is based on the clothing Europeans wore when the Garinagu first encountered them. Women wear long skirts with five sets of pleats just below the knee. The blouse is short-sleeved and usually matches the skirt. Women may or may not wear a cloth tied on their heads. It is interesting, in passing, to note that no zippers are used in traditional Garifuna clothing, only buttons and ties.

Dorothea works as a cook at a resort. Her uniform is styled after Garifuna dress, although the skirt is not as voluminous or as long. Tourists are seeking an experience that is both authentic and safe. People want the exotic in an easily digestible form. There had been a riot in Belize City a month or so before I arrived. I heard that the teachers were protesting and a motorcycle was burned. Meg, who often sells dolls and paintings in the tourist village in Belize City, asked a tourist when there would be a bombing in the United States. As she explains, “*The reason I told her that because she was constantly asking me when they going to have riot. So they going to have bombing because they have they own problem in the States to the same way we have our problem here.*” With

access to satellite television, Meg, and most of her countrywomen, knew that Belize was not necessarily more violent than the United States. She still felt she had to defend her country against the out of proportion perceptions of tourists.

Economics

Another way in which tourism interacts with beauty is through hair braiding. Many women make extra money by braiding hair for tourists. This works best on the cayes, where many of the tourists stay. Dangriga is not generally considered a tourist destination, although many tourists travel through the town, either on the way to the cayes or to Placencia in the south. Therefore, women who had never left Dangriga said they interacted less with tourists than those who had traveled or lived in other parts of Belize. In fact, a couple of women said that I was the first tourist they had ever talked to. Even though Dangriga has few tourists, many women were willing to braid my hair. I usually paid BZ \$10 to have my hair braided, without extensions. This took anywhere from a half hour to an hour. Iris had worked on the cayes when she was younger and usually charged US \$20 (BZ \$40) to braid a woman's hair. Admittedly, my hair was pretty short and I did not ask for intricate hairstyles. However, the dearth of tourists forced women to lower their prices in Dangriga compared to other areas of Belize. The phenomenon of braiding impacts local ideals of beauty in a couple of ways. First, having their hair braided and investing money in it, tourist women validate the beauty of braided hair. Many women recognize that black women are often held up to standards of white beauty (Banks 2000, Craig 2002, Lightburn 2005). Having this accepted relationship turned on its head is pleasing to many women in Belize. Secondly, it pressures women to be more creative in their hair braiding.



Figure 22 My friend, Donna, had her hair plaited while visiting Caye Caulker.

Some women wished to avoid looking “low-class.” Women described being low-class as being dirty, being on the street too much, and sometimes, as wearing revealing clothing. “Being on the street” refers to women who wander about with no clear destination in mind. Women and girls were expected to only leave the house to go somewhere specific. Older women, especially, worried about younger women being on the street because they could be talking (or more) with men. I did not hear class discussed that often among adult women, except when they talked about not looking low-class. Not surprisingly, children more openly discussed issues of class, especially when teasing one another.

There are three types of houses in Belize: thatch houses, wood houses, and cement houses. I did not interview anyone who lived in a thatch house; the majority of Dangriga is made up of wood houses and cement houses. Cement houses are more prestigious than wood houses, which, in turn, are more prestigious than thatch houses. Children who lived in cement houses teased those who lived in wood houses. On another

occasion, I was visiting Iris’s preschool class. The children and the teacher were discussing the power outage of the day before. One girl stood up and said she had not lost power. The teacher sighed and said that everyone knew her parents had a generator and that was why she had not lost power. Obviously people are aware of different class statuses, but it is considered impolite to talk about it. Class, although not discussed openly, is based on material wealth and social position. One may avoid being perceived as low class by staying clean and maintaining a tidy appearance. It takes a great deal of effort to do this, since most laundry is done by hand and many people do not have running water inside their homes. Many women feel that if they work hard and become respectable, then they will be able to improve their financial and social position.



Figure 23 An example of an impressive cement house. **Figure 24** An example of a typical wooden house.

Women are taking advantage of the many jobs created by the flourishing tourism industry. Many of these jobs are considered “traditional” women’s work, such as cleaning hotel rooms or cooking. There are few women hotel owners or tour guides. It is possible to take a tour of Marie Sharp’s farm, where the famous Marie Sharp’s Hot Sauce is made. Marie Sharp has only begun entertaining tourists after she became Belize’s

most successful businesswoman. The Belizean government has decided to limit the tourism industry to Belizean owners and operators. This creates jobs, but due to the seasonal nature of tourism, these are not very secure.

Globalization

Tourism has also increased the sense that Belize is part of a global community. Many women appreciated tourists because they helped the economy and they wanted to learn about Belize. Most women did not interact with many tourists unless they worked in the tourism industry. There was a general feeling that tourists were good people interested in Belize. Tourists were people who came to Belize for recreation and are different from foreigners, who reside in Belize or come to Belize for business on a regular basis.

Interestingly, Spanish speakers living in Belize are usually referred to as aliens, not foreigners. Deliza and Meg were the only women who had less than positive things to say about non-Belizeans, though for different reasons. Deliza worked in a technical design firm with many foreigners from Europe and the United States. Most of these people lived in Belize, either full or part-time. Deliza said it is sometimes difficult to work with foreigners because they are so direct. They never “*butter up*” their requests. Deliza enjoyed working with foreigners, for the most part, because it allowed her to learn about the world.

Meg, on the other hand, sewed dolls and made paintings to sell in the tourist village in Belize City. Near where the cruise ships dock, there is a large building where artisans rent space by the month to sell their goods to tourists from the ships. Meg could not afford the rent for a stall inside the building, so she rented space on the ground

outside of it. She memorized the cruise ship schedule and on the days ships were due, she would ride the bus for three or four hours from Dangriga to Belize City. If the ships were delayed or it rained, Meg had no chance of making money for the day and was out her bus fare. She had many positive things to say about tourists in general: they were nice and kind and rich. However, she resented it when tourists, often women, would try to take advantage of her. She sold her dolls for BZ \$20 (US \$10). Sometimes people would say they did not have that much and she would lower her price. Meg recounted a number of times when other tourists would then complain when she charged them full price because the first tourists had told the others how little Meg was selling for.

Partially because the Belizean dollar is tied to the U.S. dollar with no independent scope for inflation or depression, and partially because of how difficult it is to obtain materials in Belize, the cost of living is considerably higher than it is in the rest of Central America. Tourists on cruise ships have usually just come from Mexico and believe Meg's prices are expensive. In fact, after paying for materials, bus fare, and rent for an outside stall, she makes pennies per hour for her labor. It seems to be part of the mindset of people from the United States that things in Europe will be more expensive than in the United States and everything anywhere else should be substantially cheaper.

If the flow of people into Belize in the form of tourists is affecting the economy and social structure, the flow of people out of Belize is equally important. I will also examine how the flow of people into Belize in the form of immigrants is affecting Belize. Almost everyone I met had at least one relative in the United States. The brightest children I met all dreamed of going to the United States. As mentioned earlier, Iris's husband lived in the United States and sent remittances home. There was even a song on

the radio while I was there titled “Don’t Beg.” The song was about not begging for relatives in the United States to send expensive items because life is hard for an immigrant in the United States.

People often asked me how much things cost in the United States. I perpetuated the myth that things are cheap in the States because I was embarrassed. How could I tell someone one month of my rent was more than one year of her or his salary? I did not want to appear rich. I am not rich. I can understand why, when people call home or return for a visit, they might fall into the same trap. The result of this myth of the easy life in the United States has led to a brain-drain in Belize, where the best and brightest children grow up wanting to get out of Belize. According to the CIA, Belize has a “shortage of skilled labor and all types of technical personnel” (CIA World FactBook 2006). It is often men who immigrate to the United States. Although education is mandatory until age fourteen, children must pass a standardized test to go on to high school. Even after passing the test, the child’s family must come up with the school fees (there are no public schools in Belize) and money for uniforms and books. Although I did not directly research this area, it seemed to me that more boys than girls continued to high school. Girls were needed around the house for chores and to help with younger siblings. I did meet some women who had traveled to the United States, but most have never been outside of Belize. Women know that they are part of a larger, global community because their men leave to make money elsewhere and tourists come to visit, but they are isolated by their inability to travel for financial and educational reasons.

Although Spanish-speaking people have been in Belize since Spaniards arrived in the “New World”, a recent influx of Spanish immigrants (both legal and illegal) has upset

traditional demographics. Until very recently, Creoles were the largest ethnic group in Belize, though they were not a majority. Now Spanish-speakers outnumber the Creoles and make up almost half of the population. This shift in demographics has encouraged the Creoles to identify with the Garinagu on the basis of their shared African heritage. External pressure, which has become internal pressure, has created a need to define a Belizean identity. This identity focuses on speaking Belizean Creole or English, as opposed to Spanish, and African heritage. The government supports the idea of multiculturalism, often depicting several different ethnicities in every advertisement. Regardless of the government's efforts to create a harmonious ethnic picture, there seems to be a schism between Spanish-speakers and other Belizeans. People worried about the Spanish-speakers taking their jobs, bringing down wages, being drunk on the street, and not wanting to learn English. It was surreal to me, because these are the same arguments I heard when I lived in the Southern United States. If I had had more time, I would have investigated how the Spanish-speakers felt about the issues. I believe that the reason so many women stressed pride in their Garifuna culture was, in part, in opposition to the increase in the number of Spanish-speakers.

Media and communication are tied up with one another. People no longer have to wait for letters to hear from relatives abroad; everyone had access to telephones. Most people did not have telephones in their homes, but the local telecommunications office had a number of booths with telephones. Many people also owned cell phones. As I mentioned earlier, the price of international calls is relatively high, but calling within the country was relatively reasonable. The use of telephones has caused other means of communications to fall out of favor. For example, children were often used to send

messages between adults. This practice is still used, if the adult is nearby. Otherwise, it might be easier to call their cell phone. Teenagers seemed especially impressed with cell phones, although this came as no surprise after observing teenagers in the United States.

Before the popularity of telephones, people used the radio to broadcast messages, especially in emergencies, where, for example, people were close to death and relatives needed to get back to them before they died. The television has now taken the place of the radio in some ways. One of the local Belizean channels was dedicated to announcements of births, birthdays, weddings, deaths, wakes, and memorials. One of Iris's nieces had a birthday while I was in Dangriga and the entire family contributed money to have the child's birthday announced on television with a picture of her. The change to telephones and the television is the same difference as the difference between riding a bicycle and walking: one does not stop to talk to the random people one encounters along the way. I am not sure what this portends for personal relationships.

In addition to changing the nature of personal relationships, the media influence women's identity in more direct ways. Television provides access to news, entertainment, and depictions of lifestyles radically different from Belizean life. Before television, women read glamour magazines and newspapers for information on the latest styles and fashions. The number of people to whom women could compare themselves was limited to the number of people they knew personally and to photographs in fashion magazines. In most cases, the women they knew looked a lot like themselves. With the introduction of satellite television, women could compare themselves to the rarified model of beauty, direct from the United States. The models, in themselves are not as threatening as the relentless advertising which accompanies the programming displaying

them. Because many of the beauty products advertised are not available in Belize, women do not seem to “need” these products in the same way women in the United States do. However, those women who do have access to products from the United States, either through relatives or through their own travel, are very attached to the particular brand they buy in the United States. There is also a marked preference for products from the United States and a belief that products made in Belize are somehow inferior.

There is also the beginning of a generational rift between women. Perhaps this is just typical intergenerational stress taking on new forms from television. Regardless, it is important to note that younger women admire the fashions and lifestyles portrayed on television and older women worry that television will lead younger women down the wrong path. Both sets of women admire Oprah Winfrey as a model woman who has overcome adversity in her life.

Personal relationships, economics, and globalization all help shape women’s beliefs about beauty. All of these are being impacted by the compression of space and time to a greater or lesser extent. The women in Dangriga are affected by historical and current circumstances outside of their control. They are coping with economic and social stresses in the best ways they know how.

CHAPTER VIII - CONCLUSION

Feminism has an uneasy relationship with beauty. Wendy Chapkis explains, “We know we fail as women to be ‘feminine enough’ (by choice we reassuringly remind one another) and we fear we fail as feminists because we are still concerned about whether we are ‘attractive’ (let alone to whom)” (1986:7). In the United States, beauty is about competition for power. Susan Bordo points out that in the United States, “people *know* the routes to success in this culture – they are advertised widely enough – and they are not ‘dopes’ to pursue them. Often, given the racism, sexism, and narcissism of the culture, their personal happiness and economic security may depend on it” (1993:30). It is accepted wisdom that beautiful women have better jobs, earn more money, and generally have an easier time in life. Chapkis states, “Approximating beauty can be essential to a woman’s chances for power, respect, and attention” (1986:14). Debra Gimlin argues that women do not slavishly follow cultural dictates of beauty, but rather negotiate them as active agents (2002:17). Bordo, Chapkis, and Gimlin recognize the agency of women in pursuit of beauty; however, the context is still framed by a competitive notion of beauty.

This same concern is voiced by black women in the United States. The women Ingrid Banks interviewed voiced concern about how beauty, as defined by white standards, affected success in economic terms. Banks explains, “These two women explained how black people’s ability to conform to mainstream standards of beauty is tied to being successful, a belief that was prevalent among blacks during the early part of the twentieth century” (2000:148). Maxine Leeds Craig (2002) explores the conflict that black feminists feel about the protests against the Miss America pageant. Black women

had been excluded from these pageants and black pageants were cropping up to contest the notion that black women are not beautiful (Craig 2002:4-5). Images of beautiful black women (by various standards) disputed caricatures of all black women as ugly or humorous (Craig 2002:46). This, also, was a means to gaining power within the existing power structure. What if, however, women did not beautify themselves to attract men (who hold power) or to compete with one another over finite resources?

Chapkis notes, “Body beautification is a universal social gesture apparently stemming from a deep human need” (1986:58). Concerns about being beautiful existed prior to capitalism and the compression of space and time. What need is being met by feeling beautiful if it does not lead to a high paying job, or even to a man with a high paying job? In Dangriga, women do not discuss beauty or obsess over the latest product to make them thinner or look younger. Yet they still engage in beautification practices. Evans and Thornton argue, “The practices which a culture insists are meaningless or trivial, the places where ideology has succeeded in becoming invisible, are practices in need of investigating” (1991:15). The very fact that women in Dangriga are hesitant to talk about beauty makes the subject worth studying.

I am not proposing, however, that Dangriga is some pre-capitalist utopia where women engage in beauty practices for only the sake of pleasure. Women there are very aware of how appearances impact their relationships to men. Men, however, are not secure routes to economic or even social success. Women are more concerned with beauty as it reflects on their respectability. In order for some people to be respectable, there must be others who are not. These “others” are referred to as “low class” people or, sometimes, “sexy girls.” This does not denote differences in economic status, but rather

differences in attitude and behavior. Due to the democratic nature of poverty, everyone in the same circumstances supposedly has the same access to respectability. If a woman takes care of her appearance, within her means, and acts properly, she is respectable. In much the same way most people do not feel they are immoral, the women of Dangriga feel they are respectable and beautiful.

Relative to the United States, Belize is a poor country in economic terms. The women in Dangriga do not have the money to purchase expensive cosmetics advertised on satellite television, if they are even available. Even if some women did have the money, they might be accused of acting above their station or putting on airs by their friends and relatives who do not have the money. In this situation, the parameters of beauty are defined differently than they are in the United States. Anthony Giddens warns that “lifestyle” does not only refer to affluent people who can afford it; “‘lifestyle’ refers also to decisions taken and courses of action followed under conditions of severe material constraint; such lifestyle patterns may sometimes also involve a rejection of more widely diffused forms of behavior and consumption” (1991:6).

Perhaps the women of Dangriga recognize that the beauty game, as played and exported by the United States, is a game they cannot win. As Belize becomes more involved in the world stage, undoubtedly through capitalism, this may change. Some studies among African American women have shown a recent increase in body dysmorphic disorders, such as anorexia and bulimia, in a population that was thought to be more accepting of a greater range of body types (Bordo 1993:103). The same type of trend could potentially happen in Belize, where women become more affluent and more dissatisfied with their appearances. In the mean time, I think it is important for feminists

to consider the idea that beauty, like morality, is a personal evaluation of oneself.

Perhaps, if we step outside of the capitalist machine that drives our insecurities, we would recognize that we have the right to be beautiful.

The next time someone asks me who I think is beautiful, I am going to reply, “I am. I am beautiful.”

Appendix 1

ETHNICITY	PERCENTAGE
Mestizo	48.7%
Creole	24.9%
Maya (all groups)	10.6%
Garinagu	6.1%
Other	9.7%

Breakdown of the population of Belize by ethnicity, according to CIA World FactBook 2006 (2006).

Appendix 2

AGE RANGE	% OF TOTAL POPULATION	# OF FEMALE	# OF MALE
0-14 years	40.1%	54,877	57,114
15-64 years	56.4%	77,881	79,694
65 years and older	3.5%	5,123	4,768

Breakdown of the population by age and gender, according to CIA World FactBook 2006 (2006).

Appendix 3

RELIGION	PERCENT OF POPULATION
Roman Catholic	49.6%
Total Protestants	27%
Pentecostal	7.4%
Anglican	5.3%
Seventh-Day Adventist	5.2%
Mennonite	4.1%
Methodist	3.5%
Jehovah's Witness	1.5%
Other	14%
None	9.4%

Breakdown of the population by religious affiliation, according to CIA World FactBook 2006 (2006). Note that none of the indigenous religions are listed.

Appendix 4- Interview Questions

What is your name?

How old are you?

What is your ethnicity?

Do you work? What do you do? How long have you worked there?

Where are you from, originally?

How long have you lived in Dangriga?

Have you spent a large amount of time anywhere else?

How many females, including adult women and girl children, live in your household?

What kind of woman is beautiful?

What makes a woman beautiful? How can a woman become more beautiful?

Who do you think is beautiful? Why?

Did you hear stories about beautiful women as a child? What were they?

What do you think about different body shapes for women?

What do think about women on television?

Where do you get your clothes? Beauty products? Please list products.

Who does your hair? What do you do to your hair?

How long does it take to get ready on a normal day? A special occasion?

Describe how you get ready.

What else do you think I should know about being a woman in Dangriga?

Appendix 5

NAME	AGE	ETHNICITY	EMPLOYMENT
Abigail	23	Garinagu	Sell lottery tickets
Alfrida	19	Garinagu	Not working
Cara	25	Creole	Store clerk
Daisy	25	Garinagu	Store clerk
Deliza	23	Garinagu	Tech designer
Dorothea	45	Garinagu	Cook
Engracia	19	Spanish	Retail clerk
Grace	Over 45	Garinagu	Artist
Hazel	29	Garinagu	Teacher
Henrietta	40	Belizean Mestizo	Salon owner
Iris	30	Garinagu	Teacher
Judith	44	Garinagu	Census taker
Juliana	20	Belizean Mestizo	Salon employee
June	45	Garinagu	Business owner
Kate	18	Creole	Store clerk
Keisha	23	Garinagu	Shrimp farm supervisor
Kiki	21	Garinagu	Not working
Lana	21	Garinagu	Not working
Laura	21	Garinagu	Store clerk
Lorraine	23	Garinagu	Teacher
Marjorie	18	Garinagu	Not working
Meg	47	Garinagu	Artist
Perla	38	Garinagu	Farm worker
Rae	43	Garinagu	Census taker
Rita	37	Garinagu	Teacher
Shayleen	23	Garinagu	Store clerk / office cleaner / bartender
Sue	25	Garinagu	Not working
Vanessa	19	Garinagu	Not working

A list of informants, organized by pseudonym, including age, ethnicity, and occupation at time of interview.

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