

'COMING HOME': THE RETURN AND REINTEGRATION OF BELIZEAN RETURNEES  
FROM THE UNITED STATES TO BELIZE, CENTRAL AMERICA

By

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To Ermitte

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	<u>page</u>
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS.....	4
LIST OF TABLES.....	9
LIST OF FIGURES .....	10
ABSTRACT .....	12
CHAPTER	
1 INTRODUCTION: TRANSNATIONAL RETURNS TO BELIZE .....	14
Population and Migration Background.....	19
Scope of the Study .....	22
Migration Studies and Return Migration.....	25
Transnationalism and Return Migration.....	29
Gendered Returns.....	33
Fieldwork and Methods .....	37
Study Population .....	44
Outline of Dissertation.....	49
2 TRAJECTORIES OF MIGRATION AND RETURN .....	59
Migration Histories .....	62
Belize City and the New Capital of Belmopan .....	68
The 2000 Census of Belize .....	73
Successful and Unplanned Returns.....	77
Summary .....	79
3 TRANSNATIONAL FAMILIES.....	81
Migration and the Family .....	85
Returning to the Family .....	91
Return Decisions and the Family .....	96
Maintaining Transnational Family Networks.....	102
Summary.....	109
4 BUILDING AND MAINTAINING ‘HOME’ IN BELIZE .....	111
Houses and ‘Home’ in Belize.....	115
Constructing ‘Home’ in Belize.....	120
Maintaining and Improving ‘Home’ .....	125
Unplanned Returns and Securing Housing.....	131
Summary.....	137

5	MAINTAINING TRANSNATIONAL LIVELIHOODS.....	139
	Realizing Livelihood Goals in Belize .....	143
	Returning to Work or Leisure.....	149
	When Transnationalism Is Not an Option .....	154
	Summary.....	159
6	REINTEGRATION AND TRANSNATIONALISM.....	162
	Reintegration and Transnationalism .....	167
	Local Participation While in the United States .....	171
	Community Work in Belize.....	174
	Cultural Roles and Competencies .....	179
	Summary.....	183
7	CONCLUDING DISCUSSION .....	184
	Research Summary.....	187
	Transnational Family Networks and Future Generations .....	189
	Local Outcomes and Policy Implications .....	192
	Agenda for Future Research.....	195
	Conclusion.....	197
	LIST OF REFERENCES .....	199
	BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH .....	212

## LIST OF TABLES

<u>Table</u>		<u>page</u>
1-1	Main study population characteristics tabulated by residence. ....	53

## LIST OF FIGURES

<u>Figure</u>	<u>page</u>
1-1 Regional overview map .....	54
1-2 Map of Belize .....	55
1-3 Map of Central America .....	56
1-4 Map of the Caribbean.....	57
1-5 Map of Mexico .....	58

## Coming Home Belize

I was born in a city / In the little city of Belize  
In a country way over there / Near the Caribbean Sea

I'm coming home, coming home, coming home, Belize  
I am coming home to see / Your sunlight, rain at night, cool breeze blowing free  
Gods upon the Maya ruins / Majestic sights I'll see

Your little cayes, coral reef / Lighthouse standing tall  
The market on the riverside / My people most of all

This legacy my mama gave me / When I was born  
I watched the stars kiss the moon goodnight / I know this place is mine

I'll take a trip to Mango Creek / Visit old Sibun  
In Placencia and Burrell Boom / My love will start to bloom

From the Sarstoon River to Rio Hondo / And up the Blue Lagoon  
In Mountain Pine Ridge / The silver streams will wash away my dreams

I'm coming home, coming home, coming home, Belize  
I am coming home to see / The Swing Bridge turning in the evening  
Let the boats go by / I'll wake up yawning to see the dawning  
Of a city I call mine

...

It's been twenty years since I left home / My, how time flies  
I'm a woman now / And when life gets a little rough  
And I get a little homesick / I make a long distance call / Just to hear my mama's voice  
My mama, with her sweet broken English / Always makes me cry  
She says, "Gial, da when you come home? / I miss you bad you know  
And your papa miss you too / Come home, man, da here you belong  
It's no place like home, gial, no place like home"

I say, "Mama, I hear you, there's no place like home" / So I'm coming home  
I'm coming home, coming home, coming home, Belize  
I am coming home to see / Your sunlight, rain at night, cool breeze blowing free  
I put my feet into your ground / And bury my roots way down

...

This legacy my mama gave me when I was born  
When I die I'll be born again from your fertile soil  
I'll shed a tear, a happy tear / Belize, you are so dear

I'm coming home, coming home, coming home, Belize

- by *Bella Carib*, from the album "*Rhythm Fever*" (1998)

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Migration research has in recent decades focused on emerging transnational social fields that have come about as migrants continue to maintain multi-stranded social relations that link together their destinations with their home countries. While many migrants end up settling permanently in the destination countries while maintaining ties with 'home,' some migrants 'complete the migration cycle' by returning to their country of origin. Return migration has been understudied in traditional migration research, and has only recently emerged as an important research focus within studies of transnationalism.

Whereas traditional migration research tended to focus on immigration and migrants' lives in the destination countries, studies of transnationalism often blur the distinctions between destination and sending societies, rendering specific locations of 'home' invisible in the process. This study of Belizean return migration from the United States to Belize, Central America builds on recent migration studies that examine return migration as more than a 'completion of the migration cycle' by employing a transnational perspective on the process of return and reintegration. Accordingly, this dissertation examines how Belizean returnees manage the process of return and reintegration into Belizean society, while continuing to maintain multi-stranded relations with the United States. The central research question of this study is therefore

how transnational behavior over time informs and structures the relative success and satisfaction of Belizean returnees in their efforts at ‘coming home.’

This question is contextualized in relation to more systemic and structural aspects of transnationalism, globalization, and social change and is examined in detail through five different areas of inquiry, each corresponding to the five main chapters of this dissertation: returnees’ migration histories and how returning migrants maintain relations with Belize while abroad; how returnees maintain networks and family relations spanning Belize and the United States after having returned to Belize to live; how returnees secure satisfactory housing upon return; how they maintain sustainable livelihoods in Belize; and how they reintegrate into Belizean society. Throughout the dissertation, the process of return and reintegration is analyzed through the lens of gender relations, and how gender roles and expectations differentially structure the return experience of male and female returnees.

## CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION: TRANSNATIONAL RETURNS TO BELIZE

I was first introduced to Miss Thomas when one of my neighbors in Belmopan, the small, administrative inland capital of Belize, suggested that I interview “the old American lady who lives by herself” two streets over from where I stayed during my research project on Belizean return migration that I carried out in 2004-2005. Miss Thomas had returned to Belize to live in 2003, after spending close to forty years living and working in the United States. Before migrating, she had worked as a seamstress in Belize City where she was born, had three children, and had most of her family living close by. When Hurricane Hattie washed away most of the coastline of Belize in 1961, she, along with many other Belizeans from what was then the capital of Belize, decided to migrate in search of better opportunities, leaving behind a devastated home town and a society that was rebuilding and gradually gaining self-government from the British that had historically ruled this small colony in Central America. Miss Thomas eventually ended up in San Francisco in 1962, after an aunt in Los Angeles sponsored her travel to the United States via New Orleans. She traveled alone, and was only able to bring her children after five years in San Francisco, where she continued to live and work as a seamstress until the early 1970s. In the meantime, the capital of Belize had officially been moved from the devastated coastal town of Belize City to the newly constructed town of Belmopan, located inland and protected from future hurricanes. Miss Thomas returned to Belize in 1972, “to try and patch things up with the father of my children” as she put it, while temporarily leaving her children in the care of relatives in San Francisco. She bought a house in Belmopan and got a job with the Government Printer’s Office, but things did not work out as she had hoped, and after a year and a half she decided to migrate again, this time to New York City, where one of her brothers lived. She started working in a curtain factory, and then went on to become a registered nurse after she

moved to New Jersey in 1982. Miss Thomas kept her house in Belmopan, and for more than 25 years she would rent the house to teachers in the area, coming back to Belize every year to visit her remaining family in Belize and to check up on her house, which she completely refurbished for more than US\$ 30,000 in 1998. In 1999 Miss Thomas retired from her job as a head nurse, and because her second husband passed away shortly after, she moved to Port Charlotte, Florida, where one of her sisters lived. However, she soon found out that her medical expenses and lack of good health coverage compared to her situation in New Jersey, put her at risk of “falling through the cracks,” even though she had social security and an additional pension to live off. This, combined with her desire to take care of her ailing mother who was living in Belize City, made her decide to finally “come home.” Back in Belize, she realized that although she had completely renovated her old house, it was too small for her and all the furniture that she had shipped to Belize from the United States, and she soon had builders begin construction on a new house for her in one of the recent developments on the outskirts of Belmopan. Toward the end of my fieldwork, Miss Thomas was happy to be living in Belize, and she would drive to Belize City twice a week in her old Volvo to take care of her mother, who had just turned 90. With her new house finished, and the garden coming up beautifully, Miss Thomas was in better health than she had been in years, and she had become more involved in local life in Belize, while at the same time making sure that she got to watch her favorite NBA basketball teams play, live on satellite TV. Still, she often discussed the possibility of returning to the United States to live, “if my son in LA would build me a house out there,” or to live with her younger sister in Chicago for half of the year. In the meantime, Miss Thomas took pride in having done well for herself in life, and being able to “come home” to take care of her mother in her old age.

This dissertation examines in detail the context of how and the ways in which Belizean migrants to the United States return to Belize to live, and how they reintegrate into Belizean society. It focuses on those who have returned voluntarily after many years living and working in the United States, but also includes migrants who have returned under more challenging and unplanned circumstances, either because they were deported from the United States or because of other difficulties either abroad or at home that necessitated their return. The dissertation primarily centers on returnees who have settled in the areas of Belmopan and Belize City (Figure 1-2), the two locations most important to the woman in the introductory vignette that I refer to as Miss Thomas (all names used for interviewees in this study are pseudonyms). I begin this dissertation with Miss Thomas' story because it makes evident how the migration trajectories, life histories, and experiences of return for Belizean returnees are often more complex than simple notions of "migration" and "return" would imply. Also, while certainly unique in some respects, Miss Thomas' case highlights central aspects of the return experience that were recurring themes in the interviews I conducted with returnees in Belize, namely the importance of maintaining relations with Belize while abroad; maintaining networks and family relations spanning Belize and the United States after having returned to Belize to live; securing satisfactory housing upon return; maintaining sustainable livelihoods in Belize; and reintegrating into Belizean society. The central argument of this dissertation is that the abovementioned aspects of returning to Belize are most successfully negotiated when returnees maintain transnational lives, both during their years as migrants in the United States, during the process of returning to Belize, and as a way of integrating into Belizean society upon return. I will elaborate on this point later in this introduction, and throughout the chapters of the dissertation.

For Miss Thomas, the various aspects of accomplishing a successful return to Belize not only marked a chronology of events that defined her experience of migration and return, but were also relevant to her in different ways at different points in her life. For example, when she left Belize the first time in 1962, maintaining a residence in Belize was not a relevant concern because much of her hometown of Belize City had literally disappeared in Hurricane Hattie in late October 1961 (cf. Cain 1964; Foster 1987; Gregg 1968). However, when she left Belize the second time in the early 1970s she had a house in Belmopan that she would maintain for decades, and that became an important point of reference for her in thinking about eventually returning to Belize to live. Upon return to Belize in 2003, she was able to move back into her house and old neighborhood precisely because that had been an important connection for her with Belize over the years – even if she eventually moved on to a bigger house in another area of Belmopan once she was confronted with the realities of actually being ‘back home.’ This means that to understand processes of migration and return we must employ a historical perspective that accounts for more than specific points in the migration experience, such as an exclusive focus on the experience of return, by integrating perspectives from the different life stages of individual migrants. As Alistair Thomson (2006) has pointed out in relation to British post-war migrants returning from Australia, an in-depth examination of migrant life stories reveal long-term influences on migration and return outcomes beyond the more superficial explanations for migration and return that are ordinarily given: “For example, family dynamics are part of most return stories, but they are usually deep-rooted and complicated, and we begin to understand their effects only through the long span of a life history” (Thomson 2006: 117). A focus on personal narratives and life stories also extends a research tradition in Caribbean migration studies dating back to the 1960s that has “provided essential information on the complexities of

leaving home, settling in unknown destinations and negotiating relations to the Caribbean place of origin” (Olwig and Besson 2005: 4; see also Byron 1994, Chamberlain 1997, Glick Schiller and Fouron 2001, Gmelch 1992, and Olwig 1998 for examples). In such studies, narratives are analyzed as descriptions of lived lives, as ways of structuring the past, present and future, and as modes of communication and performance (Peacock and Holland 1993). Also, in all contexts of return migration, the underlying dynamic is structured by previous migration patterns and the population characteristics involved in the initial migration (Thomas 2008: 655). Finally, this study follows Nina Glick Schiller’s (2003) observation that ethnography must be central to a study of transnationalism, as it provides the only prism through which we can observe the various forms of transnational connections that migrants maintain –even after they return ‘home.’ This is so because, contrary to the social survey or statistical data, the ethnographic method is employed by anthropologists to “ascertain typicality of behavior not on the basis of a delimited set of self-reported frequencies of particular behavior but from their ongoing observations, over time and within a range of contexts, of what people do, differentiated from what they say they do” (Glick Schiller 2003: 116). Furthermore, the case studies and vignettes that most often form the basis of qualitatively driven ethnographies are not mere anecdote or journalistic observations, but “represent examples of patterned, frequently observed behaviors and are selected because of their typicality” (Glick Schiller 2003: 166). Based on the theoretical and methodological considerations above, this study of Belizean return migration therefore incorporates a focus on narratives and life stories to examine and personalize the historical context of migration that informs Belizean migrants’ experiences, and to examine how returnees describe themselves, their migration experience, and how they have returned ‘home’ at particular times in their lives.

## **Population and Migration Background**

The introductory vignette of Miss Thomas also stakes out the geocultural and chronological scope of migration and return of those Belizeans who have migrated to the United States and eventually decided to return to Belize to live (Figure 1-1). Wedged in between Mexico and Guatemala, and facing the Caribbean Sea to the east, Belize is both located in Central America and part of the Caribbean (Figure 1-3 and Figure 1-4). This is especially so given its unique status in Central America as a former British colony that gained its independence as late as 1981. Named British Honduras until 1973, Belize continues to be a constitutional monarchy with the Queen of England as the titular head of state, and retains English as the official language, a distinctly Caribbean sociocultural heritage still evident today, and an often complex if not antagonistic historical relationship with its Central American neighbors (Peedle 1999: 4-12). At 8,866 square miles, Belize is slightly larger than El Salvador and double the size of Jamaica, and in comparison with the United States it is about as large as New Hampshire (Barry 1995: xiii). With an estimated 277,000 residents in 2005 (SIB 2007), Belize is Central America's least populous country. It also has the lowest population density of any Central American country, which at 31.2 per square mile is approximately that of the state of Kansas. The dominant population has historically been the Creoles, of Afro-European descent. Other major ethnic groups are the Mestizos, of mixed Spanish and Indigenous ancestry, the Garifuna, of mixed African and Indigenous descent, several distinct Indigenous Maya populations, as well as smaller groups of immigrants from all over the world, including East Indian, Chinese, and Mennonite communities (cf. Barry 1995; Robinson 2006). Since the late 1970s, more than 40,000 Central American refugees and immigrants have settled in Belize, either fleeing civil wars and political turmoil in surrounding countries such as Guatemala, El Salvador, and Nicaragua, or seeking better living conditions and opportunities. With the continued exodus of

primarily Afrodescendant Belizeans to the United States, this has in effect made the Mestizos the majority population, and “Latinized” the country’s ethnic makeup, although Creoles still remain the culturally and socially dominant ethnic group (cf. Daugaard-Hansen 2002; 2005).

As many other Caribbean countries with a British colonial history, Belizean migration to the United States only really began during World War II and escalated in the early- to mid-1960s, at a time when migration to the United Kingdom was being curtailed, and renewed demand for labor in the United States resulted in immigration legislation alterations that favored Caribbean migrants, in particular those who fell within the professional and skilled labor categories (Thomas-Hope 1998: 195; see also Chapter 2 of this dissertation). The changes in immigration legislation in these receiving countries in the 1960s coincided in the case of Belize with the crisis brought on by Hurricane Hattie, and facilitated the choice of migrating that many Belizeans made at the time. Belizean migration to the United States has historically been further facilitated by the relative proximity and ease of travel to the United States for Belizeans who decided to try their luck and travel up ‘through the back’ through Mexico and cross the border as undocumented immigrants to the United States (Figure 1-5), rather than going there by plane on tourist visas or arriving by other legal means, such as on work visas or through sponsorships by relatives already living in the United States. As I discuss in Chapter 2, this history of migration is important to include in a discussion of return migration, because the initial circumstances of migration influence the individual migration experience, relative success as a migrant in the United States, ability to maintain a transnational social and economic life, and consequently the degree of success that returnees experience in reintegrating into Belizean society. Furthermore, transnational social fields come into existence and are sustained over time by continued transnational migration and interaction. While Belizeans have historically migrated to the United

Kingdom because of the colonial relationship, this migration was not sustained to any significant degree beyond the 1960s. Consequently, the Belizean returnees that have come back from Britain over the years have not been engaged in the actual formation of a transnational social field that would have tied Belize and Britain closer together. Because this study is concerned with the relationship between return, reintegration, and transnational practices, returnees from Britain have not been included, nor have returnees from other areas such as the Caribbean, despite the historical linkages between Belize and the Caribbean that are much more transnational than those that exist between Belize and Britain. Instead, this study focuses exclusively on returnees from the United States, and leaves comparisons between returnees from different areas of the world, with different experiences of migration and transnationalism, up to future comparative studies of Belizean transnationalism and return migration.

Those who have migrated to the United States since the 1960s in particular have largely been Afrodescendant Creole and Garifuna Belizeans, and have mainly settled in the metropolitan regions of New Orleans, New York, Chicago, Houston, Los Angeles, and more recently South Florida and Atlanta. Today, the Belizean population in the United States is estimated to be between 90,000 and 120,000, although the total number of Belizean-born individuals who have obtained permanent legal resident status in the United States from 1960 to 2007 is much lower at 46,000 (Vernon 1990; Mahler and Ugrina 2006; DHS 2007; Straughan 2007; see also Chapter 2 for discussion). A much smaller, although significant number of those who migrated have over the years returned to Belize to live, especially since the mid- to late-1980s, after the legal provisions of the IRCA Amnesty enacted by the US Congress in 1986 made it easier for qualifying Belizeans to naturalize in the United States, which in turn made it easier for them to return to Belize while maintaining their relations with the United States (Straughan 2007: 264).

Also, the late 1980s marked the time when an increasing number of migrants who had left Belize in the early 1960s began to retire from the United States labor market with pensions and savings that they could use to successfully return 'home.' Official statistics from the 2000 Census of Belize (CSO 2000) put the number of "Belizean-born individuals residing in Belize who have lived permanently in the United States" at just over 3,000, with an average of 250 Belizeans having returned each year between 1995 and 2000. With a general increase in the number of returnees since then, a 2007 estimate of more than 5,000 returnees seems reasonable. Still, there are numerous problems related to counting fluid populations such as transnational migrants and returnees (Thomas-Hope 1998: 195), and any numerical estimate must take this into account, which will also be discussed in Chapter 2. In general terms, however, it is evident that an increasing number of Belizeans are coming 'home,' and that their presence in Belize is having a significant impact on local communities as well as on Belizean families residing in both Belize and the United States.

### **Scope of the Study**

The research project that this dissertation is the outcome of was developed after my MA fieldwork in Belize City, which was carried out over eight months in 1999. Conducted as a study of the interactions between the local Afrodescendant Belizean population and Central American and Chinese immigrants in Belize City, I examined how the influx of different populations into Belize had both added to the demographic shifts in Belize and structured the formation of new Belizean forms of identification within a new nation-state in an increasingly globalized world (cf. Daugaard-Hansen 2002). During this research project, it became clear to me that the local Belizean population had in a relatively short span of time become much more oriented toward and influenced by North American culture and society. Most of those I interviewed had relatives living in the United States, or were otherwise intimately familiar with North American culture

and society. This echoed the findings of Richard Wilk's urban survey from the late 1980s, in which about 40% of the interviewed Belizean population had visited the United States, 15% had lived there for more than three months, and 76% reported having relatives living abroad (Wilk 1994). From being a colonial backwater, Belize had since independence from the British in 1981 quickly become part of a larger global or 'transnational social field' (cf. Basch et al. 1994) that located them in both the Caribbean, Central America, and the United States, and oriented them much less toward Britain. Furthermore, Belize had since the early 1980s increasingly been bombarded with North American mass culture, including pirated satellite television programs and consumer products sent back to Belizeans by relatives living in the United States (cf. Price and Price 1995; Sutherland 1998; Wilk 1994). These factors helped shape the changing cultural and socio-economic landscape of Belize in profound ways, and Belizean migrants, whether still abroad or having returned to Belize, embody many of these changes.

This doctorate research project focuses on how returnees adjust and reintegrate into Belizean society. As such, it extends the methodological focus of my MA research by looking at social change and interaction between different groups, in this case between returning and local Belizeans. As with my MA work, this focus is influenced by transactionalist approaches to social interaction and cultural differentiation that can be traced back to the work of Fredrik Barth (1966; 1971; 1986), and by a conceptual understanding of culture and social organization as inherently processual and dynamic (Eriksen 1993; 1998), and best understood within the context of global structures, flows (Appadurai 1996) and networks (Hannerz 1992; 1996). Further, issues of reintegration and readjustment to life 'back home' have been featured prominently in earlier studies of return migration (cf. Davison 1968; Brettell 1979; Sutton and Makiesky 1975; Gmelch 1980). Such studies placed emphasis on the difficulties and frustrations often experienced by

returnees, having to do with changes in worldviews due to the migration experience, adjustment to social, economic and political life ‘back home,’ and the mixed reception many returnees face from relatives, friends, and others in the home country (Horst 2007: 64). Still, studies of the sociocultural reintegration of returning migrants and of how they were received by their societies of origin have until recently been very scarce (Guarnizo 1997a). More recent studies of return migration, particularly studies based in the Caribbean, have placed such movements within a larger context of sustained migration, globalization, and social change related to increasing transnational behavior and the emergence of transnational social fields (Gmelch 1992; Grasmuck and Pessar 1991; Levitt 2001), and have questioned the bimodal framework traditionally employed in migration research that viewed migration in terms of “two opposing outcomes – either permanent settlement or permanent return” (Pessar 1997: 1).

**How does transnational behavior over time inform and structure the relative success and satisfaction of returnees in their efforts at ‘coming home’?** This is the central question that the dissertation seeks to answer. As I have already outlined, I examine this question by focusing on five different areas of inquiry, each corresponding to the subsequent five chapters of this dissertation: returnees’ migration trajectories and how returning migrants maintain relations with Belize while abroad; how returnees maintain networks and family relations spanning Belize and the United States after having returned to Belize to live; how returnees secure satisfactory housing upon return; how they maintain sustainable livelihoods in Belize; and how they reintegrate into Belizean society. The main argument of this dissertation is that transnational behavior does structure returnees’ experiences of return and reintegration, but does so differentially, in ways that can only be understood in a historical perspective that examines the migration trajectories of individual migrants, which can in turn most fruitfully be illuminated by

including migrant narratives in the analysis. Furthermore, it is by examining the complex negotiations of family life and the individual dreams and aspirations that returnees engage in at various stages of the return process that we can determine to what extent transnationalism plays a role in returnees' decision-making and socializing activities.

To understand how this argument relates to the wider context of anthropological theory, and to the concrete aspects of the research project itself, I therefore outline in the following sections three areas of anthropological theory that the central research questions of this dissertation engage more directly: return migration in relation to migration studies; transnationalism and return migration; and gender and migration. These sections are followed by a more detailed discussion of the fieldwork and methods of this research project; a section that examines the characteristics of the study population; and finally an outline of the chapters of this dissertation.

### **Migration Studies and Return Migration**

A central aspect of globalization has been the massive voluntary and involuntary movement of people(s) across continents, in the beginning as part of European colonizing projects throughout the world, and more recently as a result of de-colonization which has led to large scale population movements from the former colonies to the metropolises in the United States and Europe (Brettell 2000: 97). Migration studies in the social sciences have over time “tended to ebb and flow with various waves of emigration and immigration” (Brettell and Hollifield 2000: 1), and the major waves of migration in the past fifty years have brought about a growing field of migration studies, which has been characterized as “a fragmented set of theories that have developed largely in isolation from one another, sometimes but not always segmented by disciplinary boundaries” (Massey et al. 1993: 432). The objective here is not to provide an exhaustive review of the history of migration studies (see Brettell and Hollifield 2000; Castles

and Miller 2003; Massey et al. 1993; Pedraza and Rumbaut 1996; and Portes and Bach 1985 for comprehensive overviews), but to focus on anthropology's contribution to migration studies, and how the interest in the phenomenon of return migration has developed over time.

While sociologists have long focused on migration as a matter of incorporation of immigrants into the host society, anthropologists have historically focused on non-Western societies that have increasingly become sending societies of migrants leaving in search of opportunities in more developed areas of the world. Since the 1970s, anthropological migration studies have flourished, covering international migration from most parts of the world, and covering migrants from developing countries residing in the West as well, the traditional migration focus of sociologists. Because of anthropology's traditional interest in locations or people(s) located outside or on the periphery of the West, anthropology brings a particular perspective and a different set of questions to the study of migration. Sociologists and economists have traditionally described migration in static terms, as a uni-directional or circular movement of migrants who left their countries in response to economic opportunities abroad. By outlining various push-pull factors that could account for such movement, the return movement of migrants who had or had not achieved their migration objectives could likewise be explained within the same framework, as migrants were seen as being pulled back to their countries of origin because of the cultural affiliation and level of comfort that they were assumed to experience there (Plaza and Henry 2006: 4). However, in anthropology,

a discipline sensitive to place but also comparative in its perspective, these questions have focused less on the broad scope of migration flows than on the articulation between the place whence a migrant originates and the place or places to which he or she goes. This includes exploration of how people in local places respond to global processes (Brettell 2000: 98).

According to this perspective, migration is defined by the relationship between particular people and several distinct localities (conceptualized most broadly as 'home' and 'abroad'), which has

in turn led to a distinctly anthropological sensitivity toward migrants as relating to several different contexts that need to be accounted for and taken into account. An essential outcome of this perspective is the interest in transnationalism and transnational practices among migrants, which will be discussed in detail in the next section of this chapter.

Return migration has always been an implicitly recognized, but often ignored or neglected part of migration studies, and has been described by Russell King (2000: 7) as “the great unwritten chapter in the history of migration.” In defining a set of migration laws, Ravenstein early on stated that “each main current of migration produces a compensating counter-current” (Ravenstein 1885: 199). Yet in one of the first major review articles of return migration, Gmelch (1980) noted that in a previous migration bibliography by Mangalam from 1968, “only 10 of the 2051 titles listed were studies of return migration” (Mangalam and Swartzweller 1968, cited in Gmelch 1980: 135). Further, although largely ignored at the time by migration studies that focused on the assimilation of immigrants, the great wave of migration to North America from Europe in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century has since been shown to have included a substantial return movement as well (King 2000: 28-33; see also Foner 2000 and Wyman 1993). Apart from few and scattered early studies of return migration (see Saloutos 1956 and Useem and Useem 1955 for important examples), one of the first typologies of migrants to include return migrants was published by Eldridge (1965), and it was only in the late 1970s and early 1980s that more systematic and theoretical examinations of return migration began to appear in various review articles, collections and edited volumes (cf. Brettell 1979; Gmelch 1980; King 1986; King and Mortimer 1983; Rhoades 1979; Stinner et al. 1982). These publications incorporated specific studies of return migration with more general overview articles, and were concerned with topics such as typologies of returnees; adaptation and readjustment of return migrants; the impact of

return migration on sending societies; reasons for return; reintegration and social change; and return migration and economic development. More recent volumes that explicitly seek to incorporate diverse studies of return migration into larger discussions of transnationalism, identity, and globalization include Ghosh (2000), Long and Oxfeld (2004), Markowitz and Stefansson (2004) and Potter, Conway, and Phillips (2005).

In the case of the Caribbean region of which Belize is part, an increasing number of migrants have begun to return to their countries of origin after retiring from the labor markets in primarily Britain and North America, the main migration destinations for Caribbean populations since the 1950s and 1960s, respectively. This in turn has generated a relatively large but quite recent body of literature on return migration, often framed within broader studies of transnational populations engaged in multiple locations, or as more focused studies of returnees and the specific locations they return to (see Plaza and Henry 2006: 8-14 and King 2000: 33-40 for excellent overviews, and examples in Byron 1994; Chamberlain 1997; Grasmuck and Pessar 1991; Guarnizo 1997a; Levitt 2001; Olwig 1993; Pessar 1997; Thomas-Hope 1988). Caribbean populations have historically been extremely mobile, to the point where “migration has become institutionalized as the central part of the local culture, livelihood and way of thinking” (King 2000: 34). This is the outcome of a sustained process that links socio-economic and spatial mobility, to inform the mindset of local populations:

As migration grows in prevalence within a community, it changes values and cultural perceptions in ways that increase the probability of future migration. [...] At the community level, migration becomes deeply ingrained into the repertoire of people’s behaviors, and values associated with migration become part of the community’s values (Massey et al. 1993: 452).

Further, migrations in the Caribbean have historically been circular (Pessar 1997), repeating (Benitez-Rojo 1992), or included frequent sojourns (Gonzalez 1988), and have involved systemic notions and patterns of return movement back to ‘the source’ (Plaza and Henry 2006).

A consequence of this history has been the formation of a “return ideology” that has influenced migrants as well as locals in the region (King 2000: 33), Belize included. Such an ‘ideology of return’ establishes return as a cultural norm, and migration is viewed as an extension of the sociocultural space of particular localities of home, to include people in distant locations as part of the same socio-economic and cultural system, expecting that migrants residing in distant places would eventually return ‘home.’ Consequently, people have engaged in interactions bridging localities for generations, and have in the process established ‘transnational sociocultural systems’ (Sutton 1987), which will be discussed in the next section.

### **Transnationalism and Return Migration**

In the late 1980s and onward, the concept of transnationalism quickly became one of the most dominant theoretical contributions to migrations studies and to anthropology, beginning with the edited volume *Caribbean Life in New York City: Sociocultural Dimensions* (Sutton and Chaney 1987), in which Constance Sutton observed the emergence of a “transnational socio-cultural system” (Sutton 1987: 20) among Caribbean migrants in New York. Transnationalism was in subsequent works defined by Glick Schiller, Basch and Szanton Blanc (1992:1) as “the process by which immigrants build social fields that link together their country of origin and their country of settlement.” Later studies have sought to refine this definition or otherwise expand an emergent field of study through concrete research on transnational migration, from places as different as the Dominican Republic, Haiti, Grenada, the Philippines, India, Hong Kong, El Salvador, Mexico, and Ecuador, among others (cf. Guarnizo 1997b; Pessar 1995; Basch, Glick Schiller and Szanton Blanc 1994; Lessinger 1995; Ong 1999; Mahler 1996; and Kyle 2000).

According to Guarnizo and Smith (1998), writings on various aspects of transnational phenomena have held as their basic tenet the crisis of the nation-state caused by accelerated

processes of globalization. In these studies, the nation-state is seen as “weakened ‘from above’ by transnational capital, global media, and emergent supra-national political institutions. ‘From below’ it faces the decentering ‘local’ resistances of the informal economy, ethnic nationalism, and grassroots activism” (Guarnizo and Smith 1998: 3). Furthermore, studies of transnationalism within migration studies have arisen as a challenge to the normative assimilation theories that hold that once immigrants arrive in the host country they “settle in the host society and undergo a gradual but inevitable process of assimilation” (Portes et al. 1999: 228). Because immigrants have consistently proven not to follow this pattern, but have instead sustained and developed close ties with their home countries, concepts such as transnationalism (Glick Schiller et al. 1995), transnational socio-cultural systems (Sutton and Chaney 1987), trans-statal phenomena (Kearney 1995), and trans-migration (Glick Schiller et al. 1995; Mahler 1998), to name but a few, have been employed to account for this reality. Within anthropology, transnationalism has also proved a very useful concept in understanding not only how local communities in the sending countries are tied to and structured by global processes, but also in understanding how they remain intricately related to receiving countries through sustained and marked flows of capital, goods, images, and people, rather than being discrete socio-cultural units (Appadurai 1996; Hannerz 1998). While migration studies within anthropology have traditionally focused on sending or receiving societies, the concept of transnationalism and the subsequent focus on transnational practices have sought to dissolve the dichotomy by bringing the “process of moving between several sending and receiving communities” into the analysis (Burns 1999: 148).

Pertinent to the discussion of transnationalism and return migration is the fact that when Constance Sutton first launched the idea of ‘transnational sociocultural systems’ (Sutton and

Chaney 1987), the emergence of this concept was an outcome not only of the various studies included in the book that described the ““continuous and intense bi-directional flow of peoples, ideas, practices, and ideologies between the Caribbean region and New York City” (Sutton 1987: 20), but also of a study that she had carried out with Susan Makiesky in the early 1970s (Sutton and Makiesky 1975) on return migrants to Barbados. In this study, Sutton and Makiesky found that return migrants had a profound impact on local awareness of racial identity and social justice, ideas that in turn were formed in the transnational or trans-Atlantic social space that emerged among Caribbean populations in Great Britain and North America in the 1950s and 1960s. Ironically, the interest in transnational systems spurred by this and other studies initially decreased the interest in return migration. This was because in analyzing transnationalism, notions of ‘home’ and ‘abroad’ were viewed as blurred, as migrants’ notions of ‘home’ were analyzed in relation to political projects and diasporic identity constructs in the receiving country that were negotiated in transnational political and personal deterritorialized social spaces, rather than in relation to the homeland itself (cf. Glick Schiller et al. 1992; Guarnizo 1997b; Kearney 1995). The physical act of return and engagement with the locality of ‘home,’ and the social issues that pertain to the migrants’ relationship to that locality, were in other words secondary concerns in most studies of transnationalism. Furthermore, with a focus on transnationalism migration was no longer seen as a bipolar movement of people(s), with return as the ‘completion of the migration cycle,’ but as a way to sustain and expand transnational social fields. ‘Return’ thus became an analytical contradiction in terms.

If return migration should no longer be analyzed as the final stage of the migration process (Plaza 2008: 12), what are the implications for understanding the conditions under which migrants increasingly return ‘home’? After all, most returnees themselves define ‘coming home’

as a realization of their migration objective, and consider the permanency of settling back in their home countries the ultimate goal, rather than an ongoing ‘process of return’ (cf. Horst 2006). Furthermore, the return of emigrants to their home countries with the resources they acquired abroad can be considered to be the ideal end of the international migration cycle (Nyberg Sørensen, Van Hear, and Engberg-Pedersen, 2002). Importantly, however, Brettell (2003: 49-50) argues in relation to an earlier study of Portuguese return migrants (Brettell 1979) that the ‘myth of return’ that migrants nominally uphold as the end goal of their sojourn must not be confused with migrants who are “actively involved in their home society through economic remittances, the building of houses, and participation in the social and religious life of their native villages.” In other words, the extent to which migrants engage in such transnational practices is indicative of their actual desire to return, insofar as they maintain relations and invest social, cultural, and economic capital in their eventual return to their native countries. Furthermore, as I argue in this study, it is the actual maintenance of transnational relations over time that facilitates return, readjustment, and reintegration into the local community.

Drawing on the work of Thomas Faist (2000) on transnational kinship groups, transnational circuits and transnational communities, Dwaine Plaza and Frances Henry have recently noted that transnationalism plays a major role in migrants’ reintegration at ‘home,’ because groups are not only “formed at home and overseas, but also when there is an active transnational exchange between these groups; that is, between migrants who are abroad and their families, kin and advocates who are in the origin country” (Plaza and Henry 2006: 11). Consequently, the study of return and reintegration must take such “transnational exchanges” over time into account. This also includes recognizing the difference between ‘return migrants’ who are “individuals who go back to live in their sending communities ... and have no desire to

return to the United States” (Brettell 2003: 54), and ‘transmigrants’ who maintain ties with their homelands, move back and forth, and are simultaneously incorporated within more than one nation-state (Glick Schiller 1999: 98). Even if some returnees maintain that “you can’t be two places at once” (Horst 2007: 66), this distinction may be more and more difficult to uphold, especially in places where transnational migration has become the norm, and transnational social spaces spanning two or more locations have been solidified over generations. Such is the case for much of the Caribbean, Belize included, where a virtual “culture of migration” that links socio-economic and spatial mobility (Thomas-Hope 1998) has emerged over several centuries. In the case of the Dominican Republic, return migrants may therefore find that although they intend to remain ‘at home’ upon return, they retain a translocal “dual frame of reference, constantly comparing their situation in their ‘home’ society to their situation in the ‘host’ society abroad” (Guarnizo 1997b: 310). In this sense, transnationalism entails a development among transnational migrants of “dual-place orientations and identities” (Sutton 1987: 22). The process of return, in other words, continues to include a translocal perspective for the individual migrant that reflects the migration history as well as the transnational social networks that they each have played a part in creating, and continue to engage with upon their return.

### **Gendered Returns**

Central to studies of how migrants maintain transnational social networks that tie their communities of origin with their destinations is the observation that men and women experience migration differently, and engage transnational social networks in different ways (Brettell 2003; Pessar 1999). Although gender was not a strategic focus of this study from the beginning of the research project in Belize, it was evident throughout the fieldwork, and when analyzing the fieldwork data, interviews and fieldnotes that male and female returnees faced different circumstances and had different experiences both as migrants and when returning to Belize to

live. Male or female, most returnees interviewed for this study observed that “the females usually want to live in America, they usually want to stay, whereas men most of the time want to come home” to describe the attitudes among Belizean migrants in the United States that they had encountered most frequently, and indeed represented themselves. Despite such statements, it was striking that women returnees interviewed for this study had often returned for very personal reasons, returned to care for an ailing family member, or were otherwise the partner in a relationship who would continue to travel to the United States to maintain relations with and care for relatives up there. In contrast, most male returnees had returned to Belize for reasons that had much more to do with personal self-realization than with family care, be it retirement in a house constructed with money made abroad, to establish a business in Belize, or to otherwise enjoy life back in Belize, with the status and wealth generated by their sojourn.

Both of the above observations related to gender aspects of return migration correspond well with existing literature on transnational migration from the Caribbean and elsewhere. Pessar notes that women are more interested than men in settling more or less permanently in the host country to protect their gains in gender equity, whereas men, by contrast, “seek to return home rapidly to regain the status and privileges that migration itself has challenged” (Pessar 1999: 65; see also Brettell 2003 and Guarnizo 1997b). Further, because early studies of transnationalism focused on public domains of interaction in establishing transnational social fields, such as political mobilization, international investments, and hometown associations, transnational practices were portrayed as male-dominated and seen as facilitating male status-driven projects of return. Sarah Mahler (1996; 2003) has challenged this notion that women are passive transnational actors, and argued that to grasp the complexity of transnational practices that include women we have to change our research perspective to include more private domains of

interaction, such as the transnational household, transnational family networks, and how such domains are reproduced transnationally. In this context, Guarnizo (1997b: 297) notes that transnational practices can be either manifest or subtle in how they are carried out, maintained, and reproduced, and that some of the less obvious ways in which transnationalism functions are at the household level, which is often maintained across borders. For, as Guarnizo (1997b) further points out, transnational migration has not resulted in the transplantation of intact families, but has instead spatially dispersed family members in the process. This patterns also extends to return migrants, where, in the case of Dominican returnees,

at least one member of their family moved back before they did; the same proportion of sampled migrants returned unaccompanied to their country; and one-quarter of married respondents left their spouses or children behind in the US. Moreover, three of every five people in the total sample had close relatives who were active members of their household still living abroad (Guarnizo 1997b: 300).

Related to this recentering of gender and the transnational household in migration studies is Karen Fog Olwig's (2003) critique of transnationalism, in which she argues that studies of the phenomenon have placed undue emphasis on the relationship between migrant identities and their social and cultural ties to the nation-states of their migrant origins and destinations. Lacking has been a focus on how people engage in migratory processes to gain sustainable livelihoods, and how such processes are played out in family networks. Further, focusing on such migratory movements for livelihood purposes reveals a concrete context of interpersonal relations of migrants that connect them through family networks to particular places of origin, and gives substance to our understanding of their ties to particular localities:

The analysis leads to the conclusion that migrants do not only construct or perceive places of origin in terms of their transnational character, but just as much in terms of the particular cultural values and social ties that the migrants, and their families, practice in relation to these places (Olwig 2003: 788).

In this way, the gender-sensitive focus on livelihood, family networks and transnational households is relevant to the study of return migration because it privileges intimate aspects of migration and return over the overt or official displays of ‘migrant success’ so often associated with how returnees reintegrate and reposition themselves in their communities of origin upon return. As this study demonstrates, it is most often the male returnees who engage in the most manifest aspects of social life upon return, such as building a house, starting a business, or displaying migrant success through public participation and giving. Women, in contrast, most often return for much more personal reasons, such as the desire to take care of close relatives ‘at home.’ Further, women tend to sustain transnational family networks as a way of making migration possible in the first place, by supporting relatives and children during the migration process, and by most assiduously maintaining transnational family networks upon return.

Related to the methodological focus of this study, in a discussion of gendered aspects of Caribbean migration narratives, Chamberlain (1997) notes that the popular image of the migrant as young, single, and male foregrounds particular migration stories and histories that measure success in terms of male ambitions of personal achievement, rather than more family-focused reasons for migration and return that are typically defining measures of success for women. Therefore, collecting and analyzing narratives and life histories as this study attempts to do must take this gender differentiation into account, and show how men and women participate in socio-economic as well as family life in establishing themselves as successful returnees. Further, this study seeks to understand how “migrants’ families walk the tightrope of material aspiration and emotional need” (Chamberlain 1997: 110) in ways that are ultimately gendered and create different paths to migration success for men and women.

Finally, although the intention of this study is to foreground intimate and everyday aspects of migration and return, this does not mean that gendered transnational practices are to be understood outside of a larger political and socio-economic context. To the contrary, gender must be framed within a global context that defines the circumstances of Belize as well as individual migrants, and must be related to other aspects affecting the status and livelihoods of individual Belizean migrants, such as class and race. To achieve this contextual understanding of gendered aspects of the transnational migration experience, Mahler and Pessar (2001) provide a conceptual framework they term ‘gendered geographies of power.’ This framework is employed to map “the historically particularistic circumstances that a particular group of people experience, and be able to analyze them on multiple levels” (Mahler and Pessar 2001: 447). Further, this framework allows us to see “not only how people’s social locations affect their access to resources and mobility across transnational spaces but also their agency as initiators, refiners, and transformers of these conditions” (Mahler and Pessar 2001: 447). In this sense, gender is foregrounded in the analysis, but related to other aspects of the individual migrant’s social location, such as class, ethnicity, or nationality. For the purposes of the current study of Belizean returnees, this framework is important to keep in mind throughout, as it locates the discussion of gender and transnationalism in a broader context that both allows for individual agency and takes into account the structural and systemic factors that locate female and male returnees differently within the same global system of power relations that define their migration trajectories and livelihood options.

### **Fieldwork and Methods**

As already noted, this study is based on fieldwork conducted in Belize from August 2004 through May 2005, as a multi-sited fieldwork focused on returnee reintegration and adjustment in Belize City and Belmopan. Most studies of transnational migration have grappled with the

methodological difficulties of studying populations that engage several localities across national borders at the same time in most facets of their social and economic lives (Vertovec 1999). At the same time, ethnographic fieldwork has been described as an indispensable method in researching transnational social fields, “because of its long-term engagement within the social networks of immigrants”, which makes it a method “well suited to discover whether and how specific individuals within a study population maintain multiple transnational connections over time” (Glick Schiller 2003: 118). Conducting fieldwork in the multiple sites important to migrants has been advocated as one way of studying transnationalism, by “tracing a cultural formation across and within multiple sites of activity” (Marcus 1995: 96). At the same time, anthropologists risk either losing the intensity that long-term ethnographic fieldwork in one location provides, or renege on understanding the lives of dispersed populations. Clearly, there is a “need to experiment with the distribution of attention” (Hannerz 1998: 248) in ethnographic research. Hannerz (1998) and Vertovec (1999) both go on to suggest that just as we can follow the movement of people(s), things, metaphors, capital, and so on around the world in multiple locations, we may also benefit from studies that are inherently translocal and comparative. Because this study focuses on return migration to particular localities, and examines reintegration in conjunction with how returnees may continue to engage in transnational practices to ease social integration ‘at home,’ I found it more beneficial to engage in two field sites in Belize that had a particular historical relationship and were settled by different types of returnees.

Because I had previously conducted an extensive fieldwork of eight months in Belize City for my MA thesis (Daugaard-Hansen 2002), I was very familiar with both Belize City and Belmopan, where I eventually decided to conduct a multi-sited fieldwork for this study. As I will

describe in more detail in Chapter 2, the relationship and differences between these two towns of Belize made for an ideal comparative study of returnee reintegration and adjustment, as they each had different things to offer returnees, and because they had a particular history that tied them together in the development of Belize as an independent nation. Further, as already described briefly, the migration of Belizeans to the United States only really picked up after Hurricane Hattie destroyed Belize City in 1961, which also led the government at the time to pursue plans to construct the new inland capital of Belmopan during the next decade.

From my previous research in Belize, I already had practical knowledge and a well-developed network of contacts and friends that I could draw on to ease my entry into both field sites. That I had a good understanding of Belizean Creole, the lingua franca of the country, as well as Spanish which is also widely spoken, also made it easier for me to build rapport with returnees and other local Belizeans. Furthermore, as I have discussed elsewhere (Daugaard-Hansen 2009), my experiences as an immigrant to the United States allowed me to provide a personal background for my research interest in Belizean returnees from the United States, which in turn made initial conversations with returnees interesting for both parties, as we were able to exchange experiences and talk about my research interests from a more personalized perspective.

During the first weeks of my dissertation fieldwork I stayed in Belize City to sort out various practical matters and revisit different people and institutions that would become very helpful throughout my research, and to finalize my research clearance with the Institute of Social and Cultural Research under the National Institute of Culture and History (NICH) of Belize. I also made frequent trips to Belmopan, where I eventually found a place to stay. I ended up lodging in the house of a Belizean professional around my age, whose wife was away for a year to study for her MA in Marine Biology in Barbados. The house was located in one of the newer

extensions of Belmopan, and thus outside the old core of housing developments and government buildings that had been constructed in the early 1970s. At the same time, it was close enough that I had easy access to the rest of Belmopan, which by all counts is only a small town of about 7,000 residents, less than one-tenth the population of Belize City. Furthermore, the area had a fairly high concentration of returnees who had bought or constructed houses there, which made it both interesting and easy for me to get to know different returnees and other neighbors in the area. Further, because of its small size, it was easy to get around the town and meet with people I wanted to interview for my study, as well as others in my quickly expanding network of friends and informants.

Belmopan thus became my base, and gave me the most intimate and sustained contact with a local community, whereas I would visit Belize City and other parts of the country quite frequently, and at times spend several nights outside Belmopan. Most weeks, I would spend three of the days commuting to Belize City and back, a one-hour bus-ride in each direction. In this way, I would travel in the opposite of many Belizeans who continue to live in Belize City while they work in government positions in Belmopan, and catch the bus to work every morning. In Belize City, I was particularly interested in interacting with and interviewing the types of returnees that were under-represented in Belmopan, including business owners and deportees, and younger to middle-aged professionals who worked in the private sector. As described in the following section of this chapter, by spreading out my research to different locations in Belize I was able to study a very wide sample of return experiences, and interview a wide cross-section of voluntary and involuntary returnees to Belize from the United States.

In my attempt at developing as broad a sample of Belizean returnees as possible, I also followed several leads that took me outside of my two primary field sites. For example, the first

time I met the returnee Emilia Burgos, who is described in more detail in Chapter 4, was in Belmopan, where she and her husband had a small house. But I ended up spending more time with them on their main property some fifteen miles south of Belmopan on the Hummingbird Highway, where they had originally settled when they first moved back to Belize. Also, several returnees had lived in the Belize City or Belmopan areas, but had decided to move to other parts of Belize, and I wanted to get their story as well, to understand some of the regional dynamics that come to define where people settle or resettle. I also included several returnees who lived in other parts of Belize, such as Punta Gorda in the Toledo District, San Ignacio in the Cayo District, and Dangriga in the Stann Creek District, because they were related to other returnees that I had already interviewed in either Belmopan or Belize City, or because I had interacted with them in other contexts where we had engaged in numerous conversations already. Finally, many of the voluntary returnees who were working or owned businesses in Belize City resided outside of the city, and would therefore only be in the city proper during the daytime. I would therefore also visit them frequently in their homes, and hang out with them during the day.

I had originally designed an interview guide that I could use as a checklist during first interviews, and thereby generate a basic set of comparable data that I would then build my analysis on. This interview guide came to include a set of broad questions that covered areas of central importance to my research, including: basic personal biographical data; family, social and educational background; migration and work history; legal and occupational status in the United States; social and family network characteristics while abroad and upon return; transnational activities while in the United States; experiences of return; social, economic and family life upon return; and future living and migration prospects. In interviews or conversations with returnees who agreed to participate in the study, these questions would work as conversational entry points

about a specific topic, rather than just being a simple question in request for a specific answer. In this sense, I adopted in my ethnographic interviewing “a more flexible approach, allowing the discussion to flow in a way that seems natural” (Hammersley and Atkinson 1995: 152). In relation to specific questions from the interview guide, there were several that asked about returnees’ migration and return trajectories in basic terms, such as: “Length of residence in the United States?” and “When did you return to Belize?” However, as we saw in the case of Miss Thomas from the introductory vignette, her basic answers to such questions would have completely glossed over the arguably most important return experience for her, when she returned to Belize the first time almost thirty years before her (final) return to Belize upon retirement. This was when she bought the house in Belmopan that would over time become an important point of reference and attachment for her as she contemplated returning to Belize to live in her old age. Also, other returnees revealed much more complex transnational living arrangements as returnees, or were otherwise living very different lives as returnees at different stages of their lives than simple answers to basic questions would have made evident. For example, most of the returnees that I interviewed at length who were still in the workforce or operating their own business in Belize would make some income from a business venture in the United States, maintain a home and social network there, or spend a significant part of the year in the United States. As I argue throughout this dissertation, such transnational relations often come to define the success of returnees in reintegrating into Belize, for a variety of reasons that include sustaining acceptable livelihoods, local Belizeans’ perceptions of what returnees can contribute in terms of resources, networks and experience, and the wider context of family and social and economic networks that over time come to span both Belize and the United States. Aspects of return that involve this level of complexity and change over time are very difficult to

elicit from a basic data set, which came out most clearly from the subsequent in-depth interviews, collection of life histories, and participant observation I conducted with returnees in Belize, and which in the end made up the bulk of my fieldwork data.

Throughout this study, I employed a wide variety of methods, including participant observation, informal conversations, in-depth semi-structured interviews, the collection of life histories, event analysis, and archival and historical research. I conducted in-depth interviews with 41 official study participants, and did participant observation among most of those returnees as well, focusing especially on their interactions with local Belizeans and the concrete steps returnees took to socialize and reintegrate themselves into Belizean society. Also, a lot of the participant observation I conducted consisted of just hanging out with returnees and participating in some of their daily routines, such as pruning their gardens, buying groceries, or hanging out and watching NBA basketball with them at night. An important aspect of participant observation for this study was event analysis (Pelto and Pelto 1978: 200-207), whereby I would gain insight into the lives of returnees through significant private and public events such as birthdays and family gatherings, and national celebrations, sporting events, and other community-based social gatherings in which returnees participated.

From the larger sample of 41 interviewees, I also conducted 20 life history interviews with returnees that I already had had extensive interactions with. Whereas I took notes during and after most of the in-depth interviews and informal conversations, the life history interviews were taped and later transcribed. In addition, I talked at length to another twenty-five or so returnees who for one reason or another declined to officially partake in the study, but who were nevertheless for the most part happy to engage in conversations with me about their experiences. The next section of this chapter expands the discussion somewhat of who were not officially

included in this study, despite my attempts at getting as wide and representative sample as possible. Finally, I carried out archival research at the National Archives in Belmopan and conducted interviews with various officials from the Ministry of National Development, the Central Statistical Office (now the Statistical Institute of Belize (SIB)), and various other organization representatives that were able to provide me with a more contextual understanding of returnee reintegration in Belize, and Belizean migration to the United States more generally.

### **Study Population**

While conducting MA research in Belize City in 1999, I was inspired to formulate and pursue this dissertation research project after meeting three Belizeans that I spoke with at length who had returned to Belize after living in the United States for years. The first was a Creole woman in her mid-fifties who was staying long-term in a downtown hotel while she was waiting for the construction of her new house to be completed in one of the extensions of Belize City. She had lived and worked for decades in the United States and had now decided to come ‘home’ to live and presumably work. The second returnee was Mike, a Creole in his late forties who had been a soccer star in Belize in his youth before he went to the United States to try his luck. There he lived as ‘illegal’ in California and Nevada and became a drug addict and trafficker, for which he was incarcerated and eventually deported to Belize. In prison he had become very religious, and back in Belize he was constantly struggling with his addiction while trying to rebuild a life for himself in Belize City. The third person was Rudolph Pott, who when I met him the first time in Belmopan had just driven a yellow American school bus down to Belize from New York City with all his family’s belongings. Originally from a small village in the westernmost part of the Belize District, he had built a house in Belmopan when his oldest children were getting ready for high school, and after a few years there he and his wife had migrated to New York City, where they had lived and worked for close to twenty-five years before deciding to return to Belize.

When I returned to Belize to begin dissertation work in 2004, of the three returnees mentioned above I was only able to locate Mr. Pott, who was enjoying retirement with his wife in the house that they had refurbished and expanded on in the years since they came back. As I began talking to other returnees and focusing my research questions, it became evident that the three returnees that I had originally talked to in many ways represented three distinct groups of returnees: voluntary returnees still in the workforce, retirees, and deportees. However, I wanted to include as wide a variety of returnees in my sample rather than focus on one particular predefined group, just as I was not interested in refining existing typologies of returnees (see Gmelch 1980 and King 2000 for examples). I also noted that there could be considerable overlap. For example, some returnees who had retired with pensions from their jobs in the United States came back to Belize to begin new careers, either in paid positions or by starting up their own businesses. Also, Belizeans who were deported from the United States did in many cases plan for their eventual return to Belize. This was especially so for those who had migrated ‘through the back,’ and knew that their presence in the United States carried risks of detention and deportation that could suddenly disrupt their lives and land them back in Belize. This was true both for those interviewed for this dissertation and from what I could discern from numerous other sources, including local Belizeans with family members in the United States, other returnees, and deportees who did not want to be official study participants.

For this study, I carried out extensive, semi-structured interviews with 41 returnees, representing a broad cross-section of return experiences, and a variety of migration histories and legal statuses. Table 1-1 at the end of this chapter provides an overview of the characteristics of the study population, tabulated by residence, and broken down by gender, age, legal status in the United States, years spent abroad, and primary source of income. All of the study participants

held Belizean citizenship. 16 of the interviewees had in addition gained US citizenship before returning to Belize to live. Nine were permanent US residents before their return, nine were deported from the United States, and seven had either been undocumented, had expired visas or had other legal statuses before returning to Belize. Of the nine who had returned as permanent US residents, only two, both of them in their thirties, were still making efforts to maintain their US residency at the end of this study in May, 2005. Also, of those nine who had been deported, five were permanent US residents and had served time in prison in the United States before being deported, while the remaining four had been deported for illegal re-entry or similar visa violations. Of the 41 official study participants, 19 were over 65 years of age, six were between 50 and 64, eight were in their forties, and eight were in their thirties. All nine who were deported were in their thirties or forties. In terms of gender distribution, 20 were male and 21 female, with eleven women and eight men in the 65+ age group, and slightly more males in the group under 40. Of those over 65 years of age, virtually all had been in the United States between 25 and 45 years, and had some kind of fixed income from the United States to support them in Belize, although most of them were also supplementing with different income-generating activities in Belize. Of those who were younger, almost all were engaged in a multitude of livelihoods through salaried jobs, business ventures, or family support, and were not necessarily confined in their income-generating activities to Belize. Of the 41 interviewed returnees, 16 lived in or around Belize City, 18 lived in Belmopan, while the remaining seven had their primary residence elsewhere, although they for the most part maintained ties to either one of the two primary locations. In terms of ethnicity, most were Afrodescendant Belizeans such as Creole and Garifuna, with a few exceptions. While this study does not engage ethnicity and race as structuring principles of return, such ethnic categories of identification often seemed blurred or

subsumed for returnees to the racial hierarchies that they had experienced in the United States, and which most would perceive as of lesser importance in Belize. Furthermore, ethnic categories did not retain their meaning for most returnees because they had been exposed to a different racialized hierarchy of social relations in the United States, and because they upon return to Belize were much more likely to be classified and understood by local Belizeans in terms of their status as returning “Americanized” Belizeans.

Out of the 41 official study participants, I carried out life history interviews with twenty returnees, selected to broadly represent the larger sample in terms of demographics such as gender, age, residence, and returnee status. Five of the life history interviewees had been deported from the United States, and fifteen had returned voluntarily. Of the five who had been deported, two were women and three were men. Of the fifteen voluntary returnees, nine were women and six were men. While all deported interviewees were under the age of 45, eleven of the voluntary returnees were over 65 years of age. Four of the deportees were residing in Belize City, with one living in Belmopan. Of the fifteen voluntary returnees, nine lived in Belmopan, while the remaining six resided in or around Belize City and in other parts of the country. In the following chapters, more general characteristics of these returnees will be discussed through narrative and life history analyses that focus on particular processes of migration, return, reintegration and adjustment.

As I noted earlier in this introduction, the focus of the dissertation is on those who have returned to Belize to live with some level of success and contentment, regardless of the legal circumstances of their return. But the study is also defined by who were not interviewed at length, for a variety of reasons, and were therefore not included as official participants in this study. Those include deportees who had come home involuntarily and had ‘fallen through the

cracks' in Belize and had become involved in gang activity, drug use, or who had ended up on the streets as transients in Belize City in particular. Others with whom I found it very difficult to interact and include in this study were those who had been involved in dubious economic activities in the United States such as drug trafficking, or other activities that they were not comfortable discussing at length with a researcher from an American institution. Still others did not want to participate in the study because they did not think of their experience of migration and return as particularly successful or interesting to an outside observer, or there could be other personal reasons for their return that they were not comfortable discussing with others. Also, a growing number of Belizeans have obtained multiple-entry visitor's visas to the United States, typically when they have close family members living there already, and they often leave Belize for up to six months of the year to work as undocumented workers in the United States. I came across numerous cases of this practice during my fieldwork, and although I was unable to obtain official statistics on such visas it was widely acknowledged as a regularly occurring practice among Belizeans with such visas. Finally, I met with, talked to, and came to know of many Belizeans who were permanent US residents and spent months at a time in Belize, often in houses they had built with money made in the United States, and with substantial and continuous engagements in both Belize and the United States. Usually they were unable or unwilling to make the move back to Belize permanent as they would then have to give up their residency in the United States, and by doing so they would be unable to maintain their work permit in the United States, lose access to necessary medical care, and otherwise be severely restricted in their ability to stay connected to close relatives and friends in the United States. Even if such sojourning migrants engaged in seasonal labor do not fit easily within a framework of migration and return, they clearly demonstrate the importance and prevalence of transnational practices for

people who consider Belize ‘home.’ The last and perhaps most important group of returnees not included in this study were those who were no longer present in Belize, as they had chosen to re-migrate for one reason or another. While I only had the opportunity to talk to a handful of such re-migrants, it was clear from many other Belizeans with whom I discussed this that they made up a sizeable number. The reasons for such re-migration seemed to be either disillusionment or lack of resources to stay in Belize. This was so if the returnee had failed to find satisfactory work upon return, had miscalculated the time and resources necessary to construct or refurbish their homes and otherwise re-establish themselves in Belize. Other times, they found the resources necessary to live comfortably to be more than their savings allowed for, especially if they did not return with any kind of pension or social security income from the United States. For retiring returnees especially, the main reasons given for re-migration were either medical care because of ailing health, or to care for or be with family members in the United States. Although only anecdotally described to me during my fieldwork, these examples made evident that Belizeans engage in a multitude of transnational practices that tie together Belize and the United States. Further, returning ‘home’ is often a complex process, and does not preclude continuous living arrangements and livelihoods that base Belizeans in two or more places simultaneously.

### **Outline of Dissertation**

As I have argued in this introductory chapter, the relative success of Belizean migrants in their efforts at ‘coming home’ is structured by their transnational involvement over time, and can be most clearly illuminated by focusing on the following five areas of returnee behavior and interaction: returnees’ migration trajectories and how they maintain their involvement with Belize while in the United States; how returnees maintain and benefit from social networks and family relations in both Belize and the United States; how they secure satisfactory housing upon return; how they maintain sustainable livelihoods in Belize; and how they reintegrate into

Belizean society. To foreground the ethnography, and to reiterate the importance of individual migration narratives for this study, each of the following chapters begins with a vignette appropriate to the content of the chapter, followed by a broad contextual introduction to the chapter topic, as outlined in the above.

Chapter 2 outlines the historical context for understanding current migration streams in and out of Belize, and how returnees have managed the process of migration and return. The chapter also outlines the characteristics of the returnee population in Belize, and provides a comparative discussion of the historical formation of the two locations most important to this study, Belize City and Belmopan. Finally, the chapter outlines differences between successful returns and unplanned returns to distinguish between different migration practices, and how those influence the degree of success that returnees experience upon ‘coming home.’

Chapter 3 analyzes the importance of transnational practices by looking at the role of returnees’ kin ties in both Belize and in the United States. For most returnees who have been in the United States for decades, most of their family network typically resides in the United States and not in Belize. At the same time, it is often personal relations and special family circumstances that work as catalysts when migrants decide to return ‘home.’ Kin relations are thus important for returnees, and often play a large role in the degree to which they experience their return as successful. Instead of perceiving return as an individualized process, this chapter centers returnees’ experiences and how they actually accomplish the return and reintegration in relation to the wider family context, as it exists in a transnational social space spanning Belize and the United States. This is done through separate analyses of the importance of family for the migration process; the relationship with family members that returnees return to; the role the

family plays in how decisions to return are made and carried out; and how returnees maintain transnational family networks over time.

Chapter 4 examines how returnees secure stable living arrangements back in Belize. Most returnees who plan their return over many years spend considerable effort at constructing or maintaining a house in Belize while still living in the United States. In contrast, those who return to Belize involuntarily have typically not made plans to secure adequate housing upon return, and often find housing to be a major concern and source of frustration, as they come to depend on relatives and others for adequate housing. The main argument pursued in this chapter is that the returnees, voluntary or involuntary, that fare well in this process are those who have maintained a transnational network during their migration years that they can draw on in securing proper living arrangements back in Belize. The chapter first discusses the role of ‘home’ and housing in Caribbean migration literature, and then proceeds to look more specifically at how Belizean migrants construct ‘home’ in Belize. It then examines how ‘home’ is maintained and improved through the process of migration and return, and finally accounts for how securing adequate housing looks in cases of unplanned returns.

Chapter 5 describes how returnees maintain transnational livelihoods upon return, and how that is linked to their migration trajectories and how they sustained themselves while in the United States. Some returnees come back to Belize to retire with pensions, while those without such fixed incomes tend to sustain themselves by engaging in various transnational and entrepreneurial practices, regardless of their status as either voluntary or involuntary returnee. The chapter first examines to what extent returnees realize their migrant goals of securing sustainable livelihoods upon return, and then details the differences between prospective leisure and work situations for returnees. It then proceeds to discuss how returnees draw on

transnational competencies to secure their livelihoods, and what happens to returnees when engaging in transnational practices is not an option in sustaining themselves.

Chapter 6 analyzes the relationship between reintegration and transnationalism, two seemingly opposed concepts that are shown to be mutually reinforcing on many levels for migrants who decide to return. This chapter argues that returnees reintegrate into Belizean society precisely by drawing on their transnational experience and transnational social network, and return is therefore best described as an extension of a transnational social field, rather than the ‘completion of the migration cycle.’ Through a study of returnees’ participation in Belizean affairs while in the United States, their community involvement upon return, and their perceived cultural roles and competencies by themselves and by local Belizeans, this chapter shows how returnees try to bridge the perceptual gaps between their own expectations and those of local Belizeans.

The concluding Chapter 7 summarizes the main argument of this study: that returnees who successfully ‘come home’ do so by drawing on and extending transnational social relations that have been shaped through the migration experience. The major findings of the preceding chapters are then discussed, followed by an outline of potential policy implications, both in Belize and in the United States. Finally, a discussion of an agenda for future research is laid out, based on some of the findings of this study as well as on areas that were not covered extensively by the current research project.

Table 1-1. Main study population characteristics tabulated by residence.

	Belize City	Belmopan	Other
Residence	16	18	7
Gender			
Male	9	7	4
Female	7	11	2
Age			
30-39	5	3	0
40-49	4	3	1
50-64	2	1	3
65+	5	11	3
Legal status in US			
Citizenship	7	6	3
Residency	2	5	2
Deported	5	3	1
Undocumented	2	4	1
Years spent abroad			
5-10	2	4	0
10-19	6	3	1
20-29	3	6	3
30+	5	5	3
Primary income			
Pension	3	10	5
Business	8	4	1
Wages	5	4	1



Figure 1-1. Regional overview map. [Reprinted with permission from the Perry-Castañeda Library Map Collection. 2009. Maps of the Americas. University of Texas Libraries. Retrieved April 20, 2009, from <http://www.lib.utexas.edu/maps/americas.html>.]

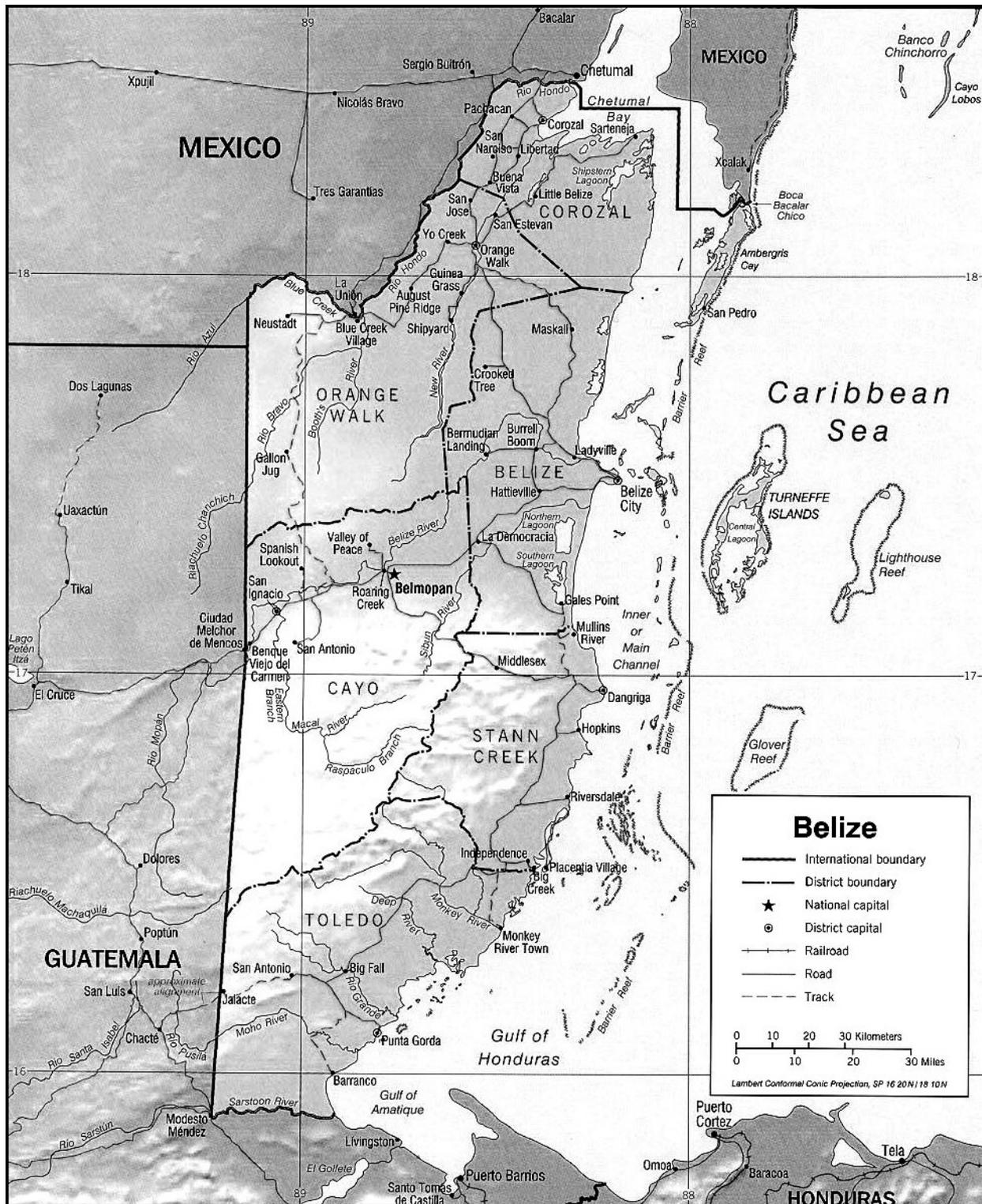


Figure 1-2. Map of Belize. [Reprinted with permission from the Perry-Castañeda Library Map Collection. 2009. Maps of the Americas. University of Texas Libraries. Retrieved April 20, 2009, from <http://www.lib.utexas.edu/maps/americas.html>.]



Figure 1-3. Map of Central America. [Reprinted with permission from the Perry-Castañeda Library Map Collection. 2009. Maps of the Americas. University of Texas Libraries. Retrieved April 20, 2009, from <http://www.lib.utexas.edu/maps/americas.html>.]

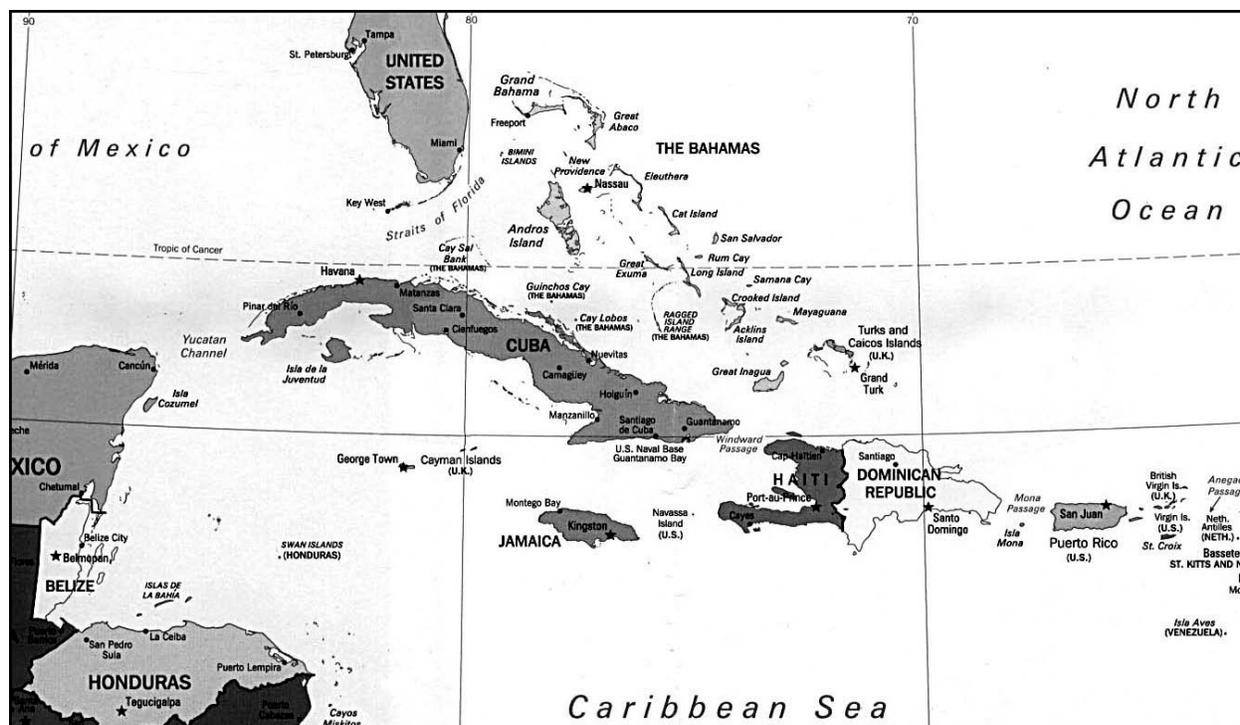


Figure 1-4. Map of the Caribbean. [Reprinted with permission from the Perry-Castañeda Library Map Collection. 2009. Maps of the Americas. University of Texas Libraries. Retrieved April 20, 2009, from <http://www.lib.utexas.edu/maps/americas.html>.]



Figure 1-5. Map of Mexico. [Reprinted with permission from the Perry-Castañeda Library Map Collection. 2009. Maps of the Americas. University of Texas Libraries. Retrieved April 20, 2009, from <http://www.lib.utexas.edu/maps/americas.html>.]

## CHAPTER 2 TRAJECTORIES OF MIGRATION AND RETURN

Having come to the United States as a child in the 1970s, when his mother was able to bring him on a green card after living in California for eight years, Big-Ben grew up in Los Angeles' poorer neighborhoods, became involved in gang life, and was soon arrested on drug-related charges. One thing led to another, and over the next ten years he spent more time in prison than outside, with his third conviction for carrying a concealed weapon without a permit. During his last time in prison he trained as a barber, and after finishing his sentence he was never out of work, having finally found something he was good at and enjoyed doing. He spent some time in Chicago, then Miami, and finally back to Los Angeles where he met his wife, and reconnected with his two children from a previous relationship. Big-Ben had started coming back to Belize on vacation every year in the mid-1990s, and soon found himself rediscovering the place where he was born. He had gotten a tattoo of the outline of Belize on his arm, "so that when people ask Where is Belize? I can show them and say Right here!" He had also opened a savings account in Belize that he wanted to use to buy land and eventually build a house. When he returned to the United States from vacation in Belize in 2004, Big-Ben was denied entry on account of his three prior convictions, and was held in an INS detention facility for three months before being deported to Belize. Back in Belize all he had were the clothes in his suitcase, the address for a distant relative, and US\$ 1,500 in his savings account in Belize. His wife, a naturalized US citizen from Antigua, eventually drove their SUV down through Mexico to visit him with her two children, intent on making their relationship work. She began looking for work in Belize, but after three months going back and forth between Belize and the United States she had to give up in order to keep her job as a legal clerk in Los Angeles. Big-Ben was deported for life, and has no realistic chance of making the life he had in the United States unfold the way he

had planned. In Belize, he is now more concerned with just getting by than any plans he had before of building a house, and although he found work in a barbershop soon after his arrival, he only survives with the financial support of relatives in the United States. He now only sees his wife and his children when they come to visit him in Belize, and despite the risks of incarceration if he is caught, Big-Ben still considers going back up ‘through the back’ to reclaim a small part of the life he had before.

Belize is geographically located in Central America (Figure 1-3), which makes migration ‘through the back’ up through Mexico a relatively easy migration option for those who cannot obtain valid visas or who cannot afford to travel by plane to the United States (Figure 1-5). Historically it has also been comparatively easy for especially Afrodescendant Belizeans such as Creoles and Garifuna to enter the United States by crossing the border from Mexico, as border guards were less likely to question black English-speaking individuals, compared to other Central American Mestizo or Indigenous populations (Everitt 1984a: 320). However, Belize has a much closer affinity with the Caribbean because of its British colonial heritage, historically dominant Afrodescendant population make-up, and particular historical absorption into the capitalist world system (Figure 1-4). Furthermore, whereas the rest of Central America experienced its greatest population movements in contemporary history in the 1980s because of violent conflicts and political instability (Menjívar 1999: 602), the migration stream from Belize to the United States has a much longer history. The flow of Belizeans to the United States has been strong and sustained for well over six decades. Hundreds of Belizeans went to work in the Canal Zone in Panama and later in the United States in the 1940s to meet labor shortages there (Vernon 1990: 7), and this steady stream continued up through the 1950s. For various reasons discussed in a subsequent sections of this chapter, Belizean migration to the United States grew

in size in the 1960s, and has remained strong and sustained since then, to the extent that as many as 120,000 Belizeans are now estimated to live in the United States (Straughan 2007), compared to a local population of about 277,000 (SIB 2005). The return flow back to Belize is of more recent date, as the annual number of returnees tripled from the early to the late-1980s, and again tripled from the early years of the 1990s to the annual number of 299 returnees recorded in 1999 (CSO 2000).

As the following sections of this chapter make clear, these broad population movements between Belize and the United States must be placed in a larger historical context of immigration and emigration that has come to define Belize as we know it today. Immigration into Belize is important to include because it has come to define the population composition of Belize historically, and also helps explain some of the demographic shifts that have taken place in recent decades, concurrent with the exodus of primarily Afrodescendant Belizeans to the United States. The following section provides a historical overview of the various migration streams into and out of Belize, followed by a discussion of the historical relationship between Belize City and Belmopan, the two main field sites for this study. The next section looks more closely at the more recent movement of return migrants back to Belize, based on a discussion of figures from the most recent available set of national data, the 2000 Population Census of Belize. The final section of this chapter analyzes the different migration trajectories of successful and unplanned return migrants to Belize, and how differentiated access to the United States creates different opportunities for successful returns to Belize. After all, as the example of Big-Ben in the introductory vignette of this chapter demonstrates, the migration circumstances of individual migrants may conflict with a desire to return to Belize to live, even if the migrant has made plans to do so eventually.

## **Migration Histories**

Due to its British colonial history, the population composition of Belize has historically been different from and in many ways more diverse than its surrounding Central American neighbors. As noted in Chapter 1, the population of Belize has been comprised of Creoles, the mixed descendants of Europeans and enslaved Africans, and the historically dominant population group in Belize; Mestizos, of Indigenous and European heritage; Garifuna, descendants of Africans and Indigenous Caribs from the Eastern Caribbean; and Kekchi- and Mopan-speaking Maya, among others. In addition, many other smaller immigrant populations exist in Belize today, reflecting the complex history of immigration to Belize over the years. In this sense, no one group can lay ultimate claim to native status in Belize, as virtually all existing groups in Belize today have come from somewhere else (cf. Medina 1997; McClaurin 1996). The popular perception among Belizeans is that Belize is a relatively peaceful and democratic country, which is generally substantiated by the history of the country. Contrary to its Central American neighbors, Belize has not experienced civil war, nor has it been marred by military reigns of political terror and persecution. The transition from colony to a sovereign and democratic nation-state proceeded peacefully, and Belize has since then not experienced violent confrontations between its ethnic groups, nor is it divided politically along ethnic lines (Bolland 1988: 199-206).

Yet such groupings of distinct populations in Belize based on ethnicity in the first place belie the cultural, racial, and linguistic diversity of the country, and the particular histories of intermarriage and interaction that can be read in the mixed heritage of most Belizeans today. Ethnic categories in Belize are rarely precisely defined, just as Belizeans seldom claim exclusive membership in either one. Still, ethnic categorizations are constantly used locally as cultural shorthand to differentiate specific groups from each other and define their relational value within the Belizean nation, often ascribing subordinate status to Mestizo and Maya Belizeans, as they

are perceived as culturally similar to incoming Central American immigrants and therefore a threat to Afrodescendant Belizeans. Further, although officially an English-speaking country, with an “Anglo-African or Creole pedigree” (Stone 2000: 118), Belize today comprises a variety of other languages spoken by specific minority groups such as Maya, Garifuna and Chinese, a growing Spanish-speaking population, as well as an unofficial local Creole language that is spoken by virtually all Belizeans and is indeed a marker of local cultural competence and belonging (cf. McClaurin 1996: 33-34; Stone 2000). For Belizean return migrants who have spent decades in the United States, returning to such increased linguistic complexity and diversity often leaves them frustrated with “how much Belize has changed,” which also includes an increased North American influence that can be heard through everyday conversations. What returnees often do not realize is that they carry with them American inflections to their outdated Belizean Creole, which subtly mark them as relative outsiders to local Belizean social and cultural life. Insofar as Belize has become a culturally much more diverse locality than it was in the 1960s, it has also become incorporated into the North American sphere of cultural and socio-economic influence and dominance, of which the return of Belizean migrants from the United States is an intrinsic part.

One of the most often-discussed demographic changes in the recent history of Belize is the emergence of Mestizos as the ethnic majority population in Belize (cf. McClaurin 1996: 30-33; Palacio 1993; Sutherland 1998: 77-89; Woods 1996). This was officially recorded with the publication of the 1991 Census of Belize results in 1992 (CSO 1992), and subsequently noted by the local newspaper *Amandala*, who proclaimed on its front page: “Belize Now Belice” (*Amandala*, September 11, 1992). By using the Spanish spelling of Belize, the newspaper provocatively indicated that Belize had become ‘Spanish’ as there were now more Mestizos than

Creoles in Belize. This was seen as a threat to the Afrodescendant populations of Belize, and was a critique aimed at both local-born Mestizos and Central American Spanish-speaking immigrants. The demographic shifts, largely caused by the influx of refugees and other immigrants from war-torn and politically unstable neighboring countries, were borne out in the census results. In 1980, Creoles and Mestizos accounted for 39.7% and 33.1%, respectively, while the 1991 census had Creoles at 29.8% of the total population, while Mestizos now accounted for 43.6% of the population of Belize (CSO 1992).

However, immigration was only part of the equation. Before Central American immigrants began arriving in large numbers in the late 1970s and 1980s, urban and coastal Afrodescendant Belizeans had been leaving for the United States for decades. In a reading of previous census data, Everitt (1984a: 320) notes that

while the population of Belize rose by nearly 21 percent from 1970 to 1980, that of Belize City (the Creole capital) rose by only 2 percent and that of Dangriga (the Capital of the Garifuna) dropped by nearly 5 percent. The rural portions of Belize District and Stann Creek District, where Creoles and Garifuna also predominate, showed increases in numbers that were well below the national average. Some of these changes reflect internal migrations, but most of the variation is a reflection of the international movement.

The Creole and Garifuna populations were historically the ones that made up the vast majority of emigrants, contrary to Mestizos who migrated in much smaller relative numbers. Also, contrary to Maya populations in Guatemala (Burns 1993, 2000) and Mexico (Adler 2008) who have migrated to the United States in large numbers in recent decades, the emigration of Belizean Maya populations has been much smaller. In fact, more Indigenous Maya have entered Belize in recent years than have left Belize. This is also reflected in the census figures from 1980 to 2000, where the number of Belizean Maya has increased, while the percentage of the total population has remained relatively stable. In 1980, the total Maya population in Belize stood at 13,808 and accounted for 9.5% of the total population of 145,353. In 2000, the total Maya population had

grown to 24,501 out of a total Belizean population of 232,111, making up 10.6% of the population. In contrast, the Creole population has remained numerically stable in the same period, at 57,705 in 1980 and 57,859 in 2000, but has decreased markedly in terms of percentage of total Belizean population, from 39.7% of 145,353 in 1980 to 24.9% of 232,111 in 2000. In a similar vein, the Mestizo population (inclusive of Central American immigrants) grew from 48,111 in 1980 to 113,045 in 2000, or from 33.1% to 48.7% of the total population (cf. CSO 1992, 2000). In this way, the demographic changes that can be observed through census data confirm a shift from Creole to Mestizo as the majority ethnic population in Belize.

The census figures listed above point to important demographic shifts in recent decades that were largely caused by migration into and out of Belize. However, while the immigration of Central Americans only really began in the late 1970s, the emigration of Afrodescendant Belizeans began in the 1940s, and increased in the early 1950s after the devaluation of the Belizean dollar in 1949 (cf. Setzekorn 1981; Straughan 2007), and other related ‘push’ factors such as rising unemployment and overcrowded and unsanitary conditions in the coastal towns of Belize City and Dangriga especially (Everitt 1984a). Also, the ‘pull’ of the booming American economy and the lure of a better life in ‘the promised land’ made many more Belizeans migrate in the years to come (Everitt 1984a; Straughan 2007).

Two additional factors spurred emigration from Belize to the United States in the 1960s and onward: Hurricane Hattie in 1961, and changes in U.S. immigration laws in 1965. Hurricane Hattie provided an immediate ‘push’ factor for literally thousands of coastal Belizeans who chose to migrate rather than rebuild or relocate within Belize, as will be discussed in the next section of this chapter. The changes in U.S. immigration laws came through the Hart-Celler Act of 1965 that abolished a national origins quota system that had been in place since the US

Immigration Act of 1924, and instead gave preference to family reunification (cf. Rumbaut 1996; Straughan 2007). While the 1965 Immigration Act has often been mentioned as an important contributing factor to the increase in immigration to the United States from the 1960s onward, it is only in the longer term that established migrants have been able to use the family reunification provisions to secure immigration to the United States for relatives (Rumbaut 1996: 23-24). To the contrary, Hurricane Hattie provided a very immediate incentive for many Belizeans to migrate, as those who had the easiest access to legal migration to the United States at the time were those who already had relatives living in the United States. Even so, most Belizeans who immigrated to the United States during the 1960s and 1970s did so without valid visas, either by traveling up through Mexico and crossing the border into the United States illegally, or by overstaying visitor's visas after going to one of the metropolitan destinations in the United States by plane. In this sense, legal immigration to the United States during this period was probably just the Belizean "emigrant iceberg," as there were an estimated 35,000 to 50,000 Belizeans in the United States in 1980, compared to a local Belizean population of less than 150,000 (Everitt 1984a).

Thus, even before Belizean independence from Britain in 1981, migration to the United States had become an institutionalized part of Belizean socio-economic life, and a "culture of emigration" had developed (Straughan 2007: 258). Even though migration continued to be the most direct route to socio-economic mobility, Belizeans no longer seemed to migrate primarily for economic reasons, but were also migrating within a social context. As Straughan (2007: 257) notes,

even before the 1980s many Belizeans, especially from urban areas, had relatives, friends, or acquaintances in the United States. Indeed, many Belizeans had close relatives in the United States, especially middle class Belizeans. This was especially true for urban Creoles (and Garifuna) who had a longer history of labor migration. [...] As a result, some

Belizeans emigrated to the US to join family members. Others who wished to migrate could rely on relatives or friends in the US to facilitate their travel and settlement. This resulted in the self-perpetuating process of chain migration, based on social networks, which made emigration more pervasive. Also this social aspect of migration helped to determine which Belizeans migrated (especially in terms of ethnicity and residence in Belize) and when.

What this quote describes quite elegantly without stating so explicitly is the formation of a ‘transnational socio-cultural system’ (Sutton 1987), as described in Chapter 1 of this study. What it also points out is the importance of family networks for such systems to come into existence and be reproduced over time. Further, it shows that as migration systems mature and solidify over time, many of the initial reasons for migrating that could be described in economic terms, or as ‘push’ and ‘pull’ factors recede in favor of more complex explanations involving and sustaining transnational social networks. Finally, as migration becomes an integral part of the socio-economic system, broader segments of the population also migrate:

The teacher, civil servant, policeman, nurse and secretary were just as likely to migrate as school-leaving youths, the unemployed, and laborers. By the time when Belizeans became more savvy about traveling to the US, working class Belizeans were as likely to migrate as middle-class Belizeans (Straughan 2007: 258).

That migration as an option for socio-economic mobility became available to a larger section of Belizeans was possible because of the relatively easy access to the United States by traveling up through Mexico, as mentioned earlier, especially for those who could not afford the plane ticket or who were unable to obtain a valid visitor’s or work visa. Today, migration to the United States seems to have become the norm for younger Belizeans, either as a permanent measure to secure reunification with close relatives or as a rite of passage to gain economic and social mobility. In a 1997 survey conducted in seven broadly representative Belizean high schools, of 868 respondents, 11% had a mother living abroad and 16% had a father living abroad. 87% had other relatives living abroad. 40% had traveled to the United States at least once, and 38% regularly received money or gifts from abroad (Babcock and Conway 2000: 77). This mirrors the accounts

of emerging “cultures of migration” in Mexico (Cohen 2004; Kandel and Massey 2002) and in the Caribbean (Thomas-Hope 1998), which often become the norm when migrant households are constituted transnationally and across generations (Sørensen and Olwig 2002).

After independence in 1981, emigration from Belize to the United States continued to grow. During the 1980 to 1991 period, Woods et al. (1994) calculate that some 35,000 Belizeans migrated to the United States. Again, this continued migration was driven by particular local factors such as the continuing economic crisis of the 1980s for small countries in the hemisphere, the increase in US cultural influences in Belize, and the matured transnational social networks that increasingly linked Belizean families across borders separating Belize and the United States. Also, the IRCA Amnesty enacted by the US Congress in 1986 made it easier for qualifying Belizeans to naturalize in the United States, and thereby secure their status and in some cases reunite other family members with them in the United States. As will be discussed later in this chapter, the amnesty also made it easier for Belizean migrants to return to Belize while maintaining their relations with the United States (Straughan 2007: 264), thus increasing the number of Belizeans who chose to ‘come home.’ What is equally important to note, however, is that many more Belizeans came to the United States after the 1982 cutoff date to qualify for the amnesty, and those migrants have today much less recourse to US residency or citizenship, especially after stricter immigration laws were enacted in the United States in 1990 and 1996. Perhaps because of these changes, the estimated number of Belizean migrants to the United States dropped off somewhat in the 1990s, from annually over 3,000 during the 1980s to an estimated annual figure of about 2,100 (cf. Mahler and Ugrina 2006; Straughan 2007: 266-268).

### **Belize City and the New Capital of Belmopan**

As outlined in Chapter 1, the fieldwork for this study was carried out primarily in Belize City and Belmopan, the old and new capitals of Belize. While Belize City and Belmopan

represent two distinct urban locations in Belize, they are also historically intertwined, in that Belmopan was constructed inland the aftermath of Hurricane Hattie, which virtually destroyed Belize City and other coastal communities in 1961. 275 people were killed as a fifteen-foot wave swept over the coastal town (Palacio 1982). Since its opening in 1970, Belmopan has only recently developed beyond the sleepy and virtually depopulated administrative capital that it was for decades. Belize City on the other hand was rebuilt relatively quickly by the local residents that remained, although without much government support, as they gradually transferred the locus of power and many vital functions of government further inland to Belmopan.

When Hurricane Hattie hit in on October 31, 1961, Belize City was a Creole stronghold and the main hub of the colonial settlement. The rest of the country was considered by Creoles the hinterland of the colony, from where timber and logwood had traditionally been extracted through a by then dwindling forest industry. In the early 1960s, the decline of the traditional forest industry of logwood and mahogany gave way for sugar, citrus and banana plantations as the leading export sectors, and the boom in the agro-industries was part of the government's attempt at developing the hinterland. Part of this process was a sustained, but largely unsuccessful attempt at convincing more urban Belizeans to move inland to settle and develop the rural areas of the country. Only few did so, partly because inland Belize was considered foreign territory inhabited by the 'Spanish' Mestizos and the Maya Indians (cf. Palacio 1982: 128).

Hurricane Hattie was neither a rare occurrence nor the one with the most devastating effects on Belize (cf. Gregg 1968: 109-113). However, it became a major social and political event, because it happened at a particular point in time, was seized upon by certain central institutional and individual actors, and had a distinctive set of historical outcomes, which all,

retrospectively at least, make the aftermath of hurricane Hattie a period of major social and political significance in the history of Belize. This social, political and material outcome of the disaster included a marked increase in the Belizean exodus of the urban population to the United States; the planned relocation of the capital to the hinterland with the construction of Belmopan; increased momentum for a national independence movement through the national resettlement and development plans that were made financially possible only with increased British support; and the sealing of the fate of Belize City as the old, dilapidated colonial city on the coast that would continue to grow in size and importance in the decades to come.

The objective of providing a better environment for the population of Belize away from Belize City through resettlement and voluntary relocation was probably the least successful, compared to that of resettling the government in a safe location and developing the nation through the move of the capital inland. When Belmopan was opened and government personnel were transferred to the new capital in 1970-71, the population was at 2,700. A decade later, in 1980, the population was at only 2,932, and today, almost four decades after its completion the population of Belmopan is only around 7,000, despite an initial five stage plan with an estimated final target population of at least 30,000 (cf. Everitt 1984b: 140). Clearly, Belmopan has not been able to attract a sizeable population anywhere near the goals set out by the government. This is partly explained by the fact that no real industries or job opportunities other than those within the government administration were created in the time since the construction of Belmopan. As such, the new capital became an empty vehicle of development. Belmopan was also originally erected to house a resettled population from Belize City, but because of the lengthy construction process of Belmopan Belize City had already grown back to its pre-Hattie

size by the time of its completion in 1971. Furthermore, the dilapidated state of Belize City may not have provided more of a 'push' than Belmopan provided a 'pull':

The unwillingness to move on the part of the City's populace was predictable, for despite 'periodical tropical storms, overcrowding, narrow streets, open sanitary sewers, poor health conditions, inadequate water supply, continual subjection to insects, rats, pests, invasions of land crabs, extreme heat, and high humidity', Belize City is the home for the Belize City people, and only the anticipation of prosperity in the U.S. has induced City folk to move (Foster 1987: 78).

Thus, Belize City remains the main town in Belize, and even today many Belizeans who work in Belmopan continue to reside in Belize City. But the issue of population relocation and the construction of Belmopan as the new capital was being constructed left many Belizeans frustrated with the government, and the whole issue quickly became politicized. Today, there are still many Belize City residents, and Belizean migrants who left for the United States after Hurricane Hattie, who have strong feelings about what they view as government abandonment of Belize City and its residents. Such was the case for Miss Thomas from the introductory vignette of Chapter 1, whose mother had continued to live in Belize City after reconstruction, and continued to maintain her same address over the years, except for the ten years she spent living with her grown children in New York and New Jersey when she retired in Belize. Miss Thomas had left Belize less than a year after Hurricane Hattie because she had the opportunity to join family members in the United States who could sponsor her, and because she had no prospects of building a life for herself and her family in Belize. Still, after Miss Thomas returned to Belize to live and moved into her new house in Belmopan, her mother refused to come and visit her there, largely because of her strong feelings against a place that was built by the government while the reconstruction of Belize City was not prioritized as highly. For Miss Thomas however, Belmopan provided her with opportunities to build a house that she did not have in Belize City,

and a much safer local environment in which she would find it easier to interact with the local community.

In relation to return migration to Belize, those who can afford to will usually not settle in Belize City proper, but rather construct houses outside the city or in one of the newer extensions of the city. In contrast, those who end up in the older parts of the city are for the most part involuntary returnees, who either settle there because of lower cost, or end up living with relatives. On the other hand, Belmopan holds no attraction for most of those returnees who grew up in Belize City and migrated in the 1950s and 1960s, as they typically do not have a relationship with the place or with people who live there. In contrast, returnees who end up settling in Belmopan upon return represent a broader segment of the population. Most of those interviewed for this study had a relationship with Belmopan prior to emigrating, such as owning a house there, or having relatives or other close friends living there. Because of its relatively short history, however, return migrants to Belmopan typically had family histories that tied them to other locations in Belize, such as outlying villages, Belize City, Dangriga, or Punta Gorda, and therefore did not have a firm historical or personal grounding in Belmopan. Whereas returnees who had grown up in Belize City would typically not return to their family home or to the local community in which they grew up, some returnees to Belmopan were indeed coming back to houses in a particular local community setting that they had been involved with for decades. This could be as in the case of Miss Thomas, who had returned briefly to Belize in the early 1970s to buy a house in Belmopan that she maintained until she came back to live in Belmopan thirty years later; or it could be as in the case of Mr. and Mrs. Pott described in Chapter 1, who had bought a house and moved to Belmopan to have their children attend high school there while they

themselves migrated to New York and left the oldest children and other relatives in charge of the house while they were away.

What is perhaps most important in the context of return migration to Belize about the relationship between Belize City and Belmopan is that they come to represent different visions of Belize for returnees, both tied to the development of the country that has shaped their existence in the first place. Whereas Belize City is the hub of the country that attracts all kinds of activity, Belmopan has come to represent a safer and more orderly future that appeals to some returnees who come home with particular visions of retirement, work life, or community participation that they were either unable or reluctant to fulfill elsewhere. Belize City on the other hand continues to attract returnees, even if they often choose to settle outside of the city proper. This is so because of its central role in the country, because of the attractions that the city has to offer, and because of the continued historical relationship that many returnees have with the place, as their family histories locate them in the city, even if the city has been literally washed away and rebuilt from scratch several times over its long life.

### **The 2000 Census of Belize**

As is the case with all migration streams, there has always been a trickle of Belizeans returning to Belize from their migration destinations. The population census figures discussed below do not represent the entire scope of return migration or movement back to Belize, due in part to the difficulty of studying fluid and mobile populations such as transnational migrants (Thomas-Hope 1998: 195), and because of some of the movement of Belizeans who still maintain residence or go for prolonged visits to the United States, as mentioned in Chapter 1. However, the 2000 Census of Belize (CSO 2000) included several questions related to residence abroad and return to Belize for the Belizean-born population, including: “Have you ever lived in another country?”, “In what country did you last live?” and “In what year did you last come to

live in Belize?” Based on the census figures, I was able to obtain several tabulated files on the returned Belizean-born population from the Statistical Institute of Belize (formerly the Central Statistical Office), as represented in the discussion below. These census figures will thus work as a starting point to discuss the more general pattern of return to Belize that they express, and will also be related to the findings of this current study. What is perhaps most striking about the census data is the general trend of return, which really picked up in the mid- to late-1980s. This coincided with the IRCA Amnesty of 1986, which gave over 6,000 Belizeans access to residency and later citizenship (Straughan 2007: 265), which in turn made it easier to return to Belize while still maintaining access to the United States. In this sense, the IRCA Amnesty facilitated transnationalism, not just by facilitating travel, but also by making Belizeans full members in two countries simultaneously. Perhaps even more important to a rise in return migration was the fact that many Belizeans who had migrated while they were young in the 1950s and 1960s reached retirement age in the 1980s. They were thus able to ‘complete the migration cycle’ and return ‘home’ with a pension to sustain themselves, and those who had obtained US citizenship were also able to travel freely between Belize and the United States in order for them to maintain relations with the family members and others who remained in the United States.

According to the 2000 Census of Belize, out of a total of 5208 Belizean-born returnees officially registered as living in Belize, 3030 of them had returned from the United States, 627 from Mexico, 533 from Guatemala, 170 from the United Kingdom, 169 from Honduras, 162 from Canada, and 113 from Jamaica, to name the countries most frequently mentioned as migration destinations. Of those who returned from the United States, the largest age group upon return was in the 65+ range (511), while a somewhat surprising number of returnees were much younger, with 294 returnees in the 25-29 years range, 333 in the 30-34 years range, and 372 in

the 35-39 years range. Significantly, only 159 returnees were in the 60-64 years range, indicating that retirement and access to social security and pensions from the United States play a role in why and when returnees return to Belize to retire. According to the 2000 Census of Belize, over the last recorded five years, from 1995 to 2000, an annual average of 217 Belizean-born returnees from the United States officially settled in Belize, with a spike in the 1999 number to 298 returnees. With those numbers in mind, and with no indication that return migration to Belize has slowed down, it is reasonable to estimate that an additional 2000 returnees from the United States have settled permanently in Belize since the time of the census. Also, census data indicate that while there has historically been a trickle of returnees from the United States since the early 1960s, only from the early 1980s did the number of annual returnees markedly increase, from 16 in 1979 to 43 in 1980, to 69 in 1985, up to 166 in 1990 and 217 in 1995 (cf. CSO 2000), as also mentioned in the above. In terms of ethnicity, more than half of returnees (1,581 of 3021) were listed as Creole, with 705 Mestizos listed as well as 412 Garifuna. The combined Maya returnee population was only 41, which correlates well with previous observations of their low frequency of migration in the first place, and contrasts with Maya return migration to other Central American countries such as Guatemala, where return migration in the 1990s followed a long period of internal political instability and terror (cf. Taylor 2000). Also worth noting is that a full 2,337 returnees were living in urban areas of Belize, whereas only 684 resided in rural areas. Further, 53% were male, and 47% female, which corresponds well with the assertion earlier that male migrants more one-sidedly pursue the return, while women migrants generally base their return decision on a more complex set of considerations involving close family member in both Belize and the United States, which leads more males than females to return to Belize to live. The male return bias is especially relevant to note here, because Belizean

migration to the United States has been described as predominantly female because of greater employment opportunities for women, although only slightly so in recent years (Straughan 2007: 255).

In terms of residence pattern by district, the census data reveal that the Belize District accounted for almost half of the registered returnees with 1,424, with 1,158 of those residing in the urban area of Belize City. 612 returnees resided in the Cayo District, with 498 of those located in either urban area of Belmopan or San Ignacio. Further, 491 resided in the Stann Creek District, with 322 of those settled in Dangriga. The outlying districts of Toledo, Corozal, and Orange walk accounted for the remaining 494 returnees. Such settlement patterns correspond well with the general observation in this study that returnees mainly settle in the urban areas. However, the numbers gloss over the population differences that exist within each figure, for example in the case of Belize City, where no distinction is made in the census between voluntary and involuntary returnees, or between those who choose to settle outside of the city but still in urban areas, as opposed to those who choose or are forced to live in the old parts of the city proper.

While this census data does provide a basic outline frozen in a particular moment of the returnee population in Belize, it does not reveal some of the most important aspects of return that this study seeks to examine. This includes the lack of census data on residence in Belize before migrating; legal status in the United States; previous transnational activities before the return; transnational activities upon return; and the spatial distribution of returnees' family and social networks. All those factors are crucial in understanding the various circumstances under which Belizeans return 'home,' how they plan for their return, and how successful they consequently are in securing a satisfactory return and reintegration. As I demonstrate throughout this study,

such data can only be generated through ethnographic fieldwork that includes participant observation, in-depth interviews, and the collection of life histories.

### **Successful and Unplanned Returns**

As described earlier, Belizean migration to the United States has taken many forms over the years, and has been more accessible to some Belizeans over others. Those who migrated in the 1940s and 1950s and who had gained US residency often provided the migration network that greatly facilitated the migration of other Belizeans in the aftermath of Hurricane Hattie, as they were able to sponsor their migration. As the migration stream to the United States strengthened over time, so did these networks. Consequently, access to such networks became increasingly important over time, especially given the increasingly restrictive US Immigration laws that still prioritize family reunification programs over other types of legal immigration. Of course, many more Belizeans were able to arrive and illegally work in the United States through other means already described, but these migrants suffered the restrictions on travel imposed on them by their lack of legal status in the United States. This in turn meant that Belizeans who were ‘out of status’ in the United States were restricted in their ability to act within a emerging transnational socio-cultural field of relations. In concrete terms, this means that without proper legal status in the United States, Belizean migrants often did not visit Belize for many years after migrating, thus making them gradually more detached from everyday life and kin relations in Belize. As has already been mentioned in this study, and as the subsequent chapters will demonstrate, it is precisely such involvement that heightens the likelihood of a successful process of return and reintegration in Belize if and when migrants decide to ‘come home.’

This point is not accessible through the census data described in the previous section, but is available through ethnographic research and the kinds of data produced through in-depth interviews and the collection of life histories presented in the following chapters. As a case in

point, Big-Ben from the introductory vignette of this chapter had come to the United States under particular circumstances that made his plans to eventually return to Belize to live turn into a project of survival in Belize, after he was deported when trying to enter the United States after a holiday trip to Belize. Big-Ben's story demonstrates how particular migration histories increase or decrease the likelihood of successful trajectories of migration and return. Big-Ben had grown up in Belize with the prospect of one day joining his mother in Los Angeles, but when he arrived the separation had been too long for him to seamlessly enter school life and making friends without getting into conflicts along the way and ultimately get engaged in criminal activities. Also adding to the problem was his mother's lack of transnational mobility after migrating, which made the tie between her and her children and older family members in Belize much more strained. As I discuss in Chapter 3 on transnational families, Big-Ben's return to Belize resulted in a further strain on his family relations all around: with his wife who had to give up living with him in Belize; his two children from a previous relationship who now could only see him by visiting him; his distant and close relatives in Belize whom he counted on in the first weeks back in Belize after being deported; and his relatives in the United States, on whom he continued to depend for financial support.

The importance to a successful return process of the migration trajectory, and the degree to which migrants have maintained relations with 'home' over time become apparent when we look at how returnees come back to Belize under different circumstances. In this study, I distinguish between voluntary and involuntary returnees to point to both the intentions of returnees and the degree of planning that they invest in their return, and to the importance of securing legal status in the United States as part of a strategy to gain transnational mobility and flexibility. For while the discussion of deportees from the United States typically center on those who have committed

felony crimes in the United States, many deportees to Belize were sent back because of simple visa violations. Many of those in turn had been planning for their eventual return to Belize, but had been hindered in this process by their lack of transnational mobility. Back in Belize, such returnees are again circumscribed in their ability to maintain transnational family networks and participate in a transnational social field, which would in turn have made their reintegration into Belizean society much easier for them. Also important in this context is the degree to which migrants are able or willing to sustain relations with 'home,' especially if they leave their house in Belize in the charge of others. Again, such willingness may be curtailed by lack of transnational mobility, in which case legal integration in the United States can be shown to have a strong influence on migrants' abilities to properly plan for their eventual return to Belize.

Examining the scope of return through such sources as census data is important for understanding the relevance of this population movement to a larger Belizean context, and to the context of the transnational socio-cultural field that Belizeans have increasingly come to occupy. This is so because the numbers speak to the distribution and frequency of returnees in Belize, and reveal general trends that have been shown to correlate with various historical events and developments, as outlined in previous sections of this chapter. What the discussion in this section has hopefully made evident is that we can only come to understand the actual process of return and reintegration through other methodological means, and by focusing on the various transnational practices that migrants actually engage in over time. To secure a successful return, migrants must not only plan the return well, but also continuously engage with the people they left behind and the people and localities they wish to return to.

### **Summary**

This chapter has outlined the historical context of migration into and out of Belize necessary for understanding the more recent return movement of Belize. While Belize has

always been a country of immigrants, the most recent influx of Central Americans over the past decades has helped change the ethnic composition of the country. Another important part of this change has been the sustained exodus of Belizeans to the United States, which began in the 1940s. In the 1960s this emigration of Belizeans escalated, largely because of the havoc caused by Hurricane Hattie in 1961. This event also caused the government at the time to plan for and construct the new inland capital of Belmopan, and government moved most of its functions to Belmopan in the early 1970s. Hurricane Hattie thus became the event around which both the increased in outmigration and the construction of a new capital must be understood. Because of this historical and often antagonistic relationship between Belize City and Belmopan, the return populations to either one of those two field sites also differ. Whereas few voluntarily return to settle in Belize City itself, but instead choose to live outside of the city, Belmopan represents a much smaller and safer community with a broader population segment of returnees. Further, because of its relative youth, Belmopan returnees do not have a historical relationship with the place that goes back more than two generations, but instead are more prone to developing close community ties over time in this smaller local environment. Finally, the history of migration to the United States has also made for varied migration experiences that influence the level of success that returnees have in 'coming home.' To the extent that migrants have been able to regularize their status in the United States and become residents and eventually gain US citizenship, their ability to achieve a successful return and reintegration into Belize while maintaining transnational ties to the United States is heightened. This is so because of their ability to engage in transnational practices both in planning for their return and in maintaining transnational networks after their return.

### CHAPTER 3 TRANSNATIONAL FAMILIES

Jeanne Castillo's father had returned to Belize in 2002 when he retired after twenty-five years working for an oil services company in California. Shortly after, Jeanne followed. Her parents had brought her and her two siblings to the United States when she was five years old, after her maternal grandparents had cared for them the first three years the parents were in the United States. As a permanent US resident, Jeanne now had a career as a surgical technician at a major hospital in Los Angeles. At 35, she had just gone through what she described as a "very, very nasty divorce," and had left her three children in the care of her sister, who also lived in Los Angeles, in the same house as Jeanne's older brother. She needed time off, and more importantly, time away from her ex-husband. In Belize, Jeanne's maternal grandmother had Alzheimer's and her health was deteriorating, and Jeanne took the opportunity to go to Belize to care for her and visit her father at the same time. Shortly after, her grandmother had an accident and broke her hip, and Jeanne's mother came down to Belize to visit and care for her as well through the surgery. When Jeanne's mother went back to Los Angeles she brought the grandmother with her for further rehabilitation in the United States. Before leaving, her mother asked Jeanne when she would go back to work, and she answered, "not now, now is not the time." Jeanne prolonged her stay in Belize for weeks and then months, and soon found herself enjoying life there, getting to know her relatives in Belize all over again, and meeting new friends. Unfortunately her father had a triple stroke, and he ended up cutting short his dream of retiring in Belize and went back to Los Angeles for medical care. But Jeanne stayed on in Belize, and let her US residency quietly expire. She found work in a managerial position in an international data processing company, and there she met the man she is now married to and

pregnant with. Although she said that it took some time to adjust to “no shopping, no movies, no restaurants,” she is now enjoying a slower pace of life, and “actually having weekends off.”

While transnational relationships “form a triadic connection that links transmigrants, the localities to which they migrate, and their locality of origin” (Guarnizo and Smith 1998: 13), such relationships are also extended, developed, negotiated, and redefined in the process (Olwig 2007: 9). Over time, these relationships of kin and friendship make up social networks that are often instrumental in facilitating migration, to the point where such networks perpetuate migration because “each act of migration itself creates the social structure needed to sustain it” (Massey et al. 1993: 449). As Caroline Brettell (2000) points out, this transnational networks model has shifted the focus in migration research from the individual to the household and social networks, a shift that also marks a break with the rational-choice and decision-making models introduced by economists and political scientists. This shift is closely related to what Douglas Massey and others (1993) have termed “the new economics of migration,” which challenged many of the assumptions of neoclassical migration theory by positing that “migration decisions are not made by isolated individual actors, but by larger units of related people – typically families or households – in which people act collectively not only to maximize expected income, but also to minimize risks and to loosen constraints” (Massey et al. 1993: 436). Households as well as social networks thus mediate the relationship between the individual migrant and the world system, and centering the analysis on households and social networks provides a more synthetic approach by combining macro- and microperspectives on migration (Brettell 2000: 107).

For returning migrants, maintaining these networks is also instrumental in facilitating a successful process of return and reintegration into society ‘back home.’ Often neglected in

migration studies' focus on immigration and integration into the host community are the relationships that must be nurtured to keep migrants relevant to the network that facilitated their migration, and this network continues to exist across borders, involving individuals in both the sending and receiving countries. Massey et al. (1993: 449) focus on how potential migrants, in relating to those who have already migrated, "draw upon obligations implicit in relationships such as kinship and friendship to gain access to employment and assistance at the point of destination." Yet these obligations and social ties must be maintained, and have consequences not only for the migrant's success in the destination country, but also for the continued existence of a transnational social field, and for relations with relatives and friends 'back home.' In the context of return migration, focusing on these relations at the household and social network levels becomes crucial to understanding the level of experienced success or frustration for individual returnees. This is so because the degree to which returnees have maintained relations with their communities of origin over time either facilitates or complicates a wide range of issues relating to their return and reintegration, and their ability to continuously function as transnational agents when back in Belize often come to define their status in the local community as well as within their transnational social network.

The example provided above of Jeanne Castillo's move back to Belize illustrates the continued importance of transnational social networks, and how they become integral to migrants' family life. The thoroughly transnational nature of Jeanne's family network facilitated her return to Belize in much the same way that her parents' migration to the United States decades earlier had been facilitated by, and in the process helped solidify, an emerging transnational social network of Belizeans. Because such transnational social networks mainly emerge as structures built by families and kin relations, with the family as the "everyday

provenance of most migrant transnationalism” (Vertovec 2004: 14), the transnational family and transnational family networks have emerged in the literature on transnationalism as important units of analysis (cf. Bryceson and Vuorela 2002; Goulbourne and Chamberlain 2001; Levitt and Waters 2002; Olwig 2007). A focus on the transnational family and the household also allows for a more nuanced gender perspective, as women and men are positioned differently within such social units. Transnational migration also allows for the repositioning of gender roles and relations as women migrate and become breadwinners for family members who stay behind (cf. Hondagneu-Sotelo 1994), and may further change the family and household composition in profound ways, given the spatial distance and social and economic dynamics involved in migration. A focus on the transnational family also brings about an intergenerational perspective, as the vantage point of the individual family member presents a unique perspective given that person’s position in the migration process, in the particular transnational family network, and engagement in transnational practices, which “will ebb and flow at different phases of the lifecycle and in different contexts” (Levitt and Schiller 2004: 1018). For example, acts of migration or transnational involvement within a single family are experienced and perceived differently by the man who migrates to the United States to live with distant relatives; by the son who is reunited with his mother in the United States at twelve years of age after four years apart; for the grandmother who decides to go live with her daughter in the United States after retiring from her government job in Belize; or for the wife who initially stays in Belize to take care of close relatives and the children. Conversely, the return migration process has different ramifications for and is perceived differently by different members of transnational families, including those who return; the relatives they return to after years apart; the children and other relatives that they leave behind in the United States; or those who return but decide to remigrate.

This chapter expands the discussion of transnational families into a specific analysis of how transnational behavior over time informs and structures Belizean returnees' efforts at 'coming home,' and how maintaining a transnational family in turn becomes an important aspect of returnees' sense of success and satisfaction with the move back to Belize. The next section focuses on the role of the family in the migration process as it is initiated and sustained over time. This is followed by a section detailing how returnees negotiate family relations in Belize as part of the process of return, followed by a closer look at how the decision to return may be influenced by family situations in either Belize or the United States. The last section of this chapter examines how returnees maintain transnational family networks, both during their years abroad and upon return to Belize.

### **Migration and the Family**

For most of the Belizean returnees interviewed for this study, migrating to the United States meant leaving behind close family members such as spouses, children, or parents, at least for an initial period. Often, the privations and sacrifices that migrants and their families endured would last years, especially during the first years after leaving Belize. This was especially the case for: those who migrated without papers and traveled up through Mexico to the United States and arrived in either Texas, Arizona, or California; who managed to come to the United States by plane on visitor's visas and then stay on to work as undocumented immigrants; and who did not already have an established family network located in the United States. For most of these migrants, travel back to Belize would initially be either impossible or a very risky and costly affair, and therefore would not be undertaken voluntarily unless a family situation or personal circumstance called for it. While crossing down through Mexico or flying back to Belize was generally not a problem, it was coming back to the United States without a valid visa that was risky. This risk has increased dramatically over the years. The returnees interviewed for this

study who migrated to the United States in the 1960s and 1970s by crossing the border from Mexico illegally described the process as fairly easy and with only a small risk of detection, detention, and deportation, compared to the circumstances undocumented migrants face today in making the same trip. Weighing the risks associated with staying illegally in the United States factor in to some migrants' decisions to return, as shown in some of the cases below, especially if the individual migrant has reasons to expect a decent livelihood and family life in Belize. Many Belizean returnees, especially those men who migrated when they were young and unattached, migrated without much initial care for those relatives that they left behind. Nevertheless, transnational family networks become important for most migrants at various points in time: "Within transnational social fields, individuals actively *pursue or neglect* blood ties and fictitious kinship. Based on their particular needs, individuals strategically choose which connections to emphasize and which to let slide" (Levitt and Schiller 2004: 1017, my emphasis). At the same time, kinship networks establish relations that obligate individual migrants in a multitude of ways, ranging from pressure to migrate to contribute to the family household, or particular family expectations relating to socio-economic mobility and status, to taking care of relatives and helping other migrating kin. Finally, meticulous planning often goes into achieving a successful return, because securing livelihoods through migration incorporates "the strategy for return, maneuvers which not only involved the family, but have helped shape it" (Chamberlain 1997: 110). In other words, understanding how migrants plan for a return to Belize involves analyzing the migration trajectory, and how this has both involved the family and reshaped it in both transnational and transgenerational terms. In the case of Barbados, Chamberlain further writes: "Sending children home to grandparents not only helped the parents, but ensured that the links with Barbados would continue for another generation. It also ensured that the model of the

family was transgenerational and that even if the links with Barbados may not survive, the family culture would” (Chamberlain 1997: 110).

The case of Miss Roches illustrates both the sacrifices involved in migration, and the role that family plays in the migration process. While certainly unique in some respects, the partial account of her situation presented here also reflects that of many other migrants, particularly women returnees interviewed for this study. Miss Roches grew up in the late 1950s in Punta Gorda in the south of Belize, a predominantly Garifuna town. She went to Belize City for high school and went on to become a teacher. She went back to teach in Punta Gorda, and after a couple of years she became pregnant by her boyfriend at the time. His family did not want him to marry her as they considered her too poor, and instead encouraged him to migrate to the United States to further his education there. Because they never married, Miss Roches was forced to resign from her teaching position when it became clear to the Catholic School that she was pregnant, and she then went back to live with her mother and sisters until she gave birth. She started working again soon after, and after some time she persuaded her boyfriend, now residing in the United States, to arrange for her to join him by helping her get a visitor’s visa. In 1970 she left her young son in the care of her mother and sisters in Punta Gorda, and went by plane to join her boyfriend in St. Louis, Missouri and got a job as a live-in maid with another family. She soon found out that he had another woman, which would continue to create problems in their relationship, even as they stayed together. The other woman eventually found out about her, and managed to report her to the immigration authorities, with the result that she was asked at an immigration hearing, despite her employer’s attempt to keep her in the United States, to go back to Belize voluntarily. Back in Belize, she realized that she “had no future there” and traveled back up through Mexico to get to relatives living in California, before traveling back to St.

Louis. In the meantime, she had left her young son with her mother and sisters in Belize, and when she became pregnant a second time she left her boyfriend and job in St. Louis to go back and give birth in Belize in her hometown. When she traveled back up through Mexico a couple of months later, she crossed the border illegally by herself, and this time decided to go straight to her relatives in Los Angeles. After four years living and working in California, she went back to Belize to visit and bring her children back up with her. While the oldest one recognized her, none of them initially wanted to leave the household in Belize. With the children, she “played it safe” and arranged her trip up through Mexico with a Belizean trafficker, who had made arrangements for her with a ‘coyote’ to take her and her children safely across the border to Southern California. For Miss Roches, who had come back to Belize as a US citizen after nearly forty years “working hard in America,” her family life had both necessitated and facilitated her migration to gain a sustainable livelihood. But her family had undergone major changes in the process, often to the point of fracture. Not only had she been separated from her children, sisters and mother for years at a time, but she had herself developed “mental issues” that she was still struggling with, and her relationship with the father of her children had been very difficult over the years.

Maintaining the coherence of families and providing sustainable livelihoods may for some Belizeans be most feasible through migration, in which the (most often female) family members at home provide a network of support that facilitates emigration. If other family members are already established abroad they may also facilitate the migration process itself in numerous ways, as in the case of Miss Thomas from the introductory vignette of Chapter 1. Miss Thomas had a relatively smooth migration experience when in the aftermath of Hurricane Hattie she left Belize with the support of her aunt who was already living in Los Angeles, and who agreed to

sponsor her trip and her entry into the United States. Consequently, Miss Thomas' entry into the labor market was made easier because she almost instantly received a work permit and social security number. By drawing on an already established network of migrating kin, her opportunities for socio-economic mobility through migration were thus much greater than those who migrated around the same time, for many of the same reasons, but who did not have relatives living abroad, and who could only reach America 'through the back' and enter the US labor market without any rights. Although most of the jobs that Miss Thomas did during her first ten years in the United States involved hard manual labor as a seamstress, because she entered the labor market legally she was able to save up social security consistently for almost forty years combined, which left her with a sizable monthly social security check as well as a small pension when she retired and returned to Belize, where she was able to take care of her old mother in Belize City. Having migrated to secure her own livelihood in the aftermath of a natural disaster, her family thus both facilitated her migration and benefitted from it immensely over time.

In other situations, for some migrants the need to support family members was a reason to postpone migration to when siblings or other relatives could take care of themselves and migrate to seek their own fortune abroad if they chose to do so. A male returnee in his fifties expressed this strategy when I asked him if he sent money or other remittances home to relatives while living in the United States:

Sometimes I sent money to my mother especially. But what I did I stayed here [in Belize] until my brothers and [one] sister were old enough to work for themselves. That way I don't have to worry about sending back money. When they were eighteen or nineteen I sent them through high school. So when they were on their own, that was the time I left, to join my two older sisters who were living in Los Angeles at the time.

In response to the same question about sending remittances to relatives, other returnees made a point of telling me that they did in fact not send money back to Belize while abroad, largely

because their family did not need the financial assistance, or because most of their close relatives such as their parents and siblings were already living in the United States. Instead, they would use the money they earned in the United States on themselves, and on various projects in Belize, such as expanding the family land acreage, building elaborate homes for themselves and other family members, and investing in various business opportunities such as hotels, specialty import businesses, or various opportunities related to a growing tourism industry. Clearly, this group of returnees belonged to the upper middle class of the country, and the issue of remittances was an important marker for them to establish that they had not migrated out of need, but for other reasons, such as education, personal interest and ambition, or to be somewhere else with more opportunities. Importantly, as most of these returnees already had family members living in the United States before or concurrent with their own migration, the importance of family networks in facilitating and sustaining their livelihood and status in Belize was just as relevant for them in securing their own mobility.

For Michael White, coming back to Belize after almost eight years studying and working in the United States was a result not so much of his desire to come back, but of his father's failure to help him regularize his status as permanent resident in the United States. Michael's father had left Belize on a Green Card when Michael was still a child, and had subsequently become a US citizen. Although he and Michael's mother were no longer together, he would still visit Michael in Belize several times over the years, and send various presents for him as well from Texas where he lived. Growing up, Michael lived with his grandmother after his mother went to Trinidad to study for a couple of years, and then lived with her when she came back to Belize. Michael had fond childhood memories of his father, so when he wanted to go to college in the United States he applied for several arts and photography programs near his father, and

started attending school in Houston on a small scholarship the following fall of 1991. Over the years as a student in college Michael would see his dad many times, but they never developed a close relationship. Despite having asked him several times, Michael's dad continued to brush off the request that he try and file with immigration to have Michael obtain permanent residency in the United States. When Michael graduated from college he only managed to hang on to a work visa for two years, after which he was forced to either return to Belize or live as an undocumented immigrant in the United States. Back in Belize, Michael often vents about his dad, with whom he has virtually stopped talking after he realized that his dad did not want to make any effort to help him stay in the United States legally. While Michael still maintains contact with many of the distant relatives and friends that he made while living in Texas, he has no apparent desire to re-migrate, especially if it entails living in the United States without the proper paperwork. In Belize, Michael is now an accomplished professional and has his own business, while also occasionally doing consultancy work for various government offices. But his beginnings back in Belize were difficult, as his migration and return did not follow the plan that Michael initially had of going to the United States to get an education and a job that would allow him to save up enough to come back to Belize and establish himself properly. Michael's strategy of migration and return can thus best be described as having failed because of his fractured family relations that instead of facilitating migration over time made it difficult for him to achieve the goals he initially had of socio-economic advancement through migration to the United States. To paraphrase Mary Chamberlain (1997) quoted earlier in this section, Michael's ties to Belize were sustained, but his family model of migration was curtailed.

### **Returning to the Family**

For virtually all of those returnees interviewed for this study, returning to Belize to live provided them with an opportunity to reconnect and re-establish relationships with family

members that they for the most part had not lived close by for decades, even if they had been close to them. Regardless of their various reasons for returning to Belize, some returnees pursued family relationships out of necessity, such as the deportees who came to depend on relatives in Belize for housing, getting a job, or economic survival. Others returned out of a genuine wish to reconnect with or take care of close relatives, even if they had not initially planned to return to Belize to live. Still others only interacted with relatives reluctantly, as they preferred to live their own life, and often felt that relatives were only asking them for things and favors.

In the case of Iris Usher, coming back to Belize after six years of living in the United States was at once a difficult and an easy decision. Iris had originally left Belize in 1993 because she wanted to study “something with arts” and “was longing for a change from Belize and really wanted to just get away.” She went to South Florida and enrolled in a community college and was later accepted at an arts school, which she attended for five years while working part-time on the side, for the last nine months doing custom printing and web design at a Kinko’s. In the beginning she was living with a roommate in an apartment, but after they had a falling out she moved in with her cousin and her family in Pembroke Pines in South Florida. For the last couple of years in Florida, she “bounced around with friends for a while” before coming back to Belize after her student visa ran out. Most of Iris’ relatives have migrated and lived spread out all over the United States, whereas in Belize she only had her mother and her mother’s sister to come back to. However, if Iris had stayed in the United States her socio-economic mobility would have been jeopardized, and she would have risked deportation if she had stayed on without a valid visa. As she stated it:

My student visa was up. I had dragged out my graduation so I could stay, but after that it was either being illegal [in the United States] and not return home in a while, or stay legal but come home to live.

She returned to Belize to live with her mother and be part of the family business, a well-known hotel in Belize City, but she did not feel settled in Belize and considered re-migrating after about a year, to stay and work illegally in the United States. She never did leave however, and two months after making the decision to stay in Belize her mother passed away unexpectedly, which changed her perspective on migrating and coming home:

Had I chosen to stay there [in the United States] illegally I would have been stuck there and not able to go back for the funeral, and if I had gone back for the funeral I would have been stuck here without being able to visit the States. Most importantly, if I had stayed illegally in the States after graduation I would have lost the last two years with her. That's been a blessing for me.

In Belize, Iris is now the co-owner of the hotel, and she has also developed her own web design company on the side. She has no plans of re-migrating to the United States, but because her father is of Scottish ancestry she is also a British citizen, and she knows that if she ever wants to or needs to work abroad again she can go to London and find a job, even though she does not really know or keep in touch with any of her relatives there. To supplement her income and to make investments in her company and repairs to the hotel, Iris has also sold off several tracts of family land outside of Belize City, and still maintains land as a potential source of income. She travels frequently to the United States for business, shopping and vacation. When she married a Belizean two years after returning to Belize, they went on a group trip to Los Angeles shortly after to celebrate the marriage with her relatives up there. Iris now has a baby boy, and is comfortable with living in Belize, even if the only older close relative still in Belize that she sees frequently is her mother's sister.

Because there is an expectation of migrants to ultimately do well for themselves and their families, returnees are counted upon to come home with something to show for themselves, and with something to contribute to their immediate family. They are also frequently expected to contribute to their communities in which they resettle, and to Belize in general. This is especially

so for migrants who have been away for a longer period of time, and come home to lead an active economic and social life. Managing such expectations is in turn made easier for returnees if they have been actively engaged in supporting relatives in Belize while abroad, if they have actively maintained their social networks and other aspects of Belizean socio-economic life over the years, and if they have been able to visit Belize frequently. At the same time, local expectations of them may run counter to their own expectations of life in Belize, as they may have returned in order to relax and enjoy life, “away from the stress of the States” as many of the interviewed returnees phrased it, particularly if they had returned to Belize to retire. For relatives and other locals in Belize, the expectations of contributions that returnees can make often involve resources, connections and knowledge that is produced and made available through a transnational social field that returnees are seen as potentially giving access to.

However, individual migrants’ expectations upon return, and the way returnees fulfill local expectations of contribution upon return, particularly in the realm of family life, is structured by entrenched gender roles that are only changing slowly. To retrace the example of Jeanne Castillo from the introductory vignette of this chapter, it was her father who initially returned to Belize by himself to retire and enjoy life, whereas Jeanne herself only followed to care for and find comfort in the closeness of older relatives such as her aunt and her grandmother. As discussed in the section on gender and return migration in Chapter 1, migration and return is carried out within a gendered social field of relations, in which male and female returning migrants are positioned differently. Further, their reasons for return are often different, and how they relate to family members is also defined largely along gender lines. Conversely, the expectations that relatives in Belize have of male and female returnees differ as well, to the point where men are generally expected to engage in various business ventures and public

activities to secure their status and help out others locally upon return. Women are in turn expected to be the ones who participate in family life in supporting and nurturing roles, such as caring for an ailing relative, taking care of children, arranging family gatherings, and so forth. Many of the cases presented in this study support such gendered differences in returnees' experiences and outlook, even if most of the examples are both complex and allow for challenges over time to static gender roles and differentiation along gender lines. Indeed, women often return for reasons that have everything to do with their immediate kin in Belize, but end up engaging in the wider social and economic life of Belize in ways that reflect their accumulated skills and life experiences in the United States. In the case of Jeanne Castillo, she came back to be near her father and care for her grandmother who had raised her, but went on to stay in Belize permanently and become a successful businesswoman in charge of a branch of an international data processing company in Belize. Her success in her work life in turn made it possible for her to establish her own family in Belize, and over time become one of the central family members located in Belize in her transnational family network.

In other cases, interacting with family members in Belize can be much more contentious for returnees. Derrick Stuart, who had returned to Belmopan to enjoy retirement and be close to some of his grown children again, had left his new Suzuki Gran Vitara SUV with a good friend of his in Long Beach, California before he returned to Belize. He had planned to eventually have it shipped to Belize so that he could “drive around and visit people and rediscover ‘the Jewel’ [Belize],” but now he was not so sure anymore. Apart from the import tax on newer vehicles that he would have to pay, he had grown increasingly concerned that a car would just give him a lot of headaches in Belize. Both of his grown children living in Belize had asked for favors large and small after he returned, from taking care of their children to monetary contributions or

“small loans,” and the oldest had asked several times about when he was going to bring the car down to Belize. Derrick confided in me that he did not want “complications” in Belize, as he had come back to enjoy a “more simple life in retirement.” While contemplating what to do with the car, he was getting around town on his bicycle, and using the local buses if he needed to visit friends or relatives in Dangriga, San Ignacio, or Belize City. Getting around like this, he had found that he was much more likely to get into conversations with other Belizeans, and often just drove around slowly on his bike to say hello to people and go for short visits around town, seeing relatives, new acquaintances, or other returnees that he had come to know while in California and who had also returned to retire in Belmopan. Although Derrick knew that having the car would elevate his status and be a help to him and people around him in many ways, he also recognized that it might bring about conflicts and unwanted attention from his relatives in particular, which he did not want to be confronted with.

Derrick’s case of trying to create distance from his relatives in order for him to carve out a space for himself in Belize is not unique, and points to larger issues of family and gender in a transnational context, where men often both migrate and return to realize a personal project of self-fulfillment, whereas women tend to return to contribute to and benefit from a transnational and transgenerational family network. The next section describes how such gendered differences in contemplating and carrying out a return to Belize is also borne out in deciding to return and under what circumstances.

### **Return Decisions and the Family**

Numerous factors help shape migrants’ decision to return to their countries of origin to live, including but by no means limited to strong family ties in the country of origin; dissatisfaction with their status and socio-economic living conditions in the host country;

obligations to relatives; nostalgia; and lasting ties with family and local communities ‘at home’ (Plaza 2008: 9). According to Plaza and Henry (2006: 14),

the decision to return to one’s place of birth is very complex and depends on a set of facts about a migrant’s life, cultural references and values. It is also a strategic choice made at a particular time in an individual’s life. The path leading from *intention* to return (professed by the majority of migrants) to *actual* return is difficult to predict (italics in the original).

Since this study is focused on the process of return and reintegration, and incorporates a life history perspective on transnational families, the focus here is on family relations and how they affect returnees’ decisions to ‘come home.’ Any ‘strategic choice’ to return is thus informed not only by returnees’ migration histories, life circumstances, and other external factors, but also by their transnational family networks, what importance they hold for them, and how they are utilized to secure a successful return. As argued in the previous section, how returning migrants negotiate transnational family relations is gendered and important to men and women in different ways in deciding to ‘come home’ or remain ‘stateside,’ as will be discussed in the following cases.

For most of the couples interviewed for this study, the return decision was made and reshaped over a long time abroad, with input from both partners, and reshaped by events external to them. However, the desire to return was expressed as most enduring and static among the men, who were also the ones most heavily involved in constructing houses in Belize, and pursuing various entrepreneurial activities to secure or enhance their livelihoods upon return. Returning women frequently mentioned numerous other considerations that they weighed against returning to Belize, such as their desire to be near their children and grandchildren in the United States, the economic freedom and access to goods and services they enjoyed in the United States, and their concerns about a fulfilling social life and acceptable livelihoods in Belize. The decision

to return 'home' could also create or exacerbate fissures or disagreements in relationships, to the point where only one person would return to Belize, while the other stayed in the United States.

In the case of Lisa and Brian, they returned to Belize a month after Lisa had given birth so that her parents could help them take care of their baby boy. Lisa and Brian had met in the United States again after having known each other briefly when they were teenagers in Belize. They had both left for the United States when they were out of high school, Lisa on a Green Card because most of her relatives were already in the United States, and Brian up 'through the back' via Mexico to California. They had eventually gotten together and moved to Georgia where some of Lisa's relatives were living. She had developed a career as a loan specialist working in realty while Brian worked different jobs in construction. They returned to Belize at around the same time, but arrived separately, Lisa flying down from Atlanta to Belize with the baby, and Brian driving his extended pick-up truck with all his tools down through Mexico to Belize. Having returned to Belize, Brian was trying to start up a nightclub, and Lisa was attending University of Belize to get a degree in marketing that would make her better qualified for a well-paying job in Belize. Lisa's parents were happy to have them and the newborn back in Belize, and fussed over the baby as proud grandparents. However, as the months passed, Lisa grew frustrated with a lot of little things in Belize, including her inability to find satisfactory work, the nosiness of neighbors and people around her, and her husband's lack of contribution to their family life. Lisa was very happy to see Brian content and outgoing in the beginning of their stay in Belize, contrary to the United States where he had had much less of a social life and often seemed frustrated with his work situation. Over time, however, she became frustrated with his increasing level of comfort and social life in Belize, as he would spend more and more time outside of the home drinking with friends and hanging out, rather than keeping her company and

helping her with the baby. When I would stop by their house toward the end of my fieldwork, they would frequently be arguing, if Brian was in at all, or Lisa would spend more and more time with their baby at her parents' house nearby. In the beginning, Lisa had found the most comfort in being back in Belize close to her parents with the newborn, but increasingly it was Brian who seemed to enjoy his freedom in Belize at the detriment to their family. Over time, Lisa and Brian drifted apart, and Lisa decided to re-migrate to try to get her old job back in Georgia, while initially leaving her young son with her parents in Belmopan.

When Ivan Andrews and his wife were planning for retirement, they both wanted to go “somewhere nice with a milder climate” than New York, where they had been living for close to 35 years. Ivan was a land surveyor in Belize for five years before he left in 1964. His older sister, who was already living in New York City, encouraged him to come and sponsored him and his wife's passage. After less than a year working various menial labor jobs, Ivan got a job with a gas company in Brooklyn, which he held on to until he retired at 57 in 1996:

I had a few very good friends at the time who were thinking about the future, so we all got together and said that we better make sure we get a job with benefits. Meaning health insurance benefits, vacation, and a pension. So in that sense I went to the right place. September 1996 I was with that same company for 31 years. At the time they were downsizing, so they were offering packages, and I qualified. I had the time, I had the age, so I took it and retired. After that, I spent three years in the States, and then in 1999 I came back to Belize to begin construction on the house.

Ivan had always wanted to return to Belize to live and build a house on his family land, and his wife had initially been supportive of the idea of eventually moving back to Belize to live in their retirement. From 1999 to 2004, Ivan spent several months every year in Belize overseeing the construction of the house, and stayed with his niece nearby as the work slowly progressed. However, as he was retired and they started making plans to move to Belize, unforeseen events made them want to also spend more time in the United States, to be around their children who were still living in the New York area, and to be with friends in South Florida. Ivan explained:

You know, my wife wanted to live between here and Miami. We bought a condo in Miami. North Miami. Around 204th Street. What happens is that we have some friends that visited [Belize] around the same time we did, in 1999. They retired, and instead of coming back to Belize to live they moved to Miami. And as a matter of fact, there's a lot of Belizeans who had come in to that area. And this good friend of mine has a condo in the area, so when there was a unit vacant he gave us a call, and we went down and we bought it.

For Ivan, this was a great third option for their retirement, to be able to live for shorter intervals in Miami, around friends they had known from New York. Once he was finished with the house in Belize, they could move down there together and still have several other places to stay in the United States, either around friends or with relatives. However, Ivan's wife had second thoughts, and she was also still working in New York. In the end, she decided that she wanted to stay in the United States, spending her time between Staten Island and North Miami when she retired from her job, with shorter visiting trips to Belize. Ivan was still grappling with her decision:

I think one of the reasons that supported her to, like, come up with that was that we had a good [Belizean] friend of ours, we worked together, he died a couple of years ago. His brother, his sister-in-law, got in an accident over in Houston, so... Like that two couples, right, that would have been friends with us down here in Belize. They are gone, we lost two friends with that. So that made her decide to still want to be there, and I still want to be here [in Belize]. So we compromise between there and here.

In this way, Ivan's decision to return to Belize to live, and his wife's decision to stay in the United States, were both strategic choices that were made at particular points in time, shaped by specific circumstances. If their two Belizean friends had not passed away, it is entirely likely that Ivan's wife would have moved down to Belize with him when the house was ready. Then again, her choice to stay in the United States was also driven by her desire to be near her grown children, and near other Belizeans that were part of her network in the United States.

What the example of Ivan and his wife makes clear is that 'coming home' is not a given that all migrants naturally aspire to. It may be one option of many when migrants consider what to do when they retire, or what to do when they face particularly difficult personal situations, such as Jeanne Castillo from the introductory vignette of this chapter. Also, recalling the

circumstances of Miss Thomas from the introductory vignette of Chapter 1, she first tried to retire to Florida from New Jersey when she moved down to her sister in Port Charlotte, but decided to come back to Belize to take care of her ailing mother instead. What is also clear is that family relations play a particularly important role when returnees make their decisions to ‘come home.’ Likewise, returning to Belize also has wider ramifications for the transnational family structure, to the extent that “the return becomes part of and reinforces the transnational household” (Thomas-Hope 2002:187).

Finally, Belizeans who were deported from the United States did not make the decision to return themselves, but their deportation must nevertheless be understood within the context of the family. This was evident in the case of Iris Usher described in the previous section, as she weighed the risk of deportation against her desire to spend time with her mother in Belize, and ultimately decided to return to Belize. For deportees, their return to Belize was not just involuntary, but also for the most part unplanned. In this respect, they returned to Belize without having carried out the kind of planning and preparation that is so often crucial for a successful return. As I discuss in the next chapters on how returnees secure adequate housing, maintain sustainable livelihoods and manage to reintegrate into Belizean society, deported Belizean migrants often clash with relatives in both Belize and in the United States. This is so because they become a burden and liability to family members who feel that they never wanted to return to Belize, and consequently cared very little for relatives or for maintaining a transnational family network while they were living in the United States. Further, since their ability to act as transnational brokers in relation to other relatives in Belize and in the United States has been severely restricted by their deportation and lack of engagement in family networks to begin with, local Belizeans do not look to them for the kinds of interactions that attract them to voluntary

returnees. Lastly, as I discuss in the next section, deportees may also have well-established family lives of their own in the United States that are interrupted by their deportation, and maintaining such ties after they return to Belize can be extremely difficult due to the restrictions on their movement across national borders, and their reduced capacity to contribute financially to transnational households.

### **Maintaining Transnational Family Networks**

Important to a successful return to Belize is the continued maintenance of relations with people and localities in Belize during the years preceding the permanent move ‘back home.’ This point will be elaborated in greater detail in Chapter 6 in particular, which deals specifically with issues of return and reintegration. In the context of maintaining transnational family networks, some of the cases discussed earlier in this chapter have already made clear the importance of family networks for achieving migration success, and in making the decision to return. Returnees who have depended upon, helped out, and maintained their relations with relatives in Belize over the years are furthermore most likely to have a positive experience of return and readjustment in Belize. Generally speaking, most of the frustrations, disappointments and difficulties that returnees encounter ‘at home’ come about because they are ill prepared for the return; do not realize how much the local community that they return to has changed over time; do not take into account how much friends and family members have changed since their departure; or are unaware of how much they have been changed by the migration experience, and how much locals’ perceptions of them have changed as well (Gmelch 1980: 143). The returnees interviewed for this study who most easily transitioned from life in the United States to living in Belize were also the ones who had invested the most time and effort over the years in maintaining ties with relatives through transnational family networks, and who had cultivated relations in the specific communities that they chose to return to in Belize. As will be discussed in more detail in

subsequent chapters, this was achieved in various ways, for example by sending remittances and other forms of assistance to relatives in Belize; maintaining or building a house in Belize, and staying involved with those who were involved with the property; communicating regularly with friends and relatives in Belize, and participating in various celebrations and events related to the family or the local community; and visiting Belize regularly, often for extended periods of time as the time for the permanent move 'home' came closer. Evidently, those Belizean migrants who most easily secured residency or citizenship in the United States were also those who could most easily travel back and forth. They in turn could most effectively maintain relations with relatives and local communities and participate in their lives quite differently from those who were forced to wait years or even decades to come back to Belize for the first time since their migration. In this sense, citizenship, belonging, and transnational family networks are inter-related and mutually reinforcing. Those who belong to more established transnational family networks are also best positioned to maintain relations with Belize over time and thereby secure a more smooth and satisfactory return 'home.'

While many migrants return to close relatives after spending years in the United States, some migrants may also have established and extended their own family ties while living abroad. Returning to Belize to live may be a realization of a personal migration goal and thereby 'complete the migration cycle' for the individual returnee. At the same time, the move back 'home' often involves giving up proximity and continued contact with other close relatives and friends left behind in the United States. This is especially the case for those returnees who have spent several decades abroad. Often, they have children, grandchildren, and an extended network of other relatives and friends that they move away from when returning to Belize to live. Many of the cases already presented in this study underscore this point. While some may return to

Belize to get away from the complications of family and work life in the United States, most often returnees maintain transnational ties concurrent with their attempts at adjusting to life in Belize and reintegrating into Belizean society. Consequently, looking at how returnees maintain and extend such transnational ties becomes important for understanding how they maintain continuity in their personal lives while at the same time building or renewing relations with people in the localities in Belize that they have returned to. In addition, returnees' capacity to maintain transnational ties to an already established network spanning Belize and the United States becomes important for how returnees are received in Belize upon return, and how successful they are in establishing themselves locally. As I demonstrate in this section, and in the subsequent chapters of this dissertation, transnational behavior often structures and informs how returnees manage to reintegrate into local Belizean social life, as they become important transnational brokers that can link local Belizeans to a wider socio-economic and familial network of relations.

In making return decisions, the family plays a particular role for migrant women, as they either respond to family members that need their presence 'back home,' or otherwise seek comfort and support from close kin living in Belize. In a similar vein, it is often women who most diligently maintain transnational family relations after their return to Belize, to a much larger extent than men do. This is not to say that the family is not important to male returnees, as they too feel and respond to the obligations and enjoy the status that comes with being able to secure a better standard of living for family members in Belize as well as in the United States. For example, Ivan Andrews, who I described in the previous section, began coming back to Belize much more often when his father's health deteriorated in the mid-1980s, and he had always taken pride in being able to take care of his parents financially as they got older. Further,

Ivan saw it as a great accomplishment of continuity and socio-economic success that he was able to build an impressive house for his own retirement on the family lot in the area of town where he grew up. However, just as men rarely stayed behind in Belize to take care of the children while the woman in the relationship migrated (if the woman migrated first, any children would be left in the care of other female relatives of the migrating woman), it was equally rare to find men who were continuously involved in nurturing and caring for children, grandchildren, or even older relatives upon return to Belize. In all but one of the nine returning married couples interviewed for this study, it was the woman in the relationship who was most actively involved in the lives of their children or other relatives living in the United States or in Belize. They often initiated contact via phone, letters or email, and would go and visit or stay with their children in the United States, sometimes for extended periods of time. This was not just a matter of visiting children and relatives, but would also often be a concrete contribution of time to alleviate family members by taking care of their children, helping out with household chores, and at times also supplementing family incomes by working part-time outside of the household. At times, such visits would be for their own enjoyment as well, and they would use the trip to buy and bring back or ship various household items that they needed in Belize, and otherwise just enjoyed being in a place bigger than Belize. At times, this place would be at or near the location where they had lived as migrants before returning to Belize, and they would therefore know and interact with a larger group of friends and relatives as well as immediate family members. Also, for the returnees who came 'home' on their own, women overwhelmingly came back because of personal reasons, either related to their personal circumstances as migrants in the United States, or to family members residing in Belize. Men, on the other hand, would more frequently return to Belize with a specific goal or project in mind, such as finishing the house they had begun

constructing in Belize before their retirement in the United States, starting up a business, or return to retire and enjoy life. Consequently, women engaged the family more frequently and substantially as part of their return than did men, and women returnees also received and reciprocated the most support and emotional sustenance from their transnational family network. Women can thus generally be said to be more heavily invested in maintaining family relations, and thus benefit more from such relations overall.

Related to the maintenance of transnational family ties is also the issue of citizenship and legal status in the United States. Frequently, if the man in a relationship is the one who is most determined to return to Belize to live, he is also less likely to make a concerted effort to gain US citizenship or even residency. In at least four of the nine cases of returning couples, it was the woman who had secured US citizenship or continued to maintain residency in the United States, while the man had returned to Belize without securing permanent legal status in the United States. This in turn made traveling so much more difficult for them if their US residency expired and they therefore had to apply for a visitor's visa to visit their children or other relatives abroad. Conversely, the women who had either gained citizenship in the United States, were maintaining their US residency by going back and forth often, or who had obtained multiple-entry visitor's visas for the United States, were actively engaged in their children's and grandchildren's lives, to the point where they spent extended periods living in the United States after their 'permanent' return to Belize. For returnees who have gained US citizenship while in the United States, the practical aspects of maintaining transnational families is thus made much easier, as returnees can travel freely, maintain livelihoods based in the United States, and in effect live between two worlds in a transnational socio-economic space. However, this does not mean that maintaining a transnational family is necessarily any easier, or that returnees will automatically do so. Also,

being betwixt-and-between, neither here nor there, transnational returnees run the risk of never belonging to one particular place or community (cf. Guarnizo 1997b). The frequent transnational practices may also be particular to the Belizean migrants who have returned from the United States, where it has generally been easier to form and sustain transnational family networks that operate with great frequency and intensity, compared to migrants who went to Canada, Britain, or locations even further away from Belize. This was the case in Jamaica, where a recent comparative study of returnees from the United States and from Britain revealed considerable differences in their transnational practices over time, leading returnees from Britain to complain about the American returnees that they seemed less committed to local life in Jamaica as, “you can’t be two places at once” (Horst 2007).

Important to maintaining transnational families and coherence within a family network are the major social events that celebrate particular individuals, or other life-stage events such as funerals or weddings that bring dispersed family members together. Constance Sutton (2004) has recently argued that such ritualized family reunions have become increasingly prevalent among Caribbean transnational populations, and work to re-create kin ties among dispersed families and help transmit kin-based connections to younger generations, thereby extending the transnational family traditions. In relation to similar kin-based celebrations in Nevis among an extended Caribbean family network, Karen Olwig notes that such ritualized celebrations are “particularly important when taking place at a family ‘home’ that has been a centre of social and economic relations and locus of emotional attachment” (Olwig 2002: 205). One such celebration, a 90<sup>th</sup> birthday celebration, became an important event for a transnational family network in Belize during my fieldwork. Miss Thomas, who was first introduced in the vignette in the beginning of Chapter 1, returned to Belize to take care of her ailing mother, who turned 90 in 2005. Since

Miss Thomas was regularly taking care of her mother by driving down from Belmopan to Belize City at least twice a week, she had taken it upon herself to arrange for a “real bash” to celebrate her mother and bring the family together. Miss Thomas had sent out formal invitations to a large number of relatives, friends and acquaintances in Belize, as well as to family members and close friends of her mother’s residing in the United States and several other countries in the Caribbean. Furthermore, she had been on the phone for hours with her siblings and children in the United States to coordinate their travel arrangements and make sure that they each brought various necessary items and gifts with them when they came down for the celebration. Also, since the family home that Miss Thomas’ mother still occupied on the south side of Belize City was near the childhood home of the Governor General of Belize, he and his wife were also invited and participated in the celebration, lending great prestige to the event, and to Miss Thomas’ organizing skills. In the week leading up to the celebration, which would ultimately have more than 150 guests, family members from near and far began arriving, some to stay for a week in Belize, others to be there only for a few days. Because Miss Thomas had lived in the United States for decades, she knew “just what those Belizean-Americans want and how they want it,” and managed to arrange for their stay in a way that most were impressed with. Also, Miss Thomas arranged for the birthday celebration itself to include a mix of traditional songs, entertainment, and food, and staple American items such as hot dogs and American flags. This was most fitting under the circumstances, since Miss Thomas’ mother had spent ten years of her retirement living with Miss Thomas in the New York area before returning to the milder climate of Belize, and properly reflected the transnational social field in which their family had grown. By successfully arranging this family gathering, Miss Thomas both reaffirmed her role as successful returnee and connecting link in her extended transnational family network, and re-

established the center of the family to its original location in one of the older neighborhoods of Belize City.

### **Summary**

This chapter has shown the continued relevance of transnational family networks for returnees' ability to achieve success in their migration and return to Belize. Migration fundamentally changes family relations, given the spatial distance and social, economic, and gender dynamics involved in migration. The maintenance of transnational family networks also becomes an important indicator of migrants' ability to return and reintegrate successfully in Belizean society, as such networks facilitate migrants' continued relations with 'home' while they are abroad, and become invaluable links between local Belizeans and a wider world.

The chapter also demonstrates that by focusing on the relations and movements within family networks, rather than population movements between nation-states, the analysis of transnationalism is enhanced to include a more nuanced, intimate and personalized perspective on how migrants relate to specific places and respond to global processes (Olwig 2003: 787). Issues relating to livelihood and belonging in a transnational context are thus articulated through kin relations that are sustained, transformed and engaged in the process of migration and return.

It is also through an analysis of transnational families that gender differences in the migration and return experience are most visible. Women tend to engage and thereby sustain transnational family relations to secure a successful return to Belize, while men more frequently return to Belize to realize personal goals of achievement. Conversely, women return to Belize more frequently to take care of relatives, or for personal support, which in turn enables them to draw on or become central to transnational family networks in their continued efforts at bridging two worlds.

As will be demonstrated in the next three chapters, transnational family networks become important for returnees to successfully return and reintegrate into Belizean society, either in relation to securing adequate housing upon return, maintaining acceptable livelihoods, or participating in the social, economic, and cultural life in local communities in Belize. In turn, during this process of return and reintegration, transnational family structures and households undergo changes that strengthen them in some respect, while weakening them in others.

## CHAPTER 4 BUILDING AND MAINTAINING 'HOME' IN BELIZE

For Al Norales and his wife, returning to Belize proved a much more difficult process than they had expected. Both in their late seventies, they moved back to Belize in 2003 because Mrs. Norales' health was deteriorating, and she said that she wanted to "die at home." They had moved from Dangriga in the Stann Creek District of Belize to Belmopan in 1970, where Mr. Norales went to work as a civil servant in the government administration. They bought a newly constructed house in the area, close to the main government buildings. For what Mr. Norales claims were "political reasons," he found himself out of a job in 1974. They decided to try their luck in the United States and left a family member in charge of maintaining and renting out their house. Al went to New York on a tourist visa and stayed with his sister, and nine months later his wife went up through Mexico and joined him in California. They found work in Los Angeles, and later moved to Long Beach before they decided to return to Belize. Coming back to Belize, they were shocked to find that the rent money from their house had never been deposited into their bank account. Consequently, the planned refurbishment of the house was delayed and they had to spend a considerable amount of their life savings from the United States to remodel it to their specifications. In the six months it took for the house to be completely refurbished, they lived with one of their sons in his house in Belmopan, and had just moved into their remodeled home when I first met them. While the house looked quite impressive when it was done, painted bright yellow with a glistening red roof, it still had essentials such as netting and bars for the windows missing, and most of the crates and barrels that contained their accumulated belongings were still left unopened. It was apparent that the prolonged process of moving back to Belize had taken its toll on them, and that most of the resources that they had hoped would sweeten their

years in Belize and enable them to carry out various other projects in and outside their home, had gone toward the refurbishment of their house.

This chapter examines how returnees establish themselves back in Belize, a process that may involve many years of planning, with much time and effort spent on constructing or maintaining a house in Belize in the years preceding the ‘permanent’ return. Those who return to Belize involuntarily often come to depend on relatives and others for adequate housing, as they have typically not made adequate plans before their return. For all returnees interviewed for this study, those who managed this process well were those who had maintained a transnational network during their migration years that they could draw on in securing proper living arrangements back in Belize. This was relevant for migrants constructing homes in Belize that they eventually returned to live in, for migrants maintaining and refurbishing already existing homes while they were away, and migrants who otherwise tried to obtain adequate housing upon return, even if such a return was involuntary or unplanned.

In the Caribbean and elsewhere, migration is a way for local populations to attain and value home ownership, which in turn becomes a marker of socio-economic upward mobility (Thomas-Hope 1995). Further, Olwig (1997) has noted of Caribbean migrants from the island of Nevis that family homes on the island remain “of emotional, cultural, and social import” and that migrating families often secure the continued existence of the family home by requiring at least “one of the children, one of the youngest daughters, to stay behind with the parents to care for them in their old age and look out for the family property” (Olwig 1997: 28). While this practice ensures continuity in the local setting, even in the absence of migrants who will eventually return, often migrants are not able to maintain family homes over time, or leave their country of origin without having family property to speak of. In either case, migrating to save up enough to

construct such a home 'back home' may be a way to gain higher socio-economic status while also establishing a family home that ties individual migrants or entire migrating families to a particular locally anchored property in their home community. In relation to returnees' ability to adjust or adapt to life 'at home,' Heather Horst notes of returnees in Jamaica that "the symbol of this process and one's commitment to becoming a 'returned resident' was intricately tied to the purchase, construction and furnishing of a home" (Horst 2006: 124). For the returnees in Horst's example, building the house was a measure of migrants success, and completing, furnishing and inhabiting the house an indicator of their commitment to staying on permanently in the community, a difference equal to one of "becoming" and "being" a returned resident (Horst 2006: 124).

In the case of Belizean returnees, their attempts at securing satisfactory housing upon return also modeled the quest for continuity, belonging, and upward socio-economic mobility through home ownership. As some of the cases in the following sections of this chapter make clear, many times it was only through migration that Belizeans were able to secure or improve their family home. Paying for the construction or refurbishment of a home in Belize with money made abroad secured ownership much faster and on much better terms than if they had stayed in Belize, where home mortgage interest rates are often much higher and average salaries much lower than in the United States. At the same time, as this chapter also demonstrates, it was only through continued transnational engagement with family members and local communities in Belize that securing adequate housing upon return was made possible. In this sense, Belizean returnees were typically much more transnational than the Jamaican returnees of Horst's (2006) sample, who had mostly returned from Britain to retire, after many years abroad with little sustained transnational interaction with the communities they returned to.

Since many of the returnees interviewed for this study had settled either in or around Belize City and in Belmopan, securing family land or family homes for generations through migration and return was not as frequent as it would have been in smaller communities in other parts of Belize. In the case of Belize City, most voluntary returnees chose to settle outside the city. They would in most cases have been reluctant to or not able to return to a family home, as most of those were destroyed during Hurricane Hattie in 1961, an event that made many Belize City residents leave for the United States in the first place. In the case of Belmopan, the construction of the first government buildings and homes was completed in 1970, and although many of the interviewed returnees had in fact established themselves in Belmopan before they left, this only constituted one cycle of migration and return spread out over two to three generations, involving a locality that had only a short historical significance for the families that returnees were part of. Still, by maintaining a home in Belize that they could eventually return to, returnees followed the same basic pattern outlined in the above, of gaining socio-economic mobility through migration, which enabled them to gain local status and belonging in Belize, depending on the degree to which they had spent the years abroad maintaining or extending transnational family networks. That transnationalism was important for this process of local integration through housing upon return is also apparent when looking at the situation of deportees and others who returned involuntarily or without much planning, as will be discussed in the last main section of this chapter. For those who were either unable or not interested in maintaining relations with Belize while abroad, securing acceptable housing arrangements upon return became all the more difficult, and would add little in terms of status or belonging in terms of how they were received by local Belizeans.

## Houses and 'Home' in Belize

As outlined in Chapter 2, the research for this study was primarily carried out in two distinct locations with an intertwined history, the old coastal capital and town of Belize City, and the recently constructed small inland capital of Belmopan. Of the interviewees who settled in or around Belize City, the most pronounced characteristic of their housing situation was their reluctance to settle in the city proper. Those who had planned for their return by building or maintaining a house had done so in one of the extensions of the city, or in one of the surrounding villages or suburbs. Plainly, their concern was with the overall safety and quality of living associated with living in Belize, where they found Belize City to be too dangerous, dirty, and run down. Also, cheaper and larger lots were usually more readily available outside the old and congested city, and many especially older returnees preferred to live in a location that they perceived as safe, yet still with easy access to city amenities, such as the hospital, the airport, and various shopping and entertainment venues. A male returnee in his mid-fifties who owned a store in Belize City yet lived five miles outside in a quieter neighborhood exclaimed, "Belize is getting to be like the States, with all this violence and all. If I wanted to be [living] in an area like that, with all the mugging and murders, I might just have stayed in Chicago!" Other returnees who either own businesses in the city, who have to go there for work, or who otherwise need to be in Belize City regularly, prefer to live outside of the city in newly constructed cement buildings that can withstand the hurricane weather systems that threaten the coastline of Belize every year, rather than in some of the wooden and dilapidated structures on stilts that characterize the core of the old city. For deportees in Belize City, the situation is markedly different, as they most often have no choice but to live in the poorer sections of the south side of the city, in houses that are often little more than wooden shacks with inadequate sanitation, and without much protection against the elements. Deportees who find the means to sustain themselves through work or

financial support from relatives in the United States will often choose to live in apartments or other rented housing facilities that more closely resemble the standard of living that they had become used to while living in the United States. Even so, returnees who came back involuntarily or who did not carry out much planning for their return usually end up living in rented accommodations in or around the city center.

The settlement pattern of returnees in Belmopan is very different from Belize City, in that the capital is considered both safe and quiet, to the point of being bland and boring, especially after dark. Further, because it is a recently constructed and ‘planned’ town as described in Chapter 2, residents here have family histories that anchor them elsewhere, and many have family migration histories that saw most of the older relatives leave Belize before Belmopan was even built. Furthermore, because of the somewhat antagonistic relationship between Belmopan and Belize City residents described previously, Belmopan is not seen as the ideal place to return to for many of those Belizeans who left in the years after Hurricane Hattie in 1961, and who had grown frustrated with the government’s preference for a new inland capital instead of funding the reconstruction of Belize City. It is interesting to note here that Miss Thomas from the introductory vignette of Chapter 1 settled in Belmopan because she liked the milder climate and the safer living conditions compared to Belize City where she grew up, but also had to accept that her 90-year old mother refused to visit her in Belmopan because she “never cared one bit for the place.” Such historical divisions also mean that the vast majority of the returnees interviewed for this study who had settled in Belmopan had lived there before they left, and were therefore more likely to return to a house they owned, and would do so after spending a shorter span of years abroad than those who migrated from Belize City in the early 1960s or even before then. In terms of their family migration histories, they were thus typically the second wave of migrants,

following their parents or other older relatives who had established important linkages in the United States that would facilitate their migration. Finally, there are relatively few deportees residing in Belmopan, and those that end up living there are typically not hardened criminals that have served long prison sentences in the United States before their deportation, but Belizeans who were deported for various visa violations or illegal re-entry to the United States.

In Belize there is no shortage of finished houses that stand empty, houses that migrants rent out to other Belizeans until their return, or houses that have been under construction for years on end. In Belmopan, it is often difficult to tell if some of the unfinished structures sitting on overgrown lots belong to Belizeans in the United States who have either given up on the project or postponed it until funds would be available again, or if they belong to local Belizeans from Belize City who began construction on a residency only meant for emergency housing during the hurricane season. However, most local Belizeans will tell you that it is easy to spot the completed houses inhabited by returnees by the tall brick and plaster walls with broken shards of glass on top that surround their yards, just as returnees' homes in some of the smaller coastal villages in Belize can purportedly be spotted by the short wooden fences that enclose their sandy lots, contrary to other villagers who make no such demarcations to outline their property. Of course, looks can be deceiving. Although local Belizeans may have incomplete or incorrect information about their neighbors, they do try to keep up with who is who in their local community. For returnees, this also means that their return and reintegration is not confined to or solely defined by the final move back to Belize. Rather, the degree to which they have remained anchored in or built relations within the local community that they plan to eventually return to greatly facilitates their acceptance into that community, and greatly increases their chances of having a positive return experience. This also means that a particular house that returning

migrants have in their possession, either under construction, finished but empty, or rented out to local Belizeans, becomes an indicator of migrant success, groundedness and commitment to the local community.

Miss Swasey, one of my informants who lives on a quiet street in Belmopan near the University of Belize, has recently expanded her house to accommodate a back room for her grandson and his wife, as they have started up a small business together in the town. She originally built the house in the early 1990s after a trip to the United States, where she overstayed her visitor's visa for close to two years to work as a live-in nanny for a wealthy African-American couple in Los Angeles. Over the past fifty years, Miss Swasey, now in her late sixties, has lived in the United States for up to two years at a time on five different occasions, each time to work and save enough money to realize specific projects in Belize, or in relation to her family members abroad. The first time she went to the United States was to work for a white lawyer and his family in Chicago in the early 1950s, but she "couldn't stand the segregation, and how black people were treated up there," so she came back to Belize to live. She got married and had six children over the years, and the youngest son now lives in San Diego in California, and regularly sends her money that she invests in improvements and expansions to her house, and in the plot of farmland she owns ten miles west of Belmopan. Miss Swasey's husband had left her years before, and by building her house in Belmopan she has become the center of the family in a matrifocal household (cf. Gonzalez 1984; Safa 2005; Smith 1996) that includes her daughter and her two school-age children, her daughter's grown son and his wife and three daughters, and the school-age son of one of her sons who lives in a village outside of Belmopan. In addition, the rest of her grown children regularly visit from where they live scattered all over Belize, and stay in the house if they are in Belmopan to take care of official business.

Out of less than twenty homes on the street where Miss Swasey lives, six are owned or occupied by Belizeans who live or have lived in the United States. The most impressive house on the street is a large whitewashed structure with a glimmering red-tiled roof that belongs to a Belizean migrant who had returned to live in the house before it was completely finished. In her late fifties at the time, she had returned with savings that she had put aside to retire early in Belize, in the dream house built to her specifications. However, she nearly depleted those savings because the costs of finishing her house ran much higher than anticipated. After about a year living in the house and managing the completion and furnishing of the house, she decided to remigrate to continue working until she would be able to come back to Belize with social security and a small additional pension from her job as a registered nurse in Chicago. Two other homes are currently occupied by returnees. An older woman down the street is renting a small house, and has been living in Belize for almost a decade after living 25 years in New York. When she came back to Belize she was in charge of the kitchen in several tourist resort restaurants on the coast before finally coming to Belmopan to retire and live off a small pension from the United States. In another house across the street, a younger professional couple is living with their two children. Both have come back to live in Belize after close to ten years studying and working in the United States and in the Caribbean, and now work at the university and in the government service. The only lot that does not contain a finished house belongs to a Belizean man in his forties who has been living in Chicago and New York for the past twenty years or so. The lot is enclosed by a chain-link fence and contains an overgrown concrete foundation for a house, with some of the walls partially constructed. His parents live nearby, and he returns to Belize every other summer to continue working on the house. This has been going on for close to ten years now, and none of his neighbors seem to believe that it will ever get finished. However,

they all seem to appreciate talking with him and seeing him around most summers. In a sense, he has become a local fixture in the community through his absence, and were he to ever finish the house and resettle in Belize, there would be a place for him in the community – and an imprint in people’s minds of him, based on how his house had changed over the years.

### **Constructing ‘Home’ in Belize**

For many Belizean migrants, going abroad to “do better” often entails saving up enough money to construct a house in Belize that they can eventually return to. In this sense, migration can be described as a temporary sojourn undertaken to meet specific financial ends that could not be realized at home (Massey et al. 1993: 434). As was the case for Al Norales and his wife in this chapter’s introductory vignette, efforts at saving for and constructing or refurbishing a home in Belize can turn into a negative and contentious experience that often puts returning migrants at odds with relatives and other locals in Belize. This is typically the case for returnees who have not been particularly well prepared or not sufficiently involved in the actual work being done on the house. Managing a house from afar can be a frustrating experience, also because local Belizeans realize that returnees who have little or no local clout, insight or history in the community represent easy targets, and they are often taken advantage of by being overcharged or downright cheated out of large sums that were supposed to go toward the construction or refurbishment of their homes. Some of the examples presented later in this chapter bear out the importance for returning migrants of staying involved in any dealings related to the construction, maintenance or refurbishment of a house in Belize.

Even when preparing well for the return, the process may involve a significant change of heart, change in outlook, or change in circumstances that result in changes to the housing situation for those who decide to build their own house. Recall the example of the returning migrant woman in her fifties who nearly depleted her savings and had to re-migrate to secure a

steady income through social security when she was to return to Belize to live several years later. Also, the case of Miss Thomas from the introductory vignette of Chapter 1 illustrates this point, as she first returned to live in Belmopan in the early 1970s, but then decided to re-migrate. Further, in the years she was away until she returned to live almost thirty years later, she kept the house she had first bought on her first attempt at moving back to Belize – only to realize after some time in Belize that it did not fit her life style or demands. Consequently, she decided to have a new house constructed while renting out her first house, and accomplishing both of those tasks was made much easier for her because she was physically present in Belize during the whole process.

Miss Thomas' success in maintaining and constructing her houses in Belize notwithstanding, the process of negotiating construction plans with builders in Belize from afar can leave women especially vulnerable, as they are seen as easier to intimidate and overcharge without consequences. While men would frequently experience problems of budget overruns and constant delays as well as problems with relatives taking advantage of them as in the case of Al Norales and his wife in the introductory vignette to this chapter, the most negative experiences with home builders in Belize came from women who tried to undertake construction projects on their own. Also, as the case of Ivan Andrews and his wife showed in Chapter 3, constructing a house in Belize on family land where Ivan grew up was very much his project and his dream of retirement, whereas his wife had a more measured view of the house in Belize as a retirement option that turned out not to be her preferred choice. She ended up staying in the United States close to their children and friends, whereas Ivan had put considerable resources into the construction of a quite impressive house in Belize that clearly boosted his status as a successful returnee in the local community.

Gaining status and respect as a successful migrant in the local community by building an impressive house for their return emphasizes the ways in which returnees' housing arrangements intertwine with the housing needs of local Belizeans as well as other returnees. This was made clear in the case of Lawrence, who had come back to Belize after more than thirty years in California to stay with his wife near her ailing parents to take care of them. Lawrence had always wanted to return to Belize to live in retirement, and retired early at sixty from a Teamster job as a truck driver. He had only started planning for a house in Belize when his wife's parents' health began to deteriorate, and they decided to come back to Belize early to care for them. They lived in her parents' house, the family home in which her grandmother had been born, for the first couple of weeks, and then decided to look around for a house in the area that was more suitable for them. Across the street was a house that belonged to a good friend of theirs who still lived in Los Angeles, who had been building the still partially unfinished house for many years.

Lawrence got on the phone with him and asked if he was renting it out:

The house wasn't finished. It didn't have this porch you see in the back there either, and I called him up and I said, "Hey, Johnny, you want to rent me the house?" He said "It's not finished, and moreover I don't want anybody to break up my house before I move into it, my wife and I." And I said, "Johnny, you used to go to my house in California." He said, "Yes." I said, "You think I'm gonna break up your house? My wife and I?" He thought for a while, then told me to go over to such and such, some lady, and then he said, "And get the key and you have the house." I asked, "What's the rent?" He said, "No no no, you don't worry about that." And this has been over six years. He comes down whenever he wants and stays with us. And every time he fixes the house up some more, like this back porch he put in last time. And we take care of it meanwhile. He'll come back soon.

Lawrence and his wife came back to Belize with the intention to build a house, but ended up renting from their good friend Johnny, who had been building on his house for years. Johnny in turn knew of the problems of renting out his house and initially had no plans to do so. However, he now has more reasons to visit his house in Belize with his good friends there, and seems to move more efficiently in maintaining and improving on it to have it ready for when he eventually

moves down to Belize himself. Finally, by having trusted friends occupy and maintain the house for him also inscribes his house with a lived history of relations, rather than being an empty and unfinished monument to his success abroad. For Lawrence and his wife, depending on when Johnny decides to come back to Belize to live, they have yet to decide if they will move into her family home across the street when her mother passes, or start building their own house on a nearby lot.

For Emilia Burgos, leaving Belize in the mid-1960s was easy, as she was an adventurous woman who found her childhood town of Stann Creek (now named Dangriga) too boring. She went to Belize City to find work, and ended up marrying a Belizean man who had settled in Detroit years before, and who was then visiting the old settlement. After living in Detroit with him for over ten years, Emilia divorced and remarried a Puerto Rican man, Juan, who she ended up bringing with her to Belize when she came down to visit in the late 1980s. They both enjoyed being in Belize, “away from it all, and so green and calm,” and made the final move down in 1999. Before that they had gone for visits several times a year to enjoy Belize and plan and set up the construction of their new home on the Hummingbird Highway in the Stann Creek District, and to visit Emilia’s sister, her only living close relative in Belize. It was to be an elaborate home, and they had allotted a substantial part of their savings to the project. When they found a builder who was willing to take on the project and gave them a detailed layout and cost estimate, they transferred the first part of the sum. Emilia explained:

We went along, and the man started to build us our home. The foundation was done. Three weeks after we left from here, the man called to tell us that the house is going up beautiful, and that he ran out of money. Three weeks. We gave him 59000 dollars Belize before we left. Everything was wrong about that deal. [...] And I decided I am coming home. And I brought a lounge chair because he said the house is going up so I was going to sleep in it, window or no window. So I came home with an overnight bag and a lounge chair. And when I got here I almost had a heart attack. The only thing that was here was the foundation and in the middle for the dining room and living room was flooring. And that

side and that side was nothing but mud. Not even one brick up. No roof or nothing. I thought I was gonna have a nervous breakdown, I cry and I cry and I couldn't stop crying. I never forget that man. I came home the Wednesday, and the Thursday morning I went to look for him. And he met me right by the Lands Department [in Belmopan] and he told me I had seven dollars left of the money. My heart broke that day. And I told him, "Keep the seven dollars, you'll need to buy you some candles." [...] But I brought money on the trip, and I went out and I found another fly-by-night contractor, because I didn't have time, I didn't come to stay. This contractor will do the job, he come recommended. [...] So I gave this man 38000 dollars. I just met him, you know? But it's funny because I thank God for him every day. The house is not completed as you can see. But he gave me a roof over my head. But that roof was always leaking. We paid him 30000 for our roof. While we were still in the States he called and said, "only thing now to go up is the roof."

While they now live happily in the spacious and beautiful house in the hilly countryside south of Belmopan, the process has left them financially drained, and with a negative experience to look back on. Recently, they decided to buy a second home in Belmopan, so that they could be closer to different amenities and services such as the hospital, the government offices, and the shops in town, and to be near several of their friends who also had houses in the same area of Belmopan. These houses were already built, as part of an extension to the capital that had been constructed by a prominent builder, and was meant to attract Belizeans to settle in the capital. Emilia and her husband still spend most of their time in their house in the hills, but enjoy "not being stuck there." Instead of traveling back and forth between Belize and the United States like so many other returnees, they have not been back to the United States for years. They enjoy their old age going back and forth between Belmopan and the countryside, and occasionally go to Guatemala or Belize City for medical care or for major purchases. In the same way that Emilia had not been back to Belize for decades, now that she is settled with her husband in Belize they do not travel much abroad either. Emilia only has her sister and a few distant relatives left in Belize that she rarely sees, and her husband's two grown children lead their own lives in the United States, although they have visited them in Belize on occasion. For Emilia and Juan, the bitter first experience with the builder of their main home prepared them well for buying their second home

in Belmopan, but Emilia has remained distrusting of other Belizeans, who she says are “always looking for something.” Recalling everything that happened since they bought the 25 acres of land that their house now sits on, Emilia says:

When we got this place and built it, I thought... I get emotional when it comes to Belize... I thought that I was coming home to the Belize that I left. That my neighbor can come and get a bunch of plantain, and then I can go to them and get a coconut if I don't have any. And we could share things. That's what I thought when I came home. That's the way I was brought up. My sister said a word to me a few years ago, she said, “You know Em, you are coming home, but you never saw the changes. You didn't want to see it.” Flemming, I swear I didn't see it.

For many returnees, the stakes involved in building a house from a distance can be very high, as they have little control over a situation that they put a substantial part of their savings into. At the same time, it is through such building projects that local Belizeans are confronted with the income disparities between Belize and the United States. Even if migrants' success is partly measured locally by the houses they construct in Belize, such success also generates a considerable amount of envy, particularly toward returning migrants that locals have no personal or familial relationship with. Maintaining a wide network of relations that tie returning migrants to the communities they plan to return to therefore becomes important in ensuring a successful process of return and reintegration into Belizean society. The various ways in which this can be achieved is the focus of Chapter 6.

### **Maintaining and Improving ‘Home’**

Some Belizean migrants have left over the years without establishing themselves in Belize beforehand, for example if they left right after high school, or if they had been left without anything in the aftermath of a natural disaster, as in the case of Miss Thomas described in the first vignette of Chapter 1. Consequently, planning to eventually return to Belize often involves planning for and implementing the construction of a house in Belize, as discussed in the previous section. Other migrants who were already well established in Belize before they left had a house

in Belize that they aimed to maintain over the years and planned to eventually return to live in. Although keeping such a house would be a major source of frustration at times, it was also an important point of reference that kept migrants connected to the community in Belize that they had left behind, and also allowed them to strengthen transnational networks with relatives and friends in the process. The dilemma of maintaining a house in Belize was perhaps most clearly expressed by Mr. Palacio, who had just returned to Belize to live after 26 years in the United States when I first met him. He had kept his house in Belize, which he rented out while away, and had returned six or seven times to Belize to visit over the years, the last time when his mother passed away in 1999:

I put some people in charge. First my mother, then my cousin, then a friend. All three, they were in charge, but there was always someone who comes in and doesn't want to pay, and that's it. They don't want to pay the rent, so I had to come home and put them out myself. And they break up everything, when you rent it out. So I'll have to make major repairs before this house is ready and livable again.

For Mr. Palacio, keeping his house in Belize served a dual purpose: to generate a modest income that could help him pay for various taxes and maintenance expenses in Belize, and to provide secure living arrangements for him when he returned to Belize to live. In the meantime, however, renting out the house seemed to give him more problems than he had anticipated, to the point where his presence was required in Belize to solve problems with renters, to refurbish the house, and pay property taxes or any outstanding bills.

For other returning migrants, leaving relatives in charge of their home while in the United States may have a different outcome altogether. Mr. and Mrs. Ramos had been away for almost three decades before they decided to return to Belize. They had initially migrated to earn enough money to pay out the loans on their properties and the house they had built in Belize before they left, but ended up staying in New York long enough to send their daughter through high school and college, while at the same time working more years than they had planned so as to have a

social security income when they returned to Belize. Mrs. Ramos explained how they had a relative take care of the house while they were living in New York:

Our reliance mostly was on family relatives. This young lady came in and she lived here, and she was very protective of what was here. You'd come in to this place, be visiting and so and you can't even be touching on things. She was so protective that even we ourselves when we come on vacation and so on, you know, really we couldn't do what we wanted in our house! [laughing] So we were actually lucky. What happened too, we hooked up and paid the phone bill, and that was very very helpful to have that technology. Yes, every month we would send money to pay the water, the electricity, the phone bill and other bills and things, so we supported that from over there. So we had two sets of bills. And if there was anything wrong we would help out with that too.

Contrary to Mr. Palacio, the Ramoses did not expect to generate an income off their property in Belize, but instead secured their relationship with family members in Belize by supporting and having relatives living in their house and taking care of it. In this way, their house was an investment in their future, defined by their relationships with relatives and others in the local community that they would eventually return to, rather than an investment intended to bring about an immediate monetary return. Furthermore, after the Ramoses became permanent residents in the United States in the mid-1980s, they made sure to visit 'home' often. As Mr. Ramos explained:

We came back to Belize theoretically almost every year for the reason that we had rental properties here before we left. There was this house, then we had land, and we still have some land, about twenty-three acres which adjoins the town limits. Most of this area was not developed like it is now. But what we would do when we were there was to buy the major necessities we needed to decorate the house, this house.

[Mrs. Ramos interjects: "Yes, we planned very well before coming home."]

So whenever we come every year we sent items in advance. Even items that we would need later, then we put them in the storage room we have next door. You see this Zenith television here? We had that for more than three years before we came home.

At the same time, the Ramoses were also acutely aware of the social standing of themselves and their family in the local community they had left behind when migrating to New York. Mrs. Ramos kept saying "my good name is very very important to me" when I talked to

her about their relationships with people in Belize and in the United States, and both of them were clearly known by many people in the community, both before they left, while they were away, and after they came back to Belize. In this context, maintaining the house and improving it over time, and taking care of certain family members in Belize by letting them stay in the house, became a way of displaying to the community that they were “good people” and that they intended to stay involved with the local community over time. Interestingly, as part of maintaining her good name Mrs. Ramos had taken on the responsibility of renting out properties for other Belizean migrants who still resided in the United States, and she took pride in handling their business properly and with great transparency, without charging them for her services. Instead, she would welcome their kind comments of gratitude when they came for visits, and use the occasions to exchange information and stories about relatives and other Belizeans in New York. In this way, managing houses, her own as well as those of others, became a way for Mrs. Ramos to maintain or even enhance her standing in the local community, while strengthening transnational ties with Belizeans abroad.

The importance of maintaining a house in Belize as a way of displaying success abroad was also evident in the case of Mr. and Mrs. Pott. They had purchased a house in Belmopan in the mid-1970s when they decided to move to the administrative capital from a smaller village in the western part of the Belize District. Their oldest children were reaching high school age, and when they had all been in Belmopan for about five years, Mr. and Mrs. Pott decided to migrate to New York and left their grown children at home in the house in charge of their two younger siblings. While in New York, the Potts continued to support their children in Belize, and had them live in and maintain the house, until the oldest two moved to the United States and left other relatives in charge of the house and the younger children. Over the years, as Mrs. Pott

managed to become a US permanent resident and then later a citizen, she would be the one traveling back to Belize most often, followed by Mr. Pott when he became a US permanent resident. They continually improved on the house, to the point where they have now found use for most parts of their lot, with a brightly painted wall enclosing a meticulously kept back porch and garden, and a house that has been vastly expanded from the original structure. Inside, the Potts have since their return to Belize completely redecorated and in many ways recreated the living space of the house they had occupied in Queens while they were in the United States. They have made the kitchen with cabinets and appliances that they brought back with them, installed air conditioning, and set up the living room “just as it was in New York,” with comfortable sofas, a formal dining area, and several display cabinets where they keep their china and other knick-knacks on display.

While the Potts take pride in how they have managed to maintain and improve their dwelling in Belmopan, and enjoy how they have set up the inside of the house, it is the outside of the house and the people who have occupied the house over time that is most noticeable to the neighbors and others who live in the area. Most local Belizeans who have lived in a particular area for some time will be able to tell you the situation of most of the houses and dwellings in their immediate neighborhood, however correct or incomplete their information may be. Especially in small towns such as Belmopan and in even smaller villages and individual areas of Belize City, knowing who is who, who owns what, and how specific individuals and families comport themselves is a matter of much gossip and constant evaluation. Speaking to neighbors of many of the returnees thus made it clear who were considered successful, who were admired, and who were looked at with scorn or derision, all depending on the circumstances of their years abroad and how they had managed their properties in Belize in the meantime. Albeit for different

reasons, both the Potts and the Ramoses were described by those around them as successful and as genuinely part of the community, and were generally admired for how they had handled themselves upon return to Belize. Mr. and Mrs. Norales from the introductory vignette to this chapter, along with Mr. Palacio described in the above, were considered in a much less positive light, and the frequent disagreements between them and relatives had not gone unnoticed in the local communities – in fact they had apparently been the object of much gossip over the years.

As the cases described in the above make clear, it is more often returnees who were established in the particular local community before they left, and who have maintained a house that they return to occupy anew, who are most successful and satisfied with their returns, and who reintegrate much more seamlessly into their local communities. This is partly so because maintaining the same house over the years allows for locals and other migrants to evaluate their commitment and efforts over time, and because the migrants who successfully maintain their houses over time do so by being supportive of and in constant contact with relatives, friends, and former neighbors in the area where they used to live, either by investing in their relatives and the community, or by visiting from the United States relatively frequently before making the final move back to Belize. Compared to a newly constructed house that signals success abroad, houses that have been maintained, improved upon, and lived in by relatives with whom the migrants have maintained good relations over time therefore project commitment and continuity to the local community as well. The house thus becomes an important marker of belonging and social standing for both the individual family and their relatives. Finally, the experienced history of the dwelling and its residents become part of the local history that returnees ‘come home’ to participate in anew.

## **Unplanned Returns and Securing Housing**

The importance of securing adequate housing, and the consequences of not planning the return properly, are most apparent when we look at returnees who were deported from the United States, who had not maintained a social network in Belize, or who otherwise returned under rushed circumstances. From my sample of interviewees, those who were deported from the United States were typically renting accommodations, or living with family members in temporary and dissatisfactory arrangements. Those returnees who had not been building a house in Belize or saving up for their return were renting either apartments or houses, even after having been back in Belize for years, and regardless of whether or not they had returned to Belize voluntarily. Finally, those who had returned under rushed circumstances, like the women I interviewed who had come back to Belize after a difficult divorce or other personal difficulties, or returnees who came back to take care of ailing family members, were typically living with either parents or other relatives for extended periods of time before moving on their own, if at all. These findings were also confirmed by informal talks I had with other returnees, as well as from how the deportees I interviewed described the situation of their friends and people they knew who had returned under circumstances similar to themselves.

Big-Ben, whom I described in the introductory vignette of Chapter 2, had lived with distant relatives for the first weeks in Belize after being deported from the United States. He told me that he was shocked by how his cousins lived when he returned, in a small house that was little more than a wooden shack, and that he just could not live like that, as he was used to a higher standard of living in the United States. Shortly after, Big-Ben moved to a one-bedroom apartment in a concrete building on the Southside of Belize City, a ten-minute walk from the barbershop where he had found work. After having lived in the apartment for a while he had talked to the five other tenants in the building and found out that they had in fact all been

deported from the United States, some of them for felonies after serving prison sentences, and others for illegal re-entry or other visa violations. It also turned out that the apartment building Big-Ben lived in was owned and managed by a Belizean migrant who had recently returned to Belize, and who had invested in the apartment building as a nest egg that would eventually secure his successful retirement in Belize. Jean Tillett was in a similar situation, in that she was living with her husband in a wooden house on stilts on the outskirts of Belize City with a cousin of hers and the cousin's two young children. Jean and her husband had both been deported from the United States after multiple minor drug related convictions, and were now both working in a hotel in the city that was owned by a Belizean woman still living in the United States, who had put her sister in charge of managing the hotel. Jean knew the woman from her time in the United States, and was therefore able to get a job as a chambermaid in the hotel, while her husband worked nights as a watchman. Both of them were extremely frustrated about being back in Belize, and felt that they had been pushed out of the United States, even though Jean's husband had served in the United States military. In Belize, they were not able to get their own place because of their meager income, and with little or no support from relatives in the United States they were both struggling to get by.

Such intersecting but disparate migration histories of those who manage to return with success and those who find themselves in much less fortunate circumstances were by no means singular in my study. In fact, there was a clear pattern of settlement for deported Belizeans, most prevalent in Belize City, where those who had been deported after having served prison sentences in the United States ended up living temporarily or long-term with relatives in sub-standard housing conditions in the city or on the outskirts. Some deportees later moved on to even worse living conditions by themselves or plainly ended up on the streets, unless they

managed to find work or other means of sustaining themselves, either by financial support from relatives in the United States, or by engaging in criminal activities to secure an income.

Apart from having to report to the local police station every week for several years after having been deported to Belize, deportees also have a very difficult time finding work or securing funding for any entrepreneurial project they may want to engage in, due to the stigma that deportation carries in Belize. In addition, local Belizeans as well as returnees who have come back to Belize voluntarily often treat such deportees with scorn, and complain that they never had an interest in Belize before they were deported, and that they “messed up” and did not take advantage of the opportunities that were given to them in the United States. They are therefore considered a strain both on Belize and on relatives abroad, because they are not able to contribute to local economic life while at the same time being fully or partly dependent on relatives in the United States who could have otherwise supported other relatives in Belize. This perception is especially relevant to deportees who came to the United States at an early age and became acculturated in the United States without maintaining or establishing relations with people in Belize. When they arrive in Belize they therefore stand out, and their expectations often clash with local perceptions of them, and family members’ reluctance to support them over the long term. These clashes are often most apparent with regard to housing, as the example of Big-Ben illustrates, and it is usually an issue that has to be resolved for such deportees to be able to develop sound relationships with their relatives in Belize over time. For Big-Ben, being able to find work in Belize and living in his own small apartment were not only signs of personal progress for him, but also allowed him to rekindle and develop relations with distant family members that would commend him for “doing alright” while also acknowledging that they were happy about not having to support him anymore. At the same time, it was clear that Big-Ben’s

relatives in the United States were still supporting him financially, and that many of his phone card conversations with them were strained and revolved around their unwillingness to support him indefinitely. Finally, it is important to mention that while this situation of return because of deportation is not exclusively a male problematic, it is overwhelmingly men who find themselves deported after having served prison time in the United States. Consequently, such deportees reinforce negative stereotypes of deportees more generally as younger male “Belizean-Americans” who “messed up” in the United States and have yet to contribute anything to Belize.

For other deportees who have typically been deported for illegal re-entry to the United States or other visa violations after spending shorter periods of time in the United States, the situation is markedly different. They often have contingency plans set up to facilitate their return, should their undocumented stay in the United States come to an abrupt end. Such deportees may also choose to re-migrate after returning to Belize, depending on what they have accomplished in terms of migration goals, such as saving money enough to begin construction on a house in Belize, sending their children through school, or saving up enough funds to start up a small business venture that they may have planned for. Furthermore, as they have not been deported for major crimes they are most often not required to report to the local police station every week, and they are therefore less likely to stand out as deportees, with all the stigma that such a categorization would carry. Furthermore, a sizeable number of these deportees are women, which adds to the complexity of this group overall. As described previously, a number of returnees interviewed for this study who stated that they had returned to Belize for “personal reasons” or because of “personal problems” had in fact been deported, most often because of their undocumented status in the United States. This was the situation for the mother of one my neighbors in Belmopan, who one day happily exclaimed, “my ma is back!” when I met her.

Silvia's mother had lived and worked in Houston, Texas for years, but had not managed to regularize her status and become a permanent resident. She had left her daughter Silvia and other relatives behind in Belize, and returned to Belize 'voluntarily' after she had been stopped for a traffic violation by local police who subsequently turned her over to the immigration authorities. Ironically, this happened only weeks after she had helped a set of friends from Belmopan purchase a used car in Texas that they drove down through Mexico to Belize. While in the United States, she had saved up money to finance the construction of her house in Belize, in which her daughter was now living, at times alone or with other relatives staying with her. When Silvia's mother was forced to leave the United States she therefore returned to a situation that she had at least planned, if not hoped for. Although she was working to support her family in Belize and build the house that she planned to eventually return to live in, the timing was not of her choosing. Nevertheless, her daughter Silvia was happy to have her back, and they both looked to remain in Belize, at least for the foreseeable future.

The prospect of returning to the family home in Belize is precisely what made some migrants return to Belize without having planned to do so. While they may have left with the intention to return later, they had not taken any specific steps to plan their return properly, but were instead confronted with particularly stressing circumstances in the United States that made 'coming home' a very attractive option for them. At other times, migrants who had no set plans to return to Belize to live would return because a family emergency required their presence, and then eventually decide to remain in Belize. This was the case for Jeanne Castillo, as described in the introductory vignette to Chapter 3, who also found that staying on indefinitely in Belize after visiting her ailing grandmother afforded her the opportunity to put some distance between her and her ex-husband, whom she had recently divorced in the United States. Jeanne decided to stay

on in Belize while keeping open her option to return to the United States where her children were living with her sister. She eventually decided to rent a house in Belize City rather than take over the house of her grandmother, or otherwise buy property in Belize that would have limited her spatial and financial mobility. As in Jeanne's case, the decision to remain in Belize and give up residence in the United States is made only gradually by many returnees who initially come back for temporary visits, and not without going through a period of adjustment and reflection.

For other returnees in similar situations it is precisely the access to family land or the ability to stay with relatives or in houses that they may have purchased themselves as investments early on that makes coming back to Belize to live an attractive option. This was the case for Leon and Julie, who each had both initially returned to Belize because of personal reasons, without having made long-term plans to return to Belize to live. Leon had returned to Belize to settle the issues related to the family properties in Belize City and family plots in other parts of Belize after his mother passed away. After some weeks in Belize, Leon decided to stay on for a while, which over time turned into a concerted effort on his part to return to Belize to live while still maintaining his work involvement with a movie production company in Southern California. After a while living in his old family home in the old part of Belize City, Leon moved north of the city to a smaller village, where he met Julie, who had just returned after seventeen years in California. Julie had come back to Belize after a hard break-up of a long relationship, and she also left behind a large credit card debt that she could not see the end of. Her parents had listened to her cry and complain over the phone, and urged her to "come back home" with her two young sons to get back on her feet. Once back in Belize she found what she described as an "inner calm" and decided to stay on and live with her parents for a while. Julie and Leon are now married and live at Leon's house north of Belize City with her two sons, close to Julie's parents'

place. While Leon is trying to make Belize his primary residence, Julie has grown personally and established her own business in Belize after getting a break in life by coming back to Belize to stay in her parents' house for a while.

A common thread in the situations described in this section of unplanned returns is the importance of family networks, and how such relationships, if maintained properly over time, provides access to acceptable housing upon return. At the same time, it is often in matters of housing that many returnees who did not initially plan to return to Belize to live encounter the most clashes with relatives living in Belize. In this way, this section demonstrates that there is a clear relation between continuous transnational practices, maintaining family networks, and securing acceptable housing upon return, even if the return was unplanned to begin with.

### **Summary**

This chapter has analyzed how returnees secure stable living arrangements upon return to Belize, whether or not they came 'home' voluntarily. By including involuntary as well as voluntary returnees, this chapter has demonstrated the importance of transnational family networks in planning and securing various forms of housing in Belize, depending on returnees' housing situation before migrating, effort and means invested in constructing or maintaining a residence in Belize over time, and subsequent access to and involvement with family members and local communities upon return.

Just as important to this process of securing housing is how houses and the living arrangements generally of returnees become local markers of migration success, community commitment and sustained relations with relatives and other members of the local community that returnees settle in. Here, houses take on their own historical life in local communities and become representative of particular aspects of migrant behavior, such as frequency of visits 'back home' over the years, how they maintain family ties and take care of the relatives left

behind, how well their constructed or refurbished home fits in with or stands apart from existing structures in the area, et cetera.

Finally, this chapter has examined how returnees secure housing upon return from a gender perspective, and found that whereas men most often engage in extensive project of constructing homes in Belize to enhance their status and establish a home for their retirement, women are more likely to engage in maintaining 'home' in a more encompassing perspective, where they establish 'home' as a particular location of nurture and support that they maintain while in the United States. This is especially important for women who leave close relatives and children behind when they migrate and continue to build a bond of support that they can benefit from upon return, and for women who return without much planning for personal reasons to be with close relatives in Belize. At the same time, male returnees are more likely to return to Belize under involuntary or unplanned circumstances where they either could not depend on family members for housing and other kinds of support, or did so at considerable strain to their family relations. The process of return and reintegration is therefore structured by a gendered relationship between securing satisfactory housing and maintaining family ties.

## CHAPTER 5 MAINTAINING TRANSNATIONAL LIVELIHOODS

“You gotta make some of your money from the States, that’s the only way to live down here” Leon tells me as we sit and chat in his wife’s clothing store on one of the main streets in Belize City. His wife Julie affectionately calls him “my wanna-be Belizean” because he left Belize with his parents when he was still a child, became a US citizen in his late teens, and only rediscovered Belize in recent years. After a career as a professional athlete in the United States, Leon is now working for a movie production company in California, and spends half of the year in Belize, where he has a house in one of the villages in the Belize District, close to Julie’s parents’ property. He also has his own foundation that does a lot of charity work in Belize, as well as in Los Angeles. Julie came back to Belize after living seventeen years in California, where she worked for the last nine years as a secretary in a law firm, and opened up her store when she realized that her taste and interest in women’s clothing were assets that she could use to make a living in Belize. She now often goes on trips to the United States and Panama to buy men’s and women’s formal fashion clothes in bulk, which is in particular demand in Belize around the holidays, either for the September Celebrations or around Christmas. While many Belizean migrants in the United States send down the latest fashion and sports apparel to their children and other relatives, Julie notes that the kinds of gowns, evening dresses, and stylish men’s wear that she imports is still very much in demand, and hard to find anywhere else. Leon and Julie have been married for less than a year, and because Julie gave up her US residency when she returned to Belize, they are now filing for her to regain US residency. This will make it much easier for her to travel and buy the clothing and supplies she needs for her store, but at the same time she would have to spend much more time in the United States to maintain her residency. Leon, on the other hand, would like to spend as much time as he can in Belize and

maybe move down permanently, but realizes that this may not happen until Julie becomes a US citizen and is able to travel freely between Belize and the United States.

For returnees, one of the most basic preconditions for a successful return is their ability to maintain acceptable livelihoods in Belize. Most often, this is achieved by bringing back savings or fixed incomes such as pensions from the United States, accumulated after decades in the US labor market. This is most markedly the case if Belizean migrants return to Belize upon retirement, but may also be the case for younger returnees who have earned enough for them to invest in business enterprises or live off savings in Belize upon return. Also, returnees may bring back with them other kinds of resources such as acquired skills, know-how, connections or other material or more intangible resources that will enable them to establish themselves and secure sustainable livelihoods upon return. For, as Elizabeth Thomas-Hope (2002) has observed, livelihood should not be equated solely with work, but comprises social processes that have both social and economic consequences, and includes the assets, capabilities, and activities required to make a living. In this way, the return of emigrants to their countries of origin with the resources they acquired abroad can be considered the ideal end of the international migration cycle, insofar as returnees achieve their migration goals by ‘coming home’ (cf. Nyberg Sørensen, Van Hear, and Engberg-Pedersen 2002).

Although the concept of livelihood has usually been employed to describe local and locally situated adaptive and coping strategies employed by the poor (Helmore and Singh 2001), Sørensen and Olwig (2002) introduce the modified concept of ‘mobile livelihoods’ to capture the way that migrants and their families sustain themselves while in different places: “Mobile populations do not necessarily migrate to start a new life elsewhere, but rather to search out new opportunities that may allow them to enhance and diversify livelihoods practiced back home”

(Olwig and Sørensen 2002: 1). In this perspective, emigrating becomes an opportunity for social and economic mobility that can be developed either at home or abroad. This distinction is important because it interprets migration and transnational practices as coping strategies or strategies of survival that are not limited in scope to transnational practices or confined by one particular locality. Rather, transnational practices are carried out by certain actors or groups as livelihood strategies that are employed under particular historical circumstances. However, this strategy “is not open to everyone because of restrictions imposed by the receiving nations and the cost of the journey and early settlement process” (Portes and Hoffman 2003: 70). To employ the concept of ‘mobile livelihoods’ therefore implies looking at not only different strategies for sustaining a livelihood, but also examining what strategies are open to whom, and under what conditions. In the context of migration and return, this means examining how different types of returnees, with different migration histories, sustain acceptable livelihoods, which in turn can tell us something about the success, or lack thereof, of migration as a viable livelihood strategy.

For some Belizean returnees represented earlier in this study, migration was a way to pay off the mortgage on a house in Belize, as in the case of Mr. and Mrs. Ramos from Chapter 4, who had initially migrated for this reason, but ended up staying in New York long enough to send their daughter through high school and college, while at the same time working enough years in the United States for them to return to Belize with social security and pensions as fixed incomes for their retirement. For others, migration was a means to support themselves and their families in Belize through remittances and other resources transmitted to relatives, while others migrated not out of need, but in order to “better themselves” in other ways that would ultimately benefit them and their families in Belize and improve their socio-economic standing. In this sense, according to Thomas-Hope, livelihoods for transnational migrants

involve working in one place and context, maintaining their families in another, socializing, investing, making purchases of goods and services, engaging in leisure pursuits, each at different points in the network and within the context of different accepted behaviours. Further, aspirations, dreams and goals are played out, or imagined, in the context of different points in the individual's transnational space. The individual can thus live in one place but focus upon another for anticipating or enjoying subsequent rewards (Thomas-Hope 2002: 189).

In the context of return migration, this means that it is not just during the years abroad that individuals “live in one place but focus upon another.” Rather, the transnational social field that is established through the migration process is also engaged upon return to maintain sustainable livelihoods. As the example of Leon and Julie from the introductory vignette of this chapter makes clear, resources and skills are not employed in an exclusively local setting, but used to secure livelihoods translocally, and most often transnationally. In the case of Leon, he had established a foundation that he employed to do charity work in Belize and the United States simultaneously, and also continued to make most of his money from working for a movie production company in Los Angeles. Julie had secured a steady income through her clothing store, firmly located in the heart of Belize City, but traveled frequently to buy clothing and other supplies for the store while drawing on her knowledge of formalwear fashion that she had acquired after living seventeen years in California.

In describing how livelihoods must be understood within a context of transnational migration, Elizabeth Thomas-Hope has further noted that

international migration is not just the movement of people between places, it is a relocation of the individual and, by extension the group, with respect to the global social, economic and political system. Thus migration requires a reshaping of livelihood and, thereby, a reformulation of identity. This is necessitated both by the outward migration and the return (Thomas-Hope 2002: 187).

Migration and return are here described as integrated, and must therefore be understood from a transnational perspective, where today's transnational networks provide alternate modes of sustaining acceptable livelihoods than was the case in previous labor migrations from the late

19<sup>th</sup> century and onward. These earlier labor migrations produced linkages that ultimately developed into social networks within and between countries in the Caribbean, Western Europe and North America. These networks in turn provided for others to migrate, to the point where livelihood and migration have become inextricably linked. For returnees, this also means that people can now return without losing their base and contacts abroad, as these linkages are sustained through the transnational network. In this way, “activities at places of migration origin and destination are seen to be intrinsically linked” (Thomas-Hope 2006: 169). For Belizean migrants who belong to transnational networks that have been established and maintained over many decades, sustainable livelihoods are achieved transnationally, even as people engage in capital-generating activities ‘at home’ upon return. This also means that returnees come to play a socio-economic role in Belize that strengthens and sustains the transnational networks they draw on to sustain acceptable livelihoods for themselves.

### **Realizing Livelihood Goals in Belize**

As mentioned in the introductory Chapter 1, ‘coming home’ was for many Belizean returnees, especially male retirees, the realization of the ideal end of the migration cycle. An important aspect of planning well for the final move ‘back to the source’ is to secure the means abroad to sustain an acceptable standard of living at home, after major investments such as the construction or refurbishment of a house or starting a business are accounted for. This also means that for most migrants who are planning to return, securing a steady source of income becomes a major goal. Among the returnees interviewed for this study who had not yet retired, finding a steady source of income in Belize that would allow them to sustain acceptable livelihoods in Belize was most frequently realized through private enterprises initiated by the returnee, as salaried work rarely lived up to their expectations. However, such business ventures did not always succeed, and returnees then had to decide if they would work for much lower

salaries than what they were used to in the United States, or if they should instead re-migrate to save up enough funds to return to Belize at a later date.

This was the case for Lisa and Brian from Chapter 3, who had come back to Belize so that her parents could help take care of their newborn child. Lisa started taking classes at the University of Belize while trying to find employment in Belmopan, and Brian was trying to put his US experience and skills in construction to use in Belize by setting up and starting a nightclub. Apart from their fractured personal relationship described previously, a contributing factor to their dissatisfaction with being back in Belize was their inability to secure a steady source of income. Lisa was only able to find irregular, part-time employment, and realized that she did not have the access to people that could help her land a full-time government position or a similarly stable job that would make up for the comparatively low salaries available in Belize. Lisa eventually decided to re-migrate in order to maintain her Green Card in the United States, and left both Brian and their baby boy behind with her parents. Brian's attempt at establishing himself in Belize by running a nightclub quickly came to a halt, as it never did take off as a successful venue in town, despite the vast amounts of resources and time that he had invested in making it a top-of-the-line attraction. Some of the reasons for his lack of success was that he was not a known and respected figure on the local entertainment scene, that he did not pay enough attention to what local Belizeans wanted in a night club, and that he did not know enough people in Belmopan to bring out a crowd every Thursday through Saturday nights. Also, Belmopan was by most locals considered a boring and slow town on weekends, and most younger professionals who wanted to party went to the much more vibrant nightclub scene of San Ignacio, a mere thirty-minute drive west of Belmopan. Finally, Brian did not have a valid visa for the United States, and was therefore not able to go there to purchase equipment and décor materials that

would have greatly enhanced the nightclub. Instead, he became dependent on others in Belize to furnish him with such items, at an added expense to him. Brian eventually remained in Belize, and because of his extended pick-up truck and the construction tools that he had originally brought back with him from the United States he was able to subsist locally on various smaller construction and repair jobs for other Belizeans. Still, with the nightclub venture unsuccessful, he considered re-migrating, even as he realized that this carried substantial risks and might not put him in a better situation than where he was in Belize.

For returnees who come to depend on the success of specific business ventures they engage in with savings from the United States, or who depend on a regular paycheck from professional positions in Belize, ‘coming home’ may be far harder to achieve over the long term than they had expected. Most times, such projects fail because of unrealistic expectations, or because working-age returnees have not maintained a network of close ties that would have allowed for their success. This especially holds true for returnees who come back to professional positions in government that may be cut short because of politics, as when the opposition party takes over control of government. But politics extends beyond government civil service jobs to virtually all corners of the economic system of Belize. For example, coming home to work in a professional position at the University of Belize or other government-funded institutions does not guarantee employment beyond the current government term. Also, succeeding in a business venture can very much depend on your government ties to facilitate work contracts, various kinds of permits, and access to particular markets. Such was the case for Evan Flores, who had returned to Belize in the early 1990s with dual Belizean and US citizenship. He initially worked as a tour guide for a well-established tour operator in the western part of Belize, but then decided to start up his own company to offer “a more refined and professional service for North

American tourists.” Evan started out with a used tour bus that he fixed up himself, and as the business did quite well he decided to go to Texas and buy a far superior Mercedes bus to expand his business. Going through customs into Belize he was asked to pay an import tax that was far higher than what he had expected, so he had to leave the bus impounded while he tried to find a way to have the import duty reduced or waived. He knew that he had to go through his area representative or others in government to accomplish this, but he did not know how. In the meantime, a competitor who was good friends with a government minister found out about the impounded Mercedes vehicle, and when Evan was forced to sell it to him because he could not pay the import duty, that import duty was automatically waived for the competitor tour operator. Today, Evan has gotten far better at handling such situations, as he has gradually managed to establish close ties with local politicians, officials, and others in the business community. Today, Evan is a highly successful tour operator in Belize, and also runs a transport service between Belize and the United States that primarily caters to Belizeans in the United States who ship personal belongings, household goods and other consumer purchases back to Belize.

For those who return to work or start up a business, their future options also depend on their legal status in the United States. As in the case of Lisa, re-migrating to maintain resident status in the United States can quickly become a high priority if things do not work out as planned in Belize. Also, in the case of Brian, no longer being able to go to the United States can be a serious impediment to local business success. Further, as in the cases described in the previous Chapter 4 of Michael White and Iris Usher, two younger professionals who had each returned to Belize after they were unable to maintain work visas in the United States, coming back to Belize instead of remaining in the United States illegally can become a way to ensure that they will not be stuck in Belize in the future. Instead, by choosing to return to Belize to

make a living, these younger returnees were able to maintain their visitor's visas to the United States and thus travel there without restrictions. Of course, such choices depend on what options for maintaining acceptable livelihoods in Belize are open to returning migrants. Both Michael White and Iris Usher were able to meet professional and financial goals in Belize upon return, and were otherwise from relatively privileged backgrounds that made their lives in Belize comfortable and made it much more likely that they would continue to achieve sustainable livelihoods in a local context. Under other less successful circumstances, either one of them might have decided to re-migrate to secure sustainable livelihoods, only to return to Belize again years later.

Coming back to Belize to work also carried a particular set of challenges for women returnees, as they often return to work environments that treat men and women unequally. Yvonne Simmons returned to Belize a couple of years after she retired from a decades-long career in the US Navy, and was offered a job shortly after at the director level in the prison system of Belize. Yvonne had come back with a dream of the country of her youth, and wanted to see where she could be of help, now that she had been able to retire from the US labor market at an early age. But her euphoria soon vanished:

All the things that I saw, that I experienced. If I told you I'd have to kill you. [laughing]. I guess I went through a period of disillusionment then. Basically, I walked off the job after one year. You see, in the States I worked for a male-dominated organization, the US Navy, and there were laws, there were rules! There were things you can't do or say to me, you understand? You can't tell me you are gonna pay me less because I am a woman. You can do it, but you have to do it underhandedly, but you can't tell me that you are gonna do that. Right? And I had this man tell me [here in Belize] that that was what he was gonna do. And that didn't sit right with me. And then you have things like sexual harassment that is blatant. I had people working for me that were trying to date me, and they were working for me! I had a boss who was doing his best to... Well, I can't even tell you. Talk about culture shock! [laughing] I remember having to tell this man, "Are you crazy?!" You see? I remember thinking to myself, "You know I can sue you?" Not here. Reality check coming to Belize!

For Yvonne, she was able to walk off that job and eventually found a somewhat more meaningful job in Human Services in Belmopan working with programs for the elderly. Still, she has had to adjust to a Belizean reality where women in positions of power have a hard time getting things done. Also, she was just fine with walking away from the job in the prison system because she was not financially forced to work. As she said, “I am way past that, the competition, the discrimination. I don’t need it. I already retired in the States! That’s not what I came back to Belize for.”

Finally, those who have gained US citizenship while abroad come back to Belize with dual citizenship, and are therefore unencumbered by the national borders that separate Belize and the United States. Some of those returnees, such as Leon from the introductory vignette of this chapter, came to the United States when they were children, and therefore only rediscovered Belize at a later age. Their migration trajectory did not include having to care for relatives still living in Belize, and therefore they typically did not maintain reciprocal ties of obligation to secure the livelihoods of others. Also, because they left either in the care of relatives or to join their parents, they did not have already established lives and individual adult identities in Belize before they left. Consequently, they did not return to a large network of friends or relatives in Belize, with whom they had been in constant touch over the years, but instead had to establish such relations from different starting points upon return to Belize. This led Julie to refer to Leon as her “wanna-be Belizean” in this chapter’s introductory vignette, as she considered his engagement with Belize to be quite recent, whereas she herself had migrated in her early twenties to make a living for herself and support her parents in Belize in the process. Thus, Julie’s ties to Belize had been ongoing and built on reciprocal relationships of support, which also provided a space of comfort for her and her two boys when she was going through a tough

time in California and decided to ‘come home.’ Julie had gained residence while in the United States, but let it expire when she returned to Belize, and instead maintained her multiple-entry visitor’s visa to the United States to enable her frequent travels for clothing and other materials for her store in Belize City. Like Julie, most of the working-age returnees who did not have US citizenship but were legally residing in the United States before their return, find that their travel options become severely curtailed if they are either not able to obtain and maintain a visitor’s visa to the United States, or else decide to re-migrate and sustain themselves and other relatives as undocumented immigrants in the United States. Under both scenarios, being unable to live in one place and visit another frequently severely restricts their options for maintaining mobile livelihoods and for playing a central role in transnational family networks. For those working-age Belizeans who left as adults and return with US citizenship, the situation is much different, as they are able to live transnational lives without the restrictions imposed on other returnees who do not hold dual citizenship. This is especially the case for those who migrated before the early 1980s, and who therefore had the opportunity to legalize their status in the United States under the legal provisions of the IRCA Amnesty enacted by the US Congress in 1986 (cf. Straughan 2007: 264). For those who migrated after this amnesty and have not managed to regularize their status in the United States, planning a successful return to Belize will therefore be increasingly difficult, as they may only be able to realize their return goals by giving up access to the United States. As some of the examples in this section and previous chapters have shown, not being able to engage in transnational practices may make a successful return less likely, and narrow one’s livelihood options upon return.

### **Returning to Work or Leisure**

As already indicated, returnees face different issues related to sustaining their livelihoods depending on whether or not they return to Belize to work, to start up a business, or to retire or

otherwise live off savings. Sometimes, returnees may try to accomplish a combination of all of the above. Leslie Peters, a tall Creole man in his late forties, came back to Belize to be with his Belizean girlfriend, who he eventually married a couple of years later. They had met through common friends when Leslie was visiting on one of his numerous vacation trips to Belize. For the past fifteen years, he had been coming to Belize at least four times a year, either for relaxation or various business deals such as land development projects involving land that his family possessed in different parts of Belize. Leslie knows a lot of people in Belize, and enjoys socializing, attending various cultural activities, and visiting unfamiliar areas of the country. He does not have any close relatives in Belize, as he migrated with his entire family when he was ten years old in 1966. Coming back to Belize was an opportunity for Leslie to “get out of the rat race” of New York City, where he worked as an information systems manager in a global company, and spend more time in the country where he was born, “among people who are very friendly and sincere.” While only going for visits for a number of years, he ended up moving down to Belize permanently in 2000. He invested in a large concrete building on one of the side streets of the main business district of downtown Belize City, and set up apartments on the top floors for himself and a couple of renters, and redid the ground floor to accommodate two stores facing the street. One of the stores he turned into a café that he equipped with an expensive and imposing espresso coffee machine imported from Mexico, to “make the best coffee in town.” He also had a local artist paint the walls of the café to make it resemble the inside of a smaller and much more rustic cabana-style café on a beach, with vistas of the ocean and palm trees on two of the walls. The other store he turned into a beauty salon that his wife took charge of and ran as her business. Both Leslie and his wife enjoy being around people, so setting up a beauty parlor and a café seemed ideal to them. Being right next door from each other they are able to enjoy life

together, even if they are busy at work. For Leslie, running these businesses is not about making money, even if they have both attracted a steady stream of customers. It gives Leslie something to do that he enjoys doing, while also empowering his wife by letting her have her own salon, which she had wanted long before they met each other. In this sense, Leslie has been able to combine work and leisure in Belize, and does not take it too hard if the café is at times not breaking even, or if he is not there all the time to supervise his staff properly. Instead, he hands over a lot of responsibility to the people that work for him, and enjoys seeing them live up to it. Leslie and his wife continue to travel frequently to the United States, most often to South Florida where many of his relatives now reside, including several of his siblings. Because Leslie came to Belize with considerable savings that enabled him to set up a business and still maintain a transnational life style, making a living in the strict sense is only of secondary importance to him. Much more important is his ability to maintain an acceptable livelihood that, although greatly facilitated by his years as a highly paid wage earner in the United States, is all about living in Belize and engaging with the local community in a multitude of ways. For example, setting up the café and salon, Leslie and his wife were able to offer employment to more than fifteen people, who they made great efforts to train properly, and they encouraged them to take active part in making each business succeed. Also, because they are rather centrally located in the business district, they are daily in touch with local Belizeans from all walks of life, and regularly support all kinds of initiatives, including charity donations, sports or school sponsorships, and various small-business food vendors and suppliers that they contract to deliver different kinds of food and beauty items to them on a regular basis. Lastly, Leslie and his wife frequently go to Florida and other places in the United States for visits, and many times they will bring back specific items that are hard to find in Belize for their Belizean friends or employees. For

example, Leslie brought back a Miami Heat basketball jersey to the manager of his café to reward him for doing a good job, and on another trip he spent most of one afternoon in South Florida trying to find a remanufactured part for his friend's Mercedes in Belize, which he gained a lot of points for bringing back to him.

Leslie's case is both an anomaly and a success story. Most returnees who come back to live before their retirement age do not have sufficient funds to live without engaging in some form of income-generating activities. Many of those who come back before retirement age therefore choose to re-migrate after a while. Then again, some retire relatively early in their lives, like Yvonne Simmons from the previous section who retired from the US Navy, or Ivan Andrews from Chapter 3, who retired from the Brooklyn gas company he worked for in New York at 57, although he did not finalize his house in Belize and return to live there permanently until seven years later. Clearly, coming back to Belize with substantial savings, social security and other pensions from the United States presents a big advantage, as such retiring returnees do not need to generate an income in Belize in order for them to sustain acceptable livelihoods. Even so, many retiring returnees come back to Belize with some kind of business plan that will help them generate an extra income, and often do very well. I found ample evidence from the sample of interviewed returnees who had retired from the US labor market that it was precisely because they could realize particular business dreams without the financial pressure to succeed immediately that at least some of them ended up heavily engaged in business ventures that they enjoyed. In realizing these business plans, many returnees would draw on special skills acquired in the United States, or a more generalized level experience of experience abroad that gave them an advantage in certain areas of business. This was true of Julie from the introductory vignette of this chapter, who had acquired a certain taste and sense for formal-wear fashion while living in

the United States, and also knew where in California and in Panama to buy such clothing wholesale and how to import it to Belize with the least amount of hassle from customs. Others came back to combine specific skills with more generalized knowledge and great ideas, such as Lawrence Black from Chapter 4, who had returned to Belize after working for decades as a Teamster truck driver in the United States. He became one of the most successful tour operators in the tourism industry in Belize only a few years after he returned, and kept enjoying running and expanding his business even as he was well into his seventies. Part of his success consisted of a real engagement in his local community, whereby he would constantly try to encourage local partnerships with larger entities, such as government programs or international organizations, to make tourism have a positive impact on the livelihoods of local Belizeans. Also, he tried to combine a particular business model that would attract North American tourists with local development programs, such as when he brought the Rotary Club to Belize and had them open a local chapter, which both secured various local charity and development programs, and attracted international members to Belize as potential customers for his tourism business.

For other returnees who come to Belize to retire, specific business plans may be of a much smaller scale, or fail altogether, for a variety of reasons. Often, retiring returnees may have particular pet projects or dreams of a small business in Belize that simply are not viable any longer, or that do not address specific wants among local Belizeans. In many instances, such misinterpretations of what is or is not a good business idea stem from the fact that such returnees have been absent from Belize for too long to really understand how Belize has changed, or because their business ideas were formed when they were much younger, and therefore did not represent plans that addressed current needs and opportunities. When Al Norales returned to Belize with his ill wife and began refurbishing their house in Belmopan, as described in the

introductory vignette of Chapter 4, he soon realized that he would go through his savings much faster than he had originally planned for, and therefore began to develop a business idea that he had had for years of importing used and new casual men's clothing to Belize from the United States. However, because of his reluctance to travel back and forth between Belize and the United States, he was dependent on friends there to ship clothes to him in Belize, which only happened a couple of times, and with much delay and misunderstandings. Further, because Al did not properly research the market for the kind of men's clothing that he had in mind, his plans soon faltered and he ended up giving away most of the items his friend had shipped down to friends and relatives.

Many returnees who come back to Belize with fixed incomes that can sustain them more than adequately. However, they engage in a multitude of social and economic activities that help them maintain acceptable livelihoods in a broader sense, as they gain satisfaction from contributing to the local community as well as maintaining a certain material standard of living. In such cases, returnees may set up small business enterprises to develop their social life, or engage in a variety of volunteer work that leaves them highly satisfied and socially active in the local community. Such social and economic practices are important for returnees' integration into local communities, and may also include particular transnational activities that they bring to bear on local relationships, such as when Leslie brought back hard-to-find items from Florida to people around him in Belize. How these practices relate to the reintegration of returnees into Belizean society will be the focus of Chapter 6.

### **When Transnationalism Is Not an Option**

As discussed earlier in this chapter, returnees who are no longer able to travel unimpeded to the United States often find that sustaining themselves in Belize without a fixed income from the United States can be very difficult, which in turn leads some returnees to re-migrate. As most

returnees realize, 'coming home' also requires a readjustment to a more simplified material life style compared to what they were used to in the United States. Then again, the prospect of leading a 'less complicated' life is precisely the attraction of 'coming home' for some returnees. When returnees no longer have access to the US labor market to maintain incomes, their success upon return very much depends on their ability to convert the assets that they may have brought back with them into sustainable livelihoods. As we have seen in several examples so far in this chapter, not all are successful in achieving this.

Returning Belizean migrants who were deported from the United States represent the group of returnees whose ability to maintain mobile livelihoods has been most obviously curtailed. Still, deportees continue to exist within transnational family networks that often help them financially and without whom they would be unable to maintain acceptable livelihoods in Belize. Also, deportees may work hard at maintaining transnational families even as their movement between Belize and the United States has been severely restricted. An example of this is Big-Ben who was first introduced in the main vignette of Chapter 2. He was deported from the United States after his Green Card was confiscated by US immigration officials when he tried to re-enter the country after a holiday trip to Belize in the spring of 2004. His wife initially tried to stay with him by driving to Belize from California in their large SUV, but was forced to go back to the United States after three months because she could not find work in Belize and was unable to secure a livelihood for herself there. Big-Ben was very fortunate to find work as a hairdresser in Belize after a couple of weeks there, but he was completely unable to sustain himself on the meager wages he made from this job. He therefore came to depend on various family members in the United States for financial support, including his wife, the mother of his two children, and his own mother, as well as others who would come and visit him in Belize from time to time.

While he was unable to contribute anything in material terms to these transnational relationships, he was clearly well-liked by those who kept supporting him, even if such support over the long term would prove to be a strain on their relationships. Further, because people close to him would start visiting him in Belize, he also became an important bridge for other Belizean migrants back to Belize, as they now had more immediate personal reasons to visit. While they were there to hang out with Big-Ben, they would go on trips together around the country, which gave both Big-Ben and those that came to visit him an opportunity to see different parts of the country, and to visit distant relatives together as well. In terms of financial support, Big-Ben was hoping that he could sometime soon convince one of his family members in the United States to help him open a small restaurant in Belize City, as that would give him better prospects of sustaining himself there instead of the intermittent paychecks he received from the hair salon where he worked. Although Big-Ben's mobility was severely restricted, his efforts at sustaining an acceptable livelihood in Belize were still transnational, and involved considerable mobilization of a transnational family support network.

The necessity of work to sustain themselves is most pronounced among deportees, even if they rarely subsist on work wages alone, as outlined in the previous example. Deportees are increasingly dissuaded from re-migrating to the United States because of tougher sanctions and higher risks associated with border crossing, and often find themselves cut off from relatives in the United States and in Belize that have grown tired of supporting them financially. They therefore find themselves competing for scarce jobs and comparatively low wages with other Belizeans in Belize, which is made even more difficult for them because of the stigma attached to the deportee status. That they compete for low-paying jobs with other Belizeans adds to local Belizeans' frustration with deportees, as they are described as not contributing, and having left

their families behind when they migrated, only to return to Belize with nothing. In this way, they are seen as having violated the expected norms of migration and return, even if their deportation was for no other reason than being caught without a valid visa in the United States. Still, to the extent that deportees have not cared for people in Belize while they were away, and otherwise do not bring back savings with them to establish themselves in Belize upon return, they are viewed quite negatively by other Belizeans. This is particularly an impression that local Belizeans have of male deportees, even if this stereotype belies a much more complex situation that may also include women deportees, as shown through several of the examples presented in previous sections of this study.

Deportees are not the only returning migrants who over time forego transnationalism as an option in maintaining acceptable livelihoods in Belize. Some may give up their US permanent residency upon return, as was the case for several of the men in returning couples discussed in previous chapters, where the woman was the one who had gained US citizenship and was therefore able and willing to travel frequently and maintain contact with children and other relatives in the United States. Also, Belizeans may decide to return after some time in the United States, either because they missed home, because they had satisfied their curiosity or met their immediate migration goals, or simply because the United States was not for them. Several Belizeans I talked to who did not consider themselves returnees had in fact gone to the United States to visit or live for shorter periods of time, but in the end decided that they would rather continue their lives in Belize. My host in Belize, the younger professional Belizean I lived with in Belmopan, had himself been to the United States for six months when he was still unsettled, and had stayed with various family members in different cities. He related to me how shocked he was in the beginning when he found out how some of the Belizeans he visited in New York

lived, in what he described as “disgusting, noisy and crammed apartments.” He, like many other Belizeans, decided that he could not live and work like this, and decided to come back to Belize when his visitor’s visa expired, instead of overstaying and working there without being able to visit Belize.

Other Belizeans who have been living in the United States for much longer may not have much in terms of family and friends that make them want to keep traveling to the United States. For them, coming back to Belize does therefore not represent much of a sacrifice, just as giving up the kind of livelihood that they could maintain in the United States, with all the material trappings that comes with it, is not enough to make up for the kind of money they could potentially make. A returnee who had come back after years in the United States, but with no apparent desire to ever go there again was Mr. King. When I first met him, he had been back for about a month in the house where he had lived before migrating in the mid-1980s. His house was still in disarray, with paint peeling from the walls, most of his belongings still in crates and barrels, and only a big screen television and an armchair to furnish the living room. Mr. King told me that before he left Belize he had been a schoolteacher, but decided to join two of his sisters, some uncles and friends in southern California to try his luck and make some money that would let him come back to Belize to retire. He had come to the United States on a visitor’s visa for vacation, but ended up staying there permanently:

The influence of friends encouraged me to stay on, so I stayed on. Since I was single so I said to myself I had nothing to lose, I don’t have to worry about a family. I started out doing a little janitorial work, and then moved on to landscaping and that kind of thing, first in California and later on in Florida before I decided to return.

Mr. King had during two decades in the United States not managed to regularize his status and become a permanent resident. Consequently, he had not been back to Belize in all this time, although he had communicated frequently with friends and relatives in Belize, and had also

supported relatives by sending various forms of remittances throughout the years, and by letting them stay in the house that he left behind. A couple of years before he came back to Belize, he had followed the advice of Belizean friends in the United States to come join him in Florida, where they were working in landscaping and other light outdoors work, but because of a declining economy there he was unable to find a regular job, and therefore gradually depleted his savings before he finally decided that his best option was to return to his house in Belize. For Mr. King, going back to the United States, even for visits, does not seem a viable or attractive option at this point. Without a visitor's visa he finds the whole ordeal too costly and risky, and he does not have many relatives that he is close to living there at this point. In his late fifties now, Mr. King plans to go to Guatemala for any health care or surgery that he might need in the future, and otherwise get by in Belize as best as he can. Although his house needs a lot of work done, he has little resources left to draw on. But as he says, "Here I don't need much. Just the vegetables I can grow in my garden, and maybe try and cultivate the piece of land I have outside [of town] to bring to market and get a little cash for taxes and so." In this way, 'coming home' was not the successful completion of the migration cycle that he had hoped for, but given the circumstances he decided that he would be more comfortable in a Belizean environment that was less demanding and less costly. On the other hand, as so many other returnees who come back without legal permit to stay in or visit the United States, 'coming home' does indeed become the 'completion of the migration cycle,' as they find their movement and livelihood options confined to Belize.

### **Summary**

This chapter has examined how Belizean returnees maintain transnational livelihoods upon return, understood through the conceptual framework of 'mobile livelihoods' introduced by Sørensen and Olwig (2002), Thomas-Hope (2002) and others. Returnees' capacity to sustain

acceptable livelihoods has also been analyzed in relation to their migration trajectories, legal status in the United States, and how they sustained themselves and secured their future livelihoods while in the United States. While some returnees come back to Belize with savings, pensions and other fixed incomes from the United States, those without such stable incomes tend to sustain themselves most successfully by engaging in various transnational and entrepreneurial practices. Such livelihood practices can be either facilitated or curtailed by their legal access to the United States through travel and livelihood opportunities, and therefore provide voluntary and involuntary returnees with different set of transnational and local options for sustaining themselves over time.

This chapter also discussed in detail the different circumstances that face returnees who come back to work or to retire, even if there may be considerable overlap in individual cases. Based on the discussion of returnees' legal status in the United States, the capacity for and interest in maintaining mobile livelihoods differs greatly for voluntary returnees and deportees, and also varies along gender lines, to the extent that women may be more focused on securing their legal status in the United States due to family considerations described in previous chapters, which in turn enables them to secure mobile livelihoods for themselves and their families.

Finally, this chapter viewed livelihood as comprising social processes that have both social and economic consequences, and encompassing assets, capabilities, and activities that people engage in to make a living. In the perspective of transnationalism, this means that returnees may engage in various activities in several locations to sustain acceptable livelihoods, and generate incomes across borders. They may also bring back a variety of assets that will either provide for them (such as business earnings, savings, pensions and other fixed incomes) or enable them to develop sustainable livelihoods in Belize (such as a vehicles, tools, machinery, or particular skill

sets). For those who have established themselves transnationally over time, by keeping in contact with the particular return locations, by maintaining transnational family networks, and by securing continued legal access to the United States, maintaining mobile and transnational livelihoods as an integral part of securing a successful return and reintegration experience is made that much easier.

## CHAPTER 6 REINTEGRATION AND TRANSNATIONALISM

Mr. Ramos had been a school teacher and a political representative in the early 1970s in the small coastal town where he was born in southern Belize, and when he did not get re-elected he and his wife decided to migrate to New York City to work and save up enough for them to pay off the mortgage on their house in Belize. The years passed, they got settled and had a daughter, and they realized that they could stay on and save up for their retirement instead of going back to Belize to work. In the meantime, they first supported an aunt staying in their house in Belize and taking care of it, and later Mr. Ramos' brother, followed by a niece of Mrs. Ramos, and this way it was always available for them when they started coming back to Belize for visits in the mid-1980s. They gradually upgraded the house and built a two-story extension next to it, which they began to fill up with furniture, consumer items and books that they shipped home in the last years before their final return in 1997. When they returned they gave the niece a plot of land and built a concrete house for her there. Their only daughter remained in New York City, but later sent her two daughters to Belize to go to school while Mrs. Ramos took care of them. In their local community the Ramoses are today well-known, both for who they were before they left, their distinctive house in the middle of town, and what they have achieved while in the United States. Also, they have become involved in the local school system through their granddaughters, and have set up the top floor of the extension to their house as a library that can be used by students in town. Mrs. Ramos also grows vegetables for sale on a plot of land they have outside of town, and Mr. Ramos occasionally rents out the used U-Haul truck that they drove most of their belongings down to Belize in. In their retirement Mr. and Mrs. Ramos are still very active, and take pride in keeping their good name in the local community, maintaining their house and garden, and seeing their grandchildren grow up alongside them.

The kind of seamless reintegration that Mr. and Mrs. Ramos achieved by preparing well for their return and building relations locally over time is by no means the norm for returnees, in Belize or elsewhere. Most returnees interviewed for this study remarked how the process of reintegration often took them by surprise and left them frustrated. At the same time, those who had the least difficulty of ‘coming home’ were those who had consistently stayed involved with the particular locations and people that they had left behind when they migrated. Furthermore, those who enjoyed their return the most, and the esteem of the local Belizean population as well, were not necessarily those who ‘reintegrated’ well into the local community, but those who had over time built a transnational social field of relations that they assiduously maintained even after returning to Belize to live.

In recent review articles of return migration and transnationalism (Plaza and Henry 2006; Plaza 2008), seven main factors have been outlined that increase the likelihood of successful reintegration for returnees: length of stay abroad; socio-economic status and available resources; the ‘home’ society’s capacity to accommodate returnees; the degree of returnee identification with ‘home’; the transnational connections returnees maintained while abroad; extended family members in communities that returnees move back to; and the frequency and intensity of return visits by returnees before their ‘final’ return. I outline these areas below in summary form, with brief comments accompanying each point.

*Length of stay abroad, and the returnee’s stage in the life cycle.* This is particularly important in identifying the different circumstances of return that younger returnees face, compared to those who come ‘home’ to retire. In the case of Belize, individuals who have been abroad for relatively few years and come home to find work or establish themselves professionally most likely will not find that they have ‘lost touch’ with Belize and people there.

Older returnees who have not been back to Belize for years or even decades will almost certainly have this experience, unless they have maintained close relations with Belize and traveled there often during their years living in the United States. On the other hand, Belizeans who entered the United States as undocumented immigrants before the mid-1980s may have had easier access to residency through the IRCA Amnesty program than those who migrated in recent decades. Thus, access to legal status in the receiving country may also be influenced by years spent abroad.

*Socio-economic status and available resources.* This is related to many of the points presented in Chapter 5 on ‘mobile livelihoods’ and how people sustain themselves upon return. The more resources returnees are able to invest over time before their return in the communities they eventually plan to return to, the better positioned they are to gain status and be viewed as successful migrants upon return in the local community. Also, returnees’ ability to invest in and contribute to local socio-economic life upon return has a direct impact on their local integration, as will be shown in the following sections of this chapter.

*The ‘home’ society’s capacity to accommodate returnees.* This point relates to the political, social and economic stability and general conditions of the country that returnees come back to, and how such conditions shape returnees’ lives upon return. To the extent that most interviewees for this study voiced their frustrations with Belizean society, such complaints mostly concerned what they saw as a politically corrupt system, where practical matters involving government or other public institutions would either be very difficult to achieve, move very slowly, or only be possible if you “knew someone” or outright paid off elected officials. Thus, the general conditions of society, and returnees’ ability or willingness to adjust and accommodate for such frustrating experiences can influence their reintegration.

*The degree to which returnees have not become alienated from their origin communities.*

This is especially relevant for those who have returned to Belize for personal reasons, but may otherwise have a very negative impression of Belize more generally, in line with the previous factor regarding society's capacity to accommodate returnees. It is also an issue that is important for those who have come back to Belize involuntarily, such as deportees, or others who were forced to return for other reasons. Such returnees may often feel trapped, and therefore not interested in making an effort at reintegrating themselves into Belizean society, just as local communities may not be very welcoming toward such returnees who "don't want to be here to begin with."

*The degree to which returnees have maintained transnational connections with their communities of origin while living abroad.* This point has been elaborated already throughout this study as the main contributing factor to Belizean returnees' success at 'coming home.' It also includes an important historical perspective to the analysis, as 'reintegration' is seen as a process that begins with how returnees were situated at 'home' even before they migrated.

*The presence of extended families in the communities that returnees come back to.* That migrants maintain ties to relatives at 'home' may ultimately be the reason why they choose to return as well. At the same time, it is the continued maintenance of ties to family members that establish returnees 'at home' over time, and thereby make them known to local community members even before they move back. In Belize, returnees who do not have such pre-existing ties to people locally are pejoratively referred to as "Belizean-Americans." They are often viewed as 'outsiders' that can justifiably taken advantage of, given their relative wealth compared to what most local Belizeans are able to generate over time. Finally, even when returnees have invested a lot of effort into building relationships with local communities before

their return, the absence of family members in Belize may be a contributing factor for their re-migration, as when returnees' children and grandchildren continue to live in the United States, and older relatives in Belize pass away.

*The degree to which migrants have made return visits over the years before making the final move back.* This last factor is closely related to the first observation related to years spent abroad, and brings a more specific set of transnational practices into focus. For while continuous contact with family members and other in local communities of origin can help secure migrants' status and presence at 'home,' an actual physical presence must also be maintained to establish particular aspects of self in relation to communities of origin, and to achieve a successful return. Such was the case in most of the examples relating to the construction or maintenance of homes in Belize, where a lack of travel to Belize also meant a lack of control over numerous aspects of the process. Also, infrequent or non-existent visits before the return move may be especially relevant for those raised abroad who decide to 'return to the source' later in life. This was the case for Leon from the introductory vignette of Chapter 5, and for Big-Ben from the introductory vignette of Chapter 2, although they came back under very different circumstances. Lastly, the ability of migrants to make return visits largely depends on their access to residency or citizenship in the United States. In this way, legal integration into the destination country can be said to facilitate transnationalism, and thereby make increase the likelihood of a success process of return and reintegration for those who choose to 'come home.' This last point is also related to the first factor facilitating return of years spent abroad, as those who migrated before the mid-1980s may have had easier access to legal status in the United States, thereby fostering more frequent return visits, which in turn facilitated the final move back to Belize for returnees.

The areas mentioned above do not define an exhaustive compendium of factors that increase the likelihood of a successful process of return and reintegration, but does provide an overview of many aspects that may come to define returnees even before they make the ‘final’ move back. Upon return, a successful reintegration further depends on returnees themselves, and how they actually interact with the local community. Much of the participant observation that I carried out in Belize made evident how returnees made particular efforts at reintegrating themselves locally, a process that often changed their perspective on ‘home’ after their initial period of adjustment. The following sections will discuss such attempts at reintegration, in relation to transnational practices, local participation while still in the United States, community involvement and volunteer work, and how returnees relate to how they are defined locally by others.

### **Reintegration and Transnationalism**

While Mr. and Mrs. Ramos from the introductory vignette had a fairly easy time reintegrating into their community in Belize upon return, this was only so because they had worked hard over the years to maintain or even enhance their status in their ‘home’ community while living in the United States. How they managed to do this was also described in some detail in Chapter 4 in a discussion of how they had close relatives live in their house in Belize while they were away. However, for most returnees, adjusting to life in Belize and reintegrating into local communities is often frustrating, and can cause returnees to re-migrate to the United States. As discussed briefly in Chapter 1 and in the first section of this chapter, concerns about reintegration have also been a consistent theme in most previous studies of return migration, even as the concept of reintegration masks the reality of the transnational social fields that migrants often come to occupy and operate in. This is so because the concept of reintegration still assumes that specific demarcations such as ‘home’ and ‘abroad,’ ‘present’ and ‘absent,’ and

‘insider’ and ‘outsider’ remain valid for analytical purposes. According to the concept of transnationalism, on the other hand, such distinctions become blurred, as migrants participate in the socio-economic life of several localities simultaneously. In this way, insofar as migrants maintain such transnational ties and practices that involve people and localities ‘back home,’ they can still be part of ‘home’ even while living ‘abroad’; they can still be ‘present’ in a multitude of ways, even while physically ‘absent’; and they may still be considered ‘insiders’ despite the fact that they do not currently live there, while others who are physically present in the local community may be considered ‘outsiders.’

Despite these analytical distinctions, most returnees conceptualize their return in terms such as ‘home’ and ‘abroad,’ and make efforts to “reintegrate” and “make a difference” in the local communities that they return to. What this chapter demonstrates is that such efforts at reintegration must be understood in both historical and in transnational terms. This is so partly because it is the degree of transnational practices that migrants have engaged in over time that often come to determine whether or not they are successful in their efforts at reintegrating into local communities, and partly because local communities come to understand the kinds of valuable contributions that returnees can make to local communities in transnational terms as well. This may conflict with the ideas of “settling back in” that returnees bring back with them, as they may come back to enjoy life locally, while locals expect them to contribute transnationally. Mr. and Mrs. Ramos recalled that when they finally returned to Belize with their belongings in the used U-Haul van, one of the first days they invited people from the neighborhood over for drinks and food to officially mark their return ‘home.’ Although this celebration was by all counts low-key and not ostentatious or elaborate in any way, it was nevertheless very important for them to mark the event of their homecoming, and be able to

relate this to others in the future and show the pictures that were taken to commemorate the event. In much the same way as Miss Thomas' mother's 90<sup>th</sup> birthday celebration mentioned in Chapter 3 marked Miss Thomas' transnational credentials and commitment to maintaining the transnational family while recentering the family home in Belize, so did the small celebration of Mr. and Mrs. Ramos' homecoming mark their commitment to the local community, while at the same time celebrating their migration success. Accordingly, this celebration was just as much about marking the 'completion of the migration cycle' for them, while re-affirming their ties within the community that they had been an integral part of before they left. Yet many of the local Belizeans around them come to them with requests that acknowledge the Ramoses' transnational connections. Sometimes people will stop by and ask them about "life in the States" and what to prepare for if they want to migrate themselves, or just stop by to exchange gossip about relatives and others from the local community who now live in the United States. Other times individuals will ask them to bring back particular items from the United States next time Mrs. Ramos travels to visit their daughter, or to bring specific food items or other items from Belize to relatives living in New York when she goes up. Also, Mr. Ramos has become very popular for letting people in the local community either rent or borrow his U-Haul truck that they brought back all their belongings in from the United States, and has also made a few substantial contributions to the school library by donating books that he had bought cheaply in the United States and had shipped down from New York.

In other cases, returnees remain much more transnationally oriented and less well-integrated locally for such a homecoming celebration to even make any sense. Still, this may not mean that they are unable to come back to Belize and contribute and find themselves at ease and welcomed in the local community. Recall the example of Leon from the introductory vignette of

Chapter 5 on transnational livelihoods. Leon practically grew up in the United States, and only became interested in moving back to Belize much later. Even after having moved back, he remained firmly grounded in the United States to secure a livelihood through his involvement with a movie production company, and spent the year more or less evenly divided between the United States and Belize. Still, Leon was well-known and respected locally because of what he had achieved transnationally, both in terms of his career as an athlete in the United States, and because of his charity foundation that operated in Belize as well as in the United States. That he had not kept a continuous presence in Belize over the years mattered less in this context because his engagement with Belizean society was so much greater when he returned, and because local Belizeans knew him through other means than close personal contact.

Most returnees are not able to establish the kind of reputation or renown from afar that Leon accomplished, but must do so through concrete interactions with other Belizeans. This further means that returnees must have been engaged transnationally with Belizeans or local communities in Belize over the years, in ways that establish their names locally in Belize. Studies of transnationalism have often focused on migrant identities and the social and cultural ties that migrants maintain to the nation-states of their origins and destinations. Lacking has been a focus on how people engage in migratory processes to gain sustainable livelihoods, and how such processes are played out in personal networks through everyday practices. This is problematic because it is often through the more mundane and intimate transnational practices that transnational relations and networks are maintained. This could be when Belizeans who have already migrated help others migrate by giving them advice on how to cross the border, by putting them up in their homes in the beginning of their stay in the United States, or by helping them get their first job. Or it could be when migrants expand their relations with Belizeans who

have stayed behind, as godparents to the children of good friends in Belize, or when returnees help out others in their transnational network by taking care of their homes in Belize, such as Mrs. Ramos did for many of her Belizean friends who were still residing in the United States. As has been noted previously in this study, these more mundane and everyday transnational practices are often carried out by women, to the extent that it is often women returnees who wish to remain transnational and maintain the linkages to children and other networks of friends and family in the United States, whereas male returnees are most interested in establishing themselves locally through public displays of migrant success, such as having a foundation to carry out charity work projects in Belize, or building large houses to impress local Belizeans. Such gendered differences are important to understand if we want to know how returnees try to reintegrate into Belizean society while at the same time maintaining multi-stranded ties with other relations and localities.

### **Local Participation While in the United States**

As many of the examples and cases presented in previous chapters have made clear, returnees who do not make frequent return trips during their years abroad, who do not plan well for the final move back, and who do not maintain relations with family members and others in the local community in Belize, often have a very difficult time reintegrating into Belizean society. These findings are also echoed in other studies of return migration, as was made clear in the discussion above of Plaza and Henry's (2006) list of factors that increase the likelihood of integration into 'home' communities. Here, the lack of return visits and minimal maintenance of transnational ties while abroad were listed as particular impediments to social integration upon return. Conversely, those are generally described in the literature as successful returnees are those who have made frequent visits home, have maintained or extended transnational ties with 'home,' and who have planned well for their return in all sorts of ways. For example, in Chapter

4 I analyzed how migrants who had maintained a home in Belize that they had occupied before they left, were much more likely to easily reintegrate into Belizean society upon return. This was so because having a personal stake in Belize made returning migrants think about and interact with a local community, a specific piece of property, and a specific set of people in Belize that tied them to that particular location.

Having a house in Belize, or constructing a home that the migrant plans to return to, makes it far more likely that he or she will make frequent return trips to Belize, insofar as he or she has gained legal status in the United States. For those who migrate without direct recourse to legal status abroad, the practice of maintaining or building a home in Belize, or even maintaining family relations through personal visits 'back home' is greatly impeded, and is often postponed until legal status in the United States is achieved. Even so, visiting 'home' on shorter trips is not the same as moving there. Many Belizeans living and working legally in the United visit Belize for the holidays, such as for Christmas, for vacation during the summer months, or for the month-long September Celebrations that include Independence Day and Carnival. The experience of visiting Belize on such trips is often one of relaxation, joy and celebration, and Belizean here 'come home' to celebrate and consume 'home,' visit with family members, and rekindle old ties. Those who are also planning to later return to Belize to live may use such occasions to deposit money in Belizean bank accounts, buy land, or make plans to start construction on the planned house. Those who have close relatives living in Belize or who have a house they are maintaining or renting out may also engage in various smaller repair and refurbishment projects, pay any outstanding taxes, or make sure that rent has been deposited properly into their bank accounts in Belize. Still, the experience of 'home' that migrants get from such visits often gloss over or mask many of the problems that they may face once they move

back to Belize to live. Belizean migrants who come back for visits typically perceive themselves as Belizeans who can much better relax and be themselves in Belize, contrary to their experience in the United States, where they often end up as marginalized and racialized ‘others’ who work at the lowest rung of the socio-economic ladder. On visits to Belize, this feeling of ‘coming home’ is reinforced by the contrast to the United States, and by the often festive and temporary circumstances related to their visit. What they do not realize is that by migrating they are also viewed differently in a local context, and are therefore often described as “Belizean-Americans” by local Belizeans who do not have an intimate relationship with them. Once returnees make the ‘final’ move back, however, they become part of everyday life of that particular locality, which may look very different from a return visit when everyone there is happy to see a long-absent friend or family member who is visiting from the States. During my fieldwork I observed numerous such visits by migrants or returning migrants, and I was also able to interact with them and talk to them during many of the family visits and more festive celebrations that they had come back to Belize to participate in. In addition, I was able to talk to local Belizeans both during the visits and after the migrants had gone back to their work lives in the United States. It was apparent that while local Belizeans genuinely appreciated the visits and whatever presents, greetings, good company and fun these visiting Belizeans brought with them, they also used the opportunity to evaluate and comment on them behind their backs or after they had left. In this sense, there is a considerable amount of ‘impression management’ going on during these return visits. Returning migrants try their best to enjoy themselves and project success abroad and happiness about being back in Belize, while local Belizeans put on a good face and act welcoming and polite toward the “visiting Belizeans from America.” While such interactions between migrating and local Belizeans may be genuine and reflect warm relations that have been

maintained through such and similar visits and exchanges, in the cases where this is not the case it is very rarely expressed outright during short visits. For example, migrants may gloss over the kinds of hardships that they have had to endure in the United States to support family members living in Belize, while family members in Belize may be resentful of migrant relatives who they find do not take care of them properly, or because they perceive them as having had all the opportunities for a better life in the United States without giving back much to the community 'back home.' Yet there is little to gain for either side by bringing these differences out in the open during short return visits, so latent conflict may not come to migrants' attention, even if their behavior is constantly being evaluated by others, either during their visits to Belize or in their absence. In the end, this means that if returnees use their previous shorter visits to Belize as a measure of what life will be like once they return to Belize to live, they will most likely be disappointed and only gradually come to understand why they are often seen as 'outsiders' in the local communities they try to reintegrate into. After all, it is not only Belize that has changed in their absence, but also themselves and others' perception of them. Such perceptions, in turn, are largely structured by how returning migrants have interacted with other Belizeans, both in their continued involvement with particular people and localities in Belize, and how they have participated in a transnational social field among other Belizeans at home and abroad.

### **Community Work in Belize**

Apart from the personal relationships that become important to returnees for their return and reintegration, returnees also interact with others in a wider social sphere in Belize that comes to define or help their reintegration into local communities. Perhaps unsurprisingly, most of the returnees interviewed for this study who had come home voluntarily engaged in a wide variety of volunteer work in various local organizations, church groups and the like. This was especially so for those who had retired from the labor market in the United States, but was also the case for

many of those who had come back to establish small business ventures in Belize. Likewise, some returnees who had returned to work or who were living off savings while planning for the future became involved in different kinds of community service activities as a way to become accepted in the community and make friends, and as a way of “giving back.” Generally speaking, voluntary returnees have a genuine interest in Belize and the local communities in which they grew up, and are looking to extend their social life beyond their immediate set of friends and relatives, often for quite idealistic reasons. As one male returnee in his forties told me about his involvement with a local youth program, “I do community stuff to help the situation here because I live in this community, and we are the ones that need to help the young people going in the right direction.” Less likely to engage in volunteer work were those who had been deported or who had otherwise not made plans to return to Belize. For these returnees, finding work and securing an income was much more important to them, and their sense of “giving back to the community” was often overshadowed by their bitterness about not being with their families or in the familiar context of the United States. Furthermore, the social stigma that being a deportee carried often made them keep a low social profile in their local communities.

For Leon, who was featured in the introductory vignette of Chapter 5, his career as a professional athlete in the United States had made it possible for him to establish a foundation that carried out charity work in Los Angeles as well as in Belize City. Since he decided to spend most of the time in Belize with his wife Julie, he had helped various projects in Belize City. As he explained “this way I can give back to the community in which I grew up, and where I now belong.” In the past couple of years, his foundation had helped pay for the construction of a new chapter of the local church that he and his wife belonged to; he had donated school materials and other resources to the school of his wife’s two children, and for Thanksgiving he had set up a

food line for the poor and homeless of the city so that they could have a “proper turkey dinner” and join in the celebration. Thanksgiving has become an increasingly popular holiday in Belize, even if it is not celebrated officially, and despite the fact that it is a celebration whose content and historical underpinnings are uniquely American. But it is precisely because of the increasing presence in Belize of individuals who have a lived experience of the United States that such celebrations gain prominence. Combined with the ever-present American cultural influences that increasingly dominate the Belizean socio-cultural landscape, Thanksgiving is fast becoming an annually celebrated event in most transnational Belizean families. On Thanksgiving during my fieldwork, I began the day in the company of Leon and his wife Julie, as they were busy preparing for the “turkey dinner” for the homeless, while Julie kept her clothing store open and greeted her customers with a “Happy Thanksgiving!” when they entered the store. Around lunchtime I headed over to see Big-Ben, who had promised to find us the best of the growing number of local restaurants that were serving Thanksgiving dinner on that day. As we were eating what can best be described as an eclectic version of a Thanksgiving dinner at a small eatery close to his work place, several of his friends called him on his cell phone to wish him a happy Thanksgiving, as did his wife and his daughter from Los Angeles. Big-Ben was deported for life from the United States, and had few prospects of going there to live again, and consequently had very little to be thankful for in relation to the United States. Instead, Thanksgiving for Big-Ben, as well as for many other Belizeans with relatives living in the United States, gave him an opportunity to reconnect with family and friends with whom he shared a transnational experience grounded in both Belize and the United States. In the evening when I came back to Belmopan I went to the house of Miss Swasey, first introduced in this study in Chapter 4, who herself had lived in the United States for up to two years at a time on five

different occasions, and whose youngest son now lived and worked in California. She had also prepared a Thanksgiving meal, but had opted for chicken instead of turkey, and made her own side dishes as well. Still, she always celebrated on the day, because “I will always be thankful for the States. I have very good memories and many friends from there, and the money for this house, that came from there. Hard work, yes, but I was always thankful for the opportunity.” In addition to Miss Swasey’s own sojourns to the United States, her youngest son had migrated as well, and was now sending money back to Miss Swasey for particular improvement and extension projects related to the house. When her son called from California that night, it was therefore another affirmation of her bond with the United States that had made her life in Belize possible. What these examples from how Belizeans celebrate Thanksgiving show is that ‘community work’ in Belize extends far beyond the physical borders of the country to incorporate populations that relate to several locations simultaneously. In the process, a celebration like Thanksgiving that by all counts is uniquely American comes to hold special meaning for communities in Belize, insofar as it is celebrated in subtle ways by individuals who use it to reaffirm the ties that exist between Belize and the United States.

Many returnees come to find real satisfaction in doing volunteer work back in Belize, and they often get a very immediate sense of “giving back to the community” while also expanding their social circle. What they also often find is that doing volunteer work puts them in touch with other returnees who they end up befriending and spending more time with on an individual basis. This is not surprising, since returnees often have similar migration experiences that set them apart from local Belizeans, and similar reasons for returning to Belize to live. Furthermore, contrary to most local Belizeans who have to channel their energies into paid work to make a living, returnees frequently return with savings and other means of sustaining themselves, rather

than having to depend on an income from full-time work. This is especially so for returnees who have retired from the labor market in the United States and have come 'home' to live off their savings and any social security and other pensions they may have as fixed incomes from the United States. For those returnees who aim to establish themselves as small-scale business entrepreneurs, such as hotel owners, tour operators in the tourism industry, store owners, or in paid public or managerial positions in charge of others, engaging in volunteer work may also be a way to make clear their intentions to support Belize while sustaining themselves, and draw on the ties that they have established over time to become successful. This was the case for Lawrence Black, who was first introduced in Chapter 4, in a discussion of how he and his wife had first lived with her parents upon return to Belize, and shortly after moved into the house across the street that belonged to one of their friends from California. Lawrence was very successful with his own business as a tour operator in the tourism industry, and had also become involved in a wide variety of volunteer organizations, among them Rotary International and the Audubon Society, in order for him to tie environmental protection, tourism, and community work together:

I came down and I joined the [local chapter of the] Tour Guide Association and became a tour guide. Then I got elected as vice chairman, and my chairman at the time, Mr. W\_\_\_\_\_, decided to start a subcommittee to deal with all this land back there called M\_\_\_\_\_, and I was in charge of that. And in 2002 Minister B\_\_\_\_\_ [from the Government of Belize] and I signed the documents turning 8000 acres of land into a national park. So things like that I got involved with.

Lawrence had continued to build his tour business and worked with local youth groups to educate them about environmental issues, and also encouraged them to train to become tour guides themselves. And just like some of the cases mentioned earlier where tour operators or other returnees who had started up their own business upon return, Lawrence soon knew that the only way to be successful in Belize was through the people you knew:

Coming back to Belize is a wonderful thing because I can see where I can make a difference. I got involved with the Belize Tourism Board. Back then it was Miss W\_\_\_\_\_ that is now married to Gordon B\_\_\_\_\_. And I told her, you know, we are related. Because your uncle was married to my wife's sister? And then she made the connection. Because Mr. R\_\_\_\_\_ is her uncle and married to my wife's oldest sister. And all these years we were first cousins, you see? So I said, you and I, we are family. Then she moved to [another environmental organization], and that's when I got 38000 dollars to do a rapid ecological assessment for my national park back there, through her influence, you see? Giving me direction on how to do it.

In this way, Lawrence has been able to draw on his family ties to effect change in the local community, while at the same time drawing on his transnational experience to attract different international organizations to do community work in Belize. Finally, he continues to make a living in Belize, and uses his experience with Americans and his years driving large semi trucks on the US interstate road system to run a successful tourism business in Belize, focused on eco-tours and community involvement.

What the analyses of specific cases of 'community work' presented in this section show is that especially older returnees come back with a genuine desire to contribute to the local communities in Belize to which they return. What the examples also show is that such acts of community work may often build upon, necessitate, or include transnational networks of relations that returnees draw upon to make local contributions. In this way, 'community' comes to entail specific practices related to Belizeans, but may at times only exist within a larger transnational framework of relations. This was the case for many of those entrepreneurs who drew on transnational experiences or networks to bring about local community initiatives in Belize, but also included those who celebrate Thanksgiving as a transnational community event that is used in subtle ways to reaffirm linkages between Belize and the United States.

### **Cultural Roles and Competencies**

Most returnees come back to Belize with a mindset that is very different from that of their years in Belize before their departure. Still, the inclination for them is to think of Belize and how

they “feel right at home there” in particular ways that gloss over the dramatic changes that both they themselves and Belize have gone through since they left the country. This is especially so for older returnees who have been away for decades, but may also apply to younger returnees who have either been away for a long time without visiting Belize, or have undergone major personal changes that have changed their general perspective on things. It is interesting to note that many of the influential intellectuals and politicians in Belize today came back to Belize in the 1960s and 1970s after getting their degrees from progressive universities in Great Britain, North America, and the Caribbean. Many of them came back with a vision for Belize, which was still under British control at the time, that was profoundly affected by the critical perspectives on colonialism and underdevelopment that they had been exposed to abroad. Such changes in outlook can also happen on a much smaller scale for ordinary migrating Belizeans, but with similar effects. One of the Belizeans I spent time with during my research noted that when his mother first came back to Belize after spending less than two years in the United States,

she came back with a plan. It was like her eyes were opened to the world, and she came back to Belize with a vision of what she wanted to accomplish in life. For herself and our father, and for us children. Unfortunately our father never understood that vision she had. He was just fine the way he was. But our mother basically saw what could be accomplished if you had a plan. I think that was very gratifying and very frustrating for her to realize.

Such plans may of course be closely related to why people migrate in the first place, and speak to the drive to accomplish broad or particular goals that they are usually not able to realize in Belize. This also means that while Belizeans may migrate to realize such goals, their outlook is changed in the process, and they return with a different outlook altogether. Many times, this change in perspective results in returnees wanting to become engaged and “make a difference” in the local community they return to, as described in the previous section. In other words, they may return to Belize with particular ideas about social change and how to accomplish it, and

with specific ideas about what Belize looks like and how it can be improved. Even if this may be most manifest in younger returnees who return to Belize for idealistic purposes, it may just as well shape how older returnees become engaged in various business enterprises and volunteer work upon return, as discussed in the previous sections of this chapter.

At the same time, local Belizeans have certain expectations about who returnees are, what they have to offer, and what their role in Belize should be that might at times be at odds with their own plans. This is particularly the case if returnees come back with ideas about social or political change, which can often lead to local clashes and conflicts and even cause frustrated returnees to feel pushed to re-migrate. However, it is also relevant in the context of everyday interactions between returnees and local Belizeans. For while returnees may want to engage themselves locally, many Belizeans view returnees as representing transnational practices and networks, and look to returnees for access to such networks. This may be in the form of asking for migration advice and help in finding a place to stay and a job in the United States, or it may be in the form of having returnees find and bring back specific items for them when they travel to the United States. In this way, most returnees come back with a wish to “reintegrate” and fit back into a particular local community, whereas local Belizeans clearly view them as different, shaped by their migration experience. One local Belizean woman expressed it to me this way:

I always tried to figure out how you can tell if [Belizean] people are from the States – because you can, you always can tell. I think I know, it’s because they just look neater, just with that extra shine, or the shirt still tucked in, I don’t know. But you can always tell.

Although this is a perception that may not be in complete accord with reality, it shows that local Belizeans do care about and notice those who “have come back from America.” Often, misperceptions about their potential contributions to Belize may make interactions with other Belizeans strained. This was the case for Miss Thomas from the introductory vignette of Chapter 1, who one of my neighbors referred to as “the old American lady who lives by herself.” When

Miss Thomas arrived back in Belize and went to the customs office to settle the inspection of her belongings that she had shipped down from New York, the customs officer exclaimed, “what a pity, you’re too old!” Miss Thomas understood this statement to reveal a general attitude among Belizeans concerning returnees that when they are younger they can contribute more in terms of financial support, skills, business investments, and family care, whereas if they return to retire in their old age they will become a burden on family members and society over the long run. Miss Thomas found this statement both ignorant and offensive, because although she was in her late sixties when she returned, she came back to take care of her old mother, to build a house, get involved in “all manner of volunteer work and church and so.” She then went on to describe several of the business ideas she had been working on since coming back to Belize, among them an idea to set up a “small drapes, blinds, and curtains business,” where she would employ local women to use the eight sewing machines she had imported to Belize as part of the shipment of her belongings from the United States. In this way, the public perception of especially older women returnees is that they will become a burden on others in Belize because, having reached a certain age, they are no longer able to make public contributions to the development of the country beyond the financial injection that their monthly checks from the United States bring to the economy. However, as we have seen throughout this study, Miss Thomas and other older returnees like her contribute locally in numerous ways that include family care, volunteer work, extending transnational family networks, and starting successful business ventures. Although some business plans are unrealistic or poorly planned and therefore never take off – Miss Thomas’ curtains business is still very much on the drawing board – those businesses that do become successful typically engage local Belizeans while building on the transnational capacities of returned Belizeans.

## Summary

This chapter has analyzed the relationship between local reintegration and transnational practices, two seemingly opposed concepts that have been shown to be related for Belizean returning migrants as they plan their return and ‘come home.’ The chapter also outlined and critically examined some of the main factors listed in previous studies of return migration that increase the likelihood of successful reintegration for returnees, such as length of stay abroad; socio-economic status and available resources; the ‘home’ society’s capacity to accommodate returnees; the degree of returnee identification with ‘home’; the transnational connections returnees maintained while abroad; extended family members in communities that returnees move back to; and the frequency and intensity of return visits by returnees before their ‘final’ return. By doing so, this chapter has expanded the discussion of reintegration to include a more nuanced understanding of the transnational practices that returnees engage in. These practices often end up extending the transnational social field that returnees and local Belizeans occupy, as returnees draw on their transnational experience in engaging with local communities in Belize through volunteer work, starting up businesses, and finding other ways to effect change and make a positive contribution to Belize. This happens even as returnees may focus on local ways of achieving social reintegration into Belizean society, when often it is the access to transnational networks and resources that local Belizeans view as the most substantial contribution that returnees may make to their local lives and livelihoods. The concluding discussion in the next Chapter 7 will pick up this discussion of reintegration and transnationalism in relation to family life and the reproduction of transnational social networks, in which returnees play a large role.

## CHAPTER 7 CONCLUDING DISCUSSION

It is a hot and muggy afternoon in Belmopan, and I am on Mr. and Mrs. Pott's covered veranda overlooking their garden. Mr. Pott is one of the returnees that I had originally met in 1999 during my MA fieldwork, shortly after he had bought and driven a yellow school bus with all their belongings down to Belize from New York City. Five years later I was able to reconnect with him, and had several opportunities to interview him and his wife, and learn more about their family and what it was like for them to have returned to Belize to live. This particular day we are merely hanging out, with Mrs. Pott relaxing in the hammock, and Mr. Pott describing the gradual stages of expansion that their house and yard has gone through over the years, when we are joined by three young adult visitors who have come to say hello to the Potts. They are all pleasantly surprised to see each other, and I find out that they are two nephews and one of their friends who have come to Belize from New York City for a vacation, to explore the country of their parents. Upon greeting the Potts, one of the young men jokingly mentions that their parents have admonished them to "make sure to stop by and greet uncle Rudy and auntie Ivy in Belmopan, or else there will be consequences." This is not the first time they have come to visit Belize, but apparently it is the first time they have come without their parents, and everyone wants to make sure that they do things right on their trip. Mrs. Pott takes the opportunity to catch up on how her side of the family is doing in the United States, and otherwise gets the latest gossip from New York and the neighborhood in Queens where she lived with Mr. Pott since they bought a two-story house there in 1990. They all seem genuinely happy to see each other, and the two nephews talk about some of the places they have gone on their trip so far, and get advice on travelling in Belize from the Potts before they leave.

This study has examined how returnees like the Potts have ‘come home’ to Belize after spending years or even decades abroad. As in the analysis of their case in the different examples brought forward in several of the preceding chapters, the focus of this study has been on the family, and how the family is reproduced and reconfigured as a social unit through gendered transnational processes of migration and return. This study has also employed a historical and situational perspective on individual migration trajectories to cast light on the process of return and reintegration, and has focused on migrant narratives and life histories to bring out the gendered and often complex ways in which Belizean migrants maintain transnational family networks, both during their migration and in achieving a successful return to Belize. The study has also demonstrated the relevance of the ethnographic method and the collection of narratives and life histories in elucidating processual aspects of transnational migration and return that would have been either overlooked or dismissed as anecdote in a survey-driven study of return and reintegration. Finally, by focusing on narratives and behaviors that centered on family life, this study has foregrounded more intimate and everyday aspects of transnationalism that are often overlooked in other studies more concerned with formalized transnational practices and the transnational identity politics of ‘home.’ Contrary to the resulting focus in such studies on transnational practices that are often dominated by male migrants, this study has included women and the importance on family-centered practices to account for transnational relations and networks that are central to the successful process of migration and return for both male and female migrants who decide to ‘come home.’ Such a focus on the family and on everyday transnational practices can be criticized for downplaying the political and larger socio-economic aspects of globalization as they relate to transnationalism and return migration. Therefore, Mahler and Pessar’s (2001) concept ‘gendered geographies of power’ was introduced in Chapter

1 to place such intimate transnational practices within a larger framework of power that asks us to see transnational family life through a prism of differentiated positions within overlapping systems of geography, gender, class and ethnicity within the world system. In this understanding, the gendered experiences of Belizean return migrants, and the relative success of their migration and return, must be framed within a global context that places Belizean migrants, and female migrants in particular, on the periphery in geographic, national, socio-economic, and racial terms, vis-à-vis a male-dominated Western hierarchy of power that they have interacted with over time as migrants seeking sustainable livelihoods in the United States.

In this concluding discussion, I begin by providing a summary discussion of the major research findings of each chapter of this study, and then proceed to outline some of the theoretical implications of this study for our understanding of transnational family networks and the role that returning migrants play in them. I then go on to discuss the research implications for understanding transnationalism in relation to future generations of migrants and returnees. For as we have seen throughout this study, and in the example of the Potts in the vignette above, returnees may come to play an important role in recentering Belize as ‘home’ for other Belizeans abroad, either other migrants, or second-generation migrants who rediscover ‘the source’ of their family heritage through increased visits to returnee family members in Belize. In the subsequent section, I discuss some of the more practical implications of the research findings of this study. I focus in particular on implications for other returning migrants, transnational families, and local communities to which migrants return, and on more generally applicable policy implications for both Belize and the United States. This leads to the final section of this study in which I stake out an agenda for future research, based on the findings and understudied areas of interest of the current study.

## Research Summary

In analyzing the return and reintegration of Belizean migrants from the United States to Belize, this study asked as its central research question how transnational behavior over time informs and structures the relative success and satisfaction of Belizean returnees in their efforts at ‘coming home.’ The premise of this question was that in the same way that migrants make use of, and in the process strengthen, transnational family networks to facilitate their migration, so does such networks and relations with specific localities and interests back in Belize facilitate their eventual return. Conversely, just as migrants continue to maintain ties with their communities of origin, and thereby over time establish ‘transnational sociocultural systems’ (Sutton 1987), so too do returnees maintain ties with the communities and people that they leave behind in the United States when making the ‘final’ move back to Belize. This is especially so when returnees have been living abroad for decades and have come to establish family relations there over several generations. Thus, to understand the process of return and reintegration, we must account for the ways in which migrants have established themselves within emerging transnational sociocultural systems over time. The relative success and satisfaction of Belizean returnees were in this study shown to depend on how well returnees had planned for their return, which could most easily be carried out by those who had migrated within an already established transnational family network that facilitated their legal integration into the United States, and thereby made it easier for them to engage in transnational practices. This study further showed that the maintenance of transnational family networks was usually a domain dominated by women migrants and returnees, to the extent that they were the ones who returned for personal reasons related to family care and maintenance, whereas men more often returned to Belize to realize personal goals of achievement, by ‘completing the migration cycle’ and return to display migrant success abroad in order to gain prestige in the local community in Belize.

Chapter 1 and Chapter 2 of this study provided the contextual background in terms of theoretical, methodological, and historical frameworks for understanding the ethnographic analyses in the following chapters. It was especially the historical analysis of the continued migration stream from Belize to the United States in Chapter 2 that demonstrated how specific histories of migration helped shape emergent transnational social fields, which were in turn accessible to particular parts of the Belizean population at different points in time. Also, the first two chapters accounted for the ethnographic focus on two distinct return locations, Belize City and Belmopan, and provided historical, socio-economic and demographic contexts to elucidate the differences and ties between those two locations.

The following Chapter 3 showed the continued relevance of transnational family networks for returnees' ability to successfully return and reintegrate into Belizean society. At the same time, the chapter demonstrated how the migration process fundamentally changes family relations and creates spatially dispersed households across borders. Finally, it was through an analysis of transnational households and families that gender differences in the migration and return experience became most visible, as women tended to draw on and maintain transnational family networks as a means to facilitating their migration, and as a main reason for their eventual return to Belize. Because of the centrality of transnational households, family networks, and gender relations to this study, Chapter 3 can thus be described as containing foundational analyses that have ramifications for the understanding of the subsequent chapters.

Chapter 4 examined the centrality of transnational social networks for returnees in their efforts at securing adequate housing upon return to Belize. Returnees who had already established themselves in Belize before they left, or otherwise continued to maintain a family home there, were most likely to maintain a transnational network that would continue to tie them

to local communities and family members in Belize. Still, the importance of maintaining transnational family ties was also relevant for those who were constructing homes in Belize and needed to return frequently or have key family members involved in the process. Even for those who had not planned their return, or who were otherwise forced to return to Belize, being able to draw on family ties to secure housing was often the only way to secure housing initially.

In Chapter 5 I introduced the concept of ‘mobile livelihoods’ (Sørensen and Olwig 2002) to account for the transnational ways in which returnees most often sustained acceptable livelihoods for themselves and others upon return to Belize, and generated income across borders. The argument presented in this chapter was that mobile livelihood practices for returnees can be either curtailed or facilitated by their legal access to the United States, and therefore provide voluntary and involuntary returnees with a different set of options for sustaining themselves over time. Also, returnees who were deported or otherwise restricted in their livelihood options upon return would often come to depend on transnational linkages for their livelihoods.

Chapter 6 analyzed the relationship between local integration in Belize and transnational practices. Returnees draw on their transnational experience in engaging with local communities in Belize through volunteer work, starting up businesses, or finding other ways to make positive contributions to Belize and bring about social change in local communities. Even as returnees may focus on local ways of achieving social integration, it is often access to transnational networks and resources that local Belizeans view as the most substantial contributions that returnees may make to the local communities.

### **Transnational Family Networks and Future Generations**

Alejandro Portes and Ruben Rumbaut (Portes 2001; Portes and Rumbaut 2001) claim that involvement in transnational practices appears to be a one-generation phenomenon, at least in the

United States, and may only be of significance for those immigrants who use such practices to “bypass both labor market constraints and nativist prejudice” (Portes 2001: 188). Furthermore, Portes and Rumbaut (2001) found in their study of the immigrant second generation in the United States “a very rapid process of acculturation” (Portes 2001: 189), as the children of immigrants purportedly only engage with their parents’ homeland as “a place of recreation and as symbolic support for their identity” (Portes 2001: 190). In a more nuanced discussion of Caribbean transnationalism, Dwaine Plaza (2008) has recently noted that the long term future of return migration to the Caribbean remains unpredictable, because it is still too early to tell if second and third generation Caribbean men and women living in the international diaspora will over time become more or less involved in the homelands of their parents and grandparents. Plaza remains skeptical of whether or not return migration to the Caribbean and transnational practices involving the ancestral homelands will endure, because he assumes, as does Portes and Rumbaut in the above, that the migration stream that brought immigrants to North America or to Britain will somehow dry up or come to an end. This is so because “the pool of traditional ‘returnees’ will become fewer and fewer” (Plaza 2008: 12). Still, Plaza also assumes that inter-generation transmission of transnationalism does take place, and provides examples of younger generations of Caribbean descendants who, faced with discrimination and unemployment abroad, may decide to ‘return to the source.’ Such evidence of second-generation returnees and other forms of transnational practices among descendants of immigrants in North America and Europe can also be found in the recent edited volume by Potter, Conway and Phillips (2005), where several studies discuss cases of ‘homeland rediscovery.’ In the context of Jamaica, Heather Horst (2004; 2007) has compared Jamaican returnees from Britain and the United States, stating that one of the important differences between Caribbean diaspora populations in Britain and in North

America is that whereas the migration stream to Britain came to a virtual halt in the mid-1960s, it continues unabated to North America. Therefore, the transnational linkages and social networks that tie locations such as Jamaica and London or Los Angeles are different, as transnational linkages become more difficult to maintain in situations where there is not a steady stream of newcomers from the 'home' societies. In contrast, for those situations where migrations are sustained over time, transnational social networks are reproduced in the process, and migrants consequently continue to engage with their 'home' localities, even beyond the first generation of the migration stream.

In contrast to the predictions that transnationalism will come to an end as immigrants automatically assimilate into the host society, or that return migration somehow fades as the migrant streams come to an end and descendants of immigrants lose interest in the countries of their parents, this study provides a different perspective, in that transnational practices and return migration are understood within a larger framework of transnational social networks. Importantly, as in the case of Horst's Jamaican migrants to the United States, the Belizean migration stream to the United States has not stopped, and there is no indication that it will do so in the future. To the contrary, it is precisely because of the transnational social networks that have been maintained and solidified over six decades that a transnational social field has emerged that ties together multiple locations and a variety of people across the borders of Belize and the United States. In this sense, second generation immigrants in a host country also must be seen as belonging to households that are often transnational, and to transnational social networks that are maintained over generations. Therefore, even if second generation immigrants (a term that in itself precludes transnational notions of 'home' as it focuses on integration into the host society) were to quickly 'assimilate' into the host society through the education system, the

majority culture, and so forth, they would still belong to households and social networks that are intergenerational and transnational. And even if they show no interest in ‘returning to the source’ to live or even visit, they may still be surrounded in their family networks by people for whom that particular locality has special import. This is especially so, and will continue to remain the case, as the migration stream continues to exist and thereby reinforce transnational social and family networks. As we have seen in several of the examples in this study, Belizeans who grew up in a US context and became thoroughly integrated and in many ways ‘Americanized,’ also maintained linkages through their family networks to Belize that became increasingly important to them at particular points in time, and in the cases analyzed in this study resulted in their return to Belize to live. The contribution of this study is therefore closely related to how it has analyzed such returns, as differentiated by gender, dependent on returnees’ engagement in transnational practices over time, and structured by their legal status in the United States.

### **Local Outcomes and Policy Implications**

Although this study only covers a relatively small sample of returnees, it has included a widely representative group of voluntary and involuntary returnees that have been shown to engage in transnational practices and operate within transnational social networks to facilitate their return and reintegration.

One of the major implications of this study for local development and integration of returning or transnational migrants is that it is not so much whether or not Belizeans leave the country for better opportunities abroad (they do), but under what circumstances they leave and how they maintain ties with Belize over time (if at all) that should be a concern for the local government and for local communities more generally. As this study has shown, migrants who were well established before leaving, and had interests such as a family home or other assets or family relations to take care of, would typically continue to engage in various transnational

practices involving Belize during their years abroad. This in turn helped facilitate their return, as they had been more invested in Belize during their years abroad. The question of reintegration must therefore be framed in a wider context of migration and transnational engagement with Belize over time, rather than solely focus on the specific acts associated with the return. At present, the Belize Government allows for duty free importation of personal belongings and other household items that returnees bring back home with them, but still taxes the importation of vehicles and other equipment, as discussed in previous chapters of this study (see also Babcock and Conway 2000). Likewise, shifting governments have encouraged Belizean migrants in the United States to invest in Belize through various development programs, but with little success, just as a number of voluntary hometown associations exist in the United States that engage in various scattered development projects in local communities in Belize. These different attempts at leveraging the social and economic capital of Belizeans abroad must be considered fairly conservative, and very few of the returnees interviewed for this study had been actively engaged in government development programs before their return, but instead chose to provide ‘development’ in Belize through their family networks and transnational linkages.

This study also emphasizes that there is no immediate contradiction between immigrant legal integration in the host society and participation in socio-economic, cultural- and family life in the communities of origin. This is especially so because legal integration facilitates transnational mobility and engagement, to the point where transnational practices makes a successful ‘final’ return to Belize all the more likely. This of course does not say anything about the potential cultural or social integration or assimilation of immigrants in the host society, as the study was focused on those who return. Even so, many returnees who came back with dual Belizean and American citizenship status did not see this as contradictory, as most especially

older returnees had lived about half of their lives in each country, and also had family and friends in both places. In this way, this study adds to ongoing discussions in society about citizenship in the age of globalization and transnational migration. The study shows that legal integration and dual citizenship may actually facilitate increased integration in both places, rather than privileging the sense of belonging to either one country.

If migrants who maintain transnational ties to 'home' and have secured legal status in the United States that further facilitates transnational mobility and travel are more likely to achieve a satisfactory move back to Belize, the obverse may also be true: that migrants who have not managed to regularize their status in the United States may not return at all, unless they are forced to do so. From a US immigration policy perspective, this means that restrictive measures to enforce stricter border controls and more adequately account for the population currently residing in the United States may not bring any real results unless the growing undocumented population is somehow accounted for and given a change to regularize their status. Based on the findings of this study, such changes would also mean that immigrants would be more likely to consider returning 'home' if they did not have to abandon friends, relatives and future access to the United States by doing so. While some undocumented immigrants in the United States may decide to return to Belize during economic downturns when jobs are scarce, others may choose to stay for the same reasons: that they would face even more dire job prospects in Belize, while precluding themselves from the US labor market in the future. This consideration is especially valid for those undocumented immigrants in the United States who can depend on extended family networks for support in times of need, so as to survive a temporary crisis and remain ready to resume work during an upturn in the economy. This study has also demonstrated the importance of transnational family networks, both for securing migration success and for

enabling a satisfactory return to Belize. The continued consolidation of such family networks would have been much more circumscribed if it had not been for the family reunification provisions of the Hart-Celler Act of 1965 that amended the US Immigration Act of 1924. This also means that although the family reunification provisions of US Immigration Law have been tightened in later years, such provisions still at least implicitly recognize that migrants engage with and provide support for relatives within transnational family networks. Consequently, undocumented migrants cannot be seen as solely engaged in labor migration, but must also be understood in a wider context of transnational family networks. In this sense, any changes to US Immigration Law should maintain such family reunification provisions as are still in place, while providing some way for undocumented migrants to regularize their status. This is so as to regularize undocumented migrants in the United States while still acknowledging the transnational family networks that they are part of, but also to over time make it easier for migrants to return home if they so choose. It is not coincidental that the wave of return migration to Belize escalated in the years following the IRCA Amnesty enacted by the US Congress in 1986, as more Belizeans were able to regularize their status and thereby travel unencumbered between the United States and Belize.

### **Agenda for Future Research**

Given the above discussion of the larger theoretical, ethnographic and policy implications and questions raised by this study, three areas of potentially rewarding future research related to Belizean return migration should be mentioned here. These are all foci that could be undertaken as direct extensions of the present study, and if undertaken would add valuable insights into issues of transnationalism and family life for Belizean migrants.

*Transnational Belizean families in the United States.* As this study has shown, returnees to Belize engage in transnational practices and maintain their transnational family networks to

facilitate a success process of return and reintegration into Belizean society. The study also demonstrated that over time, returnees may come to play an important role in their transnational family networks because of their relocation to ‘the source.’ This was seen in the introductory vignette to this concluding chapter in the case of the Potts and their young visitors from New York, and could also be seen in how Miss Thomas from the introductory vignette of Chapter 1 was able to recenter herself in her family network because of her ability as a returned migrant to organize the transnational celebration of her mother’s 90<sup>th</sup> birthday. Yet because the present study was focused on two specific localities within Belize, the actual transnational connections to a wider transnational family network were only explored insofar as they took place in Belize. To understand the role that re-migration or return migration plays for transnational family networks, it would therefore be necessary to include related family members dispersed throughout the United States, or Belizean communities more firmly established in particular locations in the United States, to account for how return migration and the ensuing extension of the transnational linkages to Belize affect their transnational participation.

*Intergenerational cultural transmission of transnational practices.* As already noted, earlier studies of the second generation in host societies were found to be lacking, in that they did not adequately take into account the larger context of transnational family networks and the continued migration that helped sustain such networks. Consequently, the continued transnational practices of younger generations of immigrants or children of immigrants was cast in doubt. Yet as this study has shown, such intergenerational transnational participation and transmission exists, particularly in migration traditions that have allowed for the establishment of strong transnational family networks. Although primarily focused on Belizeans in the United

States, such a study could also be expanded to include a comparative perspective from Belize, focused on intergenerational relationships within transnational family networks.

*Comparative perspectives on return migration to Belize.* While the present study has provided a general perspective on return and reintegration for a widely representative sample of Belizean returnees, it has for the most part been focused on returnees to either Belize City or Belmopan. To put this study into a larger comparative framework, other similar studies with different foci could add great depth to our understanding of return migration within a specific country context. For example, comparative studies of return migration to either rural or urban areas of Belize, or of returnees' reintegration into much smaller communities, could bring out issues of return that were not foregrounded in the present study. Also, return to Belize from other host countries than the United States could provide great context for comparing the differentiated migration streams of Belizeans that exist on the margins of the United States sphere of influence. As we have seen in Heather Horst's comparative study of Jamaicans returning from Britain and the United States mentioned previously, the specific circumstances of migration to either country make for the formation of very different transnational experiences, which in turn influence the return experience.

### **Conclusion**

This study has analyzed the implications of transnational practices for the successful return and reintegration of Belizeans from the United States to Belize. Rather than focusing on transnational practices concerned with political projects and diasporic identity constructs in transnational deterritorialized social spaces, this study has sought to privilege more intimate and everyday aspects of the return process, such as livelihoods, family networks and transnational households, that locate returnees in specific communities upon return while also incorporating them into larger transnational social fields. Through participant observation and analyses of

migrant narratives and life histories, this study has employed a gender-sensitive perspective to return migration, and emphasized the ways in which men and women experience the migration process differently, engage transnational family networks in different ways, and choose to return to Belize for different reasons and under different circumstances. Despite such differential transnational engagements, Belizean returnees all come back because the specific locality of 'home' continues to hold a special meaning for them, and their success and satisfaction with the return move depends equally on the extent to which they have engaged 'home' and transnational family networks over time to adequately plan for their return. As the migration of Belizeans to the United States continues, a return movement back to Belize will grow in size as well, which in turn will help strengthen already mature transnational social ties. To what extent such transnational returns have implications for how other Belizeans in the United States come to engage with Belize over time remains to be seen. After all, notwithstanding any expressed desire to 'come home,' most Belizean migrants to the United States end up staying, having children, and gradually recentering the focus of the family to particular locations in the United States. However, for those families who continue to maintain close ties with Belize, the relocation of certain family members to Belize may end up providing a link to 'back home' for the rest of the family, and for the younger second generation who may come to rediscover 'the source' of their family heritage this way.

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## BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Flemming Daugaard-Hansen was born in Herning, and raised in Odense, Denmark. In 1997, after graduating with a Bachelor of Arts in ethnography and social anthropology from the University of Aarhus, Flemming began coursework at the Institute of Anthropology at the University of Copenhagen, Denmark, where he earned a master's degree in anthropology in 2002. His master's thesis, based on eight months of fieldwork in Belize, concerns the relationship between the local Belizean population and immigrants from Central America and China in Belize City. During his master's research in Belize, Flemming was introduced to professors and students from the University of Florida, and those relations grew to help form his decision to enroll in the Ph.D. program in anthropology at the University of Florida in 2002. Having studied immigration into Belize for his master's thesis, Flemming pursued his interest in issues of migration, transnationalism, and globalization when he defined his research focus on Belizean return migration for his dissertation research at the University of Florida. With the assistance of several minor University of Florida grants, and a Dissertation Research grant from the Knud Højgaard Foundation of Denmark, he conducted his doctoral dissertation research in Belize on Belizeans who had returned to Belize to live, after having lived and worked in the United States for a number of years. Flemming has been married to Ermitte St. Jacques since 2002. Ermitte also received her Ph.D. from the University of Florida in 2009. Having migrated from Denmark to the United States in 2002, Flemming plans to pursue his career, family, and personal goals in the United States.