

Racing the Environment: Ethnic identities and socioecological positions in
19th Century Belize (British Honduras)

Melissa A. Johnson
Assistant Professor of Anthropology
Southwestern University
Georgetown, Texas 78626-0770
meljohn@southwestern.edu
512-863-1406

Revised from below for Brown Working Papers Series, Southwestern University (ed.
Eric Selbin), Spring 2001

Paper prepared for presentation in the panel “The African Diaspora and the Environment”
at the American Society for Environmental History’s Annual Meeting, Tacoma,
Washington, March 15-19, 2000.

In Belize, a small Central American nation on the Caribbean coast, different “racial” groups have been constructed as better suited to some forms of labor-in-nature than others. Belizean “Creoles” (people of mixed African and European descent) have been typified as physiologically excellent wood-cutters, but as averse to agriculture, the Maya as indolent and wasteful farmers, the Garifuna as consummate fishermen.^{1, 2} These race constructions emerged in the 18th and 19th centuries, as slavery and an increasingly oligopolic distribution of land became the chief characteristics of this swampy backwater of a colony. I argue in this paper that these racially-based socioecological ascriptions became both markers of racial identity for those so identified and a central component of the colonial apparatus for controlling who was able to benefit from the use and transformation of natural resources. These constructions have also contributed importantly to both the literal shaping of the Belizean landscape and environment and the social construction of nature for each of the ethnic groups found in Belize.

This essay is a piece of the framework of a larger research project in which I am engaged that examines the contestations, collusions, ruptures and continuities in the

¹ Research on which this paper is based was made possible by the following: a grant from the Joint Committee on Latin American and Caribbean Studies of the Social Science Research Council and the American Council of Learned Societies with funds provided by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation and the Ford Foundation, a Doctoral Field Research Fellowship from the Inter American Foundation, a Fulbright grant administered through the Institute of International Education, and a fellowship from the University of Michigan Population-Environment Dynamics Project. Additional support was provided by two grants from Southwestern University: a Fleming Grant for Collaborative Research in 2000, and a Cullen Faculty Development Grant in 1998.

² Note on Sources: Some of the sources I cite in here are contained in the National Archives of Belize, abbreviated as NAB. Colonial Office Records are cited as CO XXX/ff, with number and folio indicated, as well as title of document and year when available.

discursive links between racial identity, socio-ecological position and the social construction of nature. The historical transformations and continuities in these connections take on particular relevance as ethnic and racial groups in Belize today position themselves in relation to global conservationist discourses and practices and embark on the reassertion and reaffirmation of cultural identities within a global context of indigenous rights movement and a rapidly expanding eco-cultural tourism industry, which has been particularly important in Belize.

My endeavor is an “archaeology” of race and its environmental linkages in Belize. I proceed from the assumption that the world we live in today is fundamentally structured by a global hierarchy of races, colors, religions and cultures, a hierarchy which began to coalesce in the 1400s with the expansion of Europe.³ The global racial order classifies all humans into categories on a presumably biological basis, and is structured by the fundamental opposition of “black/African” and “white/Caucasian.” The project in which I am engaged is highly political and critical scholarship, in all senses of those words. This ranked hierarchy of races has been the most destructive and iniquitous of social orderings and desperately needs to be deconstructed in all of its manifestations. My attempt to unpack how racial hierarchy and environmental history are intertwined is but a small part of an increasingly necessary counter-stream of work on “race” that in tandem with political action can create a more socially and ecologically just world.⁴

³ Trouillot, Michel-Rolph. 1994. Culture, Color, and Politics in Haiti, in Gregory, Steven and Roger Sanjek (eds). *Race*. New Brunswick: Rutgers (pp. 146-174)

⁴ That environmental history as a subdiscipline must address these kinds of questions has been clearly pointed out by Melosi and others (Melosi, Martin. 1995. Equity, Eco-racism, and Environmental History. *Environmental History Review* (): 1-16.

Let me begin by considering the economic, political and social milieu within which the racialized stereotypes which interest me arose.⁵ What we today call Belize was a swampy bit of backwater that in the 17thC attracted British pirates and buccaneers as a base from which to raid ships headed to Spain with their valuable (and typically imaginary) cargoes of gold. The watery lowlands of central and northern Belize were also, however, home to dense stands of logwood, which, in the late 17th and 18th centuries became a highly valuable commodity---a source of dye for the burgeoning textile industry in England. Some of the early privateers settled in these waterlogged plains, cutting and selling logwood as a means to generating wealth.

This was not the home of aristocratic plantation owners, using their English wealth to develop sugar plantations as might have been found in Barbados and other parts of the Caribbean. The “fathers” of Belize were instead a set of rogue pirates who reckoned that cutting and selling logwood was more lucrative than raiding Spanish galleons. Logwood trees, though dense and heavy, are not very large, so that cutting and hauling logwood was a task easily done by one or two men. Thus it was not until the 1724 that there is mention of African slaves in British,⁶ and in these early days, the typical logwood cutter probably did not own slaves, and the few who did probably only owned a small number of slaves.

⁵ For sources on the general history of Belize: Bolland, O. Nigel. 1977. *The Formation of a Colonial Society: Belize, from Conquest to Crown Colony*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins; Bolland, O. Nigel and Shoman, Assad. 1977. *Land in Belize: 1763-1871*. Kingston: Jamaica: Institute of Social and Economic Research. Shoman, Assad. 1994. *Thirteen Chapters of A History of Belize*. Belize City: The Angelus Press. Grant, Cedric H. 1976. *The Making of Modern Belize: Politics, Society and British Colonialism in Central America*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. Dobson, Narda A. 1973. *History of Belize*. Trinidad: Longman Press

⁶ Bolland, O N. (1977) p. 48, cites Bancroft, H. H. *History of Central America*, San Francisco, 1883-7 v. 2 p. 626. I have found no earlier reference specific to Belize. However, there is mention of slaves in Campeche from long before then (Dampier, William. 1699. *Voyages and Description*), an area frequented

In the late 18th Century, logwood cutting was superseded in economic importance by mahogany extraction, which was the main industry in Belize during the 19th Century. Mahogany cutting and removal were dramatically more labor-intensive than logwood. The trees are widely dispersed in Belize's tropical forests, are enormous, and can grow quite far from the waterways which served as the settlement's only transport routes. The mahogany industry was profitable only because of slavery. Groups of between 5 and 20 slaves were employed by mahogany cutters to find the trees, fell them and haul them out.

Thus the number of slaves increased dramatically, to two thousand, by the late 1700s when mahogany dominated the economy,⁷ while the white population remained in the hundreds. Significantly, from the earliest days onward there was a substantial free-colored and free black population as well, typically outnumbering the white population, and rapidly growing because of the gender-race matrix: there were very few white women living in early Belize. Furthermore the white population itself was hugely diverse, with an only a relatively small number constituting the economic and political elite. Thus British Honduras at this stage was similar to other Caribbean colonies and settlements—a small wealthy white elite ruling a majority black population with a mid-sized free-colored, free black and poor white population mediating between the two.⁸

by British logwood cutters, and it seems likely that there probably were, at least occasionally, slaves, and probably free people of African descent, in British Honduras at this time as well.

⁷ Bolland (1977, p. 51); also NAB: CO 123/9 "General Return of the Inhabitants in the Bay of Honduras" 22 October 1790. These numbers were shifting enormously at this time, however, because of the evacuation of British subjects and slaves from the Mosquito Coast and the settlement of many of these in British Honduras in 1787.

⁸ Exactly how these categories were defined, and who belonged to which was highly variable and charged (see Judd, Karen. 1992. *Elite Reproduction and Ethnic Identity in Belize* Ph.D. Dissertation, Graduate Center of the City University of New York; Johnson, Melissa. 1998. "Rewriting Race in the Environmental History of the Caribbean: The Development of a Rural Creole Belizean Socio-Ecology in Crooked Tree" *Latin American Studies Association Congress*. Chicago, 24-26 September 1998).

Roughly 50 years later, with abolition in the 1830s, the fundamental social structure of British Honduras did not change, the ruling white elite swiftly enacted legislation to limit the ability of newly freed slaves and the growing population of free colored to acquire land, to ensure that a substantial population would be available for the hard labor of the mahogany camps. By the mid-19th Century, as the mahogany industry began to decline, various efforts were made to establish an agricultural base to the economy: bananas, citrus, sugar, though it was not until the mid-20th Century that any of these industries became viable. Although there could have been the potential for social mobility for the lower classes with these shifts, the economically elite mahogany companies/merchant houses retained control by shifting their interests to these newer agricultural pursuits. Furthermore, colonial policy encouraged large scale investment from outside British Honduras rather than small-holder expansion to develop the agricultural sector.⁹ Today, forestry-related industries are relatively insignificant in an economy dominated by sugar, bananas and citrus production and tourism.

With the late 19th Century as well, the small white population decreased in size, and a Belizean Creole population and identity developed.¹⁰ At the same time, two other populations became significant in Belize and contributed to its increasingly complex racial and ethnic structure. The Garifuna, an ethnic and racial group that developed from the mixing of a marooned ship of African slaves and Carib Indians from the island of St. Vincent in the 18th C, fled Spanish Honduras for British soil in the early 1800s.¹¹ In the

⁹ See Medina, Laurie Kroshus. 1997. Development Policies and Identity Politics: Class and collectivity in Belize. *American Ethnologist* 24 (1):148-169 for a discussion of the continuation of this policy into the present day.

¹⁰ The emergence of a racial, ethnic and cultural identity of “Creole” is a complicated story, and is closely connected to the racializing of nature as well (see Johnson 1998, Judd 1992)

¹¹ Shoman 1994, pp. 86

late 1800s, the small population of Mestizos in northern Belize swelled with refugees from the Yucatan caste war.¹² The Garifuna entered Belize while the mahogany industry was still dominant and were occasionally recruited into the mahogany gangs. The Yucatec Maya exodus to Belize occurred as mahogany was waning, and as colonial officials and elite began to turn their eyes toward agriculture. Thus the Yucatec Mestizos of the north more typically engaged in the same milpa agricultural production that predominated in the Yucatan, with some adventurous souls experimenting with sugar production. Meanwhile, long before British buccaneers set foot in Honduras, Maya civilization developed, flourished and collapsed, leaving dispersed populations of a variety of Maya linguistic and cultural groups throughout the area. Primarily within the interior portions¹³ of what would become Belize, Kekchi, Mopan and Yucatec groups lived, typically engaging in subsistence oriented agriculture combined with fishing, hunting and other forms of low level natural resource exploitation.

The socioecological pattern that exists today in Belize has persisted roughly for the past century: Creoles are predominant in Belize City where they work typically as civil servants and wage laborers. They are also dominant in the rural agricultural communities of Central Belize, and in several communities in Western and Southern Belize. Mestizos (what many people of Yucatec Maya descent tend to refer to themselves as) predominate in Northern Belize and are the cornerstone of Belize's sugar industry. The Garifuna are most common on Southern Coast, where they engage in subsistence oriented fishing and agricultural production as well as wage labor in the

¹² Identity here again is complicated: these were mostly Maya people, but often considered themselves (and thus acted in ways conforming to) mestizo.

¹³ Though may also have been a relatively continuous Mayan presence along the coast in areas unoccupied by the British.

agricultural industries of Southern Belize. Mopan and Kekchi Maya predominate in Southern Belize, and a few communities of people who still identify themselves as Yucatec Maya occur in Western and Northern Belize; all Maya continue to practice subsistence-oriented agriculture inter-mixed with some cash cropping (rice, sugar), and some wage-labor work in large scale agricultural enterprises.

What concerns me in this project is how a racialized ascription of socioecological possibility for each ethnic group in Belize contributed to the racial and ethnic identity matrix that came to define the colony, and to the location of these groups within that matrix, and to the literal configuration of the landscape of Belize.¹⁴ Racialized attributions of a particular group's ecological proclivities and abilities were critical to the maintenance of a particular social economy, and served to justify and legitimate oppressive policies and laws. These constructions operated as hegemonies as well, such that members of specific racial groups came to accept these statements about themselves as true, and thus the realms of possibility imaginable for themselves as a group were circumscribed by these discursive moves.

Colonial "ethnological" descriptions were hierarchically ranked descriptions in a bipolar scheme in which white Europeans were assumed to be far superior (biologically, culturally, socioecologically) to everyone else, with black Africans securing the bottom of this ranking. The assumptions made about people of African descent, and the metaphors employed to describe them, cast doubt on whether they were truly human, and always constructed them as the most "brutish," "animal like" and "wild" of humans. Likewise by implicit contrast, the white elites producing and recording the racial

hegemony emerge in colonial documentation and early travel accounts as the only individuals capable of managing and organizing the transformation of the inhospitable wild tropical bush of Belize into productive, humanized wealth-generating lands. Each other racial group fit somewhere into this bipolar scheme, or perhaps matrix is a better word, with some racialities pushing out into the third dimension in different ways.

While my larger project addresses the four main ethnic groups in contemporary Belize, this paper will focus on the racialization and socioecological embedding of the Belizean “creole” identity. The creole population arose from a mixture of African slaves and British settlers and slave owners. The process of the formation of a collective creole identity was a long one, and is relatively unstudied.¹⁵ There were a variety of different groups that collectively became consolidated as ‘creole’ between 1650 and 1930: slaves brought to British Honduras from Africa (either directly, or, much more commonly, through Jamaica), “creole” slaves (slaves born in the Caribbean), free-black, free-colored and European settlers, these latter three groups of freedmen each encompassing a wide array of socioeconomic statuses (from wealthy slave-owners to poor renegades).

Critical to the development of a Creole racial identity has been the historical linking of creoleness with the backbone of British Honduras’ economic history: woodcutting. The story I have pieced together from the earliest travel accounts through to colonial commentary and contemporary editorializing on Belize is one of a Creole

¹⁴ I interchange “ethnic” and “racial” here because the ethnic identities I am talking about are naturalized in the same way that ‘traditional’ racial identities are (people as members of a specific ethnic group are innately one thing or the other), and because these identities fit into the global racial order. |

¹⁵ Judd, Karen. 1990. Who Will Define Us? Creolization in Belize. *Second Annual Studies On Belize Conference*, 29-41. Belize City: SPEAR. Judd, Karen. 1992. *Elite Reproduction and Ethnic Identity in Belize*. Ph.D. Dissertation: Graduate Center of the City University of New York.

population directly descended from the English woodcutters that established this colony—the woodcutters so proudly hailed by contemporary Belizeans as the forefathers of this *British* land, who by fighting off the Spaniards created a superior, Queen-loving English settlement.

Although the English forefathers are eulogized as hardy, industrious, and clever men, it is the creole population that emerged out of the union of woodcutter and slave or free person of African ancestry that is held up as the ideal wood-cutter, as somehow genetically suited to the task of finding and cutting wood, and, critically, at the same time, genetically averse to agriculture. Dominant European tropes of African v. European, of what blackness and links to African entail are crucial pieces of these constructions. The less human, more instinctual, less reasoning African elements of these racial tropes make the forest dwelling occupation of woodcutter (but not manager of a mahogany camp) the most appropriate for an African mix in, and makes the men of African descent the most appropriate laborer for the task. Although I am highlighting continuities in the racial discourse of British Honduras, there are also key shifts and manoeuverings of this discourse. But in each instance, racialized constructions of group identity serve to locate groups of people both in the emerging socioeconomic order of British Honduras, and literally in the landscape of Belize, and in so doing thereby justify deeply unequal economic and social relations and possibilities for the various groups.

In this paper I examine three key texts, representing three key moments in Belizean history: the height of slavery and reign of “King Mahogany,” close to the abolition of slavery, and in the late 19th C as the mahogany economy waned and the colony’s economic base shifted towards agricultural production. The ways in which

racialized identities were ecologized in each text serves to legitimate socio-economic inequality in this specific case of British Honduras, but also builds upon older tropes of alterity and racial discourse deployed globally by European colonizers at the time.¹⁶

The greatest proportion of available colonial commentary on and official description of the populations of British Honduras comes from the mid-19thC. This peak of early Belizean ethnology accompanies the abolition of the slave trade and slavery and the establishment of post-emancipation society, which was effectively a reformulation of the social, economic and political barriers that existed during slavery, without the legal apparatus of slavery. Critical to the economic viability of British Honduras within the colonial context at this point was the maintenance, without slavery, of large and cheaply employable laboring population. A variety of legal institutions were put into place by colonial authorities at this time to ensure that such a population existed. Labor contracts that favored employers and land use policies that prevented most individuals from obtaining land for their own subsistence use are but two examples and were the cornerstone institutions of this nature. The tailoring and ecological embedding of ethnic and racial identities was also a key component of the reformulation of a society stratified in order to benefit the white economic elite both in British Honduras and at home.

In 1809, just after the abolition of the slave trade but more than 20 years before the abolition of slavery, and when British Honduras' mahogany production was in full swing, Captain G. Henderson, of His Majesty's 5th West India Regiment, visited British Honduras, and shortly thereafter published a full description of the colony.¹⁷ Most of this

¹⁶ Jahoda, Gustav. 1999. *Images of Savages: Ancient Roots of Modern Prejudice in Western Culture*. New York: Routledge.

¹⁷ Henderson, Capt. G. 1809. *An Account of the British Settlement of Honduras; Being a brief view of its commercial and agricultural resources, soil, climate, natural history, etc. To which are added, sketches of*

text is devoted to a detailed description of the area's natural history, and the ways in which the settlers and slaves use the area's natural resources. Henderson describes the mahogany industry in detail, carefully noting the processes by which groups of slaves identify, cut down, and remove the huge mahogany trees. The language Henderson employs in this section, while praising the abilities of the slaves working in the mahogany industry on the one hand, conforms to the dehumanizing and animalizing stereotypes that characterized colonial discourse on the "nature" of African slaves, on the other. Henderson is clearly struck by the abilities of the 'hunter,' the slave designated to locate mahogany trees. This man climbs high trees to "survey the country" for the yellow-reddish leaves of mahogany and then returns to the forest floor to find the trees he saw from his high perch. Henderson describes how the hunter

descends and to these [the yellow-reddish leaves] his steps are directed; and without compass, or other guide than what observation has imprinted on his recollection, he never fails to reach the exact point to which he aims.¹⁸

The slave (presumably African, but possibly colored) in this passage is a passive, instinctual creature. It is not reason and deduction that leads him to the mahogany tree, it is what "observation" has "imprinted" on him. In this passage, as in others, the African slaves are described as animal like, or part and parcel of the tropical forested landscapes in which they labor. Henderson's description of the mahogany slave group more generally details how effectively and efficiently these slaves perform their tasks. Underlying these descriptions is this sense of a kind of "one-ness" with the natural

the manners and customs of the Mosquito Indians, preceded by the journal of a voyage to the Mosquito Shore. Illustrated by a Map. London: C. and R. Baldwin

¹⁸ Henderson, p.

environment; a positing that the slaves appropriate post in life is being stationed out in the midst of the “bush.”¹⁹

As tension mounts around the question of the abolition of slavery, the 1830 Honduras Almanack offers descriptions of Belize’s ethnic groups for potential visitors, investors, and colonial officials. In this volume, free blacks, free colored and slaves are described separately, though they are seen as having some fundamental similarities.²⁰ In these passages, free blacks are described negatively while slaves are praised---as long as the African elements of the population are enslaved, are yoked, then they are worthy.

Though there are many free blacks, yet for the most part they either are the children of slaves or have been slaves themselves; and few of them are to be found entirely exempt from those low propensities which are exhibited in a state of barbarism. They, however, possess upon the whole, but little intelligence, their dullness of comprehension, and the difficulty of picturing on the minds of others the ideas present in their own, are at once remarkable and distressing. They seem to perform everything they take in hand, less mechanically in their movements than in their notions; and generally contrive to effect their objects with as much instinct as of reason.²¹

In this description, the animal-like qualities of the free black stand out in sharp relief. The “dullness of mind,” the reliance on instinct rather than reason in conjunction with the apparent grace of their movements are reminiscent of a deer, or a jaguar, in the tropical forest.

The authors of the *Almanack* are not reticent about their agenda in describing the classes of people in British Honduras. They wrote this part of the

¹⁹ The “bush” is a culturally and racially weighted term that describes parts of the natural environment that display little human alteration.

²⁰ *The Honduras Almanack* 1830, p.

²¹ *ibid*, p.

Almanack in order to convince the reader that the state of slavery is the most morally appropriate for these populations of African descent:

...here we would recommend the abolitionist to pause; to visit the people for whom he pleads; to reside twelve months among them to observe the mode in which their minds are habituated to work; to compare the comforts which they can command, in their present state of slavery, with the precarious existence, the absolute poverty that await their projected freedom; and let him lay his hand upon his heart, and say how far he can honestly proceed in those proposed measures, which have agitated and deceived minds unacquainted with the merits of the question, and rendered the slave himself discontented. The name of liberty is dear and precious, but unfortunately the negro's notions of freedom are confined to that state in which idleness, sloth, poverty and vice may be indulged.²²

Ascribing the conditions of “idleness, sloth, poverty and vice” to potentially liberated slaves is a dehumanizing move. These are not descriptions that would be attached to humans who are expected to make a mark on the landscape, to transform a “backward” colony into a colonial treasure.

Continuing on this theme of indolence and poverty as the key markers of African-descended identities, the *Almanack*'s authors, in discussing the availability of labor in the colony, describe a typical representative of the free black and colored population as:

equally ignorant of the value of time and responsibility for the improvement of (the country), is not alive to the duty of industry: clothes, he require none beyond a shirt and trousers, and a small quantity of powder and shot, a few hooks and line, will in half an hour, furnish him with sufficient to support his family for a day or two. The want of education leaves him void of inducements; and he seems happiest when settled in a swamp and surrounded by mosquitoes. Hence free labour is exorbitant...very few industrious men can be found²³

²²ibid, p.

²³ ibid, p.

The imagery here again constructs a kind of human who is not at all far from the rest of the natural world: “he seems happiest when settled in a swamp and surrounded by mosquitoes.”²⁴

These early colonial descriptions encode two propositions about African populations at a time of great debate over the economic future of the colony. High-level colonial officials, visiting government officers from London frequently expressed concern about the lack of agricultural development in the colony, especially given that the mahogany industry began to wane at mid-Century.²⁵ Local economic elites, however, along with a number of colonial officers, were not interested in promoting agriculture. The profitability of their enterprises depended upon both the exclusive use of slaves, and any available other labor, in the mahogany ‘works’ and the purchases made of imported food-stuffs by the local free population. The economic elite of British Honduras focused their energy simultaneously on mahogany extraction and the importation of goods from Europe to a market of non-food-producing people. Therefore, the development of agriculture was not at all in the interests of the elite: the development of an agricultural export industry threatened their labor supply, while the development of locally based food production threatened their import market.

The statements and assumptions about people of African descent in Belize were given particular power by the economics of slavery in the territory. Shortly after the abolition of slavery throughout the British Caribbean, slave-owners were compensated by the government for their slaves. Former slave owners in British Honduras earned L 53.6.9 on average per slave, the highest amount paid in any British territory. By contrast,

²⁴ That in a swamp surrounded by mosquitoes is as far from the shackles of slavery as one can get in Belize seemed not to occur to the Almanack authors.

in most of the other British colonies, compensation ran in the teens and twenties.²⁶

Slaves in British Honduras were selected for their potentially superior abilities in the work of mahogany extraction. This position of being “extra special” slaves undergirded the early ascriptions of the capacities (and consequently limitations) of people of African descent in the colony.

As throughout the rest of the Caribbean, a key concern after emancipation in Belize was how to maintain the inexpensive labor force that made the colonies profitable. The mahogany ‘works’ owners were well aware that newly freed slaves may well have wanted to be free of institutionalized “labor” (i.e. slavery or wage labor), and would have probably preferred trying to eke out a living on a small piece of land in an out of the way corner. Immediately following emancipation, then, a series of institutions were put in place to ensure the continued presence of a viable labor force: the processes by which individuals could obtain land were greatly restricted, and most employers instituted a kind of debt-peonage system to organize their newly “free” laborers. This basic socio-economic structure persisted until the mid-20th C, and racial socioecological stereotyping sedimented shortly after emancipation to support this socio-economic system.

If early accounts stressed how well people of African descent performed the labor of mahogany extraction, and how content they were as slaves, post-emancipation descriptions constructed a world in which it was unthinkable that the “creole” population (now understood to encompass the non-Garifuna “African” and “mixed African”

²⁵ Shoman 1994 pp. 112

²⁶ Dobson, 1973: 175

population in Belize)²⁷ could do anything *but* work mahogany. Thus Bristowe writes in 1888 for the *Handbook of British Honduras*:

The number of labourers in British Honduras may be roughly stated to be about 6400, being more than a fifth of the total population of the colony. Of these, about 2500 are ‘creoles’ of British Honduras of African and Anglo-African descent. These men are almost exclusively employed in the occupation of mahogany cutting—one which, besides the superior wages it offers is peculiarly attractive to men of such fine physique as are the majority of our lumbermen.

Generally speaking the creoles of British Honduras are peculiarly suited to the laborious but attractive labour of the mahogany works, and nothing short of starvation will induce them to exchange it for plantation labour.²⁸

A reading of all of the above colonial testaments thus yields a picture of the Belizean creole as the consummate lumberjack, as it were, who has found his true avocation in working mahogany. Furthermore, by virtue of being at least partially of African descent, i.e. more animal-like than human-like, this person is quite well suited to this “bushy” occupation and is in his element as an animal in the wild. “Bush” is the Creole word for areas of the natural environment that have not been altered by humans, but it also refers to rural areas in general, taking on a cultural load of rurality in opposition to urbanity, black as opposed to white, illiterate and ‘duncy’ as opposed to educated and cosmopolitan, etc.. Likewise the popular epithet “bushy” invokes an image of a dark-skinned kinky-headed half dressed man who is more at home out in a canoe in the “bush” than in the city: Belize’s ‘wilder’ version of a country bumpkin. The racial

²⁷ That commentators could write of one unified group of “creoles” (instead of free blacks, slaves, people of color) already points to a solidifying of a bipolar racial order---what significant about this population is that is NOTWHITE.

content of this metaphor is the key. Unless otherwise qualified, a “bushy” is dark-skinned and of obvious African descent. Again, this popular joking epithet encodes the long standing and widespread association of Africans with “the wild,” with ‘untamed nature’ in direct opposition to the cosmopolitan, urban-centered European.

A corollary of this construction is that Belizean creoles had no ability or interest in agriculture, or other more ‘domesticated’ ways of laboring in nature. This assumption, assertion shows up in numerous texts, and crosses the lips of contemporary officials concerned with the ‘development’ of Belize.²⁹ The story of the Belizean Creole, then, is that he (sic) is really only suited to laboring in the mahogany camps, and living in the city in between wood-cutting seasons. The Belizean Creole could not have helped to design the transformation of the Belizean landscape into a productive, developed, inhabited landscape. As the racialized ascriptions tell it, those transformative tasks were the purview of colonial elite, and Mestizo and Yucatec Maya farmers as they moved into Northern Belize in the late 19th C.

While it is quite clear that local economic elite and metropole firms (especially the extraordinarily powerful and influential Belize Estate Company) had a profound impact on the Belizean environment, removing almost all of the mahogany, and beginning to clear large tracts of land for early agribusiness experimentation at the end of the 19thC, what role the emergent Creole population played in transforming Belize’s landscape throughout the 19thC is less clear. Certainly the slave populations and later the Creole laborers in the mahogany camps contributed to the removal of mahogany from the

²⁸ Bristowe, Lindsay W., and Philip B. Wright. 1888. *The Handbook of British Honduras for 1888-89, Comprising Historical, Statistical, and General Information Concerning the Colony, Compiled from Official and Other Reliable Records*. Edinburgh and London: William Blackwood and Sons, p. 196

forests of British Honduras; but they were not controlling this fully themselves. Yet, the Creole population did not only work as wood-cutters in the mahogany industry, but also engaged in a wide variety of economic activities in the Belizean landscape, carving out an agricultural niche for themselves despite the colonial regimes discursive moves to limit that possibility. Legal institutions, economic options and racial ideologies made it impossible for Creole people to occupy the most productive lands, but they settled a number of more marginal areas in the center of the country.

Bolland (1977) argues that Belizean people of color after emancipation primarily worked in the mahogany camps during the cutting season and spent the off-season in Belize City, the place he argues is the crucible of Belizean Creole culture. From archival evidence I have been able to obtain, and the oral histories and lore told to me during my years of ethnographic research in Belize, it appears that a Belizean “creole” identity and socio-ecological niche emerged as much in the rural, marginal areas of Belize as in Belize City.

The relationship with the natural world that the Belizean Creole population established was multi-faceted, befitting its Afro-Caribbean context, and the occupational multiplicity that so well characterizes Afro-Caribbean economies.³⁰ Determining the historical details of this relationship is more difficult.³¹ Because of the huge gap in archival data (hurricanes and sloppy record keeping), evidence for the actual activities of these people is scanty. Nonetheless, the existing evidence that I have so far been able to gather indicates that Afro-Belizeans (creoles and their predecessors) were engaged in

²⁹ See Ashcroft, Norman. 1973. *Colonialism and Underdevelopment*. New York: Teachers College Press; Bolland 1977; Grant 1976; Medina 1997

³⁰ See Johnson 1998 for a detailed description of contemporary Belizean Creole socio-ecology.

many pursuits other than mahogany working. In the 1809 account of British Honduras by Captain Henderson, he notes that

Every settlement at Honduras has its plantain-walk; and many of these comprehend an extent of, at least, an hundred acres: nor can anything exceed the beauty and richness which the continued groves of these trees display, as the traveller pursues his course up the different rivers. The pine-apple and melon, being very commonly interspersed between the rows of plantains, contribute to heighten the luxuriance of the scene; and the mountain-cabbages occasionally roaring its lofty head far above the whole, adds no inconsiderable share of grandeur to the general effect...

This passage is particularly ironic given Henderson's lamentations elsewhere in his account about how no one in the colony is pursuing cultivation. Obviously people were cultivating to a great extent, but cultivating for subsistence and employing a variety of methods that were unfamiliar to the eyes of the Europeans and Colonial officers who only occasionally visited the colony's outposts.

In the Honduras Almanack, in a description of how dutifully and contentedly slaves labor in the mahogany works, the authors suggest that even after working mahogany, slaves engaged in agricultural pursuits either for their own benefits or as part of contract with their masters:

In many cases he contracts with his master for the supplies of the gangs which supplies he cultivates by his own labour: and invariably meets with that encouragement which animates his industry³²

Bolland records the contents of a letter written in 1787 concerning the skirmishes between Spanish forces and British logwood settlers

The Spaniards have very lately cut down the Plantain Walks and Provision Grounds of the Settlers, particularly in the New River, upon which the

³¹ See Johnson, Melissa 1998b. *Nature and Progress in Rural Creole Belize: Rethinking Sustainable Development*. Ph.D Dissertation, University of Michigan for an initial attempt to describe this relationship.

³² Bolland 1977, p. 58

individuals residing there have at all times had their Chief, or Sole dependence, This has greatly injured the Owners and given great disgust to the Negroes employed in that River, whose subsistence depends upon their little Plantations: And the negroes disgust in that Country being a prelude to their desertion, will, in proportion as it extends, enrich the Spaniards, and ruin the English Settlers.³³

Similarly in 1788, a settler described how the slaves were

ever accustomed to make Plantation as they term it, by which means they support their Wives and Children, raise a little Stock and so furnish themselves with necessaries, etc.³⁴.

Thus, cultivation, though not agricultural production for export, was a critical aspect of slaves' lives from early on, and presumably of the free colored and free black populations that lived in the settlement's interior. An enumeration of the occupation and racial statuses in 1790 indicates that as many as _ of the free laboring population would have been likely subsistence settlers, with an additional _ in the employ of wood-cutters and probably also farming, fishing, hunting on the side.

In a detailed account of life in rural British Honduras, in the village of Crooked Tree, in the mid-1800s, after emancipation, Frederick Crowe describes settlements based upon cultivation, cattle-raising, fishing and hunting: a well developed subsistence life style for most, with the wealthier members of these communities selling cattle and crops and moving easily between Belize City and the rural outposts.³⁵

Despite the existence of a number of rural Creole communities in the mid 1800s, Bristowe claims, in his 1888 account of the colony, that Creole men were "almost exclusively" employed in the mahogany industry (though in his document there is no

³³ Letter to Evan Napean from George Dyer (CO 123/5), cited in Bolland, 1977, p. 58

³⁴ Bolland, 1977 p. 59 FN 26

³⁵ Johnson, 1998b

source identified for this claim).³⁶ The birth and death registry for Orange Walk District for the lattermost quarter of the 19th C tells a very different story. At this point in time, the Orange Walk District had the most extensive mahogany industry encampments: much of this northern district was devoted to mahogany extraction. Yet, despite this, nearly half of the occupations listed in the Orange Walk Birth Registry at the turn of the Century for people with Creole surnames are *not* mahogany jobs. People are farmers, cattlemen, and they claim a wide variety of other occupations as well.³⁷ The large discrepancy between colonial commentary and description such as Bristowe's³⁸ and other archival data (as well as oral history in Creole communities) may be partly a function the seasonal and temporary nature of the mahogany industry. A Creole man could decide not to work mahogany one year and instead "make plantashe" or tend to a herd of cattle, for that year, and then work mahogany the following year. While away at the mahogany works, our hypothetical person may have left either an elderly or young male relation to tend to the plantashe and cattle for that year, returning between the mahogany season to assist. Belize is indeed a Caribbean nation, and as such, local-level employment trends are best characterized by the term "occupational multiplicity":³⁹ any given person would have engaged in a wide variety of occupations, or occupied a wide array of socioecological positions.

³⁶ Another line of evidence that I plan to pursue in the future are the occupations in which free black and free colored populations were engaged. It is my hunch that many of these were involved in the logwood industry and perhaps other similar extractive industries (fishing, hunting), some certainly were settling Belize city and setting up small businesses there, but I am also certain that others were small scale cultivators, probably primarily for subsistence and local exchange.

³⁷ NAB: Birth Records of Orange Walk District, 1913, which records births from 1888 through 1913..

³⁸ or see histories of Belize, such as Grant, *op cit*

³⁹ Comitas, Lambros. 1964. Occupational Multiplicity in Rural Jamaica, in Garfield and Friedl (eds). *Proceedings of the American Ethnological Society*. Seattle: University of Washington.

I do not question that Creoles predominated in the mahogany industry, nor that for many Creole men, mahogany work was a big part of their lives. I do contend, however, that cultivating, and “ketch and kill” were also big parts of their lives—that Creole people engaged in a wide variety of ways to make a living in the natural world, and were as likely to be agriculturalists as anything else. That they, like the West Africans and Europeans from which they are descended were interested in cultivation, and were no more “wild” and “animal like” than any other group of people on this planet. On the contrary, pushed to the very margins of an already marginal territory, the first free coloreds and blacks, and then the newly emancipated slaves, managed to find ways to survive and thrive in the most oppressive of conditions in 19th Century British Honduras. They cleverly cast wide nets of economic activity that covered a full range of socio-ecologies, in order to ensure their material well-being.

Thus, as much as the colonial white elite engineered the transformation of British Honduras’ landscape (to the extent that it was transformed), so did the ‘masses’ of Creoles, who established a particular, rural Creole social ecology at the edges of the mahogany forests and distant from the large tracts of lands with rich agricultural potential. The local economies established by rural Creoles have characterized these communities for three hundred years, and have altered the landscape in noticeable, but not destructive ways. These economies have not generated great wealth, but rather constitute relatively sustainable small-scale ways of living. Furthermore, in these communities, as much as in the dense neighborhoods of Belize City, a “Creole” culture has emerged and been continuously modified over the centuries. Thus in contrast to the

claims of many Caribbeanist scholars, rural Belizean Creole have a strong attachment to their land, land they have transformed in active and creative ways.⁴⁰

Nonetheless in national rhetoric and the development discourse prevalent in contemporary Belize, the stereotypes of Belizean Creoles as agriculturally-averse consummate woodsmen are still pervasive, and the joke is that rural Creoles are “bushy.” These socio-ecological stereotypes and the deeply embedded racism that they encode have operated as an obstacle to Afro-Belizeans wishing to initiate commodity production, primarily by ensuring their alienation from productive lands, but also in a number of more subtle ways. In an only recently politically independent nation in which the timber resources were historically depleted by colonial powers, and which has turned its productive interests to export agriculture, the consequences of these stereotypes, and the ellisions they support, has been to increasingly disenfranchise the Belizean creole population. Only elite Creoles who predominate in the commercial sector of the economy are economically successful. The increasingly successful citrus, banana and sugar industries are dominated by foreigners (typically white) or Mestizos: the white bias of the colonial Caribbean has been well-maintained.

Interestingly, in recent years, the different ethnic groups in Belize have begun to mobilize to “retrieve” and promote their “identities.” Thus a group of Belizean Creoles developed the Creole Association for Retrieval and Promotion Cultural Retrieval Project in the early 1990s. This surge of ethnic pride is not unique to Belize. As has suggested elsewhere, the reclaiming of difference is encouraged by the “postmodern condition.”⁴¹ But in Belize, the emphasis on ethnic differences is arising in conjunction with a rapidly

⁴⁰ How Creole people themselves have both incorporated and resisted the racialized ascriptions of being consummate woodcutters and averse to agriculture is a fascinating issue beyond the scope of this paper.

growing ecotourism industry. Thus, Belize is a central stop on La Ruta Maya—the Maya of Belize touted as the original, ecologically noble savages. How Creole identity in Belize will play out in the ecotourism industry is still an open question. Within Belize, being Creole carries with it “bushy”, environmentally-linked associations, yet outside of Belize, people of African descent are presumed to be hostile to their natural environment--too impoverished and alienated from it to care about “environmentalist” concerns.⁴² Perhaps a careful reconsideration of Belizean Creole history and the emergence of racially embedded socioecological stereotypes of Creole people will aid Afro-Belizeans in their quest to promote a positive and productive ethnic identity and socio-ecological position.

⁴¹ Harvey, David. 1989. *The Condition of Postmodernity* Oxford: Basil Blackwell.

⁴² These, of course, are yet another erroneous set of stereotypes about people of African descent in the U.S., and arguably throughout the Caribbean, as well.