

Eleonora Rohland

Entangled Histories and the Environment?

Socio-Environmental Transformations in the Caribbean, 1492-1800

INTER-AMERICAN STUDIES
Cultures – Societies – History

ESTUDIOS INTERAMERICANOS
Culturas – Sociedades – Historia

Volume 33

Series Editors:

Giselle Liza Anatol (Kansas)

Anja Bandau (Hannover)

Olaf Kaltmeier (Bielefeld)

Wilfried Raussert (Bielefeld)

Editorial Board:

Luzelena Gutiérrez de Velasco (Colegio de México)

María Herrera-Sobek (University of California at Santa Barbara)

Djelal Kadir (Pennsylvania State University)

Gary Francisco Keller (Arizona State University)

Carmen Martínez Novo (University of Kentucky)

Olga Ries (Universidad Alberto Hurtado)

Stefan Rinke (Free University of Berlin)

Eleonora Rohland

Entangled Histories and the Environment?

Socio-Environmental Transformations
in the Caribbean, 1492-1800

 **Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier**

Copublished by

UNO University of New Orleans Press

Entangled Histories and the Environment?

Socio-Environmental Transformations in the Caribbean, 1492-1800 /

Eleonora Rohland. –

(Inter-American Studies | Estudios Interamericanos; 33)

Trier: WVT Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier, 2021

ISBN 978-3-86821-833-6

New Orleans, LA: University of New Orleans Press, 2021

ISBN 978-1-60801-208-4



SPONSORED BY THE

Federal Ministry
of Education
and Research

The project, on which this book is based, has been funded by the German Federal Ministry of Education and Research (Bundesministerium für Bildung und Forschung, BMBF). The responsibility for the content of this publication lies with the author.

Cover Image: *Novissima et Accuratissima Totius Americae Descriptio*,
Nicholas Janzoon Visscher (1658)

Cover Design: Brigitta Disseldorf

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Rohland, Eleonora, author.

Title: Entangled histories and the environment? : socio-environmental
transformations in the Caribbean, 1492-1800 / Eleonora Rohland.

Description: New Orleans, LA : University of New Orleans Press ; Trier,
Germany : Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier, 2021. | Series:

Inter-American studies : cultures - societies - history = Estudios
interamericanos : culturas - sociedades - historia ; Volume 33 |
Includes bibliographical references.

Identifiers: LCCN 2020044534 | ISBN 9781608012084 (paperback)

Subjects: LCSH: Human ecology--Caribbean Area--History. | Caribbean
Area--Environmental conditions.

Classification: LCC GF13.3.C27 R45 2021 | DDC 304.209729--dc23

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2020044534>

© WVT Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier, 2021

No part of this book, covered by the copyright hereon,
may be reproduced or used in any form or by any means
without prior permission of the publisher.

Publisher: WVT Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier, Postfach 4005, D-54230 Trier,
Bergstraße 27, D-54295 Trier, Tel. 0049 651 41503, Fax 41504, www.wvttrier.de, wvt@wvttrier.de

Copublisher: University of New Orleans Press, 2000 Lakeshore Drive, Earl K. Long Library,
Room 221, New Orleans, LA 70148, United States, 504-280-7457, unopress.org

Table of Contents

1. Preface and Introduction – or: Normalizing Environmental History in the Anthropocene	1
2. Arriving: Unfamiliar and Incomparable Environments on Hispaniola?	15
3. Extracting: Comparing European and African Bodies in Tropical Climates	35
4. Conclusion: The Environment in Entanglement, and Practices of Comparing	61
5. Works Cited	65

1. Preface and Introduction – or: Normalizing Environmental History in the Anthropocene

Part of the (hi-)story that will unfold over these pages started on a roof top terrace in Seville on a sweltering September afternoon in 2017. I was having a three-o'clock lunch with Heidi Scott, a historical geographer from the University of Massachusetts Amherst who was, like me, doing research on the environmental history of colonial Latin America at the Archivo de Indias. Over our late-afternoon, post-archival tapas, we got into a long conversation about the difficulty of teaching the field we were both researching, and Heidi suggested organizing a roundtable discussion on Teaching the Environmental History of the Colonial Americas for the annual conference of the American Historical Association (AHA) 2019. And so, at the end of the first week of January 2019, Heidi, Gregory Cushman, Daviken Studnicki-Gizbert, Cameron Strang and I were discussing this theme at the AHA conference in Chicago. Among many other important points, we agreed that environmental history still needed to be normalized.¹ That is, despite the fact that environmental history is an established field – at least in the U.S. and many Latin American countries, less so in Germany – it is still a field that stands out and is treated apart from “normal,” i.e. political, social, and cultural history. However, since environmental and climatic questions have affected human societies in various and often adverse ways throughout history and into the present, a goal, we agreed, would be to integrate environmental history to such an extent that it becomes normal to teach students the environmental effects of war, or the influence of climate and disease on early colonial settlers without having to add an environmental history tag to the course. That is, in short, to close the nature-culture gap in the way we teach history.

A second strand of this (hi-)story pre-dates the Sevillian Tapas-eating by two years and begins in cold and rainy Germany, at

1 I thank all four scholars for the inspiring conversations before, during, and after our roundtable.

Bielefeld University. Bielefeld's Latin American history department has been hosting an interdisciplinary research project entitled "The Americas as a Space of Entanglements," which is linked to a long-standing Bielefeldian tradition of exploring entanglements in the global South, the "Bielefelder Verflechtungsansatz" developed throughout the 1980s (Evers 1986). The context of this project and discussions with my colleagues compelled me to think more intensely and systematically about entanglements/entangled histories in the context of my own new book project on socio-environmental transformation in the colonial Caribbean. The initial experience when working through the research literature on entanglements/entangled histories and post-colonial criticism was, yet again, that of staring squarely into the abyss of the nature-culture divide. So, the resulting vertigo became the spur for wanting to integrate "nature" and "the environment" into the concept of entanglement, ideas that I will outline a little further below.

The third strand of this (hi-)story refers to the discourse and research about the Anthropocene. It's an often-stated truism that historians are children of their time and so their questions and focus are influenced by the current events of their time as well. This study is no exception, and as may be evident, the first two strands mentioned above are closely connected or even encompassed by this third. The "Anthropocene" has been discussed as a new geological epoch in which humans have become a planetary-scale force in changing the globe from its deep soil layers and the oceans to the higher atmosphere. It was proposed by Dutch atmospheric chemist and Nobel Laureate Paul Crutzen and by U.S. biologist Eugene Stoermer in 2000 (Crutzen and Stoermer 2000). The two researchers suggested the new term to contrast with the still-ongoing Holocene, which Geologists are dating, with the help of Greenland ice cores, from 11,700 years ago (Walker et al. 2009). This is the era during which the Neolithic Revolution took place and during which human civilizations as we know them today have developed. This latter fact is largely due to the relatively mild climatic conditions that have persisted throughout the Holocene and that have allowed humans to