



## **INDIGENOUS AND AFRICAN INTELLECTUAL LABOR AND THE COMMODITIES OF VAST EARLY AMERICA**

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**DEBATE**

**Colapso ambiental e histórias do capitalismo**

## **ABSTRACT**

This article calls for centering the lives, labor, and expertise of Indigenous, African, and African-descended people in future commodity histories of the colonial Americas. The production of the Atlantic world's most prized commodities depended upon the expertise and intellectual labor of Indigenous and African people. Their knowledge — which was often violently extracted by Europeans through enslavement — buttressed colonization and enabled the existence of many of the early modern Atlantic world's commodities. If we recognize this botanical, agricultural, and environmental knowledge as intellectual history, then historians can show how Indigenous and African knowledge anchored the Atlantic world and, by extension, the global economy. At the same time, though, the creation of these commodities resulted in environmental devastation. Though imperial wealth depended upon their labor, Indigenous and African people bore the brunt of environmental collapse in the wake of commodity production. Their livelihoods and homelands were not protected.

## **KEYWORDS**

Knowledge; Expertise; Slavery.

In “Commodity Chains and the Global Environmental History of the Colonial Americas,” Leonardo Marques foresees “how global history may become some form of imperial history under new guise” (MARQUES, 2021, p. 654). He, like other scholars, is concerned that global histories result in statist or imperial histories — histories concerned with the work of officials, the creation of empires and nations, and the macro processes that connected the world. But what about the physical and intellectual labor that undergirded the extraction and circulation of these global commodities? To truly transcend methodological nationalism, historians must tell the stories of all the peoples who lived and labored within the borders of empires and nations, even if they would not have been considered subjects or citizens. That entails centering the lives, labor, and expertise of Indigenous, African, and African-descended people. Their knowledge — which was often forcefully and violently extracted by Europeans through enslavement — buttressed colonization and enabled the existence of many of the early modern Atlantic world’s commodities.

The Omohundro Institute for Early American History of Culture’s embrace of “vast early America” provides one framework for thinking about the Indigenous, African, and European people who extracted, created, circulated, and consumed commodities in the early modern Atlantic world. In this version of early America, distant places and diverse residents are connected. Their histories are co-created and co-dependent. Consequently, these new histories are less concerned with the creation of the United States and more concerned with the expansive geography of the Americas. When one examines the events that unfolded across the Americas between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries, it becomes evident that there was nothing preordained about the founding and success of the United States in 1492, 1607, 1754, or even 1776. In other words, Vast Early America fights the teleology engrained in traditional early American histories — the very teleology that Leonardo Marques aims to combat.<sup>1</sup>

Moreover, Vast Early America highlights peoples and places that exist at the margins of Atlantic history. Whereas the Atlantic framework stresses transoceanic connections and movement, Vast Early America accounts for those connections — and more. It not only calls for a discussion of the European, African, and Indigenous peoples that lived and labored in the Atlantic world, but also incorporates continental histories, discussions of borderlands, and even the Pacific Coast to create what Karin Wulf calls “mutual histories” (2019). These histories allow for more inclusive and geographically-expansive histories of the Atlantic world.

But how does this framework relate to commodity histories of the early Atlantic world? Future commodity histories — similar to new histories touting Vast Early America — should highlight the range of people that created these commodity chains, regardless of borders, subjecthood, or citizenship. For example, you cannot tell a history of the fur trade without also discussing the mourning wars of the Haudenosaunee (PARMENTER, 2010, p. 45-51). You cannot write about sugar without recounting the rebellions organized by enslaved African people from the Gold Coast (BROWN, 2020). You cannot understand the global demand for pearls without highlighting the diving abilities of the Bahamas’ Lucayan inhabitants (WARSH, 2018, p. 38-39). And you cannot tell the history of rice without recognizing the agricultural knowledge that many

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<sup>1</sup> For an excellent discussion of the value of the “Vast Early America” framework, see Karin Wulf (2019).

Africans brought with them to the Americas (CARNEY, 2002).<sup>2</sup> Indeed, you cannot write a commodity history that begins in the Atlantic world without highlighting Indigenous, African, and African-descended peoples. The violent extraction of their physical and intellectual labor through slavery and dispossession made possible the extraction and production of the Atlantic world's most valuable commodities.

Take the forests that Marques explores in his analysis of New England timber. He notes that these forests had been manipulated by Indigenous groups for centuries. Further exploration of this history would reveal the environmental toll that New England shipbuilding had on Indigenous communities. As noted by Strother Roberts, Native peoples made intentional use of fire in order to restore nutrients to the forest floor and encourage the growth of berry bushes. They gathered nuts for sustenance and firewood for a range of activities, from warmth to cleaning (ROBERTS, 2019, p. 100-102).<sup>3</sup> This meant that these forests were valuable tracts of land that residents had carefully managed for generations. Moreover, Thomas Wickman demonstrates how colonists felled timber in ways that “changed their winter landscapes.” For the Wabanaki, these landscapes had been spaces of power where they easily outmaneuvered European colonists (WICKMAN, 2017, p. 81). Continued timbering precipitated changes in these carefully cultivated landscapes, forcing Indigenous people to adapt new provisioning systems, alter their military tactics, and relocate settlements. Indeed, as these British colonists denuded forests to build the ships that would transport African captives across the Atlantic Ocean, they also dispossessed the Indigenous in the North American interior.

Enslavement and dispossession flanked timber's commodity chain throughout the Atlantic world, though not always in the same order. In the early modern Caribbean, English colonists denuded Barbados as they transitioned from tobacco to widespread sugar production in the mid-seventeenth century. In this instance, deforestation did not precipitate the immediate or ongoing dispossession of Native peoples. The island of Barbados was deserted.<sup>4</sup> Yet, as local timber dwindled, residents of the island looked elsewhere to fulfill their need for timber. Some traded with New England merchants, an economic relationship noted in Marques' essay (MARQUES, 2021, p. 650-652). Others took to the sea. Mariners cruised west to the island of St. Lucia, a verdant island within one day's sail of Barbados that was home to small populations of French and Kalinago inhabitants. The English colonists' arrival spurred bloodshed and dispossession. Intent on securing rights to timber the island (and purposefully ignoring French claims to it), agents of the Barbadian governor met with the leaders of the Kalinago population. In April 1663, the two parties signed a treaty ceding the island to the English and dispossessing the Kalinago. Once again, the English desire for timber had forced Native peoples from their lands (DRAPER, 2017).

The drive for timber also fueled enslavement. In the Caribbean, the clearing of land — often by enslaved Africans — enabled the creation of more plantations. The proprietors of these plantations then enslaved more people, creating a violent cycle as

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<sup>2</sup> Carney's argument (2002) spurred significant debate among historians. See the essays featured in the AHR Exchange section, *The Question of 'Black Rice'* (EDELSON M.; MIDLO HALL, G. *et al.*, Feb. 2010).

<sup>3</sup> For more on forest management among Native peoples of the American northeast, see William Cronon (1983) and Lisa Brooks (2018, p. 39-40).

<sup>4</sup> Historians often write that Barbados was “uninhabited” when English colonists arrived. In reality, as noted by Carolyn Arena (2017), it was deserted. People had sailed from the Guianas hundreds of years prior to settle the island, but it was deserted by the time the Spanish arrived in the region (ARENA, 2017, p. 161).

European powers fanned out across and took possession of more and more islands. In Barbados, the vast majority of the enslaved arrived from Africa, some on vessels built with the very New England timber that Marques chronicles (SLAVE VOYAGES, c2021). But others arrived from elsewhere in the Caribbean or the Atlantic world. For just as timbering led to Indigenous dispossession, it also occasioned the enslavement of Indigenous peoples.

Indeed, the first English settlers of Barbados enslaved both Indigenous and African peoples. When Henry Winthrop wrote his father, the governor of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, from Barbados in August of 1627 — shortly after the arrival of the first English colonists — he noted that they had already enslaved both “Indyenes and blacks” (WINTHROP, 1627). These enslaved people, as Carolyn Arena explains, labored on newly-founded plantations. The growth of these plantations depended upon the clearing of more land which, in turn, prompted the enslavement of more people. Arena goes on to trace how some of Guiana’s Native population became Barbados slaves. Barbadian colonists exploited existing Indigenous networks — networks that spanned the islands and continents of the circum-Caribbean — in order to acquire enslaved laborers (ARENA, 2017, p. 160-165). Just as Marques’ research shows how timbering in New England produced the slaving vessels that carried African captives across the Middle Passage, the early history of Barbados reveals how the timbering of one place provoked the enslavement of people from another. These interconnections are key to understanding the histories of the Atlantic world’s commodities.

The colonial project was coercive and violent in every possible way. Appropriation, extraction, and enslavement undergirded its incredible wealth. Over time, Atlantic slavery became an all-encompassing labor system that not only demanded physical labor, but also intellectual labor. This intellectual labor should be at the center of new commodity histories of the colonial Americas. Few commodities of the early modern Atlantic world — if any — can be fully understood without centering the lives, knowledge, and labor of the people who taught colonizers how to grow, mine, and concoct — and who often produced — the commodities that crisscrossed the globe.

New histories of commodities outline methodologies for centering the lives of these Indigenous and enslaved producers and intellectuals. In *Mining Language: Racial Thinking, Indigenous Knowledge, and Colonial Metallurgy in the Early Modern Iberian World*, Allison Bigelow examines the complex — and racially-diverse — histories of gold, iron, copper, and silver. In doing so, she recovers the language and technical knowledge of Indigenous and African miners in the Americas from a colonial archive meant to erase them. By creatively engaging with the scientific literature of the Iberian Atlantic, she shows how “Indigenous and Afro-Indigenous ideas, bodies, and skilled technical practices” became embedded within the extractive economies and scientific rhetoric of the Spanish and Portuguese empires (BIGELOW, 2020, p. 40). The result is a history of mining that centers Native America, the African Diaspora, and the ideas of subalterns. For Bigelow, their contributions are critical to understanding the operation of empire and the generation of wealth in the early modern era.

Bigelow joins a host of other scholars who are creatively engaging with the colonial archive to recover the experiences, voices, and knowledge of enslaved people throughout the Atlantic World. While Bigelow is a scholar of literature, historians can learn from her linguistic approach to early modern sources. She parses these sources — even the smallest fragments — for the intellectual contributions of men and women whose names will never be recovered. In many ways, her approach to the archive

mirrors that of historians such as Marisa Fuentes. In *Dispossessed Lives: Enslaved Women, Violence, and the Archive*, Fuentes models how to read sources “along the bias grain” by flipping the prospective of documents from that of the enslaver to the enslaved (FUENTES, 2016, p. 7).<sup>5</sup> “By changing the perspective of a documents’ author to that of an enslaved subject, questioning the archives’ veracity and filling out miniscule fragmentary mentions or the absence of evidence with spatial and historical context,” Fuentes explains, “our historical interpretation shifts to the enslaved viewpoint in important ways” (FUENTES, 2016, p. 4). By taking fragments of sources — or even a single word — seriously, these scholars demonstrate both the scholarly possibilities and astounding violence of the colonial archive.

These methodologies have the potential to foster capacious and much-needed intellectual histories of the colonial Americas, especially histories that center Indigenous and African intellectuals. In recent decades, histories such as James Sweet’s *Domingos Álvares, African Healing, and the Intellectual History of the Atlantic World* and Judith Carney’s *Black Rice: The African Origins of Rice Cultivation in the Americas* have broadened our understanding of what constitutes an “intellectual history” of the Atlantic world and its diverse peoples (SWEET, 2011; CARNEY, 2004). No longer is intellectual history concerned with the landed elites of colonial society. Rather, like Bigelow’s research shows, the knowledge of Indigenous and African peoples served as the building blocks of the colonial project. For Sweet, the Atlantic’s intellectual history is grounded in the religious and cultural experiences of Africans who adapted their practices to American settings. For Carney, that history entails the transmission of agricultural knowledge across space and time. Both scholars demonstrate the value of recognizing the practices and knowledge of the enslaved as intellectual labor.

By blending this kind of intellectual history with environmental history, new research can uncover how Indigenous, African, and African-descended peoples shaped the production of commodities throughout the Atlantic world. Their knowledge and technologies were violently extracted by Europeans since the onset of colonization. This story is one that is continuing to be told. Recent and forthcoming histories of the Atlantic world traverse littoral spaces, plantations, distilleries and forests to show how the knowledge of diverse peoples proved integral to colonial projects as well as the larger Atlantic economy. They show how few places — and few commodities — remained untouched from enslaved or Indigenous intellectual labor.

Some of these recent histories focus on liminal, littoral spaces that are often deemed secondary to plantation landscapes yet, upon closer analysis, factored prominently into imperial projects. Molly Warsh’s study of pearls, for example, highlights how enslaved Indigenous and later African peoples leveraged environmental knowledge as they harvested oysters along the Venezuelan Pearl Coast. In doing so, she uncovers how their knowledge of the seabed proved crucial to the political ecology of the Spanish empire (WARSH, 2019). Similarly, Kevin Dawson reveals how enslaved pilots’ knowledge of currents and the seabed facilitated global trade. Throughout the Atlantic world, ship captains surrendered control of their vessels to enslaved pilots. Entering particular harbors and rivers, such as Jamaica’s Kingston Harbor, required up-to-date knowledge of maritime hydrography. Enslaved pilots studied currents, noted shallow shoal waters, and learned the best routes in and out of a port (DAWSON, 2018). Though located

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<sup>5</sup> For more on writing “with and against the archive”, see Saidiya Hartman (2008, p. 12).



along the edges of imperial holdings, these littoral spaces generated prized commodities and proved critical to their global transport. Yet, the imperial value of these coastlines depended upon the coerced labor of Indigenous and African peoples.

Beyond the water's edge, Indigenous and African knowledge undergirded the plantation enterprise. In the early 2000s, both Judith Carney and Jennifer Morgan documented how the labor of enslaved African women enabled the planting, harvesting, and processing of rice in plantation British America (CARNEY, 2002; MORGAN, 2004, p. 142-166). Their knowledge proved foundational to the Atlantic economy. Yet, Morgan notes how coerced and unnatural it was for African women to pass this knowledge between generations, genders, and cultures in the colonial Americas. Whereas "knowledge of rice cultivation in Senegambia had been passed from mother to daughter for generations," in the Americas enslaved African women "found themselves in the difficult position of transferring their knowledge to men, whose enslavement would now be exacerbated by the indignity of performing women's work and the penalty for not performing well" (MORGAN, 2004, p. 163). As it generated immense wealth for planters, the transfer of environmental knowledge also upended the gender norms that many West African people carried with them across the Middle Passage. Their intellectual labor inflicted a cultural toll.

African and Indigenous intellectual labor also proved foundational to European expansion. Since Carney and Morgan demonstrated the role of African knowledge in rice production, other historians have uncovered how similar extractive processes enabled the production of other staple crops. Melissa Morris chronicles how Spanish colonists and enslaved Africans learned about tobacco production from Native populations. As other European powers attempted to build overseas empires in the Americas, they learned about the production of tobacco through inter-imperial trade. Yet, that knowledge only went so far. The English, Dutch, and French came to rely on Indigenous peoples for botanical knowledge as they colonized the northern South American coast. They learned of intertillage, observed how to properly care for seedlings, and implemented these techniques in their own plots. They also captured and enslaved Native peoples, transporting them to other colonies in order to extract their botanical knowledge and physical labor. These early European colonizers recognized the value of Indigenous knowledge of tobacco. It enabled European colonists to establish permanent, profitable colonies throughout the Atlantic world (MORRIS, 2017, p. 66-104).

But Indigenous and African knowledge extended well beyond staple crops. While sugar, rice, and tobacco generated immense wealth and global demand, so too did smaller commodities. These products also depended upon the expertise of non-European producers. Jordan Smith's study of rum, for example, highlights the intellectual role of Native and African people in alcohol production in the early modern Caribbean. Prior to the arrival of European colonists, the Kalinago fermented cassava and sweet potatoes. In travel narratives and natural histories, Europeans frequently remarked on the taste, availability, and production of these beverages. At the same time, enslaved people from Angola arrived in the Americas with knowledge of the production of malavu, or palm wine. Consequently, Native and African peoples shaped the landscape of alcohol production throughout the region, creatively combining ideas and materials from across the Atlantic world to form new, desirable products. Their knowledge proved crucial given the ignorance of European colonists. While Europeans had a robust culture of alcohol consumption, their knowledge of alcohol production was limited, especially among English colonists. Therefore, early efforts to produce

alcohol on the island of Barbados depended upon the knowledge and labor of enslaved Indigenous and African people (SMITH, 2018).

Together, these studies show how the production of commodities led to the creation of particular labor regimes that valued enslaved expertise. In the Caribbean, plantation owners looked for enslaved people that had knowledge of distilling. They could then monetize molasses in addition to cane sugar. Similarly, along the coast of Central America and in the interior of Jamaica, enslavers came to value the skills and knowledge of enslaved woodcutters. The global demand for mahogany spurred logging throughout the circum-Caribbean. The knowledge of enslaved Africans and Miskito people became crucial to meeting this demand. In forests throughout the circum-Caribbean, Jennifer Anderson shows how the enslaved “gained valuable knowledge of their surroundings which they deployed to their own advantage whenever possible”. Indeed, they served as “important brokers of environmental information” (ANDERSON, 2012, p. 157, p. 13). Whether enslaved on a plantation or along the coast, African and Indigenous people were forced to contribute their intellectual labor to the colonial project.

If we recognize this botanical, agricultural, and environmental knowledge as intellectual history, then historians can show how Indigenous and African knowledge anchored the Atlantic world and, by extension, the global economy. In this kind of global history, commodities such as tobacco, rice, and rum do not owe their existence to experimental or innovative planters. Rather, these commodities derived from the cross-cultural, inter-generational, and violent transfer of knowledge between Indigenous, African, and European peoples. That transfer of knowledge precipitated immense wealth. Planters, merchants, and empires continually profited off the knowledge of Indigenous and African peoples in the Americas, even as they dismissed them as property or derided them as unworthy of subjecthood or citizenship. That transfer of knowledge also triggered environmental collapse.

The very knowledge that enabled the production and circulation of valuable commodities also threatened American environments from North American woodlands to South American mines, Atlantic fisheries to Caribbean plantations. And Indigenous and African people bore the brunt of that devastation. The more profitable American landscapes became, the more planters, merchants, and empires prioritized wealth — and their own livelihoods — over local environments and the lives of Indigenous and African peoples. Consequently, environmental disasters plagued these communities throughout the early modern Atlantic World.

These environmental disasters were often man-made. Even the effects of so-called natural disasters were amplified by the actions of — or conditions created by — Europeans. Some of these disasters have already been mentioned, such as the dispossession of Wabanaki in the wake of continued timbering. Dispossession precipitated an ongoing environmental toll on the Indigenous. Forced to abandon their homelands, their relationship to the environment changed as they were forced to adapt to new ecologies. Other disasters coincided with imperial wars and weather-related events. In the 1770s and 1780s, the combination of the American Revolutionary war, prolonged drought, and consecutive hurricanes created a provisions crisis in the British Caribbean. Richard Sheridan shows how the disruption of trade limited the amount of foodstuffs imported into many islands. Meanwhile, weather-related events wreaked havoc on locally-grown foodstuffs. As a result, enslaved populations, especially in the Leeward Islands, faced deadly consequences as white residents fed themselves, leaving thousands of the islands’ enslaved populations to die of famine. Though imperial





wealth depended upon the labor of the enslaved, their livelihood was not protected in the wake of environmental collapse (SHERIDAN, 1976).

In fact, enslavers regularly subjected the enslaved to dangerous environmental conditions. In her recent article in *Early American Studies*, Katherine Johnson applies the phrase “environmental racism” to Atlantic slavery in the eighteenth-century British Caribbean. She analyzes the rhetoric of Caribbean planters to show how they purposely subjected enslaved people to deadly environments, even in the wake of abolitionist debates. “At the end of the eighteenth century, planters claimed that they needed African laborers in the Caribbean because their bodies suited the environment better than European bodies,” Johnson argues (JOHNSON, 2020, p. 262-263). “As it turned out,” she continues, “the issue was not about who could physically perform the labor, but about which bodies should be exposed to dangerous environmental conditions.” For Johnson, timbering — a risky activity that propelled the growth of the plantation economy — revealed this reality (2020, p. 263). Yet, the concept of environmental racism has applications far beyond the woodlands of vast early America. As Indigenous and African people gave up their intellectual labor, they endured deadly environmental conditions. Enslaved distillers died in fires (SMITH, 2015). Enslaved pearl divers died in shark attacks (WARSH, 2010). From plantations to mines, millions of enslaved people died laboring in the dangerous environments of the colonial Americas, producing the valuable commodities that traversed the globe.<sup>6</sup>

Centering the lives of Indigenous and African peoples in commodity histories not only reveals their wide-ranging intellectual labor, but also demonstrates how that labor failed to protect them from — but rather purposely subjected them to and, at times, even precipitated — environmental disaster. Whereas commodity chains are often bookended by production and consumption, in the colonial Americas, environmental destruction, enslavement, and dispossession were interwoven into that chain. New commodity histories must not only recognize the immense role that Indigenous and African peoples played in creating those commodities but also document the toll their communities endured as the commodities they labored ceaselessly to create became globally profitable.

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<sup>6</sup> For more on the omnipresence of death in the British Atlantic world, see Vincent Brown, *The reaper's garden: death and power in the world of Atlantic slavery* (2010).



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