



6-24-2020

Book Review: Becoming Creole: Nature and Race in Belize by Melissa A. Johnson

Marcia Mikaluk

University of North Dakota, marcia.mikulak@und.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://commons.und.edu/anth-fac>



Part of the [Anthropology Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Mikaluk, Marcia, "Book Review: Becoming Creole: Nature and Race in Belize by Melissa A. Johnson" (2020). *Anthropology Faculty Publications*. 10.

<https://commons.und.edu/anth-fac/10>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Department of Anthropology at UND Scholarly Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Anthropology Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of UND Scholarly Commons. For more information, please contact und.common@library.und.edu.

Becoming Creole: Nature and Race in Belize. *Melissa A. Johnson.* New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2019. 220pp.

Marcia Mikulak
Professor Emerita
University of North Dakota

Melissa A Johnson, Professor of Anthropology at Southwestern University in Georgetown, Texas, explores the everyday perceptions of rural Belizean Creole peoples in her 2019 ethnography, *Becoming Creole: Nature and Race in Belize: Nature and Race in Belize*. With a focus on the intertwined worlds of humans and their environmental habitats, Johnson seeks to excavate the formation of identities (gendered and otherwise) and social relations that constitute Creole communities in the villages of the Lower Belize River Valley. Married to a Belizean man whose home and ancestral lineage is embedded in the historical landscape of hunting, fishing, and mahogany camps, Johnson's research is, in part, indebted to her husband's deep roots as a Belizean Creole.

Johnson's ethnography begins with descriptions of the dense river ecosystems and the rich subtropical wildlands, all of which have historical roots in colonial extractions of resources and the exploitation of African slave labor. While the brutality of slave labor was economically profitable for British Colonialists, such labor provided skills appropriated by Afro-Caribbean men (and women) as they constructed new economies of their own. Johnson excavates this history by focusing on the lived experiences in current rural villages that surround her husband's community. In the opening chapters she briefly presents historical data on "white" English woodcutters, the black Africans they kept as slaves, and the conditions under which they labored to extract resources for the burgeoning global economies of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Yet, the importance of the diaspora of Black enslaved Africans among Belizean Creoles is not plumbed sufficiently to demonstrate the complexity of contemporary racial identities in this ethnography, except for their contemporary hunting, fishing, and social community relations.

Johnson argues that it is the "more-than-human" world that informs local rural Belizean Creole constructions of identity, gender, race, and Creole economies, yet she does not explore how the natural world expresses itself in cultural or metaphorical identities among Creole peoples in Belize. Attention to racial attitudes regarding Creole peoples' phenotypical appearances receives some attention, but racialized constructions of identity are only peripherally explored; a disappointing experience for a researcher who seeks to understand human agency in everyday Creole life. Her chapter on conservation and nature tourism does examine contemporary conservationist attitudes regarding Belizean Creole's and their agency, providing evidence of racialized white colonial outsider perspectives that denigrate rural Creole environmental knowledge.

Ecological environments of fishing, swamp wildlife, and the technologies used in them (boats, fishing gear, preparations made for travel to them, etc.) are described, and cooking of local fish and wildlife and their distribution as shared among villages are discussed. Johnson provides interesting personal dialogues among those participating in such expeditions, sharing family histories and hunting and fishing adventures. However, this reviewer wanted to know how the environment is understood by Belizean Creoles not only in terms of maintaining their

family stories, but also in terms of protecting and preserving their environmental inheritance and traditions, while linking the natural environment and its metaphorical meanings to their everyday agency. Johnson argues that research needs to speak both of and about *genres of being human* as a state of praxis: “Becoming Creole” provides an earnest, ethnographic body-of-work that focuses on the daily life of rural Belizean Creole’s experience, but her ethnography does not provide a deep analysis of their social praxis. For example, while attention to social practices entwined in rural Creole existence, this ethnography does not include racial identities and their link to deep ecology and the Creole Anthropocene.

Johnson’s research does provide examples of transnational Belizean Creole cuisine and family linkages revealing valuable information about immigrants from rural Belize to areas such as (Chicago) Illinois, Texas, and New York, particularly as they perform Creole identity through food exchanges in their communities. For example, meats such as deer hunted in the United States, cured and prepared according to Belizean Creole traditions, keep the diaspora of Belizean Creole connections to land, animals, and human rural economies alive. Johnson’s ethnography further demonstrates how 21st Century migrations from Belize preserve and regenerate rural Belize Creole identity within a global context. The foods, their capture and preparation are lived, migratory experiences for both those people who are migrating and for those who remain in their homelands. Migrants frequently visit homelands and bring with them transnational assemblages from both the natural and the social worlds in which they are embedded. Johnson argues that nature (plants, spices, herbs, and animals) is transnational since it is carried within the constructed realities of those who migrate back-and-forth; her discussions about the continental shipping of meats within the United States among her own Belizean Creole family members provides interesting data on the importance of the relationship of diet and identity.

Another interesting ethnographic finding in Johnson’s data on Creole language is its creative use to generate metaphors of otherness, and its borrowing from Creole perceptions of the natural world (important findings for linguistic anthropology). Humor, wit, and critiques of human character are often derived from the experiences of humans living in and with nature; to both adults and children, music is also used to translate experience into expressions that not only teach about the natural world, but also how to survive in it. In the examples provided by Johnson, her analysis demonstrates how language and music are cultural productions, most often generated by personal experiences in the natural world which are frequently due to the danger that nature poses to humans; however, her analysis does not show connections between human perceptions of nature as benevolent, knowledgeable, and supportive of human existence. While a brief discussion of the Rastafarian concept of “levity” is provided (Johnson refers to Caribbean and Black Studies to describe Levity as a “Way of Life” that includes notions of freedom), this ethnography tends to focus on freedom as a form of rural, non-capitalist economic modes of production. The analysis in this ethnography is more materialistic than dialogic; there is little discussion or examples of how human dialogue within its natural world can gain both metaphysical meanings and extractive practices for local economies and social or racial identities.