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## **It's the Climate, Scholars!: A Response to Gary Puckrein, "Climate, Health and Black Labor in the English Americas" (1979)**

**Rachel B. Herrmann**

Gary Puckrein, "Climate, Health and Black Labor in the English Americas," *Journal of American Studies* Volume 13, Issue 2 (1979), 179–193.

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When Jamaican Maroons from Trelawney Town who had been exiled to Nova Scotia made the case in 1799 for their relocation to the British colony of Freetown, Sierra Leone, they referenced their bodies, the soil, and their foodstuffs. As exiles from one British colony and dissatisfied migrants in another, Maroon Captains John Jarret, Andrew Smith, James Barrel, James Laurence, Thomas Johnston, and Charles Shaw argued in their petition that "the Soil of Nova Scotia will never answer to transplant Maroons in, nor will they ever thrive where the Pine Apple does not."<sup>1</sup> The success of their petition would result in the Maroons' next migration to a place colonized a few years prior by formerly enslaved Black Loyalists who had fled the United States after the American War for Independence. The Maroons' petition to the House of Commons and their experiences illustrate why historians (including this one) and American Studies scholars are writing about Black labor, climate, and health in the English Americas. Maroons had good knowledge of agriculture, wild plants, famine foods, and game in tropical climates. As Ruma Chopra and Anya Zilberstein have shown, they negotiated and renegotiated other peoples' expectations about their

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<sup>1</sup> Petition of Captains John Jarret, Andrew Smith, James Barrel, James Laurence, Thomas Johnston, and Charles Shaw, in behalf of themselves and the whole of the Maroons now at Preston, [enclosed in Mr. Thornton's of 4 January 1799], CO 217/70, the National Archives, Kew. This document is reproduced in Mavis C. Campbell, *Nova Scotia and the Fighting Maroons: A Documentary History* (Williamsburg, VA: Studies in Third World Societies, 1990), 91–92.

labor as they moved through different nodes of the English-speaking Atlantic World.<sup>2</sup>

Unhappy Maroon petitioners used their experiences of, and knowledge about, living in Jamaica beyond the control of the British Crown to make a point about their unsuccessful labor to grow pineapples in unsuitable, freezing soil. Their words emerge from script text in the National Archives to anticipate Gary Puckrein's observations about Black bodies in hot and cold climates, on which later writers have expanded.

Puckrein's 1979 essay was positioned between three important interdisciplinary conversations: one about disease and climate, another about race and labor, and the third about the relationships between the two, both as people in the past perceived them and as historians understood them in the 1970s. Puckrein built on Alfred Crosby's foundational *Columbian Exchange*—about people and animals on the move—by beginning with the two types of mosquitos that made people sick with malaria and yellow fever. He then considered how white colonizers responded to “the unhealthy effect of warm temperatures,” including disease, by changing their diets and avoiding strenuous labor (182). Colonists then developed ideas about race and enslaved Africans' supposedly greater capacity to work hard in hot environments without becoming as ill as white colonizers did.<sup>3</sup>

He observed that colonists of Virginia knew and recorded the fact that new migrants became ill in June, July, and August. The same year, Carville Earle and Karen Kupperman

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<sup>2</sup> Anya Zilberstein, *A Temperate Empire: Making Climate Change in Early America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016); Ruma Chopra, *Almost Home: Maroons Between Slavery and Freedom in Jamaica, Nova Scotia, and Sierra Leone* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018).

<sup>3</sup> Alfred W. Crosby, Jr., *The Columbian Exchange: Biological and Cultural Consequences of 1492* (Westport and Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1972).

made connections between drought and salt poisoning in the Jamestown Colony. Their scholarship emerged alongside new context and data about unprecedentedly cool temperatures during the Little Ice Age, which Katherine Grandjean discusses in a review essay from which this author has stolen her title. A decade after Puckrein, Rodney Baine and Louis de Vorsey made similar connections between seasons of hot weather and seasons of bad water in the place that became Georgia.<sup>4</sup> The results of this research is that historians now draw on cartography, dendroclimatology, ethnobotany and oceanography. Following these lines of thinking, Kathleen Brown, Joyce Chaplin, and Rebecca Earle have added to what we now know about diet, gender, labor, and race in the early American South and Spanish America, and Virginia Anderson, Elinor Melville, Andrew Sluyter, and Joshua Specht have written excellent books about animals including cattle, pigs, and sheep.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Carville V. Earle, "Environment, Disease, and Mortality in Early Virginia," in *The Chesapeake in the Seventeenth Century: Essays on Anglo-American Society*, ed. Thad W. Tate and David L. Ammerman (Chapel Hill: Published for the Institute of Early American History and Culture by the University of North Carolina Press, 1979), 96–125; Karen Ordahl Kupperman, "Apathy and Death in Early Jamestown," *Journal of American History* volume 66, no. 1 (1979): 24–40; Katherine Grandjean, "'It's the Climate, Stupid': A review essay of Brooke, *Climate Change and the Course of Global History: A Rough Journey*; and Parker, *Global Crisis: War, Climate Change and Catastrophe in the Seventeenth Century*," *William and Mary Quarterly* volume 72, no. 1 (Jan. 2015): 159–67; Rodney M. Baine and Louis De Vorsey, Jr., "The Provenance and Historical Accuracy of 'A View of Savannah as it Stood the 29<sup>th</sup> of March, 1734,'" *Georgia Historical Quarterly* volume 73, no. 4 (Winter 1989), 784–813, esp. 804.

<sup>5</sup> Kathleen M. Brown, *Good Wives, Nasty Wenches, and Anxious Patriarchs: Gender, Race, and Power in Colonial Virginia* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996); Rebecca Earle, *The Body of the Conquistador: Food, Race and the Colonial Experience in Spanish America, 1492–1700* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2012); Joyce E. Chaplin, *Subject Matter: Technology, the Body, and Science on the Anglo-American Frontier, 1500–1676* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001); Joshua Specht, *Red Meat Republic: A Hoof-to-Table History of How Beef Changed America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019); Andrew Sluyter, *Black Ranching Frontiers: African Cattle Herders of the Atlantic world, 1500–1900* (New Haven: Yale University Press 2012); Elinor G. K. Melville, *A plague of sheep: environmental consequences of the conquest of Mexico* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1994); Virginia DeJohn Anderson, *Creatures of empire: how domestic animals transformed early America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004).

This body of work, all of it connected to the climate, has expanded what we know about patriarchal colonizers' monitoring of and interventions upon themselves and upon the bodies of the Indigenous women, enslaved Africans, and married and unmarried white women over whom they claimed mastery or power. This journal has published ideas about race and labor violence, and about Indigenous environmental stewardship that defends sovereignty and groundwater.<sup>6</sup> It is thus fair to say that since Puckrein urged historians to improve their awareness "that colonial ideas about health and morbidity can provide useful information on how the settlers adapted to their new environments" (180), many have answered his call. Authors have taken an interest in the dietary changes that colonists made or failed to make in response to temperature, climate, and inaccurate perceptions of Native Americans as unusually hungry.<sup>7</sup>

As a historian who started her career discussing inept white colonists in seventeenth-century Jamestown before turning to Jamaican Maroons, Black Loyalists, and Native Americans, I have only recently come to appreciate how deeply imbricated the scholarship on these seemingly disparate groups has become. The study of the Indigenous slave trade has benefitted from and then expanded on Puckrein's discussion of enslaved labor. Puckrein's attention to the drive to legalize the slave trade in the Georgia colony—

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<sup>6</sup> Rhodri Jeffreys-Jones, "Theories of American Labour Violence," *Journal of American Studies* volume 13, no. 2 (1979): 245–264; Gregory Smithers and Susannah Hopson, "Rainbow Serpents and Boiling Springs: Indigenous Sovereignty and the Fight for Groundwater in the United States and Australia," *Journal of American Studies* volume 58, no. 1 (2024): 1–138.

<sup>7</sup> Katherine A. Grandjean, "New World Tempests: Environment, Scarcity, and the Coming of the Pequot War," *William and Mary Quarterly* volume 68, no. 1 (2011): 75–100; Robert Appelbaum, "Hunger in Early Virginia: Indians and English Facing Off over Excess, Want, and Need," in *Envisioning an English Empire: Jamestown and the Making of the North Atlantic World*, ed. Robert Appelbaum and John Wood Sweet (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005); Michael A. LaCombe, *Political Gastronomy: Food and Authority in the English Atlantic World* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012); Carla Cevasco, *Violent Appetites: Hunger in the Early Northeast* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2022).

known as the “Malcontent” or “Grumbletonian” controversy—rightly concluded that Georgia colonists came to advocate for slavery because they believed that people of African descent were better able to perform difficult labor in Georgia’s climate.<sup>8</sup> Historians are constantly honing their abilities to interpret the past, and they are not usually keen to predict the future. Puckrein can hardly be faulted for not knowing how much more historians would come to learn about Native Americans.

Newer scholarship has pluralized and provided important context about the early American slave trades that preceded Georgia’s adoption of slavery in the mid-eighteenth century. We now know more about: the “shatter zone” of disease, colonization, and Indigenous slave-trading that developed east of the Mississippi River; the explosion of a trade in guns and ammunition for enslaved Native Americans that was wrapped up in successive inter-imperial conflicts known as the Carolina-Creek War, Queen Anne’s War, the Yamasee War, the Tuscarora War, and the War of Jenkin’s Ear; the abuses in the slave trade, failed efforts to reform it, and a shift in trade between English colonists and Native Americans, from trading enslaved Indigenous people to dressed deerskins; the rise of the “maize and pease” complex that D. Andrew Johnson identifies, which was maintained by Native American women and on which plantations depended; the increase in the enslaved African population as plantations expanded and shifted to rice production; and the additional forms of labor that African enslavement demanded beyond Virginia.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Joyce E. Chaplin, *An Anxious Pursuit: Agricultural Innovation and Modernity in the Lower South, 1730–1815* (Williamsburg, VA: Institute of Early American History and Culture, 1993), 117–19; Matthew Mulcahy, *Hubs of Empire: The Southeastern Lowcountry and British Caribbean* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014), 85, 107.

<sup>9</sup> Allan Galloway, *The Indian Slave Trade: The Rise of the English Empire in the American South, 1670–1717* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002); Robbie Ethridge and Sheri M. Shuck-Hall, eds., *Mapping the*

Scholars now recognize that all of the people who labored in purportedly “English” colonies were connected to wider continental and Atlantic worlds. The ability to attend to these connections speaks to current scholars’ interest in the gendered labor and knowledge of enslaved Africans and Native Americans. Puckrein was ahead of his time in thinking about the importance of climate and soil to rice cultivation; twenty years later Judith Carney’s germinal book on enslaved women’s knowledge helped food studies scholars and historians to think differently about African history, rice production, waterways, and women’s labor.<sup>10</sup> Readers will not be shocked to learn that Puckrein is the founder and now President and CEO of the National Minority Quality Forum, which aims to eliminate “premature death and preventable illness” disproportionately affecting racial and ethnic minorities.<sup>11</sup> Puckrein and his contemporaries made it possible to reckon with the longer histories of race, health, and climate; his ongoing work reminds us of the urgency of continuing to do so.

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*Mississippian shatter zone: the colonial Indian slave trade and regional instability in the American south* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press 2003); Christina Snyder, *Slavery in Indian Country: The Changing Face of Captivity in Early America*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010); Steven C. Hahn, *The life and times of Mary Musgrove* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2012); D. Andrew Johnson, *Enslaved Native Americans and the Making of Colonial South Carolina* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2024).

<sup>10</sup> Judith A. Carney, *Black Rice: The African Origins of Rice Cultivation in the Americas* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press 2001).

<sup>11</sup> “Gary A. Puckrein, PhD,” *National Health Council*, <https://nationalhealthcouncil.org/staff/gary-puckrein/>

*and Mary Quarterly* volume 68, no. 1 (2011): 47–74 and “Consider the Source: An 1800 Maroon Treaty,” *Early American Studies*, volume 21, no. 1 (2023): 166–99. Her books include *No Useless Mouth: Waging War and Fighting Hunger in the American Revolution*, *To Feast on Us as Their Prey: Cannibalism and the Early Modern Atlantic*, and (with Jessica Choppin Roney) *Claiming Land, Claiming Water: Borders and the People Who Crossed Them in the Early Modern Atlantic*.