Melissa A. Johnson, *Becoming Creole: Nature and Race in Belize*. New Brunswick NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2019. xi + 229 pp. (Paper US\$ 34.95)

Readers are fortunate that New Jersey-raised Melissa Johnson and Belizean Creole Elrick Bonner Sr. met in the early 1990s and have built a life, family, and book together. Johnson acknowledges Bonner as the cocreator of *Becoming Creole*, and he has affected her “becoming” by bringing her deeply within rural Creole life. They are both outsider-insiders in different ways and places, but most deeply rooted in Lemonal and the lower Belize River valley, the region that is *Becoming Creole*’s focus.

This is a rigorously theorized and readable account of the culture and semi-subsistence economy of rural Belizean Creoles, brimming with ethnographic evidence from Johnson’s formal academic research and family life over a quarter century. At 185 pages, plus excellent maps and photos, and a self-deprecating humor that leavens its serious analysis of generations of rural Creoles’ successfully resistant engagement with powerful forms of racialized capitalism, it is suitable for advanced courses on the Caribbean, Central America, environmental studies, and postemancipation societies. Johnson argues that a central way that rural Belizean Creoles come to understand themselves as such is in relation to the agency-laden natural environment in which they make part of their living and from which they procure key foods. And she shows that ideas about race are at stake in the forging of that relationship. Every chapter offers rich analyses: of “bushiness,” powerful water, flora and, especially, fauna, socionatural practices of fishing, hunting, and making *plantashe*, and sharing, locals’ ability to negotiate relations with foreign conservationists and ecotourists, and transnational renewals of rural Creole Belizean ways of being.

Readers not familiar with Belize will find this to be more than a case study in environmental geography or postcolonial racial formations, and may well want to go to the Crooked Tree Cashew Festival, or find Elrick tending his cattle. For Belizeans and Belizeanists, the book will be highly evocative as well as illuminating. Johnson makes an immense contribution to Belizean anthropology by focusing on rural Creoles, who have attracted far less attention than Garifuna and Mayan communities, presumably for being “too westernized” for those heedless of Sidney Mintz’s admonition to study pre- and postemancipation Afro-Caribbean peoples.

Yet the book could have spoken more overtly to scholarship on Caribbean postemancipation part-peasantries. Johnson nicely skewers historical myths of Creole distaste or unsuitability for farming, even as she focuses more on fishing and hunting. Comparing the lower Belize River valley to environmentally and economically similar Caribbean regions would have helped to illuminate the

conditions necessary for meaningful postemancipation self-sufficiency combined with intermittent cash-earning. One such region could be the Creole communities just slightly further south, in the Sibun and Manatee River watersheds. Such comparison would require more political analysis than Johnson offers, particularly for the twentieth century. She says little about the postcolonial state and never mentions highly divisive party politics, perhaps because she wants local readers to feel “comfortable” (p. 17) with the book. This limits its potential to nurture intra-Caribbean comparisons, and may provoke reader discussion of the costs of such an “intimate ethnography” (p. 15).

Johnson furthers the necessary project of regional Belizean histories in the first chapter, which includes original material developed from innovative use of archival documents combined with local oral tradition. She rightly identifies the late 1780s return from Mosquitia as a key origin point for Creole communities in the lower Belize River valley, and readily acknowledges slavery and racism in Belize in general. Yet there are problems with this chapter in that it reproduces myths of regular pre-eighteenth-century British presence in what is now Belize, and assumes continuity between the cultures of hardscrabble British logwood cutters in 1719 and post-1786 free Black, free Colored, and White villagers. It unnecessarily roots present-day rural egalitarianism in the “Public Meetings” of the 1760s slave-owning elite. Far from being democratic, “revolutionary,” or “utopian” (pp. 29–30), this elite deployed the slave labor that logged out mahogany from parts of Johnson’s research area before the late 1780s. She implies that large groups of enslaved mahogany cutters were absent from the region after that point, and thus focuses on the multi-racial population of mostly modest means, mentioning a wealthy free-colored landowner’s slaves only in passing. The possibility that maroons—or, more likely, newly freed people—settled in her research area pre- or post-1834, bringing with them egalitarian practices rooted in West African cultures or in the experiences of the slave trade or urban/logging slavery, is not considered. Pairing this superb ethnography with more accurate historical and fuller political context will be important for student readers.

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