

## “Landscapes of Freedom: The Pacific Lowlands of Colombia, 1850-1930”

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At the RCC, I will write a book about the formation of a black peasant society after the end of slavery in the Pacific lowlands of Colombia, one of the most humid rainforests on the planet. My research will help explain why and how extractive economies are a prevailing form of resource use in jungle environments. In the nineteenth century, an important shift occurred in the way this economy worked in the lowlands. The extraction of resources produced by nature expanded from gold to also include platinum and plant products, such as rubber and vegetable ivory. In addition, the descendents of slaves became independent extractors who sold these products to a small group of white merchant exporters as they developed a plethora of subsistence activities.

It was in this particular context of resource use that freedom in the Pacific lowlands acquired its meaning and a deeply humanized landscape took shape. For blacks, freedom meant having control over the extraction processes, that is, over their time and lives, and also managing their territory by means of their own knowledge and world view. In this process they created a landscape that, unlike so many other cases of export-led activities, did not destroy nature. As a consequence, observers at the time imagined this landscape to be “natural,” ignoring its human presence.

This book will thus contribute to our understanding of resource use in rainforest environments, and emphasize how post-emancipation societies are deeply influenced by the functioning of their economies, which in turn is shaped by the natural setting and the way people relate to it. In this manner it will bring together environmental history and racial studies.