

Transatlantic Approaches to Environmental Racism

A Lens Through Ecologies, Materialities and Relations

Workshop | November 6-7, 2026
University of Marburg

Venue

Institute of Social Anthropology and the
Study of Religions
Deutschhausstr. 3, 35037 Marburg
Room 002 (00/1020)

Workshop organized by

the GASCA (DGSKA) regional groups
Afro-America and African Diaspora,
Mesoamerica and South America

Financially supported by

Deutsche Gesellschaft für Sozial- und
Kulturanthropologie e.V. (DGSKA)
Curupira. Förderverein Kultur- und
Sozialanthropologie in Marburg e.V.

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Friday, November 6

9.30-10.00 Arrival
10.00-10.15 Welcome address

Conceptualizing Environmental Racism

10.15-11.15 **Keynote: Regimes of Inequality and Environmental Racism faced by Afro-descendant People in Latin America** | *Rocío Elizabeth Vera Santos*
11.15-11.45 **Documenting Environmental Racism and the Reconfiguration of Aquatic Ecologies in Colombia's Ciénaga Grande de Santa Marta** | *Carmela Daza & Andrea Leiva*
11.45-12.15 **"Sacrificable" Bodies or Sacrifice Zones? Quilombolan Resistance to Extractive Violence on Ilha de Maré, Bahia/Brazil** | *Johanna Kocks*
12.15-12.45 **Recap**

12.45-14.00 **Lunch at Multikulti**

Environmental Racism in the Longue durée

14.15-14.45 **Making White Insular Deserts: Racial Environmentalism in the Malvinas / Falkland Islands** | *Ana Laura Zavala Guillen*
14.45-15.15 **PDEK: Racialized Peasants, Deforestation, and Environmental Knowledge in Regional New Granada, 1770-1830** | *Carolina Hormaza*
15.15-15.45 **Chaired discussion on key concepts and recap** | *Caterina Mantilla*
15.45-16.15 **Coffee break**

Ontologies, Epistemologies and Environmental Racism

16.15-16.45	Epistemic Shifts in Wixárika Environmental Knowledge (Mexico): the Fine Line between Environmental Racism and the Ecological Indian <i>Itxaso García Chapinal</i>
16.45-17.15	Saving the reef from whom? Negotiations of multispecies survival along the Mesoamerican coral reef in Mexico <i>Sarah Isabell Mund</i>
17.15-17.45	Recap
18.30	Dinner at <i>Market</i> (optional)

Saturday, November 7

Material Lives of Environmental Racism

9.00-10.00	Keynote: Beyond Environmental Injustice: Indigenous Heritage, Territoriality, and the Coloniality of Amazonian Landscapes <i>Carla Jaimes Betancourt</i>
10.00-10.30	Confessing in lumine natural – A Case Study of Early Colonial Transatlantic Ontological Entanglements at the Intersection of Racialized and Theological Arguments for Imperial Incorporation (Sixteenth Century) <i>Romy Köhler</i>
10.30-11.00	“The Opposite of Forest is Museum”? <i>Suelen Calonga</i>
11.00-11.30	Coffee break
11.30-12.00	Who Inherits the Ancestors’ Home? Relatedness to the Land and Ancient Materiality in the Face of Environmental Destruction in the Chenes Region, Mexico <i>Yannick Dreessen</i>
12.00-12.30	Recap
12.30-13.30	Visit to the Ethnographic Collection (Rudolph-Bultmann-Str. 4a/b, 35032 Marburg)
13.30	Lunch at <i>Innocou</i> (optional)

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Conceptualizing Environmental Racism

Regimes of Inequality and Environmental Racism faced by Afro-descendant People in Latin America

Rocío Elizabeth Vera Santos (Free University of Berlin)

Afro-descendant populations in Latin America continue to face entrenched structural disparities, evident in environmental racism, territorial dispossession, and severe socio-spatial segregation. This paper develops the concept of regimes of inequality as an analytical framework for examining the historical and contemporary mechanisms that produce and sustain these racialized disparities. The framework articulates four interdependent dimensions: logics of social stratification, legitimating discourses, legal frameworks, and patterns of everyday conviviality. By linking diachronic and synchronic analysis, it shows how structures of exclusion adapt across distinct socio-political eras, from colonial racial slavery to present-day multicultural regimes.

The paper conceives territory not simply as a physical asset or economic resource, but as a space for life, cultural reproduction, ancestral memory, and food sovereignty. Drawing on intersectional and transnational perspectives, it shows how race, class, gender, and geography converge to place disproportionate burdens on racialized subjects, particularly Afro-descendant women, in the form of environmental harm, toxic living conditions, and forced displacement that undermines traditional livelihoods. The transnational lens also moves beyond methodological nationalism by connecting local environmental injustices to global capitalist supply chains, diasporic networks, and international human rights dynamics. Two case studies from Ecuador illustrate the framework. The rural case examines dispossession, environmental toxicity, and extreme labor exploitation in corporate agro-industrial extraction, focusing on Furukawa's abaca plantations, where communities face land grabbing, serfdom-like conditions, and human rights abuses. The urban case analyzes Quito's peripheral neighborhoods, notably Barrio África Mía, where Afro-descendant single mothers confront environmental racism, municipal neglect, and toxic waste dumping through self-organized spatial resistance and the embodiment of "body-territory." The paper concludes that the regimes of inequality framework advances critical scholarship on environmental justice and the defense of territories as spaces for life and collective dignity.

Documenting Environmental Racism and the Reconfiguration of Aquatic Ecologies in Colombia's Ciénaga Grande de Santa Marta

Carmela Daza (EAN University) & Andrea Leiva (Université Paris Cité)

According to Bullard (2004) environmental racism refers to any policy, practice, or institutional decision that disproportionately affects or harms individuals, groups, or communities on the basis of race or color, whether intentionally or unintentionally. Building on collaborative ethnography in Nueva Venecia, this proposal advances the concept of aquatic environmental racism to understand how racialized inequalities are produced through the transformation, governance, and unequal inhabitation

of aquatic ecologies. Focusing on Nueva Venecia, stilt fishing community in Colombia's Ciénaga Grande de Santa Marta, we analyze how contemporary environmental degradation reflects longer histories of infrastructural intervention, ecological transformation, and territorial marginalization rooted in the colonial and postcolonial development of the Colombian Caribbean.

Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork conducted in May 2026, we examine the rapid proliferation of Hydrilla, an invasive aquatic plant whose expansion is linked to hydrological imbalances produced by decades of road construction, sediment accumulation, and the reconfiguration of water flows. Rather than interpreting the invasion as a purely ecological event, we argue that it reveals how state-led infrastructure projects have progressively transformed aquatic territories while disproportionately exposing Afro-descendant fishing communities to environmental degradation and political neglect.

Methodologically, the project combines collaborative ethnography with documentary filmmaking through *Shadows on the Lagoon*, developed together with filmmaker Carmela Daza and produced by the Colombian-German company B2medien. By bringing together anthropological research and audiovisual practice, the project seeks to document the lived experience of environmental racism while producing forms of knowledge that extend beyond academia and amplify local understandings of socio-ecological change.

“Sacrificable” Bodies or Sacrifice Zones? Quilombolan Resistance to Extractive Violence on Ilha de Maré, Bahia/Brazil

Johanna Kocks (University of Marburg)

Extractive violence is central to the capitalist system in the Anthropocene and creates sacrifice zones, which experience environmental conflicts and social inequalities along lines of race, class, and gender. Understanding extractive political economies as multiscalar, this paper focuses on glocal entanglements by asking how extractive violence manifests in spaces and is embedded in global structures, leading to systematic constructions of vulnerable bodies to extractive violence. This paper draws attention to spatial relations of power and how socio-economic inequalities are inscribed in land and bodies. It argues, logics of precarity and (environmental) exploitation not only construct spatial sacrifice zones, but also construct 'sacrificable' bodies. Taking everyday experiences of affected communities as epistemological points of departure and their knowledge claims seriously, this paper asks how extractive violence is inscribed in spaces and bodies. Utilizing the concept of sacrifice zones, this paper examines the case of the artisanal fisherwomen of the Quilombo of Ilha de Maré, Brazil, and their continuous resistance against a petroleum supply chain and the intoxication of their land and water. Through an ethnographic approach, this paper reveals how communities in a postcolonial setting resist destruction in their daily lives and perceive it as a form of extractive violence. Drawing on *Racial Capitalocene* (Vergès 2017) and *Decolonial Ecology* (Ferdinand 2021), this paper links racialization, colonial continuities and environmental entanglements. Situated in Latin American Feminist Political Ecology, it engages debates on situated knowledges and (in)visibility, making a concerted effort to center the experiences of those most affected by and resisting environmental destruction.

Environmental Racism in the Long durée

Making White Insular Deserts: Racial Environmentalism in the Malvinas / Falkland Islands

Ana Laura Zavala Guillen (Northumbria University)

The Falkland Islands/Islas Malvinas, today administered as a British Overseas Territory and claimed by both Argentina and the United Kingdom, have long been imagined as a white desert: a frozen, barren, and empty territory located at the margins. This paper introduces the concept of *making insular white deserts* to describe the colonial production of territories as simultaneously racially white, environmentally empty, and permanently available for extraction. Across successive French, Spanish, and British occupations, the islands were produced as an intrinsically white, vacant, and underutilised territory, obscuring the presence of Indigenous peoples, enslaved and free Afro-descendants, people of mixed identities, political exiles, and the mobile indigenous people who moved between Patagonia and the islands, who sometimes were imprisoned there. This process became a condition of possibility for environmental dispossession across the South Atlantic.

Drawing on historical geography, decolonial environmental history, and archival research, the paper reconstructs a *longue durée* of racial environmentalism from the eighteenth century to the present. Far from being environmentally marginal, the islands functioned as a strategic colonial node through which imperial power extracted and mobilised natural resources across the South Atlantic. Archival records document the large-scale exploitation of seals, sea lions, seabirds, and other native species; the extraction of stone, transported to pave the streets of Montevideo; and the islands' role as a logistical base for accessing and exploiting Patagonia's resources. These histories reveal that the islands were never peripheral or environmentally barren but deeply embedded within wider imperial geographies of extraction.

The paper argues that these colonial logics continue to shape contemporary geopolitical imaginaries. Representations of the islands as white, empty, and underutilised territory continue to legitimise new extractive frontiers, including offshore oil exploration, industrial fisheries, and emerging forms of resource extraction. By tracing the *longue durée* of making insular white deserts, the paper positions the Malvinas/Falkland Islands as a key site for understanding how racial erasure, environmental dispossession, and transatlantic extraction have been mutually constitutive across successive colonial regimes.

PDEK: Racialised Peasants, Deforestation, and Environmental Knowledge in Regional New Granada, 1770-1830

Carolina Hormaza (Bielefeld University)

Situated within the frameworks of biocultural diversity (Maffi & Woodley, 2012) and environmental history, this project investigates the environmental knowledge of *labradores* (independent land-tilling

peasants) regarding deforestation and climate change in the Andean cloud forests (1,000–3,000m). PDEK builds on Ruddiman's (2010) hypothesis that anthropogenic climate impact accelerated prior to industrialization, driven by late 18th-century agricultural expansion and demographic growth. This project analyses how agricultural acceleration occurred in the northern Andes, the environmental conditions that facilitated it, and how local climate changes were perceived and shaped by *labradores*. By tracing ordinary peoples' voices and narratives within legal petitions from two provinces of the Viceroyalty of New Granada—Antioquia and Loja—from 1770 to 1830, PDEK reconstructs historical experiences of dwelling in the tropical forest. At a societal level, this research addresses contemporary climate change by uncovering environmental knowledge, aligning with current global priorities to foster local climate resilience

Regarding the concept of racialised environmentalism my project had two remarks. On the one hand, my project criticises the moral ecology implicit in the adjective of deforestation which equal to destruction. In the Andes, *labradores*, poor people used to clear land in the forest as a way of subsistence. On the other hand, the forest itself became a place of freedom since for Afro-descendant and *indios libres* (free indigenous) migrated to the forest, to live scattered and so evade tribute, and challenge the oppressive colonial *casta* system. Consequently, PDEK argues that beyond extended agriculture and deforested, *labradores* dwelling in the tropical Andean forest combining slash-and-burn agriculture, land rotation, gold-washing, and cinchona bark collection. Their biocultural knowledge enabled them, racialised free-peasants, to migrate and dwell autonomously in the forest. Because live scattered bypassed colonial oversight, authorities labelled these racialised peasants as deforesters or *dispersos* to justify restrictive, state-controlled colonial environmental policies.

Ontologies, Epistemologies and Environmental Racism

Epistemic Shifts in Wixárika Environmental Knowledge (Mexico): the Fine Line between Environmental Racism and the Ecological Indian

Itxaso García Chapinal (University of Bielefeld)

In my research, I analyse epistemic contacts between the Western and the Wixárika knowledge systems in western Mexico, particularly focusing on environmental knowledge. The Wixárikaari (pl.), an indigenous group originally from the Gran Nayar region in northern Jalisco, Mexico, have preserved their knowledge system and culture with little Western influence due to the control over their territory. A key point of conflict between the Western and Wixárika epistemologies concerns the perception of the environment. While the former considers environment as an endless reserve of natural resources awaiting to be exploited, the latter regards natural elements as part of their social structure, establishing reciprocal relationships with them. Drawing upon these conflicting perspectives, first colonial authorities and later the Mexican government have sought to transform the way Wixárikaari communities interact with their environment and use natural resources, mainly through formal education and developmentalist projects.

Through the lens of biocultural diversity and the shifting baselines syndrome, I analyse epistemic the dynamism of Wixárika environmental knowledge. Biocultural diversity acknowledges the link between nature, culture and language, helping to analyse the impact of environmental changes on Wixárika culture and language, and vice versa. The concept of Shifting Baselines Syndrome contributes to understanding the continuous process of resistance-negotiation-gradual adaptation in the Wixárika environmental knowledge.

Based on historical and ethnographic research, I examine the role of formal education in promoting Western epistemic principles in Wixáritaari communities, and its implications for local practices of environmental care and knowledge transmission. I focus on to what extent the expansion of public primary education has shifted places of learning and epistemic authorities, and how these epistemic changes have altered local knowledge transmission and the ways in which Wixáritaari interact with their environment.

Saving the reef from whom? Negotiations of multispecies survival along the Mesoamerican coral reef in Mexico

Sarah Isabell Mund (University of Munich)

The Mesoamerican coral reef is the second largest coral reef in the world – second to the Australian Great Barrier Reef – stretching from the Caribbean coast of Mexico, Guatemala and Belize to Honduras. Despite its significance for the region – both for human and non-human actors –the reef itself and the various challenges life around the corals faces find little attention beyond the region. The Mexican Caribbean coast is a major tourist destination, especially for tourists from the USA and Canada, who come for the tropical weather, white sandy beaches and water activities, which also include snorkeling and diving in the coral reef. While the coral reef is daily flooded with snorkeling tourists, many local people barely get out to swim or snorkel among the corals. At the same time, the reef conservation is also commodified as tourists can contribute to conservation efforts – both through practical restoration efforts and donations. Furthermore, direct effects from tourism negatively impact the situation of the coral reef and, thus, human and non-human life along the coast. This introduces the question of who is trying to protect the coral reef for whom and how do inequalities play out in the negotiation of multispecies survival along the reef? Through ethnographic fieldwork on the Mexican Caribbean coast, this paper explores how analysing these inequalities through the lens of environmental racism offers opportunities to address the racialized aspects of environmental degradation and conservation of the reef, while also pointing out the risks of reducing a complex situation to these aspects. This paper is based on an interdisciplinary research project which is part of a collaboration between LMU Munich and UNAM Mexico.

Beyond Environmental Racism: Indigenous Heritage, Territoriality, and the Coloniality of Amazonian Landscapes

Carla Jaimes Betancourt (University of Bonn)

Debates about the Anthropocene often portray humanity as a uniform geological force while overlooking the unequal histories, responsibilities, and forms of environmental knowledge that have shaped the current crisis. Amazonia offers a particularly important perspective from which to question this narrative. Far from being a pristine natural environment, it is a historical landscape transformed over millennia through Indigenous settlement, cultivation, water management, and relationships with human and non-human beings. These histories also challenge the colonial separation between nature and culture that continues to inform environmental governance and conservation.

The Llanos de Moxos in the Bolivian Amazon provide a remarkable example. Monumental earthworks, extensive hydraulic systems, and networks of low-density urban settlements reveal profound and lasting transformations of the landscape. Today, however, these biocultural landscapes face accelerating land-use change, mechanized agriculture, road construction, and fire. This keynote examines these transformations through the lens of environmental racism and the coloniality of Amazonian landscapes. Rather than ending with a narrative of loss, it explores how collaborative archaeology, Indigenous territorial knowledge, heritage protection, and more historically informed land-use planning can contribute to alternative and more just Amazonian futures.

Confessing in lumine natural – A Case Study of Early Colonial Transatlantic Ontological Entanglements at the Intersection of Racialized and Theological Arguments for Imperial Incorporation (Sixteenth Century)

Romy Köhler (University of Jerusalem)

The case study examines two bilingual texts in alphabetic Nahuatl and Spanish (1547 and 1569), later incorporated in two different books of the *Historia General de las Cosas de la Nueva España* directed to the Spanish monarch Philipp II (1579). It examines how trilingual scholars in the foundational period of the Colegio de Santa Cruz de Tlatelolco (1536-1547), most probably working under the aegis of the Franciscan friars Andrés de Olmos and Bernardino de Sahagún, located the introduction the pre-Tridentine and pre-archdiocesan viceregal normative textual practice of sacramental confession in Nahuatl into an eschatological narrative about the creation of the sun at a sacred site foundational to the Mexica capital Tenochtitlan, a site simultaneously built over and transformed due to purposes of Imperial extensions policies of the Catholic church.

Within the context of the Valladolid controversy, convened by Emperor Charles V on 16 April 1550 to determine “how our holy Catholic faith should be preached and promulgated in that New World that God has revealed to us, and how those peoples might be brought under the authority of the emperor,

our lord, without injury to their conscience and in accordance with the bull of Pope Alexander VI,” the paper argues that early colonial bilingual sources in Nahuatl and Spanish, produced by trilingual Indigenous scholars at the Colegio de Santa Cruz de Tlatelolco, constitute an underestimated source for tracing early modern processes of environmental degradation and physical transformation at the transatlantic intersection of racial and theological arguments through which Indigenous inhabitants of the viceroyalty of New Spain were incorporated into the Spanish Empire.

“The Opposite of Forest is Museum”?

Suelen Calonga (Technical University of Berlin)

What does a museum preserve when it retains an object separated from the community, practices, and relations that once gave it meaning? This presentation proposes an answer: the museum preserves the separation itself.

The institution does not preserve the living practice of which the object was once a part. It keeps the object on one side and, on the other, the community and the knowledge that give it meaning. At the same time, it concentrates in itself the authority and the right to decide the object’s fate. In this sense, the museum preserves the violence of extraction: not only because it holds evidence that something violent happened in the past, but because it maintains in the present the relation produced by that violence. Violence does not exist only at the origin of the collection. It persists for as long as possession endures.

This idea challenges the familiar opposition between preservation and destruction. The fact that an object remains physically intact does not mean that the heritage itself has been preserved. Under certain conditions, what remains intact is precisely the rupture. Conservation can extend colonial extraction through time and give that extension the appearance of care. Heritage violence, therefore, does not depend on destruction, disappearance, or deterioration. It also operates when preservation keeps interrupted the relations between communities and the objects connected to their histories and practices, preventing them from recognizing those objects, giving them meaning, caring for them, and deciding their future.

This perspective also proposes another way of understanding repatriation. Restitution does not mean only returning something taken in the past, but interrupting an institutional relation that continues to renew the conditions of extraction in the present. Return cannot undo the violence that occurred, but it can end the museum’s exclusive authority over the future of what was extracted.

The presentation applies this lens to the formation and continued existence of the collection registered by the Ethnologisches Museum in Berlin as the Pietzcker Collection, renamed to Batuque Collection by the community claiming it. Incorporated into the museum in 1880, when slavery was still legal in Brazil, this collection makes it possible to observe how ethnographic possession preserves and normalizes an afterlife of slavery.

Who Inherits the Ancestors' Home? Relatedness to the Land and Ancient Materiality in the Face of Environmental Destruction in the Chenes Region, Mexico

Yannick Dreessen (University of Bonn)

In the last decades, the Chenes region in Mexico has been characterised by significant changes in economic strategies, which impact the environment. New forms of agriculture and construction work imply long-lasting destruction of the landscape. A diverse range of actors, especially Indigenous communities and Mennonite settlers, find themselves in conflict over ontological debates on what the landscape means and how it should be treated. Ancient sites from precolonial times are often located in the forest areas affected by increasing deforestation, and they are often relevant to cultural practices and beliefs in the communities. Studying their role can serve as a lens for connecting discourses on inheriting the land and the meaningful relationships to its inhabitants.

Relying on ethnographic research between 2022 and 2024 in the Chenes region, I would like to discuss how materiality and the impacts on its integrity give insights on the changes of beliefs and practices, and how understandings of inheriting the land across generations is connected to identities. I use the lens of environmental racism to trace contexts of extractivism and afterlives of colonialism in the region, situating current debates in historical inequalities in the Chenes region. This includes the impacts of the recent megaproject “Tren Maya”, which – despite not impacting the Chenes directly – has fortified discourses on the meaning and importance of the land. Despite general critique, the different ways to engage with the land are complex, not only across different actors and their beliefs, but also across generations and their changing.