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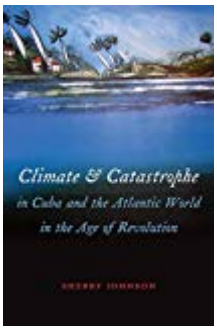

Sherry Johnson. *Climate and Catastrophe in Cuba and the Atlantic World in the Age of Revolution.* Envisioning Cuba Series. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011. xiii + 306 pp. $34.95, paper, ISBN 978-1-4696-1889-0.

Reviewed by Chris Blakley

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Commissioned by Margaret Sankey (Air University)

How entangled are human societies and the natural environment? Do environmental disasters shape the contours of history? Until recently, historians of the early modern world have ignored the environmental context of major events and crises. Sherry Johnson's ***Climate and Catastrophe in Cuba and the Atlantic World in the Age of Revolution*** challenges the anthropocentric narrative of the age of revolution by integrating the chronology of climate patterns and environmental catastrophes with the timeline of war, revolution, and political and economic change to probe how natural disasters forced Spain to reconfigure its Atlantic empire from 1748 to 1804.

Johnson centers her analysis closely on Cuba but connects the island to other colonies within the empire, including Mexico, Puerto Rico, Florida, Louisiana, and New Granada, and to such neighboring sites as Jamaica, Philadelphia, and St. Domingue. Alternating periods of hurricanes and droughts produced by El Niño and La Niña cycles exposed the limits of the imperial economy, the provisioning system, and the power of colonial governments. Johnson's study spans the period of the Seven Years' War to the Haitian Revolution, and includes analysis of Spanish involvement in the American and French Revolutionary Wars.

At midcentury, Charles III reigned over a vast territorial empire that stretched from the northern borders of Mexico south to New Granada. Mercantilist economic policy dictated that chartered monopolies, such as the Real Compañia de Comercio de Cadíz, which held the ***asiento*** privilege to import African slaves into the Americas, controlled the flows of trade across the imperium. The Crown aimed to manage an orderly imperial economy. However, hurricane strikes, drought, and warfare throughout the eighteenth century strained commercial networks and the provisioning system of the empire, leading to a series of liberalization declarations beginning in 1765. The Bourbon Reforms proved inadequate in coping with food shortages caused by drought and hurricane sequences. Severe ecological events had cross-colonial impact. Drought in Mexico, for example, led to famine in Cuba. Epidemics emerged

from the disease environments produced by hurricanes. Moreover, disasters distracted authorities and created opportunities for illicit trade and political subversion. British and American smugglers thrived by trading contraband foodstuffs and other products to colonists in post-disaster Spanish America. Enslaved people exploited the chaotic aftermath of hurricane strikes; in 1766, for example, slaves in Louisiana rebelled against their masters or ran away to establish maroon communities in the wake of a hurricane. Colonists in Cuba and elsewhere challenged mercantilist economic logic by buying contraband and openly critiquing the monopoly privileges of institutions like the Real Compañia. The combined strain of warfare and ecological crisis prompted attempts to adjust the imperial economy, beginning with the reorganization of the ***asiento*** in 1773. Ultimately, the devastation wrought by the combination of environmental disaster and continuous warfare led to the establishment of free trade throughout the Spanish Empire under the ***Reglamento para el comercio libre*** in 1778. By tracking the connection between liberalization in the Caribbean and ecological crisis, ***Climate and Catastrophe*** proves the value of combining environmental and economic history to revisit established historical beliefs.

Johnson combines methods from historical climatology, disaster studies, Atlantic history, and imperial history to produce a rich synthesis of scientific and humanistic evidence. Tracking patterns of hurricane strikes and drought, and citing climatological proxy data, such as dendrochronology, ice-core samples, and lake-bed sediments, reveals the twinned histories of climatic and historical change. Hurricanes and droughts triggered what Johnson calls critical junctures in the empire's evolution. This environmental turn necessitates revisions in our traditional explanations of major historical turning points. For example, where previous scholars have urged political and military explanations for Britain's success in the Siege of Havana, 1762-63, Johnson draws attention to the food shortages and the outbreak of deadly diseases, such as yellow fever, that had a severe impact on the Spanish army and the British occupation.

To throw human action and decision making into relief, Johnson cites a wealth of documentary evidence drawn from Spanish, Cuban, and American archives. Government memorandums, church records, maps, newspapers, trade company documents, correspondence, and natural histories testify to individual and institutional responses to environmental catastrophes. She shows that Charles III sponsored scientific research in meteorology and navigation to mitigate or avoid the worst effects of natural disasters. Over time, colonial governments and church authorities sought to develop a coherent and effective post-disaster response policy.

Lucid and highly readable, ***Climate and Catastrophe*** is an impressive contribution to environmental and Atlantic history. Johnson adds to a growing body of scholarship on the dynamic interplay between climate, environment, and war, as showcased in recent works by Geoffrey Parker, John McNeill, and Sam White. Johnson brilliantly expands on this trajectory by offering a psychological analysis of how survivors experienced "hurricane fatigue" and depression in the aftermath of disasters which compromised a community's response to post-disaster challenges (p. 17). Recovering early modern subjectivities has been a challenge for early modern environmental historians, but Johnson's work offers a model for future scholars to emulate. Perhaps Johnson could have balanced the transnational scale of the hurricane belt and the empires that fought across the Caribbean and the intimate scale of the human mind more consistently in this work. Nevertheless, scholars interested in the Atlantic world, political ecology, or imperial history will find this book an engaging and provocative read.

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