



OMOHUNDRO INSTITUTE

William and Mary Quarterly, 3d ser., 82, no. 1 (January 2025): 3–48

Evasion Ecology in the Contact Era: Fugitive Social Movements and the Atlantic Dimensions of
Marronage, 1480s–1530s

By Gabriel de Avilez Rocha

On the Gulf of Guinea island of São Tomé and the Caribbean island of Ayiti/Hispaniola at the turn of the sixteenth century, African and Indigenous fugitives from enslavement and dispossession, known as maroons, confronted profound social turmoil and environmental volatility. In each setting, the proliferation of livestock introduced by Iberian settlers created novel possibilities of sustenance and coalition-building for people on the run. Rather than treating nonhuman newcomers as invasive species that primarily favored colonial designs, this article views contact-era Atlantic change in light of “evasion ecology”: a concept attentive to how people encountered, inhabited, facilitated, and capitalized on dispersive environmental processes. The evasive nonhuman species that multiplied in the forests and mountains of São Tomé and Ayiti/Hispaniola at times favored, but did not guarantee, maroon endeavors to establish breakaway communities. Settlers riven by internal conflicts over feral livestock and colonial provisions waged war throughout the 1520s to dispel fugitive strongholds. Though specific circumstances differed in each setting, maroon social movements persisted, bringing about transatlantic ramifications by the 1530s. Merchants, traffickers, and officials adjusted to the divergent outcomes of overlapping maroon wars, while enslaved people and fugitives understood and acted upon contemporaneous struggles across the early Atlantic.