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Judith A. Carney. *Black Rice: The African Origins of Rice Cultivation in the Americas.* Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 2001. xiv + 240 pp. $37.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-674-00452-8.

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The Color(s) of Rice: Red, Gold, White and/or Black

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Black Rice: The African Origins of Rice Cultivation in the Americas is one of the latest and most engaging "Afrocentrist" contributions in the history of slave culture in the Atlantic World. It sheds new, and often, controversial light on the complex relationship between rice cultivation and slave agriculture in the Americas, with a clear emphasis on South Carolina.

In *Black Rice*, Judith Carney operates a conceptual as well as grammatical shift away from the perspectives adopted by Peter Wood in *Black Majority*, Daniel Littlefield in *Rice and Slaves*, Ira Berlin and Philip D. Morgan in *Cultivation and Culture*, and Joyce E. Chaplin in *An Anxious Pursuit*.[1]

Peter Wood evaluated the dialectic between rice and slaves in terms of "parallel" and "temporal" association. Daniel Littlefield analyzed the development of the South Carolina rice economy in the light of the slaves' "contribution(s)." Ira Berlin, Philip Morgan, and the contributors to *Culture and Cultivation* only briefly mentioned the relationship between rice and slaves and concentrated their research on cotton, tobacco and slaves. Though Joyce Chaplin admitted that "slaves who had experience growing rice in West Africa were probably instrumental in the successful creation of early rice plantations," white planters remained, all through her book, the true "innovators" and "pioneers" in an era of change and technological modernity.[2]

Judith Carney carries the investigation one step further than her predecessors by asserting that rice and slaves were not separate realities but one unique entity. Rice in the Americas was grown thanks to the slaves' expertise in rice cultivation acquired in West Africa. The role of white planters, and so-called "innovators," is hardly mentioned, except briefly at the end of the book (p. 162). Rice becomes "black," partly as a response to Peter Wood and Alex West's "white rice," and partly to suggest the near total agricultural assimilation between the crop and the slaves. In *Black Rice*, the dichotomy between the color of slave labor and the color of rice disappears. Rice becomes a metonymy for slaves, and vice versa.

Judith Carney's argument is founded upon the implicit assertion that the value of rice did not derive from the masters' technological investments–namely from capital–but from the slaves and their labor. In many ways, *Black Rice* is a story of re-appropriation, or repossession (p. 156), a shift in ownership.

As Judith Carney constantly reminds us, the history of rice in the Americas is a complex, and often, vexing question. Part of the reason is its location at the crossroads of several disciplines: agricultural history, anthropology and botany, but also African American cultural studies and biotechnology. The history of rice does not limit itself to botanical genealogy: when and where the first seeds were introduced, how they were exported from the Eastern to the Western Hemispheres in the period of "The Columbian Exchange," how rice was planted and grown in the various micro-environments of the New World, and how it became, eventually, the backbone of the South Carolina economy.[3] It is neither the nostalgic nor prejudiced narrative of rice planters' descendants who, in the post slavery period, glorified the ingenuity of their forebears into turning seemingly inhospitable wetlands into some of the most productive rice fields of the Atlantic world (pp. 79-80).

In *Black Rice*, Judith Carney argues that rice grew in the Western Hemisphere because slaves–the physical continuity of rice–and women in particular, selected the seeds, prepared the land, constructed the canals and trunks necessary for irrigation, planted and tended the fields despite the harsh climatic conditions, harvested and processed rice, whether Oryza Glaberrima, the African variety of domesticated rice, or Oryza Sativa,

its Asian counterpart. Judith Carney asserts that the history of rice cultivation in the Americas is the story of a transfer of knowledge and of African agency; "rice cultivation in the Americas depended upon the diffusion of an entire cultural system, from production to consumption" (p. 165). In *Black Rice*, agriculture, culture and technology interplay in one of the most paramount stories of African cultural survivals and retentions, most visible in the provision gardens of the slaves and in the food preferences of the runaway slave communities of South America (pp. 115-116, 155-159).

Black Rice takes the reader deep into the Rice region of West Africa, to the primary center of rice domestication, from rain-fed to wetland and tidal ecosystems, along the Niger and Gambia rivers, westward through the mangrove rice fields of Guinea Bissau, over the Atlantic to tidewater South Carolina, and southward to Surinam, Cayenne and Brazil. It ends its course where it started, where it all started, before slaves were bought into slavery and sold in the Americas. African women, then, woke up milling rice with the mortar and pestle; a fragile ecological equilibrium had been established in the three areas of rice cultivation; and a complex system of irrigated rice cultivation had been perfected long before the arrival of the first Portuguese ships off the Coast of West Africa.

The book progresses in a chrono-thematic and circular way. It starts with the first Portuguese voyages to Africa in the fourteenth century. Early European travelers described the abundance of rice along the West African coast and the existence of intricate techniques of rice cultivation among the different African communities they encountered, in particular among the Baga strongly associated with mangrove rice production. The three ecosystems characteristic of rice cultivation in Africa were the tidal floodplain environment, inland swamps and rain-fed uplands. Rice was typically planted along a landscape gradient that included all three eco-systems. From the outset, the social organization of rice culture was founded upon women. The gendered division of rice labor varied from one region to the other, but processing and cooking remained everywhere tasks reserved for women. Milling, winnowing and parboiling, for example, were typical tasks performed by women. The first encounters between Europeans and African rice growers ended in bitter irony. At a time when rice became one of the most profitable export crops in America, rice cultivation in Africa was disrupted and disorganized by the depletion of its labor force. From that point onwards, all notions of African rice expertise were denied.

In the second chapter, Judith Carney takes us to the origins of rice domestication in Africa. For a long time, historians and botanists believed that there was only one Asian origin for rice. Only at the beginning of the twentieth century did a group of French botanists, led by Auguste Chevalier, posit the existence of an independent African center of rice domestication, located in the Inland Delta of the Niger River. After the domestication of rice, political and territorial upheavals resulted in the expansion of rice from its original heartland into the rest of the Rice Region. In the North, which is drought-prone, rice is a wetland crop and its cultivation alternates with cattle herding. Southward, in the Guinean highlands where precipitation exceeds forty inches per year, rice is mainly an upland rain-fed crop. In the North West, along the Atlantic coast, the mangrove system of irrigation dominates. Judith Carney describes in great detail the mangrove ecosystem. It seems to exemplify African agency and it bears striking similarities with the South Carolina rice landscape (pp. 59, 63).

Chapter three takes us on the other side of the Atlantic world. Much more than rice crossed the Atlantic Ocean. Slaves survived the Middle Passage, not only by retaining their religious practices and family patterns, but also by preserving their indigenous knowledge of rice cultivation. From then on, "the question is whether slaves from West Africa's Rice Coast were recruited as skilled laborers in a cropping system planters had already ingeniously developed, or whether slaves expert in rice cultivation showed Carolina planters how to adapt a preferred dietary staple to diverse lowland settings" (pp. 80-81). Joyce Chaplin would likely have favored the first hypothesis. Judith Carney argues, on the contrary, in favor of a dramatic and complete reversal of roles, "the origin of rice cultivation in South Carolina is indeed African ... slaves from West Africa's rice region tutored planters in growing the crop" (p. 81).

Slaves would have been familiar with the different micro-systems they encountered in South Carolina. Owing to their knowledge of mangrove rice, slaves played a pivotal role in the shift from swamp cultivation to floodplain, irrigated rice. Only slaves, women in particular, knew how to mill rice before the advent of mechanization. Yet, in another example of bitter, historical irony, rice, which was originally a means of resistance and negotiation in the "charter period of slavery," was turned into a symbol of oppression.[4] White, "innovative" planters gradually appropriated rice.

The next chapter evaluates the questions of the (de) genderization of rice culture in South Carolina. Accord-

ing to Judith Carney, the gender division of labor was more or less replicated in South Carolina except for rice processing. This disruption in the traditional African labor system was caused by the rice calendar and by the momentous increase in rice production over the course of the eighteenth century. Women alone could not tend to the milling of rice, and planters had to rely on newly arrived, inexperienced male slaves. Unfortunately, the question of gender often fades in the background of this fourth chapter. It is often difficult to pair the contents of the chapter–discussion of African and Asian cooking practices, detailed description of the rice calendar, and lengthy elaboration on the milling of rice–with the title, "This was 'Woman's Wuck."'

Chapter five takes us back into the past and into Africa. Judith Carney investigates the hypothetical introduction of African rice seeds in the New World. If Oryza Glaberrima was found in botanical collections of South America, as in Surinam and Brazil, its presence in North America remains, up to now, only suspected. According to Judith Carney, African rice probably first entered South Carolina via slave ships. The fragility of Oryza Glaberrima was probably one of the reasons why planters adopted, from the start, two varieties of Sativa rice, "Carolina White" in the colonial period, and the high yielding "Carolina Gold" in the antebellum era. Judith Carney concedes, however, that "more archival, botanical, and archaeological research is needed in the Americas. One direction would involve archaeological studies in areas of former rice plantation economies" (p. 152). Historical archaeology could be applied, for example, to the provision gardens of slaves, where African rice may have been cultivated in conjunction with other African crops. After all, though Carney does not mention it explicitly, the African origins of rice cultivation in the Americas may well have to be searched in the gardens of slaves, "the botanical gardens of the dispossessed, the marginal" (p. 156).

In a near perfect circular structure, the last chapter of *Black Rice* takes us back, one last time, in the opposite direction, to West Africa and Sierra Leone. Yet, this time, by emphasizing the movement of repatriation of freed blacks to Sierra Leone under the aegis of abolitionist societies, Carney evaluates, though in a very sketchy way, what we may call the African American origins of rice cultivation in Africa. Indeed, "seeds and agricultural implements formed a crucial component of the goods accompanying black settlers to West Africa" (p. 172). Among the seeds brought to Africa was the "Carolina Gold" variety of rice. According to Judith Carney, rice thus regained its original symbolism of freedom. If *Black Rice* started as a story of expropriation, it truly finishes as a story of re-appropriation.

Black Rice deserves praise for its wealth of primary sources–travel narratives, plantation records, slave ships' logbooks, patent requests, inventors' accounts, WPA narratives, and drawings for example–and for its careful reading and synthesis of a large body of secondary sources written in multiple languages, French in particular.

The argument of *Black Rice* evolves according to a pattern of calls and responses, echoes and counter-echoes, as though providing the reader with a set of photographs and the set of negatives. It makes *Black Rice* into a highly dynamic and stimulating reading.

It is important, however, to point out several weaknesses. The very structure and genesis of the phrase "black rice" would have needed introductory explanation and legitimization (see page 141 for one of the very few references to "black rice"). How does it relate, for example, to the "Red Gold" of John Hemming's *Red Gold: The Conquest of the Brazilian Indians*?[5] The adjective "black" does not modify the noun "rice" in a usual way. "Black rice" can be analyzed instead as a compound noun. "Black rice" could be red, white, or gold, depending on the rice variety planted by slaves, but it remained black because it was, from the outset, an extension of the slave body.

In part because of its chrono-thematic structure, the chapters of *Black Rice* have a tendency to overlap. The role of women, the diffusion of rice and the reconsideration of Alfred Crosby's *Columbian Exchange*, for example, are repeated in several consecutive chapters. Also, despite her laudable desire to extend her research to the whole of the Western Hemisphere, Judith Carney's research is still very much limited to South Carolina and North America in general. It must be noted, finally, that the last chapter of the book, though rhetorically perfect, looks slightly theatrical. The introduction of "Carolina Gold" into West Africa and its hypothetical re- naming as "méréki"–standing for America–should be handled as pure hypothesis and not historical fact (pp. 172-177).

These reservations aside, *Black Rice* remains an extremely stimulating, innovative and insightful essay on African and African American agriculture before, during and after the period of the slave trade. It is to be hoped that Judith Carney will indeed further investigate the presence of Oryza Glaberrima in South Carolina and will expand her analysis of the relationship between rice and slavery in South America.

In the wake of Gwendolyn Midlo Hall's *Africans*

in Colonial Louisiana: The Development of Afro-Creole Culture in the Eighteenth Century and Michael Gomez's *Exchanging Our Country Marks: The Transformation of African identities in the Colonial and Antebellum South*, Judith Carney's *Black Rice* must be considered as one of the very first and most paramount episodes in the re-writing of the history of slavery and slave culture in the Atlantic World.[6]

Notes

[1]. Peter H. Wood, *Black Majority: Negroes in Colonial South Carolina From 1670 through the Stono Rebellion* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1975); Daniel C. Littlefield, *Rice and Slaves: Ethnicity and the Slave Trade in Colonial South Carolina* (Baton Rouge and London: Louisiana State University Press, 1981); Ira Berlin and Philip D. Morgan (eds.), *Cultivation and Culture: Labor and the Shaping of Slave Life in the Americas* (Charlottesville and London: University Press of Virginia, 1993); and Joyce E. Chaplin, *An Anxious Pursuit: Agricultural Innovation in the Lower South, 1730-1815* (Chapel Hill and London: The University of North Carolina Press, 1993).

[2]. Daniel Littlefield, *Rice and Slaves*, pp. 80, 103-104. Peter H. Wood, *Black Majority*, pp. 55-56. Ira Berlin and Philip D. Morgan (eds.), *Cultivation and Culture*, pp. 4, 8, 10, 15. Joyce Chaplin, *An Anxious Pursuit*, pp. 228, 232, 239 and 249.

[3]. "Columbian Exchange," see Alfred W. Crosby, *The Columbian Exchange: Biological and Cultural Consequences of 1492* (Wesport: Greenwood Press, 1972).

[4]. "Charter generations," see Ira Berlin, *Many Thousands Gone: The First Two Centuries of Slavery in North America* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 1998), p. 15.

[5]. John Hemming, *Red Gold: The Conquest of the Brazilian Indians* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press), 1978.

[6]. Gwendolyn Midlo Hall, *Africans in Colonial Louisiana: The Development of Afro-Creole Culture in the Eighteenth Century* (Baton Rouge and London: Louisiana State University Press, 1992); Michael Gomez, *Exchanging Our Country Marks: The Transformation of African Identities in the Colonial and Antebellum South* (Chapel Hill and London: The University of North Carolina Press, 1998).

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