



## Book Review

### **In the Shadow of Slavery: Africa's Botanical Legacy in the Atlantic World**

Judith Carney and Richard Nicholas Rosomoff, 2011

Berkeley, CA: University of California Press

xvi + 280 pp., ISBN: 978-0-52-026996-5 [pbk]

I simply could not put this book down and wished it never to end! This review explains why it was the case for me and might be for many others who will read this academic work. Judith Carney and Richard Nicholas Rosomoff have done an extraordinary job in achieving exactly what they set out to do: to inform the reader on Africa's botanical legacy; to re-evaluate the perception of the African continent's past and its people, based on the information provided; and to contribute to classical literature on Colombian Exchange by addressing the active role of enslaved people and plants within it. In 10 chapters the authors take the reader on a journey through time and space in order to show how Africa's botanical world, with its displaced people, animals, plants, knowledge and skills, transformed and contributed significantly to the world in which we live. Thanks to their attention to historical records, oral accounts, linguistics, archaeology, biology and ecology these authors not only provide evidence to support the claim on Africa's botanical legacy, they also re-evaluate academic contributions on the topic. Having said that, this book has the potential to impact on the ways we relate – culturally, politically, economically, and intellectually – to all of the so far uncredited, unwillingly dislocated human and non-human actors who have shaped the world we share.

Judith Carney, author of *Black Rice: The African Origins of Rice Cultivation in the Americas* (2002), was well prepared to take her account on the origins of rice to the next level. Together with an independent writer, Richard N. Rosomoff, they advocate for a change in the perceptions of what African nations might have looked like before the arrival of Europeans. By focusing mainly on plants but also considering animals, they delve deep into the history of the African, European and American continents. Chapter 1 covers African flora and fauna, while Chapter 2 the ancient history of the region, thus providing a solid background for the reader. For example, here one can find numerous references on African origins of plants now widely used on other continents, such as coffee, rice, millet, banana and plantain, groundnut, okra, tamarind. It is a misconception, as Carney and Rosomoff write, that these plants originated in Asia and the Americas, or that they were introduced by European merchants to the New World. The most striking example is that of bananas, which were traded already in 3000 BCE between East Africa and Middle East. Historical and archaeological evidence recounted in the book points out that mercantile exchange of African rice between Medieval Portugal and Africa took place centuries before the Columbian Exchange.

As the book progresses, the reader is taken further through time and space with the wealth of botanical evidence supporting the authors viewpoints. For example,

in Chapter 3, which is centred on early slave trade, one realizes not only the scale of the slave trade but also the role of African food systems and knowledges of people that were enrolled in it. In this chapter, one can read about markets supplying Portuguese caravels with African crops and cereals that flourished near slave ports, thus forever changing the African landscape. The authors strongly argue that, by 1590, a mass removal of youth from rural areas and an increased demand for food impacted severely on the sustainability of the African food system. They go on to say that in the context of high food demand instigated by rapid trade of human beings who needed to be fed (although not sufficiently) during the voyage to Americas, Portuguese merchants introduced Amerindian manioc (maize) into African food systems. The authors' attention to this very context allows them to run against the prevailing view that manioc (maize) was brought to Africa benevolently as if there was nothing to be consumed there. Therefore they argue that maize, in academic discussions on Colombian Exchange, 'should not be divorced from its role in enabling the commerce in human beings' (p. 57).

Chapters 4, 5 and 6 focus in even greater detail on the significance of African crops to the enslaved people, and the lack of significance of plants to the enslavers. The authors emphasize the importance of attending to both official and unofficial records (oral accounts) from the slave trade period. However, the oral histories 'offer a counter-narrative' in the Colombian Exchange literature and 'substitute the usual agents of global seed dispersal – European navigators, colonists, and mend of science – with enslaved women whose deliberate efforts to sequester rice grains helped establish an African food staple in plantation societies' (p. 77). However, as time progressed and global colonial trade began to be affected by outside forces, African food staples such as yams, rice, groundnuts, sesame and greens, which were grown in food plots managed by enslaved people, gained a new role: as commodities, not as just a cost of keeping up plantations. In this new African context, not only crops but also farm animals, thus far cherished and taken care of only by plantation societies (which were replaced continuously by newcomers whose agricultural skills originated on the African continent), began to be applied (without much credit to or consent of enslaved people) on a much larger scale by plantation owners. The authors narrate that the Carolina colony in North America flourished due to their knowledge of rice and livestock production gained from African societies. The authors coin this phenomenon the 'Africanisation of plantation food systems', legacy of which is seen to this day (see Chapter 9) in the mass commodity food we eat: rice, sesame, groundnut (peanut).

The strength of this book is not only based on the wealth of information contained in it, or that it is well written and illustrated with maps, oral histories, plates, and data, but also in how it is accessible to a wider audience. Indeed, one can argue with their findings or not find them surprising. For instance, one might not find startling (as I did) the fact that the cola nut (used to produce Coca Cola drink) originates in Africa and has been used for millennia to flavour water (a knowledge that was picked up by slave traders during sea voyages). However, one cannot ignore the attention the authors give to the significance of all human and non-human actors who, through immense and unimaginable sacrifice, have shaped the material as well as the semiotic worlds we live in today. They focus on the intricacies of each plant or animal, i.e. where and how they grow or live; how they are processed and attended to; how they are eaten and sustained for the generations to come. Thus the connection between plants, animals and humans they focus on offers a unique historical

account of the period, and offers a counterargument to the European claims to the development of agriculture in the Americas.

In reading this book, the reader is not only reminded of the significance of the botanical–animal–human relationship in each chapter, but is equally informed to make that decision for her/himself. I find the authors' ability to guide the reader to arrive at similar conclusions and viewpoints to be one of the strongest points in the book. As a result of their skills and academic expertise in fields of food culture, history of slave trade and colonization, African culture, past and current food systems, to name but a few, this book or even selected chapters can be read by various audiences. For instance, Chapters 1, 2, 3 and 9 can be recommended to anyone interested in food governance studies, development and agri-food studies, as they offer a counterargument to 'Africa needs Western aid'. Chapters 4 and 5 can be read by those with an interest in slave trade history, history of Americas and European colonial powers. In those chapters, one can also find strong references to the role of women in sustaining the African food ways. And lastly, this book is for those who want to see a human beyond being a slave and his and her unimaginable misery. This book, through 'the marginal spaces of food plots' therefore 'offers more insight into the history than the estate fields where they toiled' (p. 186). This book offers a history of resilient people who were passionate about and caring for all that was human and non-human in their brutal worlds.

Although the authors have not signalled a theoretical stance in their work, which one can treat as their weak point, a watchful reader might get a feel of a more-than-human approach, found in for example Sarah Whatmore's *Hybrid Geographies* (2002). A more-than-human approach, as Greenhough summarizes (2014), involves drawing on biophilosophy, science studies and phenomenology to develop an understanding of human and non-human bodies, and an effect of their relationship and composition in the world (p. 95). The ways in which human and non-humans actors and the relationship between them are deemed equally important in *The Shadow of Slavery* is profound and can work as an excellent example of this approach. Their take on the African Diaspora as a 'one of plants as well as peoples' (p. 3) is one of the examples in which this book takes non-humans actor seriously. Nevertheless, I would like to read more about the authors' theoretical inspirations simply because it would be an equally wonderful lecture, one which I would not put down easily either.

Karolina Rucinska  
*School of Planning and Geography*  
*Cardiff University*

## References

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