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

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In the Shadow of Slavery: Africa's Botanical Legacy in the Atlantic World. Judith A. Carney & Richard Nicholas Rosomoff. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009. xvi + 280 pp. (Cloth US\$ 50.00; Paper US\$ 18.95; e-Book US\$ 50.00)

This new offering from Judy Carney builds on the same perspective on the Atlantic past as that in her prize-winning *Black Rice: the African Origins of Rice Cultivation in the Americas* (2001). Her “black rice thesis” was developed from other scholars’ prior suggestions that West African slaves rather than European masters and overseers were to be credited for the successful development of rice plantations in the South Carolina low country. Carney drew on her strengths as a geographer to argue how people forced to migrate from a specific region in West Africa to early America had managed, despite their bondage, to transfer an entire cultural system that included seeds, skills, and smarts.

Carney writes here with her husband, Rich Rosomoff, an independent author and veteran co-traveler on her research trips. *In the Shadow of Slavery* reads as a broad application of the *Black Rice* argument to other plants as well as animals that could be used for food, and to places beyond the much-debated Upper Guinea-South Carolina nexus. But where the earlier book explained the development of rice as a North American cash crop, what is instead emphasized here is the significance of subsistence farming, first in tropical Africa and then in the New World. Carney and Rosomoff argue strongly that focusing on subsistence is needed to correct the “standard emphasis on commodities” (pp. 4-5)—which was, it must be said, in part created by the success of *Black Rice*. They celebrate Africans’ and then African Americans’ achievements in creating food security for themselves by themselves.

To do so, they first describe the dynamism of African foodways in the millennia before Columbus’s ocean crossings. In the deep past, Africans domesticated indigenous crops and animals before turning their attention to new alternatives originated from neighboring continents. Stressed is the sophistication of Africans, but ironically their bounty turned Africa into a breadbasket providing the provisions needed to sustain the fragile economics of the Middle Passage. Carney and Rosomoff argue, against a background of scarce evidence, that Africans liberated remaining stores from slave ships as they disembarked and entered American slaveries. These

smuggled samples of reproductive parts of African cultigens equipped African slaves and their descendants with the ability to recreate some aspects of their former lives of working, cooking, and eating.

Throughout, the authors synthesize a wide range of primary sources (especially those available in English) and scholarly secondary literature. Their sources for Africa tend toward gold-standard texts from the scholarly secondary literature of the 1970s, but also informed by judiciously selected research published in the last decade, none of it controversial. These conservative choices are likely to give longevity to the text's usefulness.

The highly readable prose—forgiving some repetitions and occasional novelistic flair—makes complicated issues accessible for those unfamiliar with the scholarly issues, and the text includes abundant illustrations from Atlantic-era books to engage non-specialists. Thus this book will find great utility for readers of the *NWIG* in any college-level topics courses they teach, for which they might assign the entire volume or select a relevant chapter or two. The recent release as an affordable paperback will help instructors adopt the text. (Puzzling is the high expense of the electronic version.)

Like *Black Rice*, this book has garnered acclaim, including a shared win of the 2010 Frederick Douglass Book Prize from Yale University's Gilder Lehrman Center for the best book written in English on slavery or abolition. Historians who raised questions about *Black Rice* will search the pages of *In the Shadow of Slavery* in vain for indications that they have been engaged (see, for example, Eltis, Morgan & Richardson 2007, 2010). But they are probably not the intended audience. Instead, Carney and Rosomoff are clear (p. 1) that they are addressing a "popular image" of Africa as a hungry continent and "perceptions of a continent populated by hapless farmers and herders in need of European instruction." These are old, but regrettably durable conceptualizations created and recreated by those outside of Africa in identifiable historical contexts (including the sort of Western liberalism that still brings some students into our courses because they want to "help save Africa").

Readers of the *NWIG* who wish to engage *In the Shadow of Slavery* as an intellectual project are recommended to read Carney's contemporary essay on geography as a research methodology (2010). It explains that geographers use the same sources as historians, anthropologists, or archaeologists, but can make distinctive "reasonable inferences" from gaps in the record, in ways that the others cannot. If geography, as defined by Carney,

cannot provide us with new information by way of new sources, it can prompt scholars to ask new questions that cannot yet be answered by data in the historical or archaeological records. Historians, linguistics, botanists, geneticists, archaeologists and others must do the spadework.

So Carney and Rosomoff should be praised for the questions they raise and for showing scholars some of the unanswered questions about the relationship between the environmental and cultural histories of Africans in the diaspora. They offer some new questions and answer many of these with new arguments, while simultaneously pushing the temporal boundaries of what humanistic geographers can pursue.

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