

Carney, Judith. *Black Rice: The African Origins of Rice Cultivation in the Americas*. (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2001).

Historian U. B. Phillips stated bluntly in his influential work, *Life and Labor in the Old South* (1929), "the plantation was a school." Few of his contemporary American historians challenged him on this point as most assumed that Africans and their descendants contributed little of value, besides pliable minds and strong bodies, to the Americas. Within this context and to counter this argument, anthropologist Melville Herskovits published *The Myth of the Negro Past* (1941), which showed, in contrast to Phillips and others who ignored or distorted the African past, that much of Black American culture and history can trace its roots to Africa. Though by no means the first scholar to explore this question, Herskovits presented a much more extended treatment of the subject than others and set a research agenda that still resonates today. His search in the American historical record and contemporary scene for "Africanisms"—religious and secular forms of African cultural expression—prompted subsequent generations of scholars of the African-American experience to more seriously consider the contribution of Africans to their New World settings. *Black Rice: The African Origins of Rice Cultivation in the Americas* is an important addition to this literature.

In *Black Rice*, geographer Judith Carney makes a persuasive argument in support of the thesis advanced by Peter Wood, in *Black Majority: Negroes in Colonial South Carolina from 1670 Through the Stono Rebellion* (1974), and Daniel Littlefield, in *Rice and Slaves: Ethnicity and the Slave Trade in Colonial South Carolina* (1981), that Africans, rather than Europeans or Native Americans, provided the "know-how" of South Carolina rice culture. Drawing upon both primary sources and an extensive secondary literature, Carney shows that well before the onset of the Atlantic slave trade, West Africans, particularly from the Senegambia Region, developed a multi-tiered rice "knowledge system." Contrary to nineteenth and twentieth-century Western images of Africa as untamed jungle, Carney shows that West Africans domesticated the red West African rice *oryza glaberrima*; mastered rice cultivation in different types of micro-environments including upland areas, inland swamps, and tidal floodplains; constructed and maintained a sophisticated network of

banks and sluices to control water and saline levels; hulled the harvested rice with mortars and pestles; and winnowed the husk from the grain in hand-woven coiled fanning baskets. Out of this context, West Africans ensnared by the Atlantic slave trade entered into the Americas.

Carney argues that in the early years of their expansion into the Atlantic, Europeans acknowledged the importance of rice in West Africa, as a number of captains provisioned their slave ships with rice purchased on the coast. And in the Americas, some colonial elites realized that Africans had experience with rice cultivation. For example, a Virginia governor wrote in 1648 that "we perceive the ground and climate is very proper for it [rice cultivation] as our *Negroes* affirme, which in their Country is most of their food." In comparison to most European colonists, Africans, though enslaved, understood how to manage American tropical and semi-tropical environments. And because in many cases slaves were responsible for feeding themselves, they relied on their knowledge of rice cultivation. Furthermore, in contrast to many other characterizations of slavery that focus on the "male slave," *Black Rice* shows that in the development of South Carolina's rice culture enslaved African women played a fundamental role. Skilled in different phases of rice cultivation and processing, West African women carried gendered knowledge across the Atlantic.

While touching on rice production in Brazil, Jamaica, Surinam, and Mexico, Carney focuses on colonial South Carolina. Though the documentation for the colony's early years is sparse, she makes both imaginative and convincing use of the surviving evidence including materials on the eighteenth-century slave trade to photographs of rice production taken in the twentieth century. From the type of rice cultivated, kinds of tools employed, methods of processing, development of irrigation systems and use of trunks to control the flow of water, South Carolina came to look like the West African rice region. Transferring this knowledge, Carney argues, enabled slaves to negotiate, though ever so slightly, the terms of their servitude and work with a relative amount of autonomy under the task system rather than the gang system.

Carney has made an indispensable contribution to the fields of American history, and African American and African Diaspora studies. Superbly written and well researched, *Black Rice* offers even more than "historical recovery," as the author states her work to

be, for it is a deeply ironic story. By viewing the enslaved in relation to centuries of African history, she acknowledges their depth of humanity, a point lost upon earlier scholars such as Phillips. And by inverting the traditional notion that slavery was a school for slaves, Carney shows that, in relation to rice cultivation, slaves were the teachers and their owners the students.

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