

The Scarcity Slot: Excavating Histories of Food Security

Amanda Logan

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In *The Scarcity Slot: Excavating Histories of Food Security*, Amanda Logan argues that African foodways are persistently depicted as lacking in abundance, taste, and history. They are portrayed, she argues, as static and unchanging, and at the mercy of overly harsh environments. Such depictions, which Logan calls “the scarcity slot,” are pervasive in popular media, development policy directives, archaeological studies, and beyond. The issue with such descriptions, Logan argues, is that they don’t hold up to scrutiny. As an archaeologist, Logan is interested in tracking—and challenging—claims of scarcity across time, and as an archaeologist, she is well poised to do so. *The Scarcity Slot* delves into a long food history of Banda, a town in western Ghana, beginning in the 1400s and ending in the present, taking the reader through major moments in time, including the introduction of crops such as maize, a 250-year drought, slaving raids, political unrest, colonial rule, and the neoliberal, post-colonial moment.

Logan explores how these major political-economic, social, and climatic events significantly altered foodways and livelihoods in Banda. Additionally, and importantly, Logan highlights how residents of Banda deployed creative strategies, deep knowledge, and flexible techniques to weather these events. Archaeological methods—combined with archival research and oral histories—allow Logan to cast a long temporal net. In doing so, she joins political-ecologists and critical agronomists, among others, who have continually stressed the ingenuity and resourcefulness of African farmers amidst popular narratives that would suggest otherwise (Berry 1993; Nyantakyi-Frimpong 2020).

For those of us not trained in archaeology, Logan leads with clarity, carefully explaining her methods and analysis. Throughout the book she builds a strong argument for using excavation of soil, of histories, of cuisines as a key method for food studies. Anecdotally, I’ve taught the book in both undergraduate and graduate classes in development studies and have found that it provides students with a sturdy discussion starter on how narratives of scarcity obfuscate the political economy of food and the agency and empirical realities of African farmers.

Zooming out, it’s not difficult to find examples of such narratives—or the scarcity slot—out in the world. Just open the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation’s latest *Goalkeepers* report, read an NPR article about fufu (Shields 2015), or consider the use of the term “orphan crops” (Dwyer, Ibe, and Rhee 2022).

The task at hand, then, is not to downplay serious issues related to food access. Instead, Logan situates her work as “a devoted study of the history of food scarcity and abundance across the continent”—a both/and kind of scenario (p. 15). In showing the creative ways in which people navigate systems of scarcity and abundance, *The Scarcity Slot* joins other recent publications, such as Ashanté M. Reese’s *Black Food Geographies* (2019), in pushing food studies to think deeply about how the discipline engages with certain communities and structural violence.

To this point, in the book’s concluding chapter Logan poses a number of questions: “What if regional African foodways were revered in the same manner as French cuisine, and African terroir and expert chefs were lauded for their creativity and evolved methods? What if the superior nutritional content of West African diets was held up as the gold standard to which we all should aspire?” (p. 167). These questions are provocations and opportunities for reflection. They may also serve as a guide for food studies programs to assess and revise their existing curricula. This offering, I argue, is one of Logan’s strongest contributions to food studies. Indeed, the African continent should be an essential component of food inquiry and education; Logan provides a framework for where to begin.

—Joeva Sean Rock, *University of Cambridge*

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Diners, Dudes, and Diets. How Gender and Power Collide in Food Media and Culture

Emily J. H. Contois

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A student in one of my modules on food media recently asked how a change in understanding of what constitutes “good