Chocolate, coffee, tea: exotic stimulants usually dominate the stories told about early culinary exchanges between European and non-European peoples. In the Shadow of Slavery also includes some tidbits about African contributions to the caffeination of humanity. For instance, we learn that the kola nut, native to Africa, provided Coca-Cola with one of its key ingredients.

As Judith Carney and her coauthor Richard Rosomoff also inform us, however, kola nuts flavored the drinking water carried on slave ships traveling from Africa to the Americas. The average transatlantic crossing took eighty days, long enough that the water spoiled before journey’s end. Yet adding kola nuts to the stagnant water improved it in almost magical fashion, making it taste like “White-Wine, and as if mixed with Sugar,” according to one seventeenth-century Dutch observer (p.71). Kola nuts thus became common cargo on the ships that carried millions of Africans into slavery.

Carney and Rosomoff’s book caters less to the jaded tastes of today’s consumers and more to those seeking to understand the role played by food in the history of Atlantic slavery. Using what they call “the lens of subsistence,” the authors focus on what slaves ate and drank as they crossed the ocean and started new lives on American plantations (p.66). They also detail the crops that Africans grew and their transplantation of agricultural knowledge to the New World. Although scholars have long understood that slavery created immense profits, Carney and Rosomoff brilliantly use food to expose its “underbelly”: the mundane supplies that kept slaves alive and helped a cruel institution become a successful business (p.46).

Works like Alfred Crosby’s The Columbian Exchange and Ecological Imperialism pioneered the approach of following food to reveal the economic underpinnings of empire. Tracking the movement of such staples as wheat, cattle, chickens, and pigs, Crosby argued that colonization ventures succeeded in large part because Europeans recreated Old World environments in unfamiliar settings. Bringing crops and livestock with them, early settlers planted what Crosby called neo-Europes across the Americas.

Inspired by Crosby, Carney and Rosomoff nevertheless fundamentally rewrite his argument by showing that African flora and fauna altered New World landscapes as much as any European transplants did. The kola nut was not the only comestible that traveled out of Africa. As the authors document, African crops like sorghum and millet also accompanied slave ships to the Americas.

The authors return to the subject of rice, too, which Carney discussed at length in a previous book entitled Black Rice. Although most rice eaten in the world today derives from the Asian Oryza sativa, Africans have cultivated an indigenous species, Oryza glaberrima, for millennia. Showing that slaving vessels sometimes carried O. glaberrima on their Atlantic crossings, Carney and Rosomoff argue that African slaves possessed technical knowledge about risiculture as well and that this knowledge aided Europeans seeking to establish rice plantations in the Americas.

Indeed, Carney and Rosomoff emphasize that slaves provided intellectual and not just manual labor for their owners, who occasionally acknowledged this debt in their writings. As one Englishman named George Brownrigg admitted in 1769 about the peanut, it was “originally… of the growth of Africa, and brought from thence by the negroes” (p.143). To find statements like these, the authors clearly combed through the European historical record, which largely elided African contributions for reasons of prejudice and racism. Making that record testify to non-European know-how is a striking and also ironic achievement, as one cannot imagine the original authors appreciating this kind of detective work.

In the Shadow of Slavery reveals in exposing the contradictions created by slavery, though. Slave ships transported their human cargo to what some considered a fate worse than death, yet they also carried the seeds that helped slaves fashion a new life on the ocean’s far side. Slave owners neglected to provide their African labor force with such basic necessities as food, but, as a result, they allowed slaves to cultivate their own gardens. These gardens in turn became sites where slaves could work for themselves and grow plants for everyday consumption. The dishes that slaves concocted out of these plants may have been humble, but they employed African ingredients and techniques that turned food into a powerful conduit for memory and diasporic attachment. These dishes later became the basis for what we now identify as soul food or, even more broadly, Southern cuisine. Hunger and deprivation certainly lay at the center of the slave experience, but, as Carney and Rosomoff show, they also laid the foundations for modern American culture and society.

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