

Black Rice Debate

Discovering more accurate accounts of chattel slavery's history has proved arduous because of the convoluted and erased narratives of Black individuals of the 1600s. With most of history being penned by beneficiaries of accounts that credit European culture and ingenuity, the truth is seldom clear. Such is the case with the Black Rice debate. A different conceptualization of power and agency, two of the most foundational aspects of this topic, make up a significant portion of both Judith Carney and David Eltis et al's differing perspectives. The historians create arguments which explore whether or not it was feasible for West Africans to have brought over their knowledge systems—along with the literal seeds needed—for rice cultivation on plantations in the colonial Carolinas. With chattel slavery—the complete ownership of a person during their lifetime, typically for labor exploitation—making up a grand part of the American colonies' history, this revelation is monumental. In an attempt to understand the history of colonial America and its visible effects on modern society, I propose my working definitions of power and agency; bring forth my rationale for supporting Carney's stance on the Black Rice Debate; and recognize the external factors which allowed for the continuity of said exploitation within the food laboring system.

To develop an opinion on the debate regarding Black Rice, this paper begins by setting the working definitions of power and agency. Power is—at its core—an asset, whether tangible or otherwise, that provides leverage for an individual or group to negotiate conditions of their existence. Apart from the symbiotic relationship, which is most typically recognized, a hierarchical format exists where an agent's ability to seek out autonomy rests on the existence or establishment of power. In the context of chattel slavery, the latter understanding rules. However, the acquisition of some level of power does not inherently give an individual (or group) agency.

Agency, for the purposes of this paper, is defined as a condition that human beings are not explicitly granted because of the powers they may hold; but, instead, a condition which is the result of the system they reside in. Further, agency is dependent upon whether or not the value of the powers they hold are sufficient enough to constitute an autonomous agent within that system.

These distinctions are crucial, and ingrained within the discussion by Carney, Hall, and Eltis et al. Carney, with the support of Gwendolyn Hall and her respective research, stands on the side of history that asks for a reevaluation of, and greater respect for, the powerful contributions to riziculture that West Africans may very well be responsible for. On the opposing side, we are exposed to the more conservative reading of history from a group of historians which are grouped together as Eltis et al. This perspective opposes the need for historical reevaluation, and reinforces the idea that enslaved people were only workers, and not contributors. The Black Rice Debate, therefore, gets its name from the possibility that riziculture and its success—as much as its existence—may be reliant upon the Black people who were exploited for their work.

The most visible distinction of the differences between power and agency appear in the formation of the short-lived task system in South Carolina. Enslaved people, through the task system, were granted some privileges from their enslavers.¹ They were granted time to tend to their own gardens, after completing the required work on the plantations.² Carney, mistakenly, attributes this privilege to be synonymous with agency.³ However, within her argument, she also recognized how this creates a system “more akin to European serfdom.”⁴ Upon researching the definition of serfdom, it becomes clear that a serf still works “to the will of his landlord.”⁵ While attempting to distinguish between the labor and the task systems present during the time, Carney

¹ Judith Carney, *Black Rice: The African Origins of Rice Cultivation in the Americas* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001), 99-101.

² Carney, *Black Rice*, 99-101.

³ Carney, *Black Rice*, 101.

⁴ Carney, *Black Rice*, 70.

⁵ "Serfdom." *Encyclopædia Britannica*. Accessed October 23, 2020. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/serfdom>.

helps to discredit her claim that agency and power are synonymous. Serfs, like enslaved people, have some powers. They, however, are still subject to the desires of their farm's owners over their own, which is what inhibits their ability to be autonomous.

Coming to understand this dynamic gives way to the development of the rest of Carney's argument. She explains, at length, the systems in place within West Africa for farming rice. The continued usage of the mortar and pestle; the dual-crop farming techniques; the gender roles tied to rice cultivation and how they were amended to adapt to conditions in the Americas; and the origin of the enslaved, enslavers, and of rice farming characterize the rest of her defense. With Carney making note of the appearance of rice in the colonies as a primary staple occurring only after the slave trade began, it begins to feel ludicrous—as a reader—to merely consider that West African ingenuity was not behind rice cultivation.⁶ The number of connections, paired with the detail that Carney speaks to them on, helps readers to visualize just how this coerced transfer of knowledge could have taken place.

In support of Carney, Hall attempts to elaborate on just how elusive the available records of the time period are. Hall has dedicated a significant amount of time to reconstructing an archive of records that has long been used and expanded on—despite all of its rudimentary gaps. The TSTD1 and newer TSTD2 fail to document many factors associated with the slave trade; anything that the slave buyers did not think was most obviously useful, did not make the “Anglo focused” records.⁷ Hall's database, and general work, aim to show a more complete history of the time period, while paying as much respect as possible to the enslaved people being exploited. She traces enslaved peoples' origins from and through separate sources. In light of her work, it becomes exponentially more difficult to ignore the influence that different ethnicities (of those

⁶ Carney, *Black Rice*, 31-35

⁷ Gwendolyn Midlo Hall, “Africa and Africans in the African Diaspora: The Uses of Relational Databases,” *The American Historical Review* 115, no. 1 (2010): 138

ripped from their homes) had on plantation culture and its success in the Americas. Her database is able to further support claims from other historians, such as Carney, that discuss enslaved people often being moved around within the Ivory Coast before being shipped off. This set of facts highlights how probable it was for enslaved people to have brought over their knowledge systems; they were being kidnapped from areas where rice cultivation was particularly prominent, and then spent time near other coastal cities or ports, where they were then officially (albeit inaccurately) marked as being from.⁸

On the opposite end of the spectrum, there is Eltis et al's work which attempts to undermine the efforts of both Carney and Hall. This group aims to deconstruct the points made by Carney by employing the Strawman Fallacy as their primary defense.⁹ They focus on aspects of Carney's claims and try to spark doubt in some of the intricacies. Yet, what stands out most prominently is that the historians never create much of an argument of their own. The evidence they provide relies on vague and misrepresented histories in the TSTD1 and TSTD2 databases—whose shortcomings we are exposed to in Hall's work and reconstruction.¹⁰ The lack of care for the humanity of West Africans comes across as malicious, and is reminiscent of the attitudes that prevailed during the time they speak to. Eltis et al's desire to discredit enslaved people's work is rooted in anti-black sentiment, and is visible through the active choices they made in the language that credits "planters [as having] dictated these improvements" in the exploitative labor system, throughout their short rebuttal.¹¹ As Hall ultimately says of Eltis et al's argument, "their conclusions far outrun their evidence."¹²

⁸ Hall, *Africa and Africans in the African Diaspora*, 144.

⁹ David Eltis, Philip Morgan, and David Richardson, "Agency and Diaspora in Atlantic History: Reassessing the African Contribution to Rice Cultivation in the Americas," *The American Historical Review* 112, no. 5 (2007): 1329–58; "Straw Man Fallacy." Excelsior College OWL. June 06, 2017. Accessed October 23, 2020. <https://owl.excelsior.edu/argument-and-critical-thinking/logical-fallacies/logical-fallacies-straw-man/>.

¹⁰ Hall, *Africa and Africans in the African Diaspora*, 136–50.

¹¹ Eltis et al, "Agency and Diaspora in Atlantic History," 1355.

¹² Hall, *Africa and Africans in the African Diaspora*, 150.

In regards to the external variables present throughout the era, the issue is broadly defined in terms of “supply and demand.”¹³ We can narrow in on some of the economic and psychological factors at play to gain a slightly better understanding of what drove and allowed for the continuation of chattel slavery during the 1600s. Continued physical abuse created a sense of learned helplessness over time. Enslaved people’s mental states were toyed with. Ripping West Africans from their homes, moving them across the ocean, and then putting them to work among strangers who may not have spoken their same dialects was traumatic. Especially, for the purpose of “sustain[ing] those dying in bondage,” which served as the colonists’ labor force.¹⁴ With enslaved people having no access to education, they did not have the knowledge and language that may have been necessary to convince their fellow enslaved workers to ‘demand’ more.

On the other hand, the issue of supply pays more mind to the beneficiaries of the exploitative system. Colonists needed food, but not nearly as much as the plantations were producing. The colonists wanted to build wealth and hoard resources to make themselves powerful in this new environment. Supply of crops was, in a very general sense, necessary for survival—but sought out in this manner because the colonists may not have known how to do it for themselves; the colonists may have been able to produce only few foods that would serve their subsistence needs, and the process of working the fields may have been too time consuming for them to work on while tending to their affairs inside their homes. People of West Africa were not readily accessible. Carney makes note of the long periods it took kidnappers to gather sufficient numbers of enslaved people to make a journey profitable for captors and sellers.¹⁵ This

¹³ Carney, *Black Rice*, 138-139.

¹⁴ Carney, *Black Rice*, 139.

¹⁵ Carney, *Black Rice*, 194.

mission was pointed, and rooted in racism as much as it was rooted in greed along every step of the way.

After analyzing the two main arguments, and considering the additional insight of Hall's work, it feels only right to credit West Africans with the rise of riziculture in the South Carolina area. The numerous overlaps in technology and the clearly delineated connections between the origins of rice and the Americas, alongside with the people who were native farmers, proves too much to overlook. As Carney points out, this debate "draws attention to just one of the numerous knowledge systems that slaves introduced to the Americas"¹⁶ America owes a great debt to the understudied influence of Black folks on our current culture.

¹⁶ Carney, *Black Rice*, 106.