

Linked to Africa: An Examination of the Modern Historical Discourse on Enslaved Foodways in the United States

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Abstract

In the late twentieth century, historians adopted a cultural lens for understanding the experiences of African Americans. In more recent years, food has become a new focus for cultural historians. This historiographical essay examines how historians have studied enslaved foodways in the United States. Two distinct schools of thought have emerged. The first group of scholars adopted a quantitative lens by exploring the nutritional impact of enslaved foodways on the Black body. The second wave of historians dissected the cultural meaning behind enslaved foodways. They have shown how African American food habits are rooted in slavery and are linked to West African agricultural traditions. They have collectively argued that food was used as a form of resistance and in the formation of Black identity.

Introduction

Food consumption is deeply intertwined with the everyday human experience. It is used to sustain life and express cultural identity. However, food also played a role in shaping the power dynamics within institutionalized captivity and generational enslavement. Historians have extensively discussed the peculiar institution of slavery, but only a handful have chosen to adopt a food lens. This historiographical essay seeks to identify trends in the literature and articulate how those trends have changed. Within the literature, two distinct lanes of discussion emerge. The first group of scholars adopted a quantitative frame of analysis by debating the nutritional implication of enslaved diets on the body. Proponents of the quantitative perspective reveal how food was another tool of oppression in slave societies. Another group of scholars used a cultural approach to understand enslaved diets. They have shown how food became a source of resistance and cultural autonomy. In this school of thought, scholars highlight the different ways that slaves' culinary and agricultural knowledge pushed back on white society's attempt to impose their concepts of Black identity. Historical narratives often disconnect African Americans from their African ancestry by neglecting the continued presence of African cultural capital within enslaved communities. These two schools of thought allow us to explore how culinary knowledge and practices can provide a tool to better understand the underlying roots of transnational Black identity and expand the scope of African American cultural history.

The archives that contain materials on American slavery are heavily influenced by the voices and perceptions of white historical actors. Food presents one way in which we can read against the narrative grain and better understand the lived experiences of enslaved Africans and the development of African American cultural practices. Scholars who examine the history of food have found that what we eat contributes to the formation of communal identities through

generational eating practices.¹ Enslaved agricultural and culinary knowledge rooted in African ancestry contributed to the development of foodways that subsidized the meager rations provided by enslavers and resulted in a hybrid cuisine that is still present in African American diets. Analyzing enslaved diets allows us to interrogate the power paradigms present in the US slave system and question the role food played in the regulation of Black bodies and cultural forms of resistances to enslavement.

R.H. Taylor's 1924 article "Feeding Slaves" is one of the earliest historical analyses of enslaved Africans' relationship to food. He argues that the cost of feeding exceeded any other single item of expense connected with the maintenance of slaves.² Taylor utilizes the "book of allowances" from Edmund Walter Jones and J. Devereux's plantations in North Carolina to provide an itemized list of goods allotted to enslaved families. Devereux, in particular, separated slaves into two groups, hands and idlers, which determined the allowance of food given to the head of the family. Rations of corn, beef, and bacon were subsidized with seasonal vegetables produced in the slaves' personal gardens or on the plantation.

Taylor's narrative calls into question the role that slavery played in the development of the Black culinary tradition and racialized foodways in the US. Six years before the publishing of Taylor's article, the US government hired Portia Smiley, an African American woman, to travel across the US and educate people about methods of cooking with corn products to promote its consumption as a part of the war effort.³ During her demonstrations, Smiley was required to dress-up like a house slave, harkening back to the mammy stereotype rooted in plantation culture. Taylor's article actualized the culinary stereotypes linking Blacks to corn products by providing evidence of it being a part of the rationing system within a slave society. The government-endorsed performance of Portia Smiley and Taylor's research reflected a broader perception that the Black community held specific culinary knowledge regarding the culinary uses of corn because of its prominence in Black diets from enslavement to current culinary practices.

Taylor further asserts that slaveholders used allowances to control the slaves' food consumption. Taylor states, "Slaves would consume more food than was needed for their physical well-being unless given a food allowance, which if systematically consumed, was ordinarily sufficient to tide them over a stated period of time."⁴ The author's emphasis on consumption and overeating reflects shifting cultural understandings of food during the post-First World War era. During the 1910s, food science became popular and shifted public opinion regarding consumption. The idea of self-control and limiting the amount of food intake became the dominant thought of the time, reflected in Taylor's article. His assertion plays into

¹ Claude Fischler, "Food, Self, and Identity," *Social Science Information* 27, no. 2 (1988):171; Cruz Miguel Ortiz Cuadra, *Eating Puerto Rico: A History of Food, Culture, and Identity* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2013); and Meredith E. Abarca, "Afro-Latina/os' Culinary Subjectivities: Rooting Ethnicities through Root Vegetables," in *Food Across Borders*, eds. Matt Garcia, E. Melanie Dupuis, and Don Mitchell (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2017).

² R.H. Taylor, "Feeding Slaves," *The Journal of Negro History* 9, no. 2 (April 1924): 139.

³ Helen Zoe Viet, *Modern Food, Moral Food: Self-Control, Science, and the Rise of Modern American Eating in the Early Twentieth Century* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2013), 101.

⁴ Taylor, "Feeding Slaves," 139.

stereotypes that depicted African descended people as a group who needed to be controlled because of an inherent unruliness. “Feeding Slaves” shaped the understanding of enslaved diets through data revealing the types of consumable goods available. Societal norms and beliefs shape the production of historical analysis, as shown in Taylor’s perspective on blackness and consumption. This presents the question: how has the historiography of enslaved relationship to food changed since 1924?

Scholars who adopted a quantitative approach to the enslaved relationship with food focus on the impact that available nutrition had on the physical development and productivity of slave populations, particularly children. Historians grappled with the question of whether slaves had enough food to support the development of the body and sustain the labor demands being placed upon them. Robert Fogel and Stanley Engerman’s 1974 book *Time on the Cross* is the cornerstone text for the quantitative lens in studying slave foodways. They argue that the slave diet was not only adequate but exceeded the recommended daily level of chief nutrients.⁵ Fogel and Engerman attribute the high caloric intake to the consumption of meat, sweet potatoes, peas, and other vegetables available to slaves. Their assertion was an attempt to dispel the myth that slavery was an economically backward institution by statistically showing that enslaved people were not underfed in plantation culture. Fogel and Engerman examine plantation records to help them better understand what food items enslaved bodies were ingesting. They conclude that free people consumed 3,741 calories each day compared to enslaved people who ate 4,185 calories each day.⁶ Scholars of enslaved foodways quickly began to challenge Fogel and Engerman’s claim, which resulted in a rich body of work that examines slaves’ dietary needs based on their West African heritage.

Kenneth F. Kiple and Virginia King’s 1981 book *Another Dimension to the Black Diaspora: Diet, Disease, and Racism* examines supposed Black genetic heritages and how the institution of slavery impacted enslaved Africans’ bodies. The third section of their monograph specifically discusses the intersection of nutrition and genetics within enslaved populations of West African descent. They situate their analysis in conversation with Fogel and Engerman’s earlier argument that claims the enslaved diet not only met caloric needs but also frequently exceeded the recommended intake.⁷ Kiple and King accepted that caloric intake was being met, but argued that it did not meet their nutritional needs. Kiple and King assert that pork became a staple item in the enslaved diet not because of the accessibility of the food item but because of its preservable qualities. Unlike beef, which was also offered to slaves, pork’s ability to be pickled and smoked allowed enslaved families to utilize it longer. Given the rationing system commonly implemented by plantation owners, the shelf life of food shaped enslaved individuals’ most desired consumable goods. Kiple and King quote a Mississippi slaveholder, “Fat Pork and cornbread are the natural aliment of a Negro. Deprive him of these and he is miserable. Give

⁵ Robert William Fogel and Stanley L. Engerman, *Time on the Cross: The Economics of American Negro Slavery*, (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1974), 115.

⁶ Fogel and Engerman, *Time on the Cross*, 112.

⁷ Kenneth Kiple and Virginia King, *Another Dimension to the Black Diaspora: Diet, Disease, and Racism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 82.

him his regular allowance and the Negro enjoys heaven on earth.”⁸ The fear of fresh meat spoiling and the lack of a packing industry in the South made pork more accessible to both the enslaved population and white society. Plantation owners allotted working slaves half a pound of pork per day. Kipple and King suggest that this would have met their nutritional needs if given lean cuts such as ham, loin, or shoulders, but that the fattier cuts of meat being offered to slaves only provided them with a third of the daily protein requirement needed to sustain a healthy diet.⁹ Slave diets resulted in a lack of calcium, vitamin A, and vitamin D absorption.¹⁰ Kiple and King reveal that while slaves received enough food to meet their caloric intake, they were simultaneously malnourished.

Several scholars examined the nutritional value of milk, or the lack thereof. Nicholas Scott Cardell and Mark Myron Hopkins’ 1978 collaborative work, “The Effect of Milk Intolerance on the Consumption of Milk by Slaves in 1860,” specifically questioned the low occurrence of milk intake in Fogel’s work. They argue that several factors contributed to the lack of milk in enslaved diets.¹¹ Cardell and Hopkins assert that because enslaved people were descendants of West African tribes, it is likely that they too experienced lactose intolerance. Enslaved Africans’ adverse reactions to milk consumption contributed to enslavers’ choice of available foodstuffs. In addition to the genetic interpretation, Cardell and Hopkins present three reasons for slaves consuming less milk than members of free society. The first was that the price of milk was higher in 1860 compared to the price in 1879. The second contributing factor was that milk was more expensive than meat from a nutritional point of view. The third seemed to support the genetic interpretation by emphasizing how milk consumption made most enslaved people physically ill.¹² The article published by Cardell and Hopkins is in direct conversation with Fogel’s argument and supports the assertions made by Kiple and King. They argued that milk was not common in enslaved Africans’ diet because of economic factors that influenced the enslavers’ decisions regarding food allowances and because of genetic predispositions that did not allow for the digestion of lactose.

⁸ Kiple and King, *Another Dimension to the Black Diaspora*, 82.

⁹ Kiple and King, *Another Dimension to the Black Diaspora*, 89.

¹⁰ Kiple and King, *Another Dimension to the Black Diaspora*, 84.

¹¹ Nicholas Scott Cardell and Mark Myron Hopkins, “The Effect of Milk Intolerance on the Consumption of Milk by Slaves in 1860,” *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 8 no. 3 (Winter 1978): 508. Cardell and Hopkins drew on several other scholars as they developed their argument, especially Tuvia Gilat, Ralph Kuhn, Enny Gelman, and Odette Mizrahy, “Lactase Deficiency in Jewish Communities in Israel,” *American Journal of Digestive Disease* 15, no. 10 (1970); Norman Kretchmer, “Lactose and Lactase,” *Scientific American* 227, no. 4 (Oct. 1972); Frederick T. Simoons, “Primary Adult Lactose Intolerance and the Milking Habit: A Problem in Biologic and Cultural Interrelations,” *American Journal of Digestive Diseases* 15, no. 8 (August 1970), Gilat et al. asserts in “Lactase Deficiency in Jewish Communities in Israel” that the environment and geographical location contributed to lactase deficiency in different populations. Simoons claims in his article “Primary Adults Lactose Intolerance and the Milking Habbit: A Problem in Biologic and Cultural Interrelations” that the percentage of children of interracial marriages with lactase deficiency is between the percentages of the parent’s race. Finally, Kretchmer found in his article, “Lactose and Lactase,” that almost all adults in coastal Nigeria, specifically Yoruba and Ibo, were almost 100 percent lactose intolerant.

¹² Cardell and Hopkins, “The Effect of Milk,” 510-511.

Plantation conditions and fluctuation in nutritional intake influenced enslaved women's ability to conceive. A more recent work in this vein, Richard Follet's 2008 piece "Gloomy Melancholy: Sexual Reproduction among Louisiana Slave Women, 1840-60" explores how the structure of sugar plantations impacted the reproductive systems of enslaved women. He argues that inadequate diet, excessive workloads, climate, and hormonal imbalances all seriously compromised fecundity in Louisiana sugar cane districts.¹³ The seasonal cycles of the sugar regime dictated when enslaved women's bodies had enough caloric intake to sustain a pregnancy. Unlike the reproductive patterns present on rice plantations, which saw an increase in pregnancy during the winter, sugar plantations saw an increase in conception during the autumn harvest. Follet attributes this to planters' use of incentives including food and leisure time in exchange for working long hours in sugar mills. Sugar plantation owners also fueled enslaved workers with a hot molasses to increase their energy during the harvest.¹⁴ The seasonal introduction of this carbohydrate-rich substance provided enslaved women's bodies the necessary caloric boost needed to gain weight and conceive. Like Kiple and King, Follet's work suggests that enslaved Africans in the US did not consistently have access to food items to maintain basic bodily functions. Planters used nutritional stress on the body as another form of control in an attempt to reinforce the racial paradigms present in an agricultural society that relied on the labor of Black bodies. Through these quantitative methods of analysis, we see that practices of the American slave system sought to control the bodily autonomy of enslaved Africans not just through overt violence but also by gatekeeping food.

Enslaved children frequently experienced food scarcity and malnutrition within the plantation community due to the rationing system that favored laboring bodies. In 1977, Kiple and King published an article entitled "Slave Child Mortality: Some Nutritional Answers to a Perennial Puzzle." They argue that enslaved children experienced higher mortality rates than white children not because of planter mistreatment but due to the overlapping conditions caused by African environmental heritage, North American climatic circumstances, and the denial of nutrient rich food items. If enslaved children's nutritional needs were being met, they argue, then life-threatening diseases would not have been the leading cause of young slaves' deaths before the age of ten. Kiple and King begin their discussion by claiming that slave children were born nutritionally deficient. During the prenatal period, the fetus will do its best to satisfy its own needs for minerals, even if the mother is deficient, by drawing on her skeletal stores.¹⁵ Based on the argument presented in Kiple and King's later book, *Another Dimension to the African Diaspora*, it is safe to assume that enslaved mothers were indeed in a state of malnutrition before conception, as shown in Follet's work. Slave children came into the world deprived of the necessary vitamins and minerals needed to sustain healthy childhood development. Kiple and King further explain how planters' food allotments only perpetuated

¹³ Richard Follet, "Gloomy Melancholy: Sexual Reproduction Among Louisiana Slave Women, 1840-60," in *Women and Slavery, Vol. 2: The Modern Atlantic*, eds. Gwyn Campbell, Suzanne Miers, and Joseph C. Miller (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2007), 55.

¹⁴ Follet, "Gloomy Melancholy," 64.

¹⁵ Kenneth F. Kiple and Virginia H. Kiple, "Slave Child Mortality: Some Nutritional Answers to a Perennial Puzzle," *Journal of Social History* 10, no. 3 (Spring 1997): 287.

prenatal nutritional deficits. After being weaned off their mother's breast milk, enslaved children's diet mainly consisted of cornbread, hominy, and fat.¹⁶ Kiple and King suggested that, due to West African descended children's predisposition to sickle cell anemia, the high carbohydrate and low protein diet impacted their overall health and made them susceptible to diseases. They chronicled the impact of convulsion, tetanus, rickets, sudden infant death syndrome, and pica on the high occurrence of enslaved children's mortality. Although Kiple and King's argument is backed by substantial evidence, it also runs the risk of perpetuating a culture of victim-blaming by focusing on supposed genetic predispositions of enslaved people, rather than the institution responsible for their circumstances. They claim, "West Africa endowed her sons with marvelous mechanism of protection for survival in that region. However, the same mechanism contained the potential for provoking severe nutritional difficulties once their possessor was removed from West Africa's specialized environment."¹⁷ Neglecting the role that slaveholders played while focusing the blame on West African genetic predispositions and the North American climate overlooks the fact that enslaved persons were forced into a system that deprived them of access to foodstuffs capable of meeting their nutritional needs. Indeed, the enslaver's position of power and control of available consumable goods made them culpable in the malnutrition and subsequent death of slaves.

Fetal and infant malnutrition would impact enslaved people's later physical development. Richard Steckel's 1981 article, "A Peculiar Population: Nutrition, Health, and Mortality of American Slaves from Childhood to Maturity," engages the established quantitative discourse by evaluating enslaved growth charts to understand the role food played in children's development. After analyzing data on the height of enslaved and free children, Steckel found that enslaved children were smaller than any other population of children. He also found that by the age of sixteen, American male slaves were taller than factory workers and laboring classes in England, the poor in Italy, students in Habsburg's military schools, the middle class of Stuttgart, German peasants, and factory workers in Russia.¹⁸ Steckel attributes this slow-growing curve and subsequent catch-up growth during adolescence to the allocated diet given to enslaved children. Like previous scholars, he found that insufficient protein, iron, and calcium significantly stunted the development of enslaved children's bodies. In his narrative, Steckel discusses enslavers' belief that youngsters' glistening ribs were a sign of good health. This observation was a physical manifestation of malnutrition and specifically protein deficiency.¹⁹ The lasting impact of enslaved children's poor diet potentially resulted in the delay in developing fine motor skills and permanent damage to cognitive development.²⁰ Steckel's research posed a controversial question: did nutrition contribute to the Sambo stereotype that depicted Black people as docile and childlike? He urged researchers to investigate the role nutrition played in the development of slave personalities. The argument presented in "The Peculiar Population"

¹⁶ Kiple and Kiple, "Slave Child Mortality," 288.

¹⁷ Kiple and Kiple, "Slave Child Mortality," 287.

¹⁸ Richard H. Steckel, "A Peculiar Population: The Nutrition, Health, and Mortality of American Slaves from Childhood to Maturity," *The Journal of Economic History* 46, no. 3 (September 1986): 728.

¹⁹ Steckel, "A Peculiar Population," 734.

²⁰ Steckel, "A Peculiar Population," 738.

directly challenged Eugene Genovese's portrayal of enslaved children as being protected within the plantation so they may have time to grow.²¹ Steckel argues that food being allocated for enslaved children impacted their physical and cognitive development, contributing to the perpetuation of racialized stereotypes that depicted Black people as docile. This position speaks to the impact of malnutrition on the cognitive and physical development of enslaved Black children but should be regarded with caution due to the risk of perpetuating negative racial stereotypes used to discriminate against African Americans.

The quantitative perspective on African slave's relationship with food emphasizes the nutritional value of consumable goods. Fogel's early scholarship presented data suggesting that enslavers provided slaves with enough food to meet the mandatory caloric intake. Kiple and King's research tried to dispel the belief that enslaved people were well fed by proving the allotted plantation diet did not meet West African-descended people's nutritional needs and thus left much of the enslaved population malnourished. Diets of fatty pork and cornmeal did not provide the necessary protein to sustain the proper development or maintenance of a healthy body. Further scholarship argued that Genovese's assertions about enslaved children were inaccurate. Infants born to slave mothers entered the world with nutritional deficits. The lack of protein, iron, and calcium in their diet attributed to higher childhood mortality rates than free society as well as physical and cognitive delays. Scholars of this quantitative approach examined how nutrition, or the lack thereof, impacted enslaved populations and contributed to our understanding of the profound ramifications of slavery beyond notions of race that restricted the freedom of African descendant people. Quantitative perspectives on slave diets reveals how food became a tool of oppression, just like the threat of violence.

In more recent years the study of enslaved foodways has shifted towards a cultural lens that focuses on the development of the Black culinary tradition and specifically how food was used to express identity. This perspective on African American foodways reflects the growing popularity of food studies as an academic discipline. Earlier works used the scope of nutrition to reveal that the gatekeeping of food was another oppressive tactic used by planters to suppress Black autonomy. The recent turn in the literature acknowledges how food was a tool of oppression but emphasizes how enslaved culinary practices that were rooted in West African botanical knowledge were also a mechanism of resistance.

Psyche Williams-Forsen has emerged as one of the leading scholars researching Black culinary traditions. Her 2006 book, *Building Houses out of Chicken Legs: Black Women, Food and Power*, set the tone for research on Black foodways in the US and established a literary legacy that situates food as a mechanism of resistance and performance of identity. Williams-Forsen's work was heavily influenced by Vertamae Smart-Grosvenor's 1970 cookbook *Vibration Cooking: or The Travel Notes of a Geechee Girl*. In a time when cookbooks offered readers little to no narrative, Smart-Grosvenor intertwined her story and the story of African American culinary history into a text that expanded our understanding of foodways. Her cookbook presents food not merely as a source of nutrition but an extension of the hands that cooked it.

²¹ Steckel, "A Peculiar Population," 740; Eugene D. Genovese, *Roll, Jordan Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1974), 504-5.

Smart-Grosvenor's work inspired food historians to link foodstuff to the history and performed identity of Black communities.

In *Building Houses out of Chicken Legs*, Williams-Forson dispels racial stereotypes associated with Black chicken consumption by detailing how this meat product became a source of economic liberation during slavery.²² Williams-Forson argues that chicken became a tool for African American women to redefine their identity and obtain a new level of socio-economic autonomy. Her first chapter emphasizes how enslaved women used chickens to occupy racialized spaces. She discusses how the marketplace, where Black women often sold chicken, was a place for cultural performance. Williams-Forson utilizes a story from August Baldwin Longstreet's *Georgia Scenes* and argues that the marketplace was a venue where enslaved women could challenge the racial hierarchy. Williams-Forson states, "From a racial point of view, white men expected that relations between them and Blacks would always be based on servitude and gratitude, and women would always be subordinate to men."²³ She further explains that in the public marketplace, where many whites often relied upon Blacks to supply them with goods, market rules required some concessions. In the context of her argument, enslaved women's ability to commercialize their knowledge of chicken enabled them to challenge the gender and racial power structures of slave culture. Within the market Black women held the knowledge and possessed a valuable commodity that white people wanted to purchase, helping to shift the power paradigm. Williams-Forson's new interpretation encouraged scholars to look at Black foodways during slavery not as something that was strictly about sustenance but utilized to perform Black identity within racialized spaces.

Christopher Farrish's chapter in Jennifer Jensen Wallach's 2015 edited collection, *Dethroning the Deceitful Porkchop: African American Foodways from Slavery to Obama* examines the presence of food theft and the power dynamics within plantations' domestic spaces. He argues that in antebellum Virginia, Black food culture emerged within a system designed to eliminate Black power and flatten culinary expression.²⁴ Farrish describes how rationing systems were rooted in violence. Rationing acted as the sanctioned culinary flow of the antebellum plantation home, and it defined the conditions of culinary production for the enslaved. Further, he asserts stealing food was performing resistance. Theft removed food from a system of rationing and restored it to a space of life, of personal and communal pleasure rather than the profit of another.²⁵ Williams-Forson's chapter on enslaved people's relationship with food and the market also explores the presence of chicken thieves and the trickster trope in West African and African American folk traditions. In Farrish and Williams-Forson's pieces, food theft represents an attempt to create culinary autonomy by removing the gatekeeping practices of

²² Forson-Williams also discussed segregated foodways in her book *Building Houses out of Chicken Legs*, but for the purpose of this historiography I chose to focus on her narrative regarding enslaved women's relationship to chicken. Psyche Forson-Williams, *Building Houses out of Chicken Legs: Black Women, Food, and Power* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006).

²³ Forson-Williams, *Building Houses out of Chicken Legs*, 21.

²⁴ Christopher Farrish, "Food, Theft, Labor, and Culinary Insurrection in Virginia," in *Dethroning the Deceitful Pork Chop: African American Foodways from Slavery to Obama*, ed. Jennifer Jensen Wallach (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 2015), 155.

²⁵ Farrish, "Food, Theft, Labor, and Culinary Insurrection in Virginia," 157-8.

slave society. Within their arguments, food acted as a tool of oppression and resistance in the racial hierarchy of plantation culture. Farrish's discourse is less about the food being consumed but what it represents. Like the scholars of the 1970s and 1980s, Farrish positions his argument in direct conversation with Fogel's work. Where the previous school refuted Fogel's claims through data, Farrish adopted a cultural lens that looked at the power dynamics associated with access to food in slave communities. Williams-Forson and Farrish's conversations about the pursuit of culinary autonomy in slave society reveals that this cultural capital was a manifestation of an African cultural heritage transmitted through the transatlantic slave trade to the Americas.

Other scholars emphasized the botanical legacy linking foodways in the Americas to West African culinary traditions. Frederick Douglass Opie's 2006 book *Hog and Hominy: Soul Food from Africa to America* examines the history of soul food and its relationship to people of African descent over hundreds of years.²⁶ He argues that soul food is the amalgamation of West African culture and an adaptation to the conditions of slavery and freedom in the Americas.²⁷ The first third of Opie's book specifically discusses West African traditional foodways present in modern African American cuisine. Prior to the transatlantic slave trade, pork, corn, yams, and guinea hen were a key part of the West African diet. The Columbian exchange introduced corn and pork to Africans along the Atlantic coast. West Africans were exposed to imported food items and subsequently incorporated them into their everyday diets, including religious meals and practices. In his autobiography, Olaudah Equiano described the Igbo tradition of using the blood of fowl at friends' graves. West Africans not only used poultry in some of their religious practices but in their everyday eating habits. Women would fry hens and fish with palm oil when cooking for their families. Opie's discussion of West African poultry consumption and its uses extends the argument presented by Williams-Forson. When reading these pieces of work as part of broader discussions of enslaved foodways, we see that poultry is linked to Black identity through a diasporic lens. Using Opie's research, we can see that the stories of Black women selling chicken in the marketplace in Williams-Forson's work not only represent financial autonomy but a performance of West African identity through mastery of food-based knowledge. Opie's analysis contributes to the scholarship by asserting that West African slaves entered the Americas with an established culinary tradition that utilized pork, corn, yams, rice, and poultry. This perspective allows us to view modern Southern foodways as an extension of the African Diaspora due to the presence of foodstuff directly linked to West African ethnic group's cuisines.

We can also see the presence of West African food knowledge in the work of Judith Carney, beginning with her 2001 book *Black Rice: The African Origins of Rice Cultivation in the*

²⁶ Frederick Douglass Opie, *Hogs and Hominy: Soul Food from Africa to America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), xii. Opie explores the concept of "soul" as it relates to the social and religious aspects of African American cuisine. Opie stated, "Soul is the style of rural folk culture, Soul is Black spirituality and experiential wisdom. And soul is putting a premium on suffering, endurance, and surviving with dignity." Opie's understanding of soul encompasses the cultural phenomena of "Soul Food" and "Soul Music" to embody an enduring Black spiritual identity that manifests in cultural capital such as food or music.

²⁷ Opie, *Hogs and Hominy*, xi.

Americas. She argues that the methods that plantations adopted to mass-produce rice were derived from enslaved knowledge base, which was rooted in West African agricultural tradition. In South Carolina, enslaved West Africans' experience with irrigation systems in their homeland allowed for the region's successful cultivation of rice. Like Williams-Forson, Carney focuses on the experiences of enslaved women. According to Carney, a larger percentage of enslaved women was sent to South Carolina than the Caribbean. In West African culture, women controlled rice cultivation and brought that knowledge with them when taken from their homeland.²⁸

Carney expanded her research with her 2009 collaboration with Richard Nicholas Rosomoff, *In the Shadow of Slavery: Africa's Botanical Legacy in the Atlantic World*. Carney and Rosomoff focus on the transmission of agricultural knowledge through the Middle Passage. They explore African contributions to the Colombian exchange and assert that slave ships not only contributed to the forced movement of Africans to the Americas but also brought foodstuffs from the West coast of Africa. Enslaved Africans' broad contributions to early agricultural practices in the Americas are often overlooked. Carney and Rosomoff's work reveals that the West African botanical and culinary knowledge influenced the culinary legacy of the American diet, not just enslaved individuals. This contributes to current debates about the difference in "soul food" and "southern cooking" by placing Black culinary knowledge at the foundation of traditional American cuisine. Carney and Rosomoff's work disrupts the cultural paradigms that mark people of African descent as cultural others by placing them at the genesis of the American culinary traditions, as creators of the agricultural and culinary knowledge that sustained society. Their knowledge and practices were subsequently transmitted to modern consumers through the handing down of African eating practices from one generation to the next.²⁹

Jessica B. Harris further examined the presence of West African foodways in US slave society in her 2011 book *High on the Hog: A Culinary Journey from Africa to America*.³⁰ Like her predecessors, Harris examines the cultural and botanical impact of the transatlantic slave trade. She incorporates okra, watermelon, and black-eyed peas into the discourse which had previously focused on corn, pork, and chicken. Okra, one of the most well-known agricultural transplants into the new world and a staple in Southern households, was incorporated into colonial diets in the early 1700s. Harris traces okra's linguistic heritage to Nigeria's Igbo language, where the plant is referred to as okuru.³¹ After a brief discussion of the origins of Gumbo, a stew-like dish with containing rice, okra, and protein, Harris shifts her analysis to focus on watermelon. During Reconstruction, watermelon became linked with racialized

²⁸ Judith A. Carney, *Black Rice: The African Origins of Rice Cultivation in the Americas* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001).

²⁹ Judith A. Carney and Richard Nicholas Rosomoff, *In the Shadow of Slavery: Africa's Botanical Legacy in the Atlantic World* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011).

³⁰ On May 26, 2021, Netflix released a docuseries entitled "High on the Hog" featuring Stephen Satterfield. Jessica B. Harris' book, with the same title, influenced the exploration of West African foodways and its connection to African American cuisine seen in Satterfield's docuseries. Jessica B. Harris, *High on the Hog: A Culinary Journey from Africa to America* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2011).

³¹ Harris, *High on the Hog*, 17.

caricatures of freedmen, which has continued into the modern era. Harris' discussion of racialized food items suggests how stereotypes developed and provides insight into how African American culinary traditions are intrinsically tied to the Atlantic world.

Harris then shifts her focus to examine enslaved food consumption during the Middle Passage. Ship captains allotted two meals a day, mostly consisting of rice. The first meal was served around ten in the morning and consisted of rice, corn, or yams, depending on the origins of the enslaved, and along with water. Later in the day, depending on the European food supply, slaves would receive their second meal, which often included slabber sauce of daddadad. According to Harris, this was a mixture of palm oil, flour, water, and chili.³² Daddadad could also be a mixture of rice, salt meat, pepper, and palm oil. Members of the crew lessened slave allotments of water and meal ration as a tool of punishment. Slaves would often refuse to eat as a method of resistance. In these acts of discipline and resistance, we see how food items are not just a part of consumption, but an articulation of power and identity rooted in multi-generational culinary knowledge. Harris' book also informs existing scholarship by examining enslaved Africans' connection to overlooked plants and by interrogating the importance of eating practices present during the Middle Passage. In her analysis, ships became the mechanism not just for the forced migration of enslaved Africans but also the transmission of culinary and agricultural knowledge that influenced the development of early American diets. The historical conversations between the research of Harris and her contemporaries reveal the depth of West African agricultural and culinary knowledge that laid the foundation for modern African American cuisine.

These more recent scholars use their research to profoundly connect African-descended people in the US to the African continent. Due to the nature of the transatlantic slave trade, African-descended individuals' familial histories and African connections are often considered lost. This discourse pushes against the idea that enslaved West Africans were totally stripped of their cultural autonomy. White slaveholding society attempted to impose their own concepts of blackness on slaves. However, enslaved people's agricultural knowledge from their ancestral homelands allowed for the creation of the Black culinary tradition in the US, which has significant ties to West Africa. These authors' scholarship does not deny the lasting personal disconnect caused by enslavement, but rather tries to uncover evidence of continued ties between people of African descent and the culinary traditions of their ancestral homelands.

Quantitative and cultural approaches to studying enslaved foodways have shown how food has been used as a tool of both oppression and resistance. The study of enslaved foodways can help readers gain a more nuanced understanding of African American cuisine and its connection to West African culinary and agricultural knowledge. A close reading of the literature on enslaved diets lays the groundwork for understanding the power paradigms present in other eras. It suggests, for example, that the Civil Rights Movement protests against segregated eating spaces during the 1950s and 1960s form part of a much longer history of white gatekeeping of food and African Americans using the culinary sphere as a point of resistance. The scholars discussed in this essay provide a foundational understanding and open

³² Harris, *High on the Hog*, 32.

the door for further research on the intersection of power, food, and Black identity in the Atlantic world.