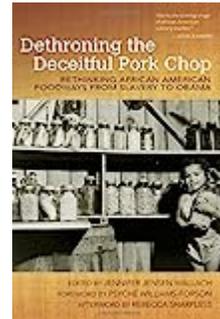




Jennifer Jensen Wallach, ed. *Dethroning the Deceitful Pork Chop: Rethinking African American Foodways from Slavery to Obama.* Food and Foodways Series. Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 2015. 295 pp. \$27.95 (paper), ISBN 978-1-55728-679-6.



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Food For Thought: What U.S. Environmental Historians Can Learn From African American Food Historians

Most US environmental historians would admit that until relatively recently, our field has done a less than satisfactory job of chronicling the African American experience. At the same time, these same scholars would be quick to point out that food is one of the least recognized but most fundamental connections modern Americans have with ecosystems. For these two reasons, environmental historians should welcome this anthology of scholarship exploring African American food history.

Most of the essays in *Dethroning the Deceitful Pork Chop* (a title inspired by W. E. B. Du Bois's 1918 call to support the war effort by eating less meat) use African American food history as a window on social relations. Some essays take a top-down approach, exploring the development of racist stereotypes and caricatures (such as Aunt Jemima), demonstrating the ways white cookbook authors appropriated African American cooking without giving due recognition, or unearthing how white librarians' catalogs did classificatory violence to black food writing. Most though emphasize black agency. Marcia

Chatelein and Katharina Vester recover black voices by looking closely at cookbooks written by African American women. Anthony Stanonis uncovers older spiritual connotations of the term *âsoul foodâ* and argues that black cooks not only physically sustained bodies but also sometimes used the kitchen to harness supernatural forces. Jennifer Kenyatta Walker shows how participants on the cooking show *My Momma Throws Down* subtly disrupted stereotypes. Audrey Russek documents how during the Cold War, African American diners subverted the color line in segregated restaurants by posing as foreign diplomats.

As good as many of these essays are, their lack of attention to the material aspects of food will leave environmental historians hungry for more. Food, as the historian Douglas Sackman reminds us, is always both cultural and material. On the one hand, we use food to make meaning and to forge ethnic, gendered, national, regional, class-based, and familial identities. But food is also biological. Plants and animals are domesticated, bred, and then cul-

tivated and ranched in engineered ecosystems. Our food is the product of energy and often hidden human labor. And of course, calories and nutrients sustain the bodies of eaters. For Sackman, a food item, say a Southern California orange, is both material and semiotic. It is a hybrid artifact that defies any attempt to draw a clean line separating nature from culture.

Some chapters in this volume move beyond culture and also take up the material dimensions of African American food and point us back to food's ecological context. In so doing, these essays considerably advance our understanding of African American environmental history.

Recent scholarship has dramatically enhanced our knowledge of what we might call the biological black Atlantic, the exchange of plants, animals, and diseases between Africa and the Americas and Europe during the colonial period. US environmental historians are already familiar with slaves' outsized role in Carolina rice production. But rice, as Judith Carney and Richard Nicholas demonstrate in *In the Shadow of Slavery: Africa's Botanical Legacy in the Atlantic World* (2009), was just the tip of the iceberg. Long before the slave trade, Africans domesticated and/or cultivated a number of important plants (rice, sorghum, African millet, various legumes, okra, sesame, watermelon, taro, oil palms, bananas, plantains, and coffee, among others), and these plus African foders brought over with animals transformed landscapes throughout the Americas. Meanwhile, American cassava, corn, peanuts, peppers, and tomatoes fundamentally altered traditional African foodways.

Two chapters in particular add to our understanding of the biological black Atlantic. In her essay, Kelly Wisecup complicates our understanding of the American blockbuster root crop cassava (or manioc). Europeans, she explains, brought tubers to Africa to feed themselves and African slaves, but free Africans quickly adopted the starchy plant and began growing it themselves. Wisecup speculates that newly enslaved Africans then carried cassava knowledge back with them to the Caribbean. Caribbean sugar growers who cashed in on Europeans' insatiable appetite for sweetness fed their slaves cassava, but slaves also sometimes used their knowledge of cassava to create cyanide-laced poisons, which they then fed to their masters. In his essay, Robert A. Gilmer argues that the blending of African, Native American, and European foods and cooking techniques during the Columbian Exchange characterizes African American food, but he warns us against romanticizing

the process of culinary fusion, reminding us that most exchange took place not in innocent contact zones but within the context of slavery and colonialism.

Christopher Farrish's examination of the Virginia plantation yard and kitchen contributes to our field's understanding of the environmental dimensions of plantation slavery. He documents how white plantation mistresses kept close guard over food and distributed often-inadequate rations of bacon, flour, and molasses to their calorie-hungry slaves. African Americans, he argues, resisted this authoritarian and stingy food system not only by hunting, fishing, and gathering in the surrounding ecosystem, but also by stealing from the larder. More subtly, slaves resisted through their cooking. While kitchen labor was difficult, dangerous, and coerced, it also gave enslaved cooks a modicum of power. In the black space of the plantation kitchen, the enslaved creatively combined African, Native American, and European ingredients and created southern food.

In her essay on food reform at Booker T. Washington's Tuskegee Institute, volume editor Jennifer Jensen Wallach furthers our understanding of African American environmental history during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. According to Wallach, Washington hoped to racially uplift students at his Tuskegee Institute by feeding them Anglo-American dishes (including copious amounts of beef) and by instructing them in European-derived ideas of proper dining etiquette. At the same time, Washington held fast to certain African American foods (such as the West African cowpea) and urged students and southern blacks to sustain themselves from fruits and vegetables that grew in their local environment. But for Washington, far more important than whether students ate traditional Anglo or Afro meals was that black people control their own food system. For Washington, black food independence (from farm to table) underwrote black economic independence.

Angela Jill Cooley's essay contributes to our understanding of black environmental history during the civil rights era. She argues that landlords in the Mississippi delta maintained white power in large part by controlling food. Planters uprooted black food gardens, kept tight reins on federal food aid, and forced sharecroppers off the land if they dared to vote. The result was widespread food insecurity that kept blacks living in one of America's most productive agricultural areas hungry, indebted, and dependent. Civil rights activists responded to hunger and caloric dependence on whites in the delta and elsewhere with a host of programs (including Nation of Islam

farms, Black Panther hot breakfast programs, and Southern Nonviolent Coordinating Committee co-operatives inspired in part by the kibbutz movement in Israel). Cooley focuses her attention on activist Fannie Lou Hamer, who is best known for her 1964 effort to disrupt Mississippi's all-white delegation to the Democratic National Convention. In 1969, she started Freedom Farm, her attempt to improve food security among poor delta blacks. Freedom Farm loaned pregnant sows from its pig bank, grew forty acres of vegetables (including West African okra) for local families, and helped sharecroppers negotiate new federal food stamp programs. She shows that far from a side project, the struggle for black control over the food system and food justice was central to the civil rights movement.

Vivian Halloran brings us up to the present with an essay on the contemporary African American urban food movement. She reminds us that chronic food insecurity defined not only slavery and sharecropping but also often the black urban experience. African Americans have long responded to urban hunger, unhealthy and unfamiliar food options, and a sense of alienation from the soil by cultivating urban gardens, such as the one grown by the grandparents of Michelle Obama in 1940s Chicago. Recently, though, black urban gardening has taken on new prominence, thanks in large part to Obama (who has made the White House garden and her *Let's Move!* program the centerpiece of her tenure as First Lady) and Oprah Winfrey (who grew up in rural Mississippi, established her own organic farm in Hawaii, and champions

locally grown food). Equally important to the popularization of black urban gardening have been Ron Finley in Los Angeles, Will Allen in Milwaukee, and Michael Twitty in Washington, DC. Each in his or her own way has worked to make African Americans more aware of the unhealthy and environmentally damaging effects of the dominant food system and tried to reintroduce urban blacks to the land and their own food history. At the same time, these black urban gardeners and farmers have subtly and not so subtly challenged an all-too-white food movement that is often blind to social inequality.

While environmental historians might lament that many of the essays in this anthology divorce food from its ecological and somatic context, they will find that other essays more than compensate. By using African American food as a window on both culture and nature, these chapters advance the still developing subfield of African American environmental history. Even more, these essays and other materially oriented scholarship in ethnic food history can help US environmental historians write accounts that better reflect American diversity. We know that food is one of our most fundamental relationships with the natural world. And we know that food is critical to understanding historical environmental inequalities. But even more, the history of food helps us see that the marginalized were not just environmental victims but also complicated, three-dimensional environmental actors who played important if still often underappreciated roles in the development of American environmental history.

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