

**UNIVERSITY OF UTRECHT**

**THESIS**

**An Edible Resistance:  
Connections between Bondswomen, Food and Power**

Student: Paula Kaufman 3625311

Date: June 27, 2011

MA in Cultural History, Department of History and Art History

Supervisor: dr. Willemijn Ruberg

## Contents

---

<b>Introduction</b> .....	2
<b>Chapter 1. Slave Historiography, Methods and Theories</b>	
Introduction.....	4
Food Theories .....	4
Black Feminist Theories and Slave Historiography .....	6
Oral History Theories.....	9
Research Methodology for “An Edible Resistance” .....	11
Conclusion.....	12
<b>Chapter 2. Slaves and Southern Cuisine: A History</b>	
Introduction.....	12
Food Facts and Figures.....	13
Bondswomen’s Food Practices.....	17
Resistance, Power and Food.....	21
Conclusion.....	26
<b>Chapter 3. Food Memories in Bondswomen’s Words</b>	
Introduction.....	27
The Great Depression and Eating Patterns.....	27
Positive and Negative Memories.....	31
Neutral Food Memories in Bondage.....	36
Conclusion .....	39
<b>Conclusion</b> .....	41
<b>Bibliography</b> .....	42

## Introduction

"The smell and taste of things remain poised a long time, like souls, ready to remind us...." (2004: Proust, 87).

In inconceivable acts of violence, Africans were uprooted from their home, shackled and tossed onto slave ships. Everything they knew was looted—their family broken, arms and hands bound. America was responsible for the transport and capture of fifteen million slaves, or, the largest forced migration in history (2007: Eltis, online). This labor force would make America an economic powerhouse—slaves plowing, tilling, cultivating. African blood would seep into the soil from so many lashings, their blood, sweat and tears raising the crops of the New World.

Over time, some African cooking traditions became engrained in American culture, the food of the enslaved becoming the food of the enslavers. This paper looks at that history. Additionally, I investigate the ways in which food was used as a tool by masters to control slaves, and how food was used by slave women as a tool to resist this dehumanization. My research question asks the following: How was food a source of power between bondswomen<sup>1</sup> and masters in the American south as written about in oral history transcripts from the Federal Writer's Project from 1936 to 1938.

Food has always been an important topic in anthropological studies and it is increasingly becoming recognized in the field of cultural history. When looking at food from a cultural history lens, such queries are asked as: How is food used? What are its cultural meanings? How is the notion of food constructed? How does food shape individuals and how do individuals shape cuisine?

In order to learn about these questions I read books on food studies and slave history. I also researched black feminism in the 1970's because black feminist scholars were the first to write in-depth on slave women. Additionally, I learned about oral history studies in order to be able to better analyze my primary source documents. My main source was a collection of interviews with former slaves called the Federal Writer's Project Slave Narrative Collection. This enterprise was undertaken by the federal government during the Great Depression. The collection is unique because, to my knowledge, no other slave-holding society has ever sought to record the lives of the formerly enslaved in such depth. The project lasted from 1936 until 1938. The

---

<sup>1</sup> I use the terms female slave and bondswomen interchangeably in this paper

collection serves as one of the most valuable insights historians have into the lives of slaves.

Recently, scholars have begun to utilize the Slave Narrative Collection more. An example is the book “What the Slaves Ate,” published by Eisnach and Covey in 2009. This book catalogues of every time food was referenced to in the Slave Narrative Collection. Chapters are broken down into food-based categories such as meat, grains and vegetables. The work shows how slaves sometimes used different names for the same ingredients, depending on where they lived. It also highlights potential ambiguity in terms, such as how the word “potato” could either refer to a sweet potato or Irish potato. Eisnach and Covey’s book is useful in showing the variety of foods slave’s ate. But the book does not mention how slaves cooked or farmed or what they said about the food they consumed. These are all topics this thesis covers.

The order of my thesis begins with a chapter on theory and historiography of slavery, gender, oral history and food studies. This chapter lays groundwork for the following two chapters. In chapter two, I discuss which foods were brought from Africa to America and how food acted as a fulcrum in a balance of power between master and slave. In order to make this argument, I utilized theories from Mary Douglass, Levi Strauss, Georg Simmel and Sydney W. Mintz (theorists that are introduced in chapter one.) I also interrogate practices around food and slavery and question whether food could be a tool of resistance. Finally, chapter three uses interviews with former bondswomen to shed more light on slave practices. It also shows the ways in which slave women remember food. In short, this dissertation demonstrates the different ways that food contributed to bondswomen’s lives. This thesis is cross-disciplinary and fits into the fields of black feminist studies, cultural history, anthropology and food studies. It strives to show how food is always more than just food—how it was an instrument of power, control, and resistance.

## **Slave Historiography, Methods and Theories**

“No other fundamental aspect of our behaviour as a species except sexuality is so encumbered by ideas as eating; the entanglements of food...with both belief and sociality, are striking” (1996: Mintz, 8).

### **Introduction**

In the following chapter, I sketch the methods and theories used by others in all the fields this thesis dovetails with. I briefly mention scholars such as Claude Lévi-Strauss, Mary Douglas, Sidney W. Mintz, Georg Simmel who helped me see food as a cultural system. I also foreground the research done on bondswomen by black feminist such as Deborah Gray White, bell hooks and Angela Davis. Another area I investigate is oral history. In this field I present some boons and caveats connected with my primary source material. And I conclude the chapter with an introduction to my research methodology.

### **Food Theories**

The earliest scholars to write about the connection between culture and food were anthropologists. A trailblazing cogitation on food and social meaning was done by Audrey Richards in 1932 in her book *Hunger and Work in a Savage Tribe: A Functional Study of Nutrition among the Southern Bantu*, however, it was not until the 1960's that an established field can be said to have been formed in cultural food studies. Today, the area of food theory is capacious.<sup>2</sup> In the last decade, a multiplicity of scholars have written on the intersection of food with politics, economics, society and meaning in the United States.

In addition to reaching back to Richards' scholarship, this movement is rooted in the second half of the twentieth century, a time when structuralists pointed out that “taste” was socially constructed and culturally formed. Many scholars began to view food as more than cuisine; it was a cultural indicator of power structures and social

---

<sup>2</sup> A good food reader is: *Food and Culture: A Reader* by Carole Counihan and Penny Van Esterik (1998). Within this volume one can find an article from the first-person perspective on black female identity and food, See: “Soul, Black Women, and Food” by Marvalene H. Hughes.

formations, something I will write about more in chapter two. Anthropologists Lévi-Strauss (1966, 1968, 1970), Douglas (1966, 1997), Mintz (1971, 1986, 1996) and semiologist Roland Barthes (1997) make this point. They described food as an evolving language and culture.

Lévi-Strauss wrote about the importance of food to folkloric culture in his multi-volume book *The Origin of Table Manners*. Here, Strauss writes that the person that prepares food is a cultural translator. By this he means that the person preparing food perpetuates cultural norms and familiar traditions, or invents new ones. He argued that food preparation was a form of socialization for society—it is how we transmit our cultural standards. For example, Strauss cites ways of cooking as cultural choice-making (1968:471-493). Like Roland Barthes, Strauss also compares food to a language and as a method of communicating identity (1966:35).

Levi Strauss is famous for declaring that some foods are “good to think” while others are “bad to think.” By this he means that what we like to eat is driven by cultural norms, not by it *actually* tasting good or not. Like Mintz and Douglas, Strauss believed that our taste buds were culturally driven. There have been some criticisms of this approach, however. One critique comes from food writer Marvin Harris who argues that we eat what we do based on taste, not on tradition or culture, if I read him properly (1985: Harris, 15).

All of theorists were intent on looking the ways society is shaped by food and vice versa. Roland Barthes explained food as a complex web of signs and symbols that “signified” greater meaning. Barthes wrote that most food did not signify by itself, but only had meaning when humans had prepared the food, and thus transformed it. With the exception of luxury goods like salmon or caviar, Barthes argued that the preparation of food meant more than the food item (1997:21). In this way, he emphasized the role of humans in turning food into a cultural item.

In a similar vein, Douglas viewed food as a maker of cultural identity. She paid particular attention to how food practices—what one eats and how—exclude and include communities. She wrote how some foods could be seen as polluting and some, not, based on culture (1966:98-104). She made this distinction by calling some things “pure” and others “impure.” She also wrote widely on the importance of etiquette and table manners. Another anthropologist, Sidney W. Mintz, who wrote about slaves, power and food in the Caribbean, states:

Eating is not merely a biological activity, but a vibrantly cultural activity as well. Under slavery, this activity, like all else in slave life, had to be rebuilt and endowed anew with structure and meaning, by the slaves themselves. Slavery shredded the whole of the material life of its victims, penetrating the very cell of the family...But in the New World the slaves remade their lives culturally. They drew upon their ultimate resources as human beings, and they succeeded by struggle in keeping their humanity intact (1996:49).

Mintz gestures to the way slaves drew upon inadequate resources to create fare that nourished their stomachs, their families and sustained their African culture.

In chapter two of this paper, I draw upon the works of Douglas, Strauss and Mintz as well as theories from German philosopher Georg Simmel. In his short essay, "Sociology of the Meal," (1910), Simmel claims that eating is a political act that perpetuates power systems. An example Simmel gives for this statement is writing how people of different classes eat differently (so he claims.) Simmel posits that for the lower class, the material sense of food is most important to the meal, while for the upper classes, the meal is dominated by codes of rules of etiquette, that matter as much as the food itself. He writes that the plate and glass symbolize an order of balance; the glass ensures that everyone gets their share of the whole, while at the same time limiting what can be consumed (2006: Coff, 15). In chapter three, in application of Simmel's theory, I argue that by denying slaves plates and cutlery, planters were trying to make a statement about control, evidence that food denoted power.

Finally, an important text in food studies is *What the Slaves Ate: Recollections of African American Foods and Foodways from the Slave Narratives* (2009) by Dwight Eissach and Herbert C. Covey. This book catalogues all times food is mentioned in the Slave Narrative Collection. My research utilizes this same primary source as well as secondary source literature from all the disciplines mentioned heretofore in order to paint a more comprehensive history of food in slave society.

### **Black Feminist Theories and Slave Historiography**

Black feminism grew out of what was perceived as a glaring shortcoming in the American feminist movement of the 1970's. Black feminist argued that they existed in order to expand the predominately white, upper to middle class discourse around women's rights.

When black feminists wrote about oppression, they used slave history as their launching pad. For example, they cited how American black women have always had experiences that were radically different from white women. Black feminists also emphasized the importance of oral history sources—something my paper makes heavy use of in chapter one—to American history.<sup>3</sup> After all, for most of black Americans history, they have been forbidden by law to learn to read and write. And so, history had to be transmitted orally. Another discourse black feminists helped fuel was over the distinction between the terms sex and gender. They stated that sex was a biological term while gender was a societal construct that was shaped by cultural mores and beliefs (1988: Fox-Genovese, 29).

One of the earlier groups to form in the black feminist movement was the Combahee River collective, started in the mid-1970's. In this same decade, Alice Walker coined the term “Womanism,” to be a more inclusive term than feminism. Scholar bell hooks,<sup>4</sup> who prefers the term feminism to womanism, wrote one of the first pedagogical books on black feminism titled “Ain't I a Woman. Black Women and Feminism” (1982). This book combines a historiography of bondswomen with urges for women's liberation. Another book of a similar name helped put female slaves on the public's radar: Deborah Gray White's “Ar'n't I a Woman? Female Slaves on the Plantation South” (1985). A few historians, like Eugene D. Genovese, in his noted book on American slavery “Roll, Jordan, Roll” (1975), had paid attention to female slaves experiences, but few focused solely on bondswomen before Gray White's book. She comments:

Slave women were everywhere yet nowhere. They were in Southern house-holds and in Southern fields but the sources are silent about female status in the slave community and the bondswomen's self-perception...Whites wrote most of antebellum America's records and African-American males wrote just about all of the antebellum records left by blacks. To both groups the female slave's world was peripheral. The bondswoman was important to them only when her activities somehow involved them. Few sources illuminate the interaction of slave women in their private world(1985:23)

The most relevant and prevailing argument put forward by black feminists on slavery was that the experience of bondswomen and bondsmen were different. Both sexes

---

<sup>3</sup> For a good anthology on female autobiographical theory, See: *Women, Autobiography, Theory*. 1998. Ed. Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson.

<sup>4</sup> hooks does not capitalize her first or last name

were in bondage. However, the slave *women's* experience of being sexually exploited was singular. Being born female meant that women were always in danger of being raped either by white master's or other slaves. In one narrative, ex-slave, Rachel Fairley recalled how her mother had two lighter skinned children that belonged to her sister. In a sinister twist, after slavery these children were made to work as servants for their white family, whom they were related to by blood, their fate determined by the color of their skin (Fairley, 261).

Being a woman meant that one would be forced against one's will to repeatedly reproduce in order to expand the profit margins of greedy planters. Rape and sexual abuse from white masters was ubiquitous and is written about by famous bondswomen like Sojourner Truth in her autobiography *Ain't I a Woman* to the lesser known tales of bondswomen like Fannie Barry (Barry, 1937) and Rose Williams (Rose, 1938) who recount their experiences in the Virginia and Texas slave narratives, respectively.

American feminist theorist Angela Davis also wrote a groundbreaking article in 1972 on female slave life. To this day, the article, titled "Reflections on the Black Woman's Role in the Community of Slaves," remains one of the most comprehensive on the subject. Davis makes an interesting point when talking about slave women and domestic work. In a surprising inversion of the expected, she argues that work like cooking, could be liberating for slaves. Davis states:

In the infinite anguish of ministering to the needs of the [black] men and children around her (who were not necessarily members of her immediate family), she was performing the *only* labor of the slave community which could not be directly and immediately claimed by the oppressor. There was no compensation for work in the fields; it served no useful purpose for the slaves...Precisely through performing the drudgery of which has long been a central expression of the socially conditioned inferiority of women, the black woman in chains could help lay the foundation for some degree of autonomy...her survival-oriented activities were themselves a form of resistance (1972:87).

And so, for bondswomen, an act which traditionally was oppressive, could, in certain situations, be transformed into a positive act, where there might have been the potential to assert a scintilla of agency.

In brief, the black feminist movement was an attempt to enlarge the discourse around women's rights. By writing black feminist pedagogy, the black feminists successfully helped enlarge the discussion around women and equality in the United

States. Furthermore, the black feminists rooted their debate in black female history. By doing so, they were able to both advocate for the rights of women in the twentieth century as well as teach about injustices during bondage.

### **Oral History Theories**

This section contains a critical analysis of oral history, and in particular, the documents in the Slave Narrative Collection. I call these texts egodocuments, an expression coined by Dutch historian Jacques Presser in the 1950's. Presser's term includes letters, diaries, autobiographies and memories, all texts for which "an author wrote about his or her own feelings, thoughts and actions...those documents in which an ego intentionally or unintentionally discloses or hides itself..."(2002: Dekker, 286).

The slave narratives expand historian's understanding of life in bondage. However, one wonders what function the interviews served for the interviewees. For example, was the interview process cathartic? Did African Americans like the opportunity to discuss their experiences? Did they find this kind of sharing freeing? Empowering? Or, did African Americans find the questioning (primarily by whites) to be invasive? Did former slaves believe that by speaking they were relinquishing power and turning over their narratives to invisible forces who could distort and misinterpret their words? Historian Dominick LaCapra, who writes in the field of trauma studies, suggests that talking about trauma can be important for individuals (1998: LaCapra, 16-17 in 1998: Kennedy, 514). Conversely, Penny Summerfield argues that remembering the past is not always positive and that memory itself can be problematic. For Summerfield's research she interviewed 42 women who were alive during WWII. She found that most women were reluctant to share their war-time experiences and changed their narrative to conform with society's idea of what the women's role was in the war (something entirely different from the reality) (1998: Summerfield, 1-338).

One caveat to personal testimonies is that it is never clear what is disclosed and what exactly is left out. One ex-slave, Millie Barber stated, "My tongue too short to tell you all dat I knows. However, if it was as long as my stocking's, I could tell you a trunk full of good and easy, bad and hard, dat dis old life-stream have run over in eighty-two years. I's hoping to reach at least them green fields of Eden of de

Promise Land. ‘Scuse me ramblin’ round...” (Millie Barber, 38) This being said, contrary to Summerfield’s assertion, it is unclear whether all of the bondswomen intentionally trying to frame their narrative in a certain way. This aside, egodocuments are one of the best ways to illuminate marginalized voices that are not preserved in more traditional sources. However, red flags are occasionally raised on issues such as veracity. Connected to these accusations is always the question of how reliable memory is—particularly when the interviews are with those age 65 years to 103 years, as is the case with the ex-slave documents (1967: Yetman, 228).

A further complexity that arises with oral histories is the personal dynamic between the interviewer and interviewee. For the Slave Narrative Project, this dynamic had implications for the sorts of answers that were offered. Section one in chapter one underscores the tension between whites and African Americans at the time. Norman Yetman writes, “Seldom before has racism been so pervasive and so academically respectable in America as during the early years of the twentieth century” (1976: 538). Since tensions ran so high between whites and blacks it would be naïve to think that all (or any) African Americans spoke comfortably when interviewed by whites. In large part, what is asked at the interview helps shape the answers given. Historian Jan Vansina speaks to this point when he talks about how history is spoken through a cultural frame and “strongly influenced by the social present” (1985: 94). This “social present,” the other person to whom the interviewer is speaking, must be considered when the material is being analyzed.

While most interviewers were white, there were some exceptions such as the Negro Units of the Works Progress Administration (WPA) Writer’s Project and some interviewers in Florida and Virginia (1976: Yetman, 547). Black interviewers in these divisions were responsible for spearheading the WPA ex-slave narrative initiative. Individuals like Zora Neal Hurston were instrumental in the project. She and others helped get major players in Washington like John A. Lomax, director of the Folklore Division of the Writer’s Project to pay attention to the endeavour (1976: Yetman, 545). With Lomax’s support, hundreds of interviewers were dispatched across the South to create the largest oral history project of its kind in America (Yetman, 545).

Another critical component of the slave narratives was who was permitted to draft interview questions. While some African interviewers wanted questions that asked about slave’s perceptions of slavery, Lomax had another focus. Lomax has been charged with creating questions that focused on slave traditions, religion, culture and

folkways. The benefit of these questions is that they put a focus on black cultural life, and showed the power of black culture as it grew under slavery. However, some scholars have suggested that Lomax created questions of a trivial nature.

In short, issues of memory, age, race and veracity come to the fore when oral history is being utilized. Perhaps these elements make historians wary of egodocuments and oral history. However, even with these shortcomings, scholars such as Norman R. Yetman express the value of the material. Yetman asserts: “The Slave Narrative Collection, despite its limitations, is a most appropriate, even essential source of data” (1976:553).

### **Research Methodology for “An Edible Resistance”**

For my research methodology I combined a grounded theory approach with the theories of Mintz, Simmel, Douglas and Strauss. I used their theories to illuminate my findings. To begin, I used a qualitative methodological approach when analyzing the bondswomen’s interviews. Before undertaking my research I was pleased to find a recent article that has been of much help. The 2010 article, “Of Broken Bonds and Bondage: An Analysis of Loss in the Slave Narrative Collection” by Laurie and Neimeyer supplied me with a way to begin analyzing material in the slave narratives. Like Laurie and Neimeyer, I chose the narratives I decided to work most closely with based on the number of times food was mentioned in them and “for their richness of description and for diversity” (2010, 228).

Like Laurie and Neimeyer, I employed a grounded theory approach, an inductive technique of analysis that produces theory by staying near to or “grounded” in the data (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). This theory is undergirded by a social constructivist perspective which contends that all one knows of the world exists through personal interpretation of that world based on personal experiences (1967: Glaser and Strauss.) Like Laurie and Neimeyer, for my first step of analysis I studied the transcripts and divided them by theme (2010, 231). I set aside all narratives that included the single theme or idea I was studying: food. Next, I only selected to read the narratives written by women in order to have a more in-depth study.

In order to further explicate and understand the material I found in the slave narratives using the grounded theory approach, I turned to the work of theorists. Of the different food theorists mentioned in the section “Food Theories,” I chose to

utilize the works of four continually throughout my paper: Mintz, Simmel, Douglas and Strauss. I was able to use their theories to interpret the interviews of former bondswomen and to establish connections between power, bondage, slave women and food.

### **Conclusion**

This chapter serves to introduce theorists writing in the fields of food studies, oral history studies and black feminist studies. I sketch these fields in order to show where this paper is situated—at the intersection of both food studies and slave studies. The items mentioned in this chapter help lay groundwork for chapter two, in which I sketch slave practices around food. Theorists I mention such as Simmel, Mintz and Strauss will be returned to throughout the thesis.

## **Chapter 2. Slaves and Southern Cuisine: A History**

## **Introduction**

At the same moment humans were being transported to the newly colonized United States, food ingredients and practices were making their way onto American soil. American slave-holders brought over slaves from West Africa particularly because of the rice-growing culture there. And when female slaves were sent to work in white kitchens, bondswomen also drew upon their knowledge of African cuisine, which they sometimes subtly combined with dishes native to England. In all ways, from how food was cultivated to what foods were cultivated, the impact of Africa on America's cuisine is vast; this is something I strive to convey in this chapter. I start with lists of food brought from Africa to America, facts and figures. In the following section I look at the practices of bondswomen in the kitchens and in the fields, harvesting foods like rice. I wanted to look at the ways in which food figured into daily life for bondswomen.

I gathered my data using secondary sources literature on bondswomen and slave historiographies and supplemented it with a few pieces of evidence from the ex-slave narratives. A final function of this chapter is to look at bondswomen practices around food from the angle of power and resistance.

## **Food Facts and Figures**

As long as humans have been travelling, they have been trading spices and recipes. Most cuisines include foreign influences owing to colonialism or immigration. In her book *Culinary Tourism* (2004), Lucy M. Long writes about how foods become assimilated in diets; what once seemed foreign may quickly become something that seems like an integral and ubiquitous part of a meal. Long calls this "the shifting of the exotic to the familiar" (24). Long provides pizza as a contemporary example of a food that once was once stigmatized in America as being "ethnic" (2004: Long, 24). African food traditions are another lesser known example of foods that have become so familiar to the American taste buds that most people are oblivious to their history. Nearly all ingredients brought over with the slave trade are now part of America's epicurean heritage.

As a case in point, the following all came from Africa: Chilli pepper, sorghum

(2007: Kiple, 56), peanuts, and the Bantu word for it: goober<sup>5</sup> (2000: Swyer, Dandhu, 365; 2005: Osseo-Assare, 25) cow-peas or black-eyed peas (often called just peas in plantation records) (Kiple, 195), rice and its cultivation methods (2001: Carney, 13), cola nuts, the secret ingredient in coca cola (Kiple, 57), okra, watermelon (Kiple, 58) and yams (Kiple, 59). Furthermore, food historian Fran Osseo-Asare has noted parallels in how food is prepared in West Africa—often slow cooked or fried—and how food is cooked in the American South (2005: xiv). Another influence on the cuisine of American (formerly English) planters was on the quantity of vegetables consumed. After the slave trade began, it was found that the planter’s diets contained more vegetables and legumes (pods like peas and beans) (2008: Douglass Opie, 2).

In addition to America’s most famous foods, like watermelon, slaves influenced dishes served on Southern tables. Historians note the imbrications between the lives of planters and bondswomen. Though the two had different experiences, their worlds collided, especially in the realm of cooking. Slaves were often employed in white kitchens and cooked cuisine using ingredients they were familiar with. A new flavour of cooking emerged based on a hybrid of Native American, European and African flavours. The African okra plant became a chief ingredient in southern cooking, particularly along the Gulf Coast. Also, in the Carolina Low Country, slaves introduced many singular dishes like “country captain”, a chicken-curry stew, “red rice,” rice boiled with tomatoes and spices, “rice pilaf,” and “she-crab soup,” a specialty made with Atlantic blue crab meat, crab roe and sherry (2007: Kiple, 208). The introduction of piquant spices and new flavours to the American cuisine can be attributed to the influence of men and women in bondage.

For a pithy history of the U.S.<sup>6</sup> slave trade we should turn to the Caribbean which made the forced connection between slaves and food, by making slaves harvest sugar cane. This crop was brought to South America by Christopher Columbus on his second voyage in 1494 (2008: Douglass Opie, 3). Other stimulants would also be traded in the sixteenth century like caffeine and rum in what historian David T. Courtwright calls the “psychoactive revolution” (2004: Civitello, 118). This intimate connection between slaves and food would continue when those in bondage landed in

---

<sup>5</sup> There is a famous Civil War song still sung in some southern elementary schools (such as my school—the author of this paper) that contains a chorus which goes, “peas, peas, peas, peas, eatin’ goober peas, isn’t it delicious, eatin’ goober peas. (1913: Wayland Fuller, 190).

<sup>6</sup> The United States was the destination for six percent of African slaves (1993: Kolchin, 22). Haiti, Jamaica and Cuba were some of the largest human importers as well as Brazil, which trafficked over four times as many slaves as the United States (1994: Fogel, figure 19).

the thirteen colonies. North American colonies like Virginia would attempt to mirror the Caribbean by growing sugar, but the climate was too cold (2004: Civitello, 128). Instead, the American South turned to the production of cotton, indigo and rice, the latter of which was mostly grown along the swampy coasts of South Carolina and Georgia.

Rice is a microcosm detailing how every facet of slave's labour was controlled and subsumed in what the scholar Alfred W. Crosby termed "ecological imperialism" in his book of the same name (1993). By looking at rice we see that slave trader's not only took possession of bondswomen's labor, but also their insights into food cultivation practices and techniques. Some of these traditions survived in slave communities, such as in the Gullah people of South Carolina, which will be discussed later in this chapter.

American rice originated<sup>7</sup> in Africa, contrary to popular opinion (2001: Carney, 2). It came to America because European planters were keen to transport slaves from West Africa, a region known for rice-growing. By 1710, African slaves outnumbered white settlers in South Carolina 2 to 1; many grew rice (2004: Civitello, 129; 2003: Berlin, 68). Dutch merchants meticulously chronicling details of rice cultivation methods from tribes such as the Baga, writes food historian Judith Ann Carney (2001:15). The first time Europeans mentioned rice was in the 1400's when they were referring to rice being planted along the West African coast, (2001:13). After this point, planters specifically sought slaves from West Africa who would have knowledge of rice cultivation techniques like "water control...winnowing...milling" the rice (2001: Carney, 7).

Rice planting and harvesting was done from dawn until dusk under a blazing sun and poised whip. In his essay "Rice and Slavery: A Fatal Gold Seede," Jean M. West quotes Charles Ball, a runaway slave; he states:

Watering and weeding the rice is considered one of the unhealthiest occupations on a Southern plantation, as the people are obliged to live for several weeks in the mud and water, subject to all the unwholesome vapours that arise from stagnant pools, under the rays of a summer sun, as well as the chilly autumnal dews of night.

---

<sup>7</sup> Rice was, however, first brought to the African island of Madagascar from China, as early as 1000 B.C. (*The Cambridge World History of Food*. "Rice" 2000).

Slaves working in the rice fields had a particularly high death rate, due to the strenuous work involved and diseases from insects breeding in the water, though as one scholar states, those in bondage were often “immune to malaria, and weren’t Christian, so according to the Christian world at that time, they could be enslaved for the rest of their lives” (Civitello, 128). One example of just how unsavoury the work was can be found in the fact that slave owners found the location of rice fields to be so unbearable—hot, muggy, wet and insect-infested—that they often moved away to their other homes and left the oversight of slaves to their virulent overseers.

Rice cultivation practices also help elucidate the paradox of food for captured Africans. For example, in Africa, rice represented a vibrant cultural tradition. In Africa, rice was a soulful substance, not something that comprised a sinister substance, like it did in the New World. Suddenly, a crop connected to abundance and history came to stand for purloined labor and culture. And so, European slave traffickers pocketed an entire agricultural system of production, from the seeds to the literal bodies that nurtured the seeds.

However, interestingly, resistance can be found when examining slave practices related to rice. While practices of resistance, power and food are examined more thoroughly in the next section, the example of rice is telling because it shows how certain cultural elements from slave times endured in black communities. This in itself represented a cultural victory, since slave-owners sought to own every dimension related to rice-growing.

For example, a positive legacy related to food can be found in modern times in the Sea Islands off the coast of Georgia. Here, African American’s ancestors were forced to raise rice for hundreds of years. However sinister this past, slaves and their descendents found the resiliency to preserve a beautiful part of their African food culture in more modern times. After the Civil War, some ex-slaves were given parcels of land on these swampy islands. Ever since, the descendents of former slaves, known as the Gullah, have nurtured rice on what are collectively known as the Sea Islands.

For the Gullah people, rice is an integral part of the community’s cultural heritage (1995: Beoku-Betts, 535-555). For the Gullah rice is not *just* rice. For them, rice is a connection to their ancestors. An anthropological study on this community showed that for women, rice represented a way of preserving heritage when all else was gone. For this community, rice is eaten with every meal (Beoku-Betts, 535-555). Mothers teach daughters and sons how to prepare the rice. When anthropologist

Beoku-Betts gave a Gullah family an automatic rice-cooker as a gift (something I find ironic because her paper is about the value in preserving traditional methods of rice cooking) the family thanked the giver. Years later, Beoku-Betts visited the family; to her surprise she found the rice-cooker still in its box. When Beoku-Betts queried as to why they had never used the cooker, the family politely responded that they were trying to preserve family ways of cooking their rice.

In conclusion, it is telling that a food crop (sugar) catalyzed the Atlantic slave trade. Ever since, the relationship between slaves, their descendents and food has been politically complex. It is a beautiful history of innovation and resourcefulness and a painful one of exploitation and loss. On the one hand, slaves creatively invented some of America's most loved foods, but the slave conditions under which this cuisine arose were deplorable. In this section rice-growing was used as a microcosm to foreground the ways in which skills obtained in Africa were utilized by slave-traders. In the next section, theorists mentioned in chapter one—Mintz, Simmel, Douglas and Strauss—will be brought back up and further using secondary source literature.

### **Bondswomen's Food Practices**

Whites have employed blacks in their gardens and kitchens for most of American history, and this shameful past has done much to define the interaction between slaves and food. The practice of slaves, former slaves and their decedents working in white kitchens has created the insulting derogatory stereotypes of the obese Mammy on cookie jars and grinning Aunt Jemima plastered across bottled syrup.<sup>8</sup> One historian noted that thanks to the Civil Rights movement, these advertising icons received a makeover so that they not looked more like “professional people and less like happy slaves” (2004: Civitello, 293). While the images stemming from these slave practices, of working in white people's kitchens, are familiar

---

<sup>8</sup> Alice Walker has a fine essay that includes notes on Aunt Jemima. Walker writes: “For generations in the South it was the only image of a black woman that was acceptable. You could be “Aunt” Jemima, sexless and white-loving, or you could be unseen. There were Aunt Jemima dolls that sprawled in shops where black women could not try on dresses. There were ashtrays, cookie jars, lemonade dispensers. Everywhere you looked, the open, beaming fat black face. Guileless. Without any attempt to fool you. Here I am, the smile said...” (Walker, 132). From *Anything we Love Can Be Saved*. 1997. For more on the topic See: “Now Then—Who Said Biscuits?” *The Black Woman Cook as Fetish in American Advertising (1905-1953)* (p.69-95) (2001). *Black Hunger: Soul Food and America*, Doris Witt (1999) which contains the essay “Look Ma, the Real Aunt Jemima! Consuming Identities Under Capitalism” (21-54) And See M. M Manring's bok, *Slave in a box: the strange career of Aunt Jemima* (1998).

hallmarks of the 50's and 60's, the history of slave women and food begins much earlier. To start, we look back to the first crops that were tilled by slaves in the New World and continued to be tilled by former slaves as share-croppers well after the nineteen-twenties.

For American bondswomen, food epitomized a paradox of plenty and want. For example, while female slaves were forced to cultivate an abundance of food, such as Thomas Jefferson's 5,000 acres of orchards and vegetable gardens (2004: Civitello, 171), their own families often went hungry, forced to eat their master's leftovers.

When slaves were not labouring in fields, they were often in kitchens; those that worked in kitchens were usually women (2004: Civitello, 183). Planter's wives often read recipes to slaves since it was illegal for bondswoman to learn to read. For this reason, until the early twentieth century, there were few cookbooks written by black women and most recipes were passed down in the oral tradition. Sometimes, slaves closely guarded recipes, other times they willingly offered them to their master's wife. Regardless, slaves rarely received credit for their recipes in white plantation cookbooks (Yentsch, 12-13). "Food was an area of intense feminine competition," writes Anne Yentsch (13) where slave's wives claimed the culinary creations slaves made. Bondswomen may have received a kitchen compliment, but rarely credit.

Some historians contend that bondswomen ranked working in a kitchen above toiling under a Southern sun in the fields (Civitello, 183, in Fox-Genovese, 159). However, other historians write that the level of scrutiny involved when working in such close proximity to whites in the kitchen left no reprieve for slaves. As a case in point, historian Peter Kolchin writes: "Although they [domestic slaves] usually enjoyed more privileges—often including exceptions from backbreaking labor, a chance to nibble delicacies cast from the master's table...—they also faced unusual obstacles" (1993:53). For one, in the fields, children were sometimes allowed to accompany bondswomen up and down the rows. In the kitchen, the planter's wife rarely wanted to tolerate black children in her home.

Furthermore, it must have been maddening for bondswomen to cook all day with an abundance of ingredients, knowing these same foods were off limits for their own children. Simple ingredients in white kitchens like gelatine, used to thicken jam, yeast, for making bread rise, and vinegar, for pickling, were considered luxuries for bondswomen's own families, and not accessible unless they stolen (2008: Yentsch, 2).

Similarly, fancier items like almonds, raisins or cinnamon were out of the question. Fancy drinks like wine were off limits and even real coffee never made an appearance in the slave quarters. Slaves would often use ground or roasted plants as a substitute for coffee (Yentsch, 2 in 1929: Merton Coulter, 337).

It is important to note that though my focus is on the bondswoman's role in cooking, both men and women shared in responsibility of preparing food for slave communities. Certain food-related tasks were typically allocated to men, others to women, but they worked together to prepare a meal. Certain male undertakings might include hunting small game in the forests, animal butchery and alcohol distillation (Yentsch, 5). Men also helped with preparation for cooking such as digging fire pits, splitting wood and slow-roasting meat at night (Yentsch, 5). However, unlike white families, slave families could rarely all sit down at the same time for a meal. It was common for members to be absent. They were either running errands for the planter on the plantation, or sent off-plantation for an errand, cooking food for the planter's wife, nursing her children, or watching the planter's children.

By tightly circumscribing the foods their slaves ate, planters strove to set up firm boundaries of distinction between themselves and who they considered "other," or those that were less human. According to Mintz, Simmel, Douglas and Strauss, food is a way to draw boundaries between the self and other. Planters would never deign to give something fancy like cinnamon or almonds to a horse or mule—animals which they considered to be on par with their other chattel: slaves—and so they never broke with protocol to give such delicacies to bondswomen to use for their own families. To do so would be to blur the cultural boundaries that food helped establish. To do so would be to deny that slaves were different from animals, that, unlike animals they had food preferences and liked certain foods more than others. First, they attempted to demean and subjugate slaves by withholding certain foods.

In addition to making slaves eat food that was different from the food planter's ate; they sought to determine how slaves ate. By doing this, they reinforced the boundary they perceived between white and black. Despite slaves' efforts to cook nourishing meals for their families and retain a sense of dignity, their attempts were perennially undermined by their masters. For example, those in bondage had to eat out of troughs and use their hands, or shells as scoops since their masters denied them plates, forks and knives. As Eugene Genovese writes: "If nothing else had told them, at a tender age, that they were of inferior cast, the trough must have; no white child

ate that way (1975:57). Describing the experience of eating in such a way, former slave Robert Shepherd of Kentucky said, “Aunt Viney crumbled up dat bread in de trough and poured buttermilk over it. Den she blowed de horn and chillen comarunnin’ from every which way. If us et [ate] it all up, she had to put more victuals in de trough” (Genovese, 57 from Yetman, ed. 265).

Echoing these sentiments is Booker T. Washington, a famous twentieth century African American educator born into slavery. In his book *Up from Slavery* (1900), Washington describes how he was made to feel inferior through food:

I cannot remember a single instance during my childhood or early boyhood when our entire family sat down to the table together, and God’s blessing was asked...On the plantation in Virginia, and even later, meals were gotten by the children very much as dumb animals get theirs ...(9-10).

In brief, withholding and rationing foodstuffs was a way for planters to control their slaves. As Simmel, Douglas, Strauss and Mintz argue, by drawing boundaries over what and how people eat, you can signify who is included and who is excluded from a group. The point to be made is that slaves resisted their master’s attempts to define them by giving them a paucity of food. They stole food, hunted, fished, grew their own vegetables when they could in an attempt to diversify the foods they had access to.

While desire for delicacies drove some slaves to steal, and forage in order to supplement their diets, hunger and necessity was more likely the impetus for most food-related resistance. A few examples of this delve into the realm of medicine. To start, slaves rarely saw a white doctor. Bondswomen served as midwives and used home remedies involving plants and food to treat illness: “When us git sick us go to the woods and git herbs and roots and make tea and medicine,” one ex-bondswomen recalled in the Texas narratives (Butler; Thompson, page numbers not given). To further underscore their distressing health conditions and high rates of infant mortality, ex-slave Liza (Cookie) Jones, who was so nicknamed because she cooked so much for white families after slavery said that she had fifteen children, “but never had but three to live any length of time” (Jones, 1-3).

Sickness on plantations was common due to lack of food, poor housing and exhaustion from perpetual work. However, at the time, heaps of pseudo-scientific information was published in journals by white antebellum medical authorities

attesting that Africans were inherently sick. Even white planters often contended that they fed their slaves well (Eisnach and Covey, 16). However, contemporary medical evidence shows that slaves were denied proper nutrients. Because of this, bondswomen displayed food practices to help counter their nutritional imbalance. For example, some slaves, particularly those who were pregnant ate pica, or clay. Scholars now say this clay was rich in iron and calcium (Eisnach and Covey, 17). If slaves were caught eating clay they were severely punished and sometimes forced to wear a metal face mask (Eisnach and Covey, 17). Nonetheless, bondswomen continued the practice in a subtle form of resistance. The following section will further explore ways that food may have been used by slave women as a catalyst for resistance.

### **Resistance, Power and Food**

In the following paragraph I ask the question: Can bondswomen's food practices be viewed as forms of resistance? I have chosen to highlight four actions that I term resistance related to food: First, starvation on slave ships, secondly, food theft, thirdly, food resourcefulness by hunting, fishing, foraging and gardening on the sly, and fifthly, innovative cooking. The question is problematic because it is difficult to draw the line between what slaves did for survival and what was a conscious act of resistance. And also is looking for foods that taste good actually a form of resistance, or simply a human quality? Nevertheless, I argue that whether bondswomen considered their actions resistant or not is not as important as the reality that some of these practices (such as suicide by starvation and theft) had the ability to directly impact planters and thus shift the power balance between planters and slaves.

To begin, it is important to demonstrate that every aspect of a slave's life was micromanaged by the master, including the foods that were eaten. Slave owners believed that bondswomen were infantile and unable to know how to ration food. As a result, planters would not give large quantities of food to slaves at once, but only a little at a time. Scholar Eugene Genovese writes:

A common kitchen guaranteed the master control of the quantity and quality of his slave's food and removed the danger that the slaves, weary from a long day in the fields, would undercook the pork or not bother with the corn and vegetables or gulp their food down in a manner injurious to their health (1975:544).

This conscience decision by white planters to deny slaves food choice and food quantity was meant to crystallize the power balance; it was a statement further codifying the hierarchy between races. Through this, planters helped create a raced and gendered identity in connection to food. For example, race determined who was a slave and who was not, and it forced those who were slaves to produce food all day long without being able to benefit from the labor themselves. In this way, race became tied to food production. Additionally, since bondswomen were more often forced to work in kitchens than bondsmen, white planters imposed a gendered dynamic, in which womanhood became bound up in the practices of cooking and preparing food.

The first form of food-related resistance was starvation. This act of defiance transpired during the forced migration through the Middle Passage. Here some bondswomen attempted to end their lives rather than be taken to an unknown destination by jumping into the sea by refusing food. This method of resistance was sometimes thwarted, however, when sailors forced the captives mouths open with metal tongs (2004: Civitello, 120). Nonetheless, slaves demonstrated agency in attempting to end their lives through starvation on the ships. To sum up this point, Sydney W. Mintz writes, “Food and power are clearly linked. For it denotes life and death” (1996: 11).

This same steely determination to die on board ships would be revived in a reverse way—in an attempt to live and survive—when slaves reached shore. It is interesting to note that most slaves had never before been on a ship, certainly not one captained by people that spoke in another language where they were crammed together like cattle and given little food or air for months. Many captured Africans had watched their families be pulled apart, or even killed. It is reasonable then, that many chose to jump overboard, drowning in their chains, or chose to try to starve themselves, exerting power in the only way possible besides mutiny, which happened often, but was rarely efficacious.

When slaves reached shore, more acts practices of food-related resistance emerged. The second act of food-related resistance I mention is theft. Bondsfolk stole a variety of foodstuffs, like live animals. Pig theft became so common at one point that in 1748, Virginia decreed the death penalty for a third offense (1975: Genovese, 599). Some animals, like hogs, were difficult to filch because they had to be quickly knocked in the head so they would not squeal, a task that required adroitness (Genovese, 606). Slaves also took care how they prepared stolen food. Instead of

frying meat, they boiled it, to reduce the smell. And parts of the hog that were not eaten were discarded in streams or the woods so they would not be found (2009: Eissnach and Covey, 11).

Additionally, when preparing pilfered fare, slaves often had a contingency plan in case they were caught by a watchful overseer. One anecdote from the 1845 ex-slave narrative of Lewis Clarke describes a fast-thinking bondswoman who had stolen a hog and was in the process of boiling it. She heard her master approaching and quickly “placed the pot on the floor, covered it with a board, and sat her young daughter upon it. It seemed the poor child had a terrible cold that had to be sweated out of her...” (Genovese, 606 in Clark, 23-24).

As far as the ethics of stealing, bondswomen and men believed they were justified in their actions. In short, probably did not classify their acts as forms of rebellion, but merely functions of daily survival. Genovese writes:

Their logic was impeccable. If they belonged to their masters—if they were in fact his chattels—how could they steal from him? Suppose they ate one of his chickens or hogs or some of his corn? They had only transformed his property from one form into another, much as they did when they fed the master’s corn to the master’s chickens (1975: 602).

As a case in point, in an 1855 account, a slave named Tom stole a turkey and replied “When I tuk the turkey and eat it, it got to be part of me” (Genovese, 602 from Sellers, 257).

Sometimes slaves stole from the kitchen gardens, supervised by the planter’s wife, “these were tempting places offering opportunities to grab fresh vegetables.” (2008: Yentsch, 6). Large plantations were oftentimes greatly self-sufficient. Because of this, they boasted a vast quantity of outbuildings and alluring orchards. Some plantations had a cornucopia of fruits and, according to its season, “almost everyone took fresh fruit” (Yentsch, 7) including apples, pears, plums and apricots. Though closely supervised and often locked, slaves sometimes managed to procure food from the plantation mill, spring house, dairy and granary (Yentsch, 6-7).

Additionally, bondswomen that worked in white kitchens may have taken some ingredients. Another type of kitchen resistance occurred when bondswomen poisoned their masters food—a less common, but still practiced act (1971: Davis, 91). While theft appears to have been common, if detected, the punishment was

draconian. One form of torture involved food—dousing whipped lacerations with salt and pepper to create excruciating pain.

A third act which I chose to term borderline-resistance, manifested itself in food resourcefulness: hunting, fishing, foraging and gardening on the sly. Archaeological evidence, coupled with slaves autobiographies and interviews show that slaves hunted and fished in the fields and forests. Yentsch writes that slaves lived in rural areas, usually a short distance from the planters. Here, slaves often had access to animals in streams like frogs, turtles and fish and wild berries and small game in the woods (8). Yentsch also describes in detail how some slaves bartered with their caught game, sometimes selling it at market. Yentsch explains:

Black men and women both slave and free, joined the market chain as suppliers, resellers, and buyers. They worked face-to-face, built personal networks, drew on favors, haggled and traded. They bought and sold small barnyard birds – chickens, fowl, turkeys, geese – and a few animals; fresh-water fish, saltwater fish, clams, oysters, shrimp, crabs, and turtles; eggs, honey, Spanish moss; rice, corn, and wheat; figs, peaches, berries, and melons; sweet potatoes, Irish potatoes, peanuts, and perishable green vegetables(14)

Sometimes slaves even gave what they caught to their masters as presents to curry favor. Yentsch writes: “Canny slaves gifted planters with fresh fish, eggs, oysters, or shrimp. There was an unspoken assumption behind this. You let me hunt and fish for my family and I will keep bringing to your door that which you can’t get by yourself” (10-11). In this way, slaves worked to expand their food choices.

A fourth act of what I call food-related resistance came in the form of creative cooking. I argue that planters gave slaves food they themselves would not eat in order to display their opinion that African Americans were tantamount to animals, thus undermining their humanity. However, I argue that contrary to this, slaves utilized the foods planters did not want in a way that showed off their humanity—that demonstrated their cooking prowess, their culinary creativity and love for their own community. The latter was shown because after a day of toiling for white families in ways prejudicial to their health, bondswomen still took hours to prepare food for the slave community.

Resourcefulness with food enabled bondswomen to ensure the health and survival of the slave community. Slaves were daedal with their scant resources and found ways to improvise to create cuisines that belied their owner’s knowledge and

expectations utilizing ingredients they filched and found. Records indicate that slaves took care in preparing food for their families. Bondswomen utilized parts of the hog and leaves of vegetables, called “greens,” which rich white families and most poor white families discarded. Out of the leftover remains, black women invented a cuisine that would eventually grow to be accepted by rich and poor alike.

Slave food—now called soul food, or simply Southern cooking—was a cuisine of thrift. While the plantation master and family consumed meat from “high on the hog<sup>9</sup>,”—ribs, roast and ham—slaves were left with the snout, ears, tail, feet (trotters), and intestines, called chitterlings, or, “chitlins.” Food historian Linda Civitello writes, “Slave cooks could prepare the meat from high on the hog but weren’t allowed to eat it” (184). Slaves were also not usually permitted to eat beef, lamb, mutton, chickens, turkey and geese. These were only for the “Big House,” as the plantation house was often called (Fox-Genovese, 103). Traditional slave dishes were sometimes introduced to white families by slave cooks. Eugene Genovese discusses the ingeniousness of bondswomen when it came to provisions: “What the slaves did, they taught themselves to do, and they contributed more to the diet of poor whites than the poorer whites ever had the chance to contribute to theirs,” he writes (549).

It is telling that after such an arduous day of working in the fields or white people’s kitchens, scholars write that slaves still took the time to prepare involved meals for their own family. Eugene Genovese writes:

Returning from the fields after an exhausting day, some slave women would toss their cornmeal and fat pork on the fire and serve it indifferently. Dinner had already been eaten anyway haphazardly, for dinner meant the midday meal.<sup>10</sup> At night they had supper, a less important matter. Yet, to a surprising extent, many took pains with supper despite their fatigue. When their husbands lived on another farm or plantation and visited once or twice a week, those evenings became a special occasion...(545).

Sometimes slaves casually put together meals, however, they also put energy and care into their dishes. A description of one slave dish begins with cooking a piece of hog jowl<sup>11</sup> in a pot with beans. When the beans are half done, cabbage is added. A little while later, squash goes into the pot. When the squash was half cooked, okra was added. When the vegetables were thoroughly cooked they were removed layer by layer (1975: Genovese, 548).

---

<sup>9</sup> This is the origin of the expression “living high on the hog” which means living richly

<sup>10</sup> Sometimes there were only two meals a day (2008: Yentsch, 9).

<sup>11</sup> The fatty part of meat in the jaw of the hog

In brief, one might also argue that simply by cooking for the slave community, bondswomen were being cultural mediators, and therefore displaying agency. Anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss wrote that when we manipulate food, prepare it—turn it from raw earth stuff to meal stuff—we are being cultural agents. We are making choices. In this way it can be argued that slave practices of cooking for the slave community were inherently resistant, if one of the planter's aims was to strip slaves of the ability to make choices and therefore have power. In this way, slaves could have agency and power, by cooking food. While in white kitchens they were made to prepare certain dishes in a particular way, but in the slave quarters they could cook as they chose, even though planters and their wives tried to control the ingredients slaves had access to. I argue that together, these acts functioned to imbue female slave's with a modicum of agency.

### **Conclusion**

This chapter has several aims. The first is to provide a history of what food came to the New World from America and show how many dishes have their genesis in Africa. The second aim of this chapter was to foreground food practices for bondswomen, ranging from how they prepared food to how their dignity was compromised by slave-holders. And thirdly, this chapter elucidated the ways in which bondswomen resisted the pestilence of planters through food, perhaps even unintentionally budging the power balance. I also define four-types of food-connected resistance that bondswomen practiced. In short, this chapter elucidates how masters sought to control slaves through food, and shows the buoyancy of slaves who used their wits to live as well as possible. It is important to note that it is ambiguous whether slave women called their own actions forms of resistance. It is more likely that slave women wanted to live well and eat diverse foods, which they did by stealing and being creative with ingredients. Nevertheless, I argue that these actions were inherently resistance because they contradicted the planter's behests.

## **Chapter 3. Food Memories in Bondswomen's Words**

### **Introduction**

This chapter answers two queries: what do slave women talk about, when they speak of food (something negative, positive, or neutral.) And secondly, what can slave women teach us about food practices in bondage? The interviews I used were accessible online via the Library of Congress Slave Narrative Collective archives. The first section of this chapter discusses food circumstances for former slaves during the Great Depression. Section two discusses food circumstances pre-emancipation. In this section I examine food memories cited by ex-bondswomen that were both negative and positive. And finally, my third section is on more neutral-sounding memories that clarify cooking practices during slavery. This section functions as a primary source-backed supplement to chapter two.

In order to analyze these sources I used an approach called grounded theory. This approach was part of what became known as the “qualitative revolution” where social science research began to use a qualitative, in addition to a quantitative approach (1967: Glaser and Strauss.) This theory requires that one analyze a set of data and then break that data down into smaller categories, based on any number of factors. I chose to group my data according to whether food memories seemed related to positive, negative or neutral experiences.

Of the interviewees, 843 were female and 1,465 participants were male; they were all between 65 and 103 years of age (2010: Laurie and Neimeyer, 228). The interview transcripts vacillate between describing living conditions during slavery and at the present moment the interview is being undertaken: 1936-1938.

### **The Great Depression and Eating Patterns**

The Great Depression began in about 1929 with the great Wall Street crash and lasted until the late nineteen-thirties and early forties. Loans defaulted, banks failed and thousands of Americans became jobless and homeless. Cars were tied up to horses called “Hoover wagons” and sometimes used by farmers too poor to purchase gasoline. By 1933 personal income had dropped by half and American unemployment had reached a record high of twenty-five percent (1972: Swanson, 53-73). As

devastating as the Great Depression was for white Americans, it hit minorities even harder. “Last to be hired, first to be fired,” was a relatively common mantra expressing African American prejudice in the work place. Due to discrimination, African Americans had difficulty finding work by all employers. Racism penetrated every facet of life, even down to food.

Elderly, and in many cases, too old to work, the ex-slaves struggled to find food in order to live. Discrimination did not help matters. In her book “Anything We Love can be Saved,” Alice Walker recounts a single scene around race and food during the Great Depression. This experience impacted her mother’s life and instilled rage in her own. She told the story of a time her family was hungry and was denied food by the government because of their race. Walker writes: “The imagined scene of her [her mother’s] humiliation reverberates through my work, as it has reverberated through my life. Indeed, it is quite ineradicable. That anyone could refuse my mother food sends me alternatively into rage or despair...” (1997:61).

While food deprivation existed during slavery, there were usually some sorts of rations, even if these rations were paltry. This bare-bones food security vanished when slavery ended. Consequently, some former slaves describe their material conditions as being worse post-emancipation. For example, in slavery, bondswomen could sometimes plant their own crops on their master’s land and gather fruits and nuts that fell in abundance on some plantations. However, post-emancipation this was nearly impossible since sharecroppers “had neither space nor time to spend raising fruit trees” (2008: Yentsch, 7).

Additionally, slave women who once cooked for white kitchens preparing nice foods rarely found themselves able to replicate these dishes in their own homes. They lacked the time, ingredients and appliances (2008: Yentsch, 20). The food bondswomen prepared for their families post-emancipation resembled the types of food they were accustomed to eating during slavery in many ways.

Even homes resembled the shacks former slaves used to live in, but now, for the first time, ex-slaves could put aside wages and try to save for a home and land. Homes were drafty and usually lacked glass windows and electricity. According to historian Peter Daniel, “Farmer’s joked that they could see the stars at night and watch the dogs and chickens run through cracks in the floor” (2008: Yentsch, 23 from 1986: Daniel, 87). Interviewers of ex-slaves in the Slave Narrative Project support these claims with similar comments attesting to the impoverished conditions of slave

homes. Tenant farmers rarely owned land and survived on an indefatigable work ethic. Citing scholar Patricia A. Gibbs, archeologist Ann Etch writes that “prudent families prided themselves on the ability to feed their households while spending as little as possible. An archaeologist looking for commercially produced material culture might conclude such families barely lived at all” (2008: Yentsch, 24 from 1999: Gibbs, 23-24).

Most ex-slaves did the same work as freedmen and women that they did as slaves (farming and working as cooks) for a bit of pay. Sharecroppers were exploited and trapped in debt. They often owed a white planter rent for their house, farming supplies and land. According to Ann Yentsch, African Americans tried to pay off debts by doing odd jobs and making trades with storekeepers for items like eggs, chickens and homemade candy (2008:22). Yentsch writes that conditions post-slavery were deplorable.

Deep-seated, unimaginable rural poverty affected black and white alike and fueled resentment among embittered former slave owners. The tight hold that landowners maintained on land use enabled them to force tenant families to plant field crops right up to their cabin doors. This fact, combined with the demands of labor intensive agriculture, made it almost impossible to keep substantial kitchen gardens.

Racially bellicosity was so high that even in freedom some African Americans expressed feelings akin to being enslaved. Times were ever-so-slow to change. For example, the life described by Annette Coleman, a black child living in the 1920’s, sounds similar to life before the Civil War: A landowner handed out a food allowance each week—molasses, cornmeal, flour and meat. And much of the food Coleman ate were table scraps “that had to be shared with the landowner’s dogs.” (2008: Yentsch, 22, quoted from 1986: Daniel, 84).

Ex-slaves recalled food repeatedly in interviews. When they spoke about food they referred to two time periods—pre and post emancipation. The following few paragraphs will look at how ex-bondswomen related to food after emancipation. An interview with ex-slave Alice Green titled “Plantation Life” underscores the poverty of the time. When the interviewer came to Green’s home, she described her address as “a tumble down shack set in a small yard which was enclosed by a sagging poultry wire fence. The gate, off its hinges, was propped across the entrance” (1). Green, like many other ex-bondswomen was surprised that someone wanted to know her story, “I never ‘spected to be axed to tell ‘bout dem days” (2) she said. Upon entering the

dwelling, the interviewer writes that she was treated hospitably and asked to sit down. At that point “a little rat terrier ran barking” at the visitor (1). To quell the excitement, Green said to the interviewer named Ms. Hornsby: “Lady, dat dog won’t bite nothin’ but somepin’ t’ eat -when he kin git it.” And so, the narrative opens with hunger all around, from animals to people.

Another ex-slave recalls conditions post-emancipation, but much earlier than the Great Depression. Minnie Green of Georgia (it is not clear whether she is any relation to Alice Green), recounts a hard-scrabble childhood. Ms. Green was a young girl when the war ended. The following anecdote illustrates the extent of her hunger: One day, her hair full of “oukle-burrs,” Ms. Green came to town to search for leftover food. She spied a man by a shop eating an orange. He nonchalantly dropped the peel on the ground, and, since “no one kept their cows and pigs up,” a sow grabbed it in its mouth and ran. According to the narrative, Ms. Green “chased the pig right down Hill Street...”(1) seeking the peel. The narrative does not say whether Ms. Green’s chase was successful.

However, Ms. Green does continue to explain how her life unfolded after the war. When freed, she went to work for a man on “halves” as a share-cropper—the owner of the land got half the profits and crops and Green got the other half (a typical arrangement.) Green always worked for rich whites because poor whites could not afford to have hired help. She said: “I had to wuk in de field ‘til I was a big gal, den I went to wuk for rich white folk,” (Green, 7). Green’s narrative concludes with the interviewer giving a dime to Ms. Green. Green’s response illustrates simply how poor she is: “Oh-h-h! Lady, I sho’do thank you for dis here dime. I’m gwine to buy some meat wid it. I ain’t had none dis week” (8). Green continues, “Has you axed me all you wants to? I sho’ is glad ‘cause I had nothin’ t’ eat yit” (9). Then Sadie S. Hornsby (the interviewer) writes how Ms. Green “pulled down her stocking to tie the coin in its top and revealed an expanse of sores from ankle to knee” (9). Green’s transcript is a telling reflection of the poor health and hunger that many ex-slaves experienced during the time between enslavement and the Great Depression.

One could argue that slave food choice was worse in the immediate years following slavery than during slavery. Ex-slaves no longer worked in as close proximity to whites and so stealing food would have been more difficult. Ex-slaves rarely had space for their own garden plots (which they occasionally had on their master’s farms) and they rarely had the means for much variety. However, now freed,

African Americans regained an element of control over their meals and cookery. For example, African Americans could eat when and how they chose. They could eat with whom they chose. They had the power to save food and store it for later without fear of retribution. They could use food to mark events. For example, one ex-slave, Katie Darling from Texas states : “When a slave die, massa make the coffin hisself and send a couple niggers to bury the body and say, ‘Don’t be long,’ and no singin’ and prayin’ ‘lowed, jus’ put them in the ground and cover ‘em up and hurry on back to the field” (Darling, 279). Few slaves were told when their birthdays were so they could not acknowledge that occasion. Now, for the first time, slaves could celebrate and mourn with food.

Also, African Americans could now begin to transform the way they ate—they could make tables and sit around them together as a family and use utensils and plates—an act of civility denied to most blacks while in bondage. By forcing slaves to eat from troughs like animals, planters tried to uphold the view that slaves were mentally inferior and like animals. Simmel, Douglas, Strauss and Mintz argue that food is a locus of power. Simmel argues that how people eat determines class status and power arrangements. Douglas posits that what we eat is socially defined and labeled as impure and pure, which has the ability to circumscribe power hierarchies. Strauss contends that humans are cultural actors and agents that have the ability to create meaning and order in society by how they utilize food. Last, Mintz states that food and power are inextricably linked.

By looking at the positions of these theorists we can see how emancipation changed the food and power dynamic for former slaves. Before, the only way slaves could influence the order of power was by utilizing practices of resistance in connection to food—by stealing food, poisoning their masters or hunting and fishing on the sly. Before, slaves never had access to utensils. Before emancipation, slaves were rarely intact as a family. Being able to practice these acts around food was symbolically important. It was a slight shift in power.

### **Positive and Negative Memories**

In this section I look at the ways that slave women remember food during bondage. I grouped the ex-slave transcripts according to whether food memories were connected with good, bad or neutral experiences. And then I analyzed the data in what is called a

grounded theory approach. Food was a loaded symbol for slaves. It represented bitterness as well as pain, joy and resistance. It was a source of their weakness: bondswomen were perennially fatigued from cooking all day and planting rice in deep, mosquito-infested swamps. And it was a source of their strength and resiliency: bondswomen continued to take considerable time to cook for their own families even when they were fatigued.

In their interviews, slave women rarely talk about cooking food in a positive manner. It is either spoken of in negative terms (hunger) or neutral terms (recipes, lists, facts). However, occasionally, positive reflections crop up. For example, sometimes, celebrations were permitted such as cases when eggnog was given on the New Year (Thompson, 1) or pulled candy at Christmastime (Butler, 5). Ex-slaves fondly recount these memories in the Slave Narrative Project: “ At Christmas times, dey gib you extra syrup to make cakes wid and sweet ‘taters to make ‘tater pone,” ex-slave Adeline Hodges wrote (3). “And, Lor,’ dey would hab big cribs of pun’kins. Hit makes me hungry to think ‘bout dem good ol’ pun’kin pies” (3).

Another ex-bondswomen, Mary Thompson of Texas, wrote of her exhaustion after laboring in the fields, but how slave women still put forth the energy to cook for their own, which was a source of positive memories: “When we come home from de fields at night, de women cooked us food and den dey was so tired dey jus’ went to bed” (1). Even fatigue did not prevent slave women from creating a vibrant cultural food heritage. For example former Oklahoma slave Lizzie Farmers describes the skilled way a wild animal was prepared: “When we cooked possum dat was a feast. We would skin hum and dress him and put him on top de house and let hum freeze for two days and nights. Then we’d boil him with red pepper, and take hum out and put him in a pan and slice sweet ‘taters and put round him and roast him. My, dat was good eating” (2).

Sandwiched between positive reflects are more forlorn ones. The following food memory is combined with religion. Rachel Fairley spoke about how her mother got down on her knees to pray under a cooking pot. Her mother, a field hand, was whipped lots by a master who was “mean and hard,” according to Fairley: “My mother said she had a hard time getting through, had to steal half the time; had to put her head under the pot and pray for freedom. It was a large pot which she used to cook in on the yard. She would set it aside when she got through and put it down and put her head under it to pray” (258). It is unclear why Fairley’s mother chose to pray

beneath a pot. It may have had symbolic reasons, or, it may have merely been a place as good as any. The pot was located out in the yard because if slaves tried to cook in their huts in summertime, “they’d burn up” (Fairley, 259). For Fairley’s mother, the trauma of slavery is made clear and passed down in food memories. Even after slavery, Rachel Fairley said her mother could not eat hogshead<sup>12</sup> because it was dried and given to her while in bondage. Back then, “you had to eat what you could git,” Fairley stated (260). Here one can view the potency of food-related memories and see how they endure over the years.

While many food-memories were negative, they were not all bad. Food accompanied every facet of slave life; as a result, it is remembered in connection to every set of emotion. Millie Barber’s transcript aptly highlights the variety of food memories bondswomen possessed. Her narrative delineates both positive and negative memories. Ms. Barber recounts how food was connected with punishment and Yankees, who she viewed in a negative light (or, said she did) and more positive aspects like special foods eaten on Sundays and the Fourth of July.

Barber, of South Carolina, grew up in the crucible of slavery. Her father lived on one plantation, her mother on another. This was a common experience among slaves and something that caused “confusion mix-ups, and heartaches” (39.) Only husbands were allowed rare permission to visit wives, not the other way around. In one narrative, an ex-bondswomen spoke about how women would prepare special food for when their husbands visited. It is logical that bondswomen went to such lengths to cook special foods for their husbands, considering the risks they took in visiting. Ms. Barber describes one case when her father came without his pass to visit her mother. He desperately climbed up the inside of a chimney to hide when he heard patrollers coming. They found him and they “they stripped him right befo’ mammy and give him thirty-nine lashes, wid her cryin’ and a hollerin’ louder than he did” (39) Barber writes.

When Millie Barber was interviewed, between 1936 and 1938 (the date is not given), Barber was living on land owned by her former master. In her narrative, Barber describes how she moved away from her former owner when she was emancipated, but soon moved back. She returned because she feared for her life. According to Barber, the Klu Klux Klan came to Barber’s home searching for her

---

<sup>12</sup> Meat jelly made with flesh from the head of a pig, sheep or cow.

husband. It is not stated what the Klan wanted to do with Barber's spouse, but many former bondswomen write of the Klan terrorizing, beating and killing African Americans. Fortunately, Barber's husband was away when they came calling.

Ms. Barber begins her narrative by talking about the abundance of food she has eaten on her former owner's 2,000 acre farm: "spect I eats too much yesterday" (38), and on the fourth of July; "us had a good dinner" (38). She survives because she is given food by her former owner slave white owner. "God bless dat white boss man," (38) Barber writes. It is a sad state of affairs. Barber is 82 years old and after slavery must rely on white charity in order to live.

Ms. Barber's transcript told of the ups and downs of her life. She worked as a kitchen slave. She writes that she never got butter, sweet milk or coffee. However, she suggests that as a kitchen slave, she received better rations than some. On a rare occasion Barber was allowed to eat the same food as her master, after she had worked "minding de flies off de table wid the peafowl feather brush..." (39).

When asked what slaves ate, Ms. Barber stated: "I 'members they got peas, hog meat, corn bread, 'lasses, and buttermilk on Sunday, then they got greens, turnips, taters, shallots, collards, and beans through the week. They were kept fat on them kind of rations" (39). What is important to note about the last line is that slave conditions varied from plantation to plantation. In some plantations, slaves were well-fed. In most, they were not. However, when slaves were fed enough, it is important to note that they were not being fed in order to nourish or satisfy them. On the contrary, they were fed so they would have strength to work harder, planting more crops and cooking more food for white families.

Ms. Barber also mentions two other incidents involving food. One, she details the incidents of punishments that revolved around foodstuff. Secondly, she references food when talking about Yankees and independence. In answer to a question about what sorts of punishment slaved received, Barber says, "Did I ever git a whippin'? Dat I did. How many times? More than I can count on fingers and toes. Oh, just one thing, then another. One time I break a plate while washin' dishes and another time I spilt de milk on de dinin' room floor. It was always for something,' sir. I needed de whippin' (39-40).

The last line of Barber's paragraph is telling. In this instance, and throughout the narrative, Barber states that her sympathies lie with her white enslavers. These words must be taken with one of the largest pieces of salt ever considered. One may

assume that Barber meant what she said, it is also equally plausible that Barber was putting on a front for her white interviewer. This latter reasoning is probably more presumable because Barber was still living on her owner's land at the time of the interview. Her survival—food, clothing and shelter—was dependent upon her former master. As an old saying goes, “Do not bite the hand that feeds you” and it is likely that Barber did not want to speak ill of her former master.

Author, Jennifer Fleishner writes in depth about how slave women had to negotiate and analyze their memories. They had to think carefully about their audience before speaking. This was as a survival stratagem. Fleishner writes that these women had to have “psychologically coded strategies of remembering” (1996, 16). One must acknowledge the gendered and raced dynamic of the Slave Narrative Project interviews (predominately white interviewers and black interviewees) and how this impacted the interviewees responses.

In the second passage where Barber mentions food she says, “De Yankees come and burn de gin-house and barns. Open de smokehouse, take de meat, give de slaves some, shoot de chickens, and as de mistress and girls beg so hard, they left widout burnin’ de dwellin’ house” (40). Barber, like other ex-bondswomen describe their own liberation in surprisingly negative terms. They describe the Yankees as enemies and destroyers, adopting the opinions of their southern masters. Another common theme from ex-slave women's narratives is that they often mention that when the Yankees came they took food. This detail foregrounds the importance of food as a commodity and valued resource. Meat in the smokehouse was a prized good on any plantation and something that the Yankee soldiers went after.

In conclusion, this section shows how slave women may have sugar-coated their words and opinions to appease a white listener. This narrative also serves to highlight the dichotomy of food. In one way, food is associated with positive imagery and joyful celebration, such as the fourth of July, however, food also meant hard labour and abuse. For such puny acts as cracking a dish and spilling milk, one slave's skin was made to bleed. In this way, food memories dwell in the interface between good and bad.

## Neutral Food Memories in Bondage

Even more prevalent than positive and negative food memories, however, are what I term “neutral food memories.” These memories revolve around daily practices pertaining to how food was served and cooked. These accounts offer an unparalleled vista into the inner-chamber of slave women’s cooking practices.

For example, Ms. Evans spends much of her narrative describing the resourcefulness of slaves. She details how self-sufficient her plantation was. In many large plantations, like the one Evans was raised on, nearly everything that was used by white folk was made and harvested by slaves. Ms. Evans’ narrative begins by describing the known details surrounding her birth. “My birthday comes in fodder pullin’ time cause my ma said she was pullin up till bout a hour ‘fore I was born” (240). This sentence is telling because the subject does not know in what month she was born, but only the year (1849) and what season it was in. The detail she most vividly connects to her birth has to do with food: planting. It is also worth noting that Ms. Evans was nearly born in the fields because women were so seldom allowed a break from labor, even for labor.

Evans also describes other events which have to do with details surrounding the practices of bondswomen and food. Evans writes: “Ev’y mornin’ bout fo’ clock o’ ’master would ring de bell for us to git up by an yo could hear dat bell ringin all over de plantation...” (240) Mealtime was a welcome reprieve from gruelling labor. However, mealtime was also a reminder that work was about to start. Slaves could tell by the sun’s shadow when food would be served. The day began early: “When they called you to breakfast it would be dark as night,” an un-named slave wrote in the Georgia narratives. “They did this so you could begin working at day-break. At twelve o’clock they blowed the horn for dinner [lunch], but they didn’t have to cause everybody knowed when it was dinner time. Us could tell time by the sun...” (Oliphant, 7).

Besides calling slaves to work like animals, with a horn, planters found other ways to dehumanize bondswomen. Slave owners made slaves eat like pigs or cattle: from troughs. Evans states: “They had a long trough fo’ us dat dey would keep so clean. They would fill dis trough wid buttermilk and all us chillun would git roun’ th’ trough an drink wid our mouths an hol’ our Johnny cake wid our han’s (Evans, 240). This statement is interesting because Ms. Evans refers to it as “so clean.” It is unclear

if she believed these statements or if she was trying to soften the harshness of her experience for a white listener. After dinner slaves continued to work; they cooked, spun and wove. The hundred plus slaves on the plantation Evans grew up on were summoned like livestock to go into the pastures to work.

Millie Evans goes on to describe the daily rituals of cooking: “Greens was cooked in a big black wash pot jus’ like yo’ boils clothes in now. An’ sometimes they would crumble bread in the potlicker [the juice from the greens] an give us spoons an we would stan’ roun’ the pot an’ eat...But we didn’ eat out’n plates. We et out of gourds an had ho’ made wood spoons” (241). This is an apropos example of Mary Douglas’s terms “pure” and “impure.” Douglas uses the words pure and impure to show how societies use food as a metaphor for creating boundaries between things they think are positive and negative. For the planter class, food and food practices, like how one ate, was a way of reinforcing power structures.

Further commenting on the difference between how planters and slaves ate, an un-named slave in the Georgia slave narratives writes about how dinner for slaves had a more casual protocol than for their owners. The female narrator writes: “Us didn’t have but a very few chairs ‘cause the men didn’t have time to waste makin’ chairs, but us had plenty of benches...When us went to eat...some would sit on the floor, some in chairs, and some would sit in the steps, but mos’ everybody held their plates in their laps” (Oliphant, 7).

In this section, I will re-introduce some of Georg Simmel’s theories about food and society. In the essay “Sociology of the Meal,” (1910), Simmel posits that how one eats creates systems of power. Coff cites Simmel, who writes that manners have always been a way of including and excluding people along class lines. For example, he argues that for the lower social classes, the material sense of food is most important to the meal. Conversely, he states that for the upper classes, the meal is dominated by codes of rules of etiquette. He writes that the plate and glass symbolize an order of balance; the glass ensures that everyone gets their share of the whole, while at the same time limiting what can be consumed” (2006: Coff, 15). Applying the theories of Mitnz and Douglas, one can see how the rules governing how, what and when slaves ate were instrumental in helping codify hierarchies of domination and power.

One of the most useful elements of Millie Evans’ narrative is how she describes the quotidian details of slave life. These are the elements in her account that

I refer to as “neutral.” Bondsfolk made every manner of things from corn-husks covering their beds, “which sometimes three and four had to sleep in when it was cold” (Evans, 6) to leather that was cobbled into shoes. Slave women even provided their own medical care since white doctors were rarely seen on the premise. However, perhaps the best example of the slave’s farming skills and resourcefulness is demonstrated with food. Unlike many ex-slaves, Millie Evans was interviewed twice. The two transcripts closely resemble each other, however, one transcript describes how the slaves on the plantation of her youth grew sugar, rice, peas, chickens, eggs and cows (1936: Evans, 248). It is telling that the bondsfolk on Millie’s plantation harvested sugar—the crop that launched slavery in the Caribbean—and rice, a foodstuff brought over by slaves from West Africa.

In addition to being skilled farmers, bondsfolk were also resourceful: Slaves were able to fashion multi-course cuisine in their master’s kitchens using fine ingredients that were at their disposal and then managed to make palatable meals (as palatable as they could) with the leftovers they were given for their own families. In another interview that was less than a page long, ex-slave Betty Curlett emphasized the vast difference between how the slaves cooked for themselves and how they cooked for their masters (Curlett.) Slaves could usually not use their master’s kitchens and so they cooked in large wash pots, outdoors; they made their own utensils and eating receptacles (if they had any) from wood and gourds and cooked vegetables outdoors in earth banks (Curlett, 790).

Betty Curlett states: “They cooked a washpot full of peas for a meal or two and roasted potatoes around the pot in the ashes. They always cooked hams and green of all kinds in the big iron pots for there were so many of them to eat...They made banks of dirt, sand, leaves and plank and never washed the sweet potatoes till they went to cook them...They saved the ashes and put them in a barrel and poured water over them and saved the drip-lye-and made soap or corn hominy...They carried corn to the mill and had it round into meal and flour made like that, too...The men would hunt between crop times. If the slaves were caught stealing, the Patty Row would catch him and his master whip him” (Curlett, 790).

Like Curlett’s transcript, Evans’ gives ample space discussing the various ways food products were used and the multiple purposes prescribed to certain ingredients: Evans shares the process for making vinegar from apples (6) and how to make tobacco by picking it, twisting it, dipping it in molasses and letting it dry 10-12

days, how perfume was made from rose leaves, jasmine and basil (6) and the comedy of one slave stealing a iced cornbread cake the slaves made for their master's daughter's wedding (7). Though Evans says the thief was caught she does not detail what punishment the bondsperson received. In both Curlett's and Evans' narratives, the difference between how and what planters ate and what the slaves ate is brought into stark relief. Though neither Curlett or Evans write about the food eaten in planter's homes, other researchers have made it plain that planters kept the ingredients that they considered desirable to themselves.

As a final example epitomizing the exploitative of bondswomen and underscoring the role of food in slave life, I present facts from Katie Darling's interview. Darling was an eighty-eight year-old ex-slave, born on the plantation near Marshall, Texas. She was a nurse and house girl during slavery. In a telling passage, Darling stated: "Massa have six chillen when war come on and I nussed [nursed] all of 'em. I stays in the house with 'em and slep' on a pallet on the floor, and soon I's big 'nough to tote the milk pail they puts me to milkin', too. Massa have more'n 100 cows and most the time me and Violet do all the milkin'. We better be in that cowpin by five o'clock" (278). The vividness with which Darling recalls her childhood chores on the plantation is striking. Also relevant is the *two* types of milk that are sources of sustenance in this passage. When Ms. Darling is small she is in charge of transporting cow's milk; however, by the time she is old enough to have children of her own she is providing her own milk for planter's white children. In closing, one can problematize the idea of labelling this memory as neutral. For example, just because the narrator does not mention words that are considered positive or negative in connection to her statements does not mean that she did not possess clear feelings about the incident.

## **Conclusion**

One of the primary aims of this chapter was to see how food-related experiences were remembered by ex-slaves. Another purpose was to place the historical context in which slaves were doing the remembering. This chapter also indicates some of the ways planters exerted power of slaves through food—by punishing bondswomen who broke a plate or stole an animal. What is also made plain is that while planters tried to maintain power over their slave by controlling the

circumstances surrounding food, slaves circumvented these strictures, practicing small acts of resistance.

## Conclusion

Studying American food history reveals race, gender and power dynamics. It also shows how food had the capacity to be a subtle tool of resistance. In this case, this resistance helps challenge the idea that slaves were passive. In chapter one, I write about bondswomen from South Carolina, Texas, Arkansas, Georgia and Alabama. I use the ex-slave narrative to illuminate slave food practices. In chapter two I highlight how African foods came to the United States and the integral role bondswomen played in making southern cooking. I then introduce the grounded theory I utilize as well as theories used by Douglass, Strauss and Mintz. These three argue that food can be a sight of conflict and power. Finally, in chapter three, I provide a historiography of slavery.

In conclusion, this paper shows how food is more than just food. It shows how eating and cooking can define a world and represent pathways of power and resistance. I argue that for bondswomen, food was a way to pass down cultural traditions. Food was also a bargaining chip between life and death. Additionally, through food, slave women could further exert independence and agency. My findings are backed not only by secondary sources, but by bondswomen's own words. Through the bondswomen's narratives I was able to glean insights into slave rituals, practices and food culture. The word "culture" stems from the meaning, "tilling" or, "place tilled." This has a touch of irony to it since it was African slaves who tilled the crops which sustained and nourished the peoples of America. Southern foods today still bare flavours owing to this painful and important past.

## Bibliography

- Barthes, Roland. "Towards a Psychosociology of Contemporary Food Consumption" in *Food and Culture: A Reader*. Ed. Carole Counihan and Penny van Esterik. New York and London: Routledge, 1997.
- Beoku-Betts, Josephine, A. "We Got Our Way of Cooking Things: Women, Food, and Preservation of Cultural Identity among the Gullah." *Gender and Society*, 9.5. (October 1995): 535-555.
- Berlin, Ira. "American Slavery in History and Memory and the Search for Social Justice," *Journal of American History* 90 (2004): 1268.
- Berlin, Ira. *Generations of Captivity*. Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 2003.
- Blassingame, John W. "Using the Testimony of Ex-Slaves: Approaches and Problems." *Journal of Southern History* 44 (1975):490.
- Carney, Judith Ann. *Black Rice: The African Origins of Rice Cultivation in the Americas*. Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 2001.
- Civitello, Linda. *Cuisine and Culture: A History of Food and People*. New Jersey: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2004.
- Coff, Christian. *The Taste for Ethics: An Ethics of Food Consumption*. The Netherlands: Springer, 2006.
- Cooper, William, J. *Liberty and Slavery: Southern Politics to 1860*. South Carolina: University of South Carolina Press, 2001.
- Coulter, E. Merton. "A Century of a Georgia Plantation." *Mississippi Valley Historical Review*. 16.3. (1929): 337.
- Crosby, Alfred W. *Ecological Imperialism: The Biological Expansion of Europe, 900-1900*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993.
- Daniel, Pete. *Standing at the Crossroads: Southern Life in the Twentieth Century*. New York: Hill and Wang, 1986.
- Davis, Angela. "Reflections on the Black Woman's Role in the Community of Slaves." *The Massachusetts Review*. 13.1/2. (Winter-Spring 1972): 81-100.
- Deck, Alice A. "Now Then—Who Said Biscuits?" The Black Woman Cook as Fetish in American Advertising (1905-1953)." *Kitchen Culture in America, Popular Representations of Food, Gender and Race*. Ed. Sherrie A. Inness. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001.
- Dekker, Rudolf. *Egodocuments and History: Autobiographical Writing in Its Social Context since the Middle Ages*. Introduction. Hilversum: Voloren, 2002.
- Douglass Opie, Frederick. *Hogs and Hominy. Soul Food from Africa to America*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2008.
- Douglas, Mary. *Purity and Danger*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1966.
- Douglas, Mary. "Deciphering a Meal." *Food and Culture: A Reader*. Ed. Carole Counihan and Penny van Esterik. New York and London: Routledge, 1997.
- Dwyer T. Jahanna and Sandhu, Rita. "Peanuts" in *The Cambridge World History of Food*. New York and Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000.
- Eisnach, Dwight and Covey, Herbert. C. *What the Slaves Ate: Recollections of African American Foods and Foodways from the Slave Narratives*. Santa Barbara: Greenwood, 2009.
- Eltis, David. "A Brief Overview of the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade." Emory University. The Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database: Voyages. Online.

- www.slavevoyages.org/tast/index.faces. 2007.
- Fleishner, Jennifer. *Mastering Slavery: Memory, Family and Identity in Women's Slave Narratives*. New York and London: New York University Press, 1996.
- Fogel, Robert William. *Without Consent or Contract: The Rise and Fall of American Slavery*. New York and London: W.W. Norton and Company, 1994.
- Fox-Genovese, Elizabeth. *Within the Plantation Household: Black and White Women of the Old South*. Chapel Hill and London: The University of North Carolina Press, 1988.
- Geertz, Clifford. *The Interpretation of Cultures*. New York: Basic Books, 1973.
- Genovese, Eugene D. *Roll, Jordan, Roll :The World the Slaves Made*. United States: Andre Deutsch Limited, 1975.
- Gray-White, Deborah. *Ar'n't I a Woman? Female Slaves in the Plantation South*. New York and London: W.W. Norton and Company, 1985.
- Glaser, Barney and Strauss, Anselm. *Discovery of Grounded Theory. Strategies for Qualitative Research*. Sociology Press, 1967.
- Hale, Smokey. *The Great American Barbeque and Grilling Manual*. Abacus Publishing, 2000.
- Harris, Marvin. *The Sacred Cow and the Abominable Pig: Riddles of Food and Culture*. New York: Simon and Schuster Inc., 1985.
- hooks, bell. *Ain't I a Woman. Black Women and Feminism*. London and Sydney: Pluto Press, 1982.
- Holloway, Joseph E. "African Crops and Slave Cuisine." California State University Northridge. Online. [www.slaveryinamerica.org](http://www.slaveryinamerica.org).
- Hughes, Marvalene H. "Soul, Black Women, and Food." *Food and Culture: A Reader*. Ed. Carole Counihan and Penny Van Esterik. New York: Routledge, 1997.
- Kennedy, Rosanne. "Stolen Generations, Testimony: Trauma, Historiography and the Question of "Truth." *The Oral History Reader*. Ed. Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson. London and New York: Routledge, 1998.
- Kiple, Kenneth, F. and Himmelstein King, Virginia. *Another Dimension to the Black Diaspora: Diet, Disease and Racism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003.
- Kiple, Kenneth, F.. *A Movable Feast: Ten Millennia of Food Globalization*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007.
- Kiple, Kenneth F. and Conee Ornelas, Kriemhild (Ed). *The Cambridge World History of Food*. II. A. 7. "Rice." Online. <http://www.cambridge.org/us/books/kiple/rice.htm>
- Kolchin, Peter. *American Slavery: 1619-1877*. New York: Hill and Wang, 1993.
- LaCapra, Dominick. *History and Memory after Auschwitz*. Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1998.
- Laurie, Anna; Neimever, Robert A. "Of Broken Bonds and Bondage: An Analysis of Loss in the Slave Narrative Collection." *Death Studies*. 34.3.(March 2010): 221-256.
- Lévi-Strauss, Claude. "The Culinary Triangle." *Partisan Review*. 33. (Autumn 1966): 586-95.
- Lévi-Strauss, Claude. *The Origin of Table Manners*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1968.
- Lévi-Strauss, Claude. *The Raw and the Cooked*. New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1970.

- Lindemann, Mary. "Sources of Social History," in: *Encyclopedia of European Social History* I. 6. Detroit: Scribner's Sons, 2001.
- Long, Lucy M. *Culinary Tourism*. Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2004.
- Manring, M.M. *Slave in a Box: The Strange Career of Aunt Jemima*. Virginia: The University Press of Virginia, 1998
- Mintz, Sidney W. "Towards an Afro-American History." *Cahiers d'Histoire Mondiale*. 13.2. (1971): 317-332.
- Mintz, Sidney W. *Sweetness and Power: The Place of Sugar in Modern History*. New York: Penguin, 1986.
- Mintz, Sidney W. *Tasting Food, Tasting Freedom. Excursions into Eating, Power, and the Past*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1996.
- Osseo-Asare, Fran. *Food Culture in Sub-Saharan Africa*. Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 2005.
- Proust, Marcel. *In Search of Lost Time: Swann's Way*. Penguin Classics: 2004.
- Richards, Audrey. *Hunger and Work in a Savage Tribe: A Functional Study of Nutrition Among the Southern Bantu*. London and New York: Routledge, 1932.
- Schiebinger, Londa. *Plants and Empire: Colonial Bioprospecting in the Atlantic World*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004.
- Sellers Benson, James, Amos Doss, Harriet E. *Slavery in Alabama*. Alabama: University Alabama Press, 1994.
- Sharpless, Rebecca. *Cooking in Other Women's Kitchens: Domestic Workers in the South, 1860-1960*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2010.
- Shaw, Stephanie J. "Using the WPA Ex-Slave Narratives to Study the Impact of the Great Depression." *Journal of Southern History*. (August 2003): 623-659.
- Smith, Sidonie and Watson, Julia. Ed. *Women, Autobiography, Theory, a Reader*. Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1998.
- Stetson, Erlene. "Studying Slavery: Some Literary and Pedagogical Considerations on the Black Female Slave." *All the Women are White, All the Men are Black, But Some of Us Are Brave*. Ed. Gloria T. Hull, Patricia Bell Scott and Barbara Smith. New York: The Feminist Press, 1982.
- Swanson, Joseph; Williamson, Samuel "Estimates of national product and income for the United States economy, 1919-1941". *Explorations in Economic History*. 1.1, 1972.
- Summerfield, Penny. *Reconstructing Women's Wartime Lives: Discourse and Subjectivity in Oral Histories of the Second World War*. Manchester: Manchester UP/ New York: St. Martin's, 1998.
- Toussaint-Samat, Maguelonne. *History of Food*. Translated from the French by Anthea Bell. Cambridge: Blackwell Publishers, 1987.
- Vansina, Jan. *Oral Tradition as History*. London: James Currey Ltd, 1985.
- Walker, Alice. *Anything We Love Can Be Saved: A Writer's Activism*. London: The Women's Press, 1997.
- Wayland Fuller, Dunaway. *Reminiscences of a Rebel*. New York: The Neale Publishing Company, 1913.
- Weir, Allison. *Sacrificial Logics. Feminist Theory and the Critique of Identity*. New York and London: Routledge, 1996.
- West, Jean. M "Sugar and Slavery: Molasses to Rum to Slaves." Online. [slaveryinamerica.org](http://slaveryinamerica.org).

- West, Jean. M. "Rice and Slavery: A Fatal Gold Seede." Online. slaveryinamerica.org.
- White, Deborah Gray. *Ar'n't I a Woman? Female Slaves in the Plantation South*. New York and London: The Feminist Press, 1985.
- Wilson, Mary Tolford. "Peaceful Integration: The Owner's Adoption of his Slaves' Food." *The Journal of Negro History*. 49.2. (April 1964): 116-127.
- Witt, Doris. *Black Hunger: Soul Food and America*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999.
- Yentsch, Anne. "Excavating the South's African American Food History." *The African Diaspora Archeology Network Newsletter*. June, 2008. Online.
- Yetman, Norman R. "Ex-Slave Interviews and the Historiography of Slavery." *American Quarterly*. 36.2. (Summer 1984): 181-210
- Yetman, Norman R. "The Background of the Slave Narrative Collection." *American Quarterly*. 19.3. (Autumn 1967): 534-553.

### Primary Sources

- Baker, Lindsay T. and Baker, Julie P. ed. *The WPA Oklahoma Slave Narratives*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1996.
- Barber, Millie, in Slave Narratives of the Federal Writer's Project, South Carolina, 1937 (typescript), vol. 14, pt.1, 38-41.
- Butler, Ellen, in Slave Narratives of the Federal Writer's Project, Texas, 1936-1938 (typescript), vol. 16, pt. 1, 176-179.
- Clark, Lewis Garrard. *Narrative of the Sufferings of Lewis Clarke, During a Captivity of More Than Twenty-Five Years*. New York: Cornell University Library, 1845.
- Curlett, Betty, in Slave Narratives of the Federal Writer's Project, Arkansas, 1936-1938 (typescript), vol. 2, pt. 2, 79-80.
- Darling, Katie, in Slave Narratives of the Federal Writer's Project, Texas, 1936-1938 (typescript), vol. 16, pt. 1, 278-281.
- Evans, Millie, in Slave Narratives of the Federal Writer's Project, Arkansas, 1936- 1938 (typescript), vol. 2, pt. 2, 240-248.
- Fairley, Rachel, in Slave Narratives of the Federal Writer's Project, Arkansas, 1936-1938 (typescript), vol. 2, pt. 2, 258-262.
- Green, Alice, in Slave Narratives of the Federal Writer's Project, Georgia, 1936-1938 (typescript), vol. 4, pt. 2, 31-38.
- Hodges, Adeline, in Slave Narratives of the Federal Writer's Project, Alabama, 1936-1938 (typescript), vol. 1, 181-185.
- Jones, Liza (Cookie), in Slave Narratives of the Federal Writer's Project, Arkansas, 1936-1938 (typescript), vol. 2, pt. 4, 155-158.
- Thompson, Mary, in Slave Narratives of the Federal Writer's Project, Texas, 1936-1938 (typescript), vol. 16, pt. 4, 100-103.
- Washington, Booker T. *Up From Slavery: An Autobiography*. Cambridge: The Riverside Press, 1900.
- Williams, Rose, in Slave Narratives of the Federal Writer's Project, Texas, 1936-1938 (typescript), vol. 16, pt. 4, 174-179.
- "Work, Play, Food, Clothing, Marriage, etc.," in Slave Narratives of the Federal Writer's Project, Georgia, 1936-1938 (typescript), vol. 4, pt. 4, 355-365.

Yetman, Norman. *Life Under the 'Peculiar Institution': Selections from the Slave Narrative Collection*. Holt McDougal, 1970.