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Jori Lewis, *Slaves for Peanuts: A Story of Conquest, Liberation, and a Crop that Changed History*. New York: The New Press, 2022, 352 pp. ISBN: 978-162-097-156-7.

Before peanuts came to West Africa through the transatlantic slave trade, they emerged and spread across the Americas. First domesticated in the arid plains of the Gran Chaco in modern day Bolivia more than 10,000 years ago, the peanut traveled with people throughout the Americas, acquiring American names, from *mani* in Taíno to *manobi* in Tupí and *tlacacuatl* (literally "earth cacao") in Nahuatl (24-26). As the Spanish, British, and Portuguese forcibly introduced enslaved Africans into the Americas, enslaved people established their own relations with peanuts, growing them in their garden plots across the diaspora.

Lewis follows peanuts into the entangled biographies of a place called Saint Louis, Senegal, the politics of abolition, and a pastor named Walter Taylor. In doing so, she demonstrates that many competing realities and visions of slavery, freedom, and emancipation existed alongside the many abolition efforts of 19th-century French West Africa. She successfully grounds this story in West African perspectives across eight parts, consisting of 55 short and highly readable chapter vignettes. The trials and tribulations of the Protestant missionary, Walter Taylor, offer Lewis and her reader an archival chaperone along the peanut trail.

The Kingdom of Kajoor, in what is today Northwest Senegal, was known in the nineteenth century for its political independence, as the most prominent kingdom to split from the Jolof Empire. This independence also attracted the French, who incessantly sought footholds to obtain and manipulate power in the region after the end of the French transatlantic slave trade in 1833. As European demand for peanuts exploded in the 1840s, Kajoor garnered international attention for producing some of the best peanuts in West Africa.

Kajoor was "deceptively fertile," with dryland, sandy soils, and a climate favorable for peanuts (38, 55). That Kajoor did not have navigable rivers for transporting peanuts internally only further served imperial interests. A proposal to build a railroad, like the proposal to end domestic slavery, helped to reinforce French power in the region at the expense of local authorities, such as Lat Joor, the king of Kajoor. Aligned with a historiographical interpretation dating back to Eric Williams's *Capitalism and Slavery* (1944), Lewis shows how the end of chattel slavery in Francophone West Africa helped France gain the political leverage to secure raw materials and labor for its industrial transition in the nineteenth century.

Lewis argues that peanuts later became an "emancipatory crop" in villages like Konyéya and Bethsheba. First, however, the peanut boom came in the form of plantations. From the 1840s to 1870s, France funded religious missionaries and anti-slavery governance to reform Kajoor into an export agricultural enclave for French consumers. French industries at the World's Fairs loved to display peanut oil for food, lanterns, and soap. Lewis's discussion on the scientific and industrial histories of soap in France pairs brilliantly with Anne McClintock's (1995) analysis of sanitary and racial thinking in the British soap industry. It is also noteworthy that industries like railroads demanded around 13,000 tons of peanut oil annually during this period (17).

This world of peanuts brought Walter Taylor to Kajoor in 1872. With the hope that Christianity would ease imperial expansion as peanut oil greases an engine, the French government bestowed on men like Taylor the political authority and economic support to convert people in Kajoor to Christianity. While Taylor only converted a few dozen people, at his shelters for runaways he ushered even more people toward peanut agriculture. Plantation agriculture was the goal, but as the ecology and economics of peanuts shifted, smaller-scale peanut agriculture was more practical. Taylor and his colleagues believed that peanuts could help runaways transition into new, but still racialized and unequal, post-emancipation divisions of labor.

Taylor was born in Sierra Leone in the 1840s as the peanut boom erupted, but he entered Kajoor just as the economic impact of peanuts began to wane. The reasons for this decline were many and sometimes unclear. The combined Long Depression in Europe and the opening of the Suez Canal adversely affected peanut prices in the 1870s (122, 240-241). There was also the problem of soil and seed degradation in Kajoor and growing interest in rubber and other export crops. However, the French preferred to blame West African farming practices and the lack of modern railroads for struggles in the peanut trade, thus reproducing the "civilizing mission" that had underpinned slavery.

Walter Taylor's mission reveals the ways slavery never really ended. The French-imposed abolition of slavery in Kajoor might have opened up a space for enslaved people to escape and find freedom, but how would that freedom look? How invested were French authorities in enforcing anti-slavery policies? Not very and not at first. With few punishments to fear, slaveholders and pro-slavery leaders, such as Lat Joor, continued to terrorize runaways and sympathetic missionaries. Peanut cultivation did help a few "freedom villages" find sources of income after slavery, but Lewis details how peanut cultivation usually led to plantations and economic hardships. Peanuts brought emancipatory moments, but these pale in comparison to the general violence they helped engender.

Slaves for Peanuts has many strengths, and none is more apparent than its methodological attendance to gaps in the archive and historical memory. Lewis's prose and analysis offer a master class on narrating archival and historical uncertainty. With careful, engaging, and critical questions and considerations, Lewis invites readers to think, imagine, and postulate the many possibilities in the archive. In trying to narrate Taylor's life and times, for instance, Lewis is clear that "the world [Taylor] lived in had no incentive to save his story" and that "the writer who depends on voices from the archives is often disappointed" (151, 253). *Slaves for Peanuts* is a

must-read for any scholar practicing how to sit with and analyze archival silences in the translantic slave trade, African history, and the Black Diaspora, especially those using methods from geography, critical plant studies and political ecology.

From a place of curiosity–rather than criticism–this reader wonders about domestic peanut consumption in colonial Kajoor and how it changed with the expansion of export-oriented peanut cultivation. Relatedly, how did the rise of other export crops, namely palm oil, cacao, and rubber, impact Kajoor beyond weakening the peanut trade? How did these new forces shape land, labor, and empire? Speaking of empire, this reader is also interested to know how Islam informed the many forms of slavery and blackness in the region. For instance, how did the Islamic law against enslaving fellow Muslims influence the slavery of Bambara people and other non-Christian people? How did the Trans-Saharan slave trade–which transported around five enslaved people for every twelve in the transatlantic slave trade–impact the relationship between blackness, slavery, and the political economy of soap in colonial Senegal? Given the author's creative storytelling and archival approach, I lastly wonder what peanut cultivation in Taylor's shelter for runaways looked like for former runaways, even though that story might not fully exist in the archive.

Jori Lewis enhances our understanding of the botanical legacy of the African Diaspora in the Americas, joining noted scholars such as Beronda L. Montgomery, Abra Lee, Jessica B. Harris, Case Watkins, and Judith Carney. Like Tiya Miles (2021), Jori Lewis tells a rich and far-reaching story about the history of black folks through a humble object. Similarly, Claudia Leal (2018) traces black life in post-emancipation Colombia with ivory palm and Maya L. Shamsid-Deen and this author (2022) track black place-making in New Mexico, USA with sorghum. And, whereas most environmental histories of diaspora focus on the Americas, Lewis follows Edda Fields-Black's (2014) example in providing a dynamic account of West Africa that is relevant to American agrarian histories from Brazil to Mexico and the United States. *Slaves for Peanuts* won a James Beard Award for good reason. It will serve as a critical study in resourceful and careful storytelling for a generation of writers narrating diaspora through plants, food, and material culture. *Slaves for Peanuts* reminds us that plants can have many political lives. Peanuts could simultaneously serve the French empire and formerly enslaved people.

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