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Academic Journeys in the Black Atlantic

Gender, Work and Environmental Transformations

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The University of California at Berkeley during the mid-1970s was an exhilarating place and time for graduate students in the Department of Geography. As a group we were much affected by the pervasive social inequalities and environmental transformations that were radically changing the world. The course curriculum in the department was unstructured but encouraged engagement with the University’s natural science programmes. We studied botany, forest ecology, soils, rangeland management, pest management and non-Western food production systems; we took courses in anthropology, history and agricultural economics. This multidisciplinary approach, of course, is a hallmark of Geography, and its intention to broker and synergize the biophysical–social science divide is one of the discipline’s great virtues. Thus, inspired by our Berkeley training, with its strong emphasis on fieldwork and language acquisition, an invigorated cohort of graduate students began their scholarly adventures.

Into this highly energized scene alighted Dr Michael Watts, a newly minted PhD who arrived on campus in 1979 as assistant professor of Geography. To this day, I remember his electrifying job talk on hunger, poverty and famine in northern Nigeria. I realized immediately that Michael was asking precisely the questions I wanted to work on in my own research. Indeed, what drew me to Geography, graduate school,
and specifically Berkeley, was a book I read while working in Oregon: *Agricultural Origins and Dispersals* by Berkeley geographer Carl O. Sauer. I found Sauer’s holistic perspective on culture and the environment engaging and compelling. His work gave me an appreciation for a discipline that placed human-environmental relations at the forefront of analysis at a time in the 1970s when the environmental movement was gathering momentum. Sauer’s writings on cultural landscapes, indigenous peoples’ contributions to crop and animal domestication, and Latin America inspired me during my first travels through Mexico and Central America. When I arrived at Berkeley, I learned that Professor Sauer had long retired from the faculty; however, there were a core group of faculty and graduate students who shared my enthusiasms for Latin America, environmental change, human ecology and poverty.1 Michael’s arrival added an enlivened coda to this group. He introduced us to the theoretical literatures on the structural forces within the world system that produce wealth and poverty and pointed to how these ideas might cohere with and clarify our own research. I felt Michael’s work added a critical perspective to the inspiration I took from Sauer’s work and the ‘Berkeley school’s’ emphasis on cultural ecology. There was a sense that an older generation of geographers was ceding the stage to a new and exciting one.

I had begun my PhD research in Berkeley – before Michael’s arrival – on South America, specifically, Amazonic Brazil. By 1977 dramatic landscape changes and population movements were accompanying the military government’s programme to develop the Amazon for mineral extraction, cattle ranching, tree farms and pulp mills. Road construction and sponsored colonization schemes attracted new settlers into the region, contributing to alarming trends in deforestation. Such socio-economic and environmental changes were already proceeding apace in rural Maranhão, where I was headed. Roads were reaching the state’s forested interior and the peoples who lived there. Land expropriations, ineffective World Bank projects, mineral companies and logging interests soon followed, undermining the way of life of indigenous peoples and the mixed-race farmers (caboclos), who traditionally planted rice and tropical tubers for subsistence and harvested babaçu palm forest products for food and trade. Their territory was now a new frontier for outside interests, who were ready and willing to dispossess smallholder farmers by force, if necessary, from mostly untitled land. But I was unaware of all this until a 16-hour bus ride deposited me in the Alto Turiaçu region, where I immediately felt the unease born of conflict. Instead of finding myself in an area amenable to my academic project – a cultural ecological analysis of smallholder environmental adaptation and resilience – I found a region in turmoil. There, I met university students wanted by the
military government for their political activities, communist leaders of peasant leagues, activist Catholic priests, gun-slinging enforcers for cattlemen, and FUNAI government agents charged with ‘assimilating’ the indigenous Ka’apor people. Nothing in my academic training had prepared me for what I experienced during those weeks in the interior of Maranhão. There, too, I first encountered quilombos, free communities that runaway slaves founded during slavery still inhabited by their descendants.

Throughout the Alto-Turiaçu region, smallholder cultural identity and memory was rooted in an environment that was undergoing unprecedented and often violent transformation. What had captured my attention during this visit to rural Maranhão was the disquieting struggle of the rural poor to stay on the land. As neither quilombolas nor peasant farmers possessed formal title to the land their families had worked for generations, they had no legal standing to defend their claims. For the military government and its economic allies, they were impediments to the process of transforming the Amazon. The new invaders frequently used guns and intimidation to seize land continuously held by the mixed-race descendants of runaway slaves. Many rural Maranhense saw their communities destroyed as systemic violence forced them to flee. Some became part of the huge exodus of poor Brazilians who crowded into colonization projects that frequently failed them.

My experience in turbulent rural Maranhão in 1977 prompted two critical insights that have since informed much of my research. First, it provided a way of seeing the world – the interplay of culture and environment, the relationship of place-based knowledge systems to subsistence strategies and environmental sustainability. I began to see the limits of the cultural ecology research framework in which I was being trained since it failed to provide the tools to examine land use in the context of economic change and policies that privileged one type of land use over another. The economic interests that freely exercised frontier justice to force peasant farmers off their land were threatening an entire way of life whose roots were Amerindian and New World African. Having witnessed the shooting of one man for resisting efforts to seize his land, I was no longer satisfied with academic discussions that presumed stability in local knowledge and land use.

Like many other geographers working in the tropics where military governments ruled, I turned to political economy and to the development studies literature for a more dynamic conceptualization of what was occurring. In this way, the accomplishments and struggles of rural peoples could be placed against the background of economic change and power relations. I was among the first generation of geographers whose fieldwork in the global South demanded a more robust theoretical
framework – one that would later become known as political ecology. Michael Watts played no small part in the development of this framework.

There was a second insight from my fieldwork in Maranhão that I did not fully appreciate at the time. My work among the quilombos had actually provided a powerful introduction to the African presence in tropical America. When I subsequently went to West Africa for my dissertation research, I began to think about African continuities, the cultural heritage of enslaved Africans in Neotropical environments, and the creolized food systems they shaped in former plantation societies. The fieldwork experience on both sides of the Atlantic moved me to think about the Atlantic Basin as a historical-geographical continuum. When nearly 25 years later I returned to rural Maranhão, it was with the realization that many of the subsistence farming practices that I witnessed in the 1970s incarnated profound connections to West Africa.

But very little of this was clear when I first met Michael Watts. The urgent questions he was asking about Nigeria and Africa ran congruent to my own rather inchoate thoughts, especially as they turned to my experiences in Brazil. Unhappily, I realized that it was not possible to explore these questions in Maranhão because my dissertation chair was not supportive. I passed my PhD exams to work in Brazil but found the pull of questions difficult to ignore. It was then, with Michael’s help and sponsorship, I managed the awkward transition to a new committee chair and study region. As a junior assistant professor, Michael had now assumed mentorship of a would-be Africanist who had advanced to candidacy but never taken a course on Africa. Weighed down by these handicaps, I was unable to qualify for a competitive fellowship. Fortunately, Michael intervened at a critical moment: as co-director of a study on the Gambia and Senegal River basins sponsored by the Center for Research on Economic Development (CRED) at the University of Michigan, he was able to enlist me in the CRED project, thereby enabling me to go to West Africa for the first time in 1983. Michael was the reason why I so fortuitously ended up in The Gambia rather than Brazil for my dissertation.

West African rivers had become the focus of international financial aid in the decade following the 1968–73 Sahel Drought. The field director of the Gambia River Basin Studies was the noted ecologist, Karl F. Lagler. Lagler believed firmly in scholarship that combined biophysical with social science research. We agreed that I would examine the downstream socio-economic impact assessment of a proposed anti-salinity barrage along the Gambia River. The Gambia was a rice-growing country. Development planners sought to ‘drought proof’ the region by converting wetlands to pump-irrigated rice schemes that would support
the production of two annual rice crops. The proposed development promised the rural poor both food security and cash income from the sale of surplus crops. But, as I discovered during my study, rice is traditionally a woman’s crop in The Gambia and the proposed drought-proofing project would have a direct and significant impact on their daily lives, work and income. Government officials and international donors proclaimed the project was a model for gender-sensitive development; it would deliver direct benefits to women farmers. Suspecting that I might be witnessing an epochal agrarian transition, I decided to focus on the ‘gender’ question of rice production for my dissertation. I relocated to an agricultural research station in rural Gambia to begin my fieldwork.

**Gender and Agrarian Transitions**

I began my 14-month field research with a survey of farming practices in the central region of the country. These encompassed wetlands of the Gambia River, the focus of rice development projects and drier uplands where peanut cultivation prevailed. The wetlands were the principal zone of food production during the colonial period, while the rain-fed plateau specialized in peanut cultivation for export. Rice was a subsistence crop cultivated by women, while men cultivated peanuts as a cash crop. Colonial policies had encouraged a greater reliance on women’s swamp rice production for food, but this was never enough and was augmented by rice imports. Since the end of colonial rule, the country had undergone an incomplete process of agrarian transformation. Commodity production of peanuts had reduced the rainfed upland acreage devoted to subsistence cereals (millet, sorghum, maize), but cash income from peanuts, as with African commodities in general, had declined in global markets. Droughts had further strained subsistence production of rice, and the country relied on imports for around half its rice consumption. It was in this context that irrigated rice projects promised to make up the domestic shortfall by extending cash cropping to wetland environments. This meant that a subsistence crop traditionally grown by women was going to be commodified.

The development studies literature Watts included in his seminars drew attention to the role of the state, markets and class for understanding the power relations mediating specific agrarian transitions such as the Gambian one I witnessed in the 1980s. His seminars also introduced students to debates in peasant studies, such as whether specific peasantries were differentiating with market development, the moral economy that at times enabled family labour to intensify, peasant resistance to labour
exploitation, and peasant-based political movements. Amartya Sen’s pioneering scholarship linking hunger and famine to policies that weakened the claims of the poor to subsistence entitlements proved another important influence.6

However, when I left for West Africa to start my fieldwork, the literature on agrarian political economy, peasant and development studies, and cultural ecology in Geography had little to say about rural women, households or gender relations. The debates on markets, states and the peasantry as a class inevitably overlooked the importance of women in subsistence agriculture. Some female social scientists (principally in rural sociology and development economics and anthropology), were beginning to bring women into the discussion but mainly through the analytical framework of class.7 There was little geographical scholarship on agrarian transformations and their impact on women’s labour, perhaps because not many female geographers were engaged at that time in international development fieldwork.

Gambian farming systems had been studied since the 1940s by a few excellent scholars. Their work provided an invaluable historical perspective on the role of rice farming in subsistence strategies from the colonial era.8 While in the field, I was not yet aware of the household studies literature that was emerging as a critique of Marxist class analysis of agrarian transformations. Watts introduced me to this literature upon my return to Berkeley in 1985. Feminist concern with reproduction and production had opened up the household as a category of analysis, especially for examining demands on female labour, income opportunities, the social construction of gender, and patriarchy within and between households. Household studies revealed that the peasantry as a class was shaped by many types of responses to poverty. The burdens placed upon women and differential access to and control over resources were significant for understanding how peasant households responded to agrarian change and the effect of economic transformation on patriarchal family structures.9

Returning from my fieldwork in central Gambia, I immediately recognized the salience of this scholarship for understanding the gender conflicts that ensued in the Jahaly-Pacharr irrigated rice scheme. Jahaly-Pacharr was promoted as a ‘women’s project’ but the Gambian government officials registered the irrigated plot allotments to male heads of households. By registering titles in men’s names, project officials claimed that it would break down a gendered cropping system. The project’s work calendar was calibrated on the availability of both male and female family labour for year-round rice cultivation despite longstanding male resistance to working on a ‘woman’s crop’. Tension over which household members would carry the household labour burden in irrigated rice
and who would be the beneficiaries of paddy sales became evident after the first harvest, when the male household head listed on the land registry received the payment. The wives and daughters had laboured to produce the crop in a project which formally enabled senior male members to control the earnings. Thus technological change in rice cultivation, which created conditions for two cropping seasons and surplus production, had effectively intensified women’s labour while transferring their traditional control of plots and income benefits to their male household heads.

When women were denied the benefits from sales of the first harvest, there followed a loud and unprecedented outcry during the second planting season. They refused further work unless compensated in paddy. Some households conceded to their demands; others did not. Harvest yields declined as the project’s planting calendar depended upon the full, yet unrealized, participation of family labour, not just females. After completion of my dissertation in 1986, Michael and I incorporated these insights into two well-received research articles that addressed the crucial role of family authority relations and property relations for structuring gender divisions of labour and access to and control over rural resources in agrarian transitions of the global South.¹⁰

By the mid-1990s policy reforms had delivered the final blow to the Jahaly-Pacharr scheme. IMF structural adjustment policies had removed the price support for domestically grown rice in favour of cheaper imports. Economic reforms and donor assistance no longer prioritized ‘food security’ as a development strategy, favouring instead ‘comparative advantage’ and market liberalization. The policy shift, which eliminated protective tariffs for domestic rice growers just as fertilizer prices quadrupled in The Gambia, dashed the country’s hopes for rice self-sufficiency.

Despite proclamations of “food security’ and ‘a women’s project’, irrigated rice development had not improved women’s socio-economic position. But I saw a way forward through advocacy of traditional swamp rice growing as an alternative, ‘bottom-up’ strategy that would positively reach female growers. I devoted one research trip to deepening my understanding of the agro-ecological practices and micro-environments in which women customarily planted rice, that I had initiated with the CRED study. The research represented a return to earlier graduate-school training in cultural ecology. Here was an autochthonous knowledge system that did not depend upon imported chemical fertilizers, costly fuel oil, and spare parts for pumps and tractors. It built instead upon the expertise and cumulative in situ landscape and agronomic knowledge of rice culture passed down through generations of women on land that remained under their control.
When I first went to The Gambia, I wondered how an Asian crop had assumed such importance in West Africa. Why were West Africans growing rice and when had the Asian crop been introduced? I read that the Portuguese had introduced rice to the region during their maritime voyages. But in carrying out the library research for my dissertation, I was astonished to learn that rice had been in West Africa for several millennia. This was not *Oryza sativa*, the rice of Asian origin, but *O. glaberrima*, an indigenous species independently domesticated in the wetlands of Mali nearly four thousand years ago. From there, African rice diffused over a vast region, east to Lake Chad in the country by that name, west along Sahelian Rivers and inland swamps to the Atlantic coast and southward across mangrove-forested estuaries from Gambia to Côte d’Ivoire. The traditional rice-growing practices I had observed among Gambian women formed part of a broader legacy: a knowledge system seemingly rooted in antiquity that was responsible for numerous varieties adapted to drought, salinity, flooding and to specific agro-ecologies.

A few years into my position as assistant professor of Geography at UCLA, I came across historical research that attributed the origins of the rice plantation economy of South Carolina to enslaved West African rice growers.\(^{11}\) I realized that my research on indigenous African rice agro-ecologies and practices could contribute to this scholarship.\(^{12}\) I reviewed all available European commentaries on African rice systems over the first centuries of the transatlantic slave trade. These accounts provided considerable detail on the micro-environments cultivated as well as the prominence of women in the cereal’s cultivation, marketing and milling. The historical overview complemented my earlier fieldwork by enabling an identification of the principal African rice-growing environments.

The result of this research many years later was *Black Rice: The African Origins of Rice Cultivation in the Americas* (Harvard University Press, 2001). The research started out by focusing on the South Carolina low country where historians had made a strong argument for African expertise in establishing an introduced crop that shaped the colony’s rice plantation economy in the late seventeenth century. I then went through different archival and material evidence from other New World colonies to show how the appearance of rice cultivation was linked to the presence of enslaved growers. The research on Atlantic rice history eventually returned me to Brazil and fittingly, Maranhão, where the Portuguese in the mid-eighteenth century had launched a rice plantation economy, emulating that of the Carolina colony in North America. Rice had remained the dietary staple of their descendants, whom I had met in the region in the 1970s.
I began to think of ways to follow the cereal’s introduction under different colonial experiences. Fortunately, US historians had so thoroughly combed the archives that I could identify the critical documents necessary for identifying the micro-environments planted and comparing techniques from field to kitchen with those described in West Africa. But this work also demanded considerable familiarity with the vast literature on slavery. I found a way forward by focusing attention on plantation food systems, crops grown for subsistence and the period when cultivated rice (an introduced crop to the Americas) first made its appearance. This research involved thinking about rice as a system of knowledge, the suite of practices that encompasses its planting, cultivation, harvesting and milling. I term the entirety of knowledge and practices ‘rice culture’ in order to bring into relief both agricultural methods as well as post-harvest processing, the way the grain is milled and cooked. The basic features of African rice culture then provided the methodology for a cross-cultural diachronic exploration of Atlantic rice history.

Cultural and political ecology again pointed the way for considering the flow of African knowledge systems in the context of forced migration, enslavement, subsistence choices and cultural identity. While my intellectual horizons at Berkeley originated with the insights of Carl Sauer and his respect for indigenous Amerindian knowledge systems, I had been struck in my own Latin American fieldwork by the seeming reticence of geographers to similarly engage the contributions of enslaved Africans in the Americas. Working in rural areas of the Black Atlantic world made me want to address this historical lacuna. I wished to illuminate the role of New World Africans in establishing food plants of African origin in new biophysical and socio-economic environments. Their botanical legacy also involved recognition of plant genera of pantropical distribution known for their medicinal properties.

While researching the onset of rice cultivation in northeastern South America (the Guianas and Brazil), I learned of the maroon oral history that tells how an enslaved African woman introduced rice by hiding grains of the cereal in her hair as she disembarked a slave ship. Here was a view of rice introduction to the Americas that stood in stark contrast to the bulk of scholarship on the Columbian Exchange. Coined by historian Alfred W. Crosby, the term Columbian Exchange refers to the Amerindian crops and European agency that transformed global food systems and environments between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries. The Columbian Exchange literature says little about the African crops that were introduced to the Americas partly because not many people considered the possibility that African slaves might have their own forms of agricultural agency under severe, coercive circumstances.
The story of maroon rice provided independent testimony of the significance of African females for the diffusion of rice culture across the Black Atlantic.

I extended this research in a second book which covered many more of the African food crops introduced to the Americas during the transatlantic slave trade. I showed how Columbian Exchange scholarship could benefit from understanding its African components, how food grown in Africa for provisioning slave ships played a critical role in plantation societies when slaves carried and planted food gardens from whatever was left over or saved from the Atlantic crossings. Slaves labouring in plantations also cultivated sorghum, millet, yams and other foods from their continent in their subsistence gardens and created new food assemblages from what I like to think of as ‘botanical gardens of the Atlantic world’s dispossessed’.

Conclusion

In writing this chapter, I am struck by how tenuous much of the research seemed to me while I was in the field. Retrospection always tempts the memory to implant a grand, unified vision in terms of what one has seen and accomplished. In truth, I was unsure about where I was going on my academic journey into poverty, hunger and inequality. All I know was that the experience profoundly affected me, my view of the world, the paths I followed, and the scholars with whom I interacted and worked. It has been an enormous privilege to have the opportunity to live in different areas of the world and to know people from different cultures and perspectives. If I had my life to live over again, I would follow the same path because it led to discovery, self-awareness and compassion. The personal transformation that research engenders is not often evident to those who read the articles and books academics write. Theories provide the way scholars talk to each other, but the vitality of the experience that guides its formulation is often lost in communication.

In my lifetime, I have learned to appreciate the opportunity to travel outside my own culture, to ask large questions and to venture uncertainly in search of answers, even when conclusions were only partial and hypotheses seemed untenable. Along this journey, I had the good fortune to be among an exceptional cohort of graduate students at Berkeley and to have worked and collaborated with Michael Watts. The original work I did for CRED led to a dissertation and study of traditional rice ecologies that would inspire two books. Michael Watts gave me an opportunity to work in West Africa and the intellectual encouragement to pursue my research. Thank you, Michael, for the grand inspiration you gave to
me, which turned a Latin Americanist into an Africanist, and an Africanist into a student of the Atlantic World. Your work in political ecology, development studies, on poverty and hunger, and on resource scrambles and petro-violence continues to inspire well beyond the academy.

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**Notes**

1. During the late 1970s the principal Latin Americanist professors in Berkeley Geography were Jim Parsons, Hilgard O’Reilly Sternberg and Barney Nietschmann; Clarence Glacken was also an inspiring presence through his concern with environmental history and intellectual modesty. Other notable campus Latin Americanist scholars included Woodrow Borah in History, Alain de Janvry in Agricultural Economics and Herbert Baker in Botany. Within Geography, graduate students working on environmental issues in Latin America at this time included Susanna Hecht, Nigel Smith, Karl Zimmerer and Bob Voeks.

2. FUNAI (Fundação Nacional do Indio or National Indian Foundation) is the Brazilian government agency charged with establishing and carrying out policies that concern the country’s indigenous peoples, their lands and affairs.

3. During the transatlantic slave trade, Brazil received some four million slaves, about 40% of the total number of Africans forcibly migrated to the Americas. The plantation economy in Maranhão specialized in rice, cotton, indigo and coffee. Slavery was not formally abolished in Brazil until 1888, making it the last country in the Western hemisphere to do so.

4. With the return to democratic rule in 1985s, Brazil passed a law that enabled quilombos to qualify for land titles based on registering their land as collectively owned. Maranhão holds one of the highest quilombo concentrations in Brazil. Some 856 hamlets have petitioned for land titles, but only a few have in the decades since actually received them. See Sanzio Araújo dos Anjos (2009).

5. Geographers took the lead in developing political ecology as a research framework. Additionally influential were: Blaikie and Brookfield (1987) and Hecht and Cockburn (1989).


7. Deere (1976); Agarwal (1982); Beneria and Sen (1982).

8. Gamble (1949, 1955); Haswell (1963); Weil (1972); Dey (1981).

9. Scholars whose work was pioneering in this regard included Guyer (1981); Whitehead (1981).
There are wild species of rice but only two were domesticated, one in Asia and the other in West Africa. These two species were introduced to tropical and subtropical America with the arrival of Europeans and Africans.

A notable exception was West (1957). James Parsons’ research on the history of African grasses in tropical America, for instance, failed to consider this possibility. Parsons (1972).

References


