

Rhetoric of things

Retoryka rzeczy

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The rhetorics of food as an everyday strategy of resistance in slave narratives Retoryka jedzenia jako strategia codziennego oporu w narracjach niewolników

Abstract

Food is never just food; it is also an instrument of power in a Foucaultian sense. Food is simultaneously a rhetorical tool of dominance and a means of insubordination/defiance. As depicted within slave narratives food is a site of material and symbolic struggle, serving as a means of oppression and resistance. In this study I will examine how enslaved African Americans used the production and consumption of food, as well as discourse about food, as a rhetorical means of resistance. While Michel Foucault produced the theoretical scaffolding that rethinks power and resistance, his theories can be placed in a productive dialogue with the rhetorical studies of Kenneth Burke, Gillian Symon's general conception of rhetorical resistance, as well as more specifically with James Scott's and Elizabeth Janeway's theories of the everyday resistance of the "weak." Through these analytical lenses, I will place particular focus upon the role of food in slave narratives as a rhetorical means of defining and disputing identity, of establishing and violating various boundaries, and of challenging the status quo of plantations.

Jedzenie nigdy nie jest jedynie jedzeniem; jest również narzędziem władzy w sensie Foucaultowskim. Jedzenie jawi się bowiem jako retoryczny sposób wyrażania dominacji i manifestowania nieposłuszeństwa. Przedstawione w narracjach niewolników jedzenie to przejaw materialnej i symbolicznej walki, instrument przemocy i sposób wyrażenia oporu. W niniejszym opracowaniu przyjrę się, w jaki sposób zniewoleni Afroamerykanie wykorzystywali przygotowywanie i konsumpcję żywności, a także dyskurs o jedzeniu, jako retoryczne środki oporu. W tym celu stworzone przez Michela Foucaulta podstawy teoretyczne dla rozważań o władzy i oporze zestawione zostały z retorycznymi studiami Kennetha Burke'a, koncepcją oporu retorycznego Gillian Symon, a także z teoriami codziennego sprzeciwu „słabych” autorstwa Jamesa Scotta i Elizabeth Janeway. Wykorzystując to zaplecze teoretyczne, skupiłam się na analizie roli jedzenia w relacjach niewolników, rozumianego jako retoryczny środek definiowania i kwestionowania tożsamości, ustanawiania i naruszania granic oraz kwestionowania *status quo* zastanego na plantacjach w południowych stanach USA.

Key words

food, resistance, slave narratives, rhetorical resistance, weapons of the "weak/powerless", juba songs
jedzenie, opór, relacje niewolników, retoryczny opór, broń „słabych/bezsilnych”, piosenki juba

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The rhetorics of food as an everyday strategy of resistance in slave narratives¹

“in the meaning of food, there is much rhetoric”
Kenneth Burke 1969, 173

Food is never just food;² it is also an instrument of power in a Foucaultian sense.³ Food reflects and refracts power, unevenly ascribing agency to both privileged and oppressed. In doing so, food is simultaneously a rhetorical tool of dominance and a means of insubordination/defiance. As depicted within slave narratives food is a site of material and symbolic struggle, serving as a means of oppression and resistance. The diet and foodways of enslaved African Americans are significant subjects in several classic studies of slavery.⁴ However, only a handful shed light on the complex power relations embedded in foodways: on food as a method of controlling slaves and of enslaved people’s attempts to undermine that control. Indeed, food as a vehicle of everyday resistance has rarely been systematically analyzed as a phenomenon in itself.⁵ This study attempts to fill this void. It will examine how enslaved African Americans as active and creative agents used the production and consumption of food, as well as discourse about food, as a rhetorical

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3. Foucault “marks a radical departure from previous modes of conceiving power and cannot be easily integrated with previous ideas, as power is diffuse rather than concentrated, embodied and enacted rather than possessed, discursive rather than purely coercive, and constitutes agents rather than being deployed by them” (Gaventa 2003, 1).

4. The subject of slave diet and foodways is mentioned in several classic studies of slavery; however, while most scholars discuss the quality of the slave diet at length, they scarcely mention the rhetorical potential of using food as a tool of resistance. To date two articles have explored the use of food in slave narratives: Jennifer Brown’s “Remembrance of Freedoms Past: Foodways in Slave Narratives” (2018) and Stephanie Tsank’s “‘Midnight Bakings’ Amid Starvation: Food and Aesthetics in the Slave Narrative” (2021). In some aspects my reading of food in slave narratives is conversant with Jennifer Brown’s and Stephanie Tsank’s analyses. We may share similar points and general observations about the role of food in slave narratives, however we ultimately pursue different ends. Tsank concentrates on analyzing how food empowered and individuated the enslaved (2021, 128) and how it “bolster[ed] the creative, literary achievements of slave narratives” (2021, 130). Jennifer Brown, on the other hand, analyzes how slave narratives exposed the ruthlessness and wickedness of slavery through their depictions of food.

5. I have already discussed the role of food as a tool of violence and domination in shaping the relations between white plantation owners and their black slaves in my article (2019) „Kij i marchewka – pożywienie jako narzędzie kontroli w narracjach niewolników” [“Carrot and Stick – Food as a Tool of Control in Slave Narratives”]. The present article aims to explore the other side of the coin – the use of food as non-insurrectionary form of rhetorical resistance towards white oppression.

means of resistance. In doing so, this article expands upon Gillian Symon's (2005) conception of rhetorical resistance. Consequently, particular focus will be placed upon the role of food as a rhetorical means of defining and disputing identity, of establishing and violating various boundaries, and of challenging the status quo.

The year 2019 marked the 400th anniversary of the Anglo-centric enslavement of Africans within the USA.⁶ An estimated 400,000 captive Africans were brought to the British coastal colonies, and later the USA, from across the Atlantic through a journey that came to be called the Middle Passage (Charleston, South Carolina was the major port of entry, receiving up-to 200,000 captured Africans) (Gates 2013).⁷ The ban on trans-Atlantic slave trade issued by the US Congress in January 1807 became effective in January 1808. At that time four-million enslaved Africans lived in the South. Slavery flourished in southern states despite the cessation of importing human chattel. Northern "entrepreneurs", mostly from New York, continued to illegally traffic captive Africans through Spanish Florida well into the 1860s, long after Florida had been ceded to the USA in 1819. More than 8,000 smuggled captives were sold into bondage to southern plantations after the 1807 ban and before the Civil War (1861-1865). Since Africans were deemed legal chattel slavery, defined as property owned by an enslaver, their children were automatically born into slavery, thus enabling planters to reap profits from breeding and selling their own slaves.

Although slavery was officially abolished in 1865,⁸ its influence continued in American culture and literature. Fictional depictions of slavery originated during the antebellum period (pre-Civil War). Sentimental novels written within the moonlight-and-magnolia tradition (romantic plantation novels) defended slavery by glorifying plantation life. Two of this genre's most recognizable writers – John Pendleton Kennedy and William Gilmore Simms – presented the Southern plantation in the most favorable light: *Swallow Barn* (1832) and *The Golden Christmas* (1852).⁹ Others saw enslavement as a blessing for the enslaved. Mary Eastman's *Aunt Phillis's Cabin* (1852) and Caroline Hentz's *The Planter's Northern Bride* (1854) were written in response to Harriet Beecher Stowe's alleged slandering of the Southern plantation system in her bestselling novel *Uncle Tom's*

6. Before the Anglo enslavement of the Africans, there were Spanish and Indigenous episodes. Spaniards were responsible for arrivals of enslaved Africans as early as the mid-16th century to the Florida, as well as the enslavement of indigenous peoples beginning around 1619.

7. An estimated 12.5 million Africans were shipped to the New World (both North and South America, as well as the Caribbean) during the entire history of slave trade (1525-1866), out of which 10.7 million survived the Middle Passage's rough Atlantic crossing (Gates 2013). More information about forceful transportation of Africans can be found here: <https://www.slavevoyages.org>

8. The 13th Amendment to the US Constitution, ratified in December 1865, declared that "[n]either slavery nor involuntary servitude, except as punishment for crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted, shall exist within the United States, or any place subject to their jurisdiction."

9. Nostalgic revisions of the ideal plantation life were present in the post-Civil War literature as well, for instance in the glorified past of Thomas Dixon's and Thomas Nelson Page's fiction.

Cabin (1851-52). Still other fictional depictions of slavery stressed the economic ineffectiveness and socially destructive impact of slavery on the fabric of society – e.g., George Tucker’s *The Valley of Shenandoah* (1824) and William Alexander Caruthers’ *The Kentuckian in New York* (1834).

The late eighteenth century antislavery movement in the USA,¹⁰ precipitated by the humanitarian principles of the Enlightenment and the rise of sentimentalism, fostered public interest in autobiographical narratives written or dictated by ex-slaves of African descent. Abolitionists exploited this literary genre to advance the cause of ending slavery. In the 1830s and 1840s slave narratives were a popular means of graphically documenting the horrors of Southern chattel slavery, such as the rape of enslaved women and the heinous torture of enslaved men, as well as pointing out the hypocrisy of Southern religion which allowed such atrocities to occur. These narratives not only provide accounts of the conditions in which the enslaved lived, but also describe the ways slaves responded to and rebelled against their forced captivity. Many such narratives reference the role of food as a tool of resistance.

Situating food in the oppression/resistance axis reveals how it functions rhetorically as well as materially as one of the “weapons of the weak.” In this study evidence from published slave narratives and *The Works Progress Administration’s (WPA) Federal Writers’ Project* first-person accounts of life under slavery serve as illustrative examples of non-insurrectionary forms of resistance in the Old South hidden in foodways and foodscapes. Dozens of slave narratives and samples of several thousand WPA interviews recorded between 1920s and 1930s offer remarkably invariant examples of black lives under the exigencies of chattel slavery in various Southern states. What is crucial in the text narratives and transcribed testimonies, as primary historical evidence, is not the individual accounts of what happened, but rather the cumulative repetitiveness of the negotiations of black subjectivity as depicted within those texts. The black voice and the situated perspective it provides could no longer be silenced, as “using language”, according to Tonkin (1992, 39) “involves a ‘claim’ that one should be listened to. To speak at all makes this claim.”

Who gets food, what kind, and how much speaks volumes about the power dynamics at play between enslaved people and their putative masters. It would be mistake, however, to ascribe all the power in that relationship solely to slave owners. Indeed, as James C. Scott (1985) points out in his classic study of rural conflict in Malaysia those lacking sanctioned institutional power are not powerless by any means. They possess what he calls weapons of the weak,

10. While the Pennsylvania Abolition Society was founded in 1775, the heyday of American abolitionism was the 1830s, for instance the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society was established in 1831 and the American Anti-Slavery Society (AASS) in 1833.

which include evasion, pilfering, sabotage, deliberate delay, false compliance, and feigned ignorance. These “require little or no coordination or planning; they often represent a form of individual self-help; and they typically avoid any direct symbolic confrontation with authority” (Scott 1985, 29). Through the use of these tactics – and others such as Symon’s (2005) rhetorical means of disputing identity or establishing and violating various boundaries – enslaved African Americans obliquely challenged the power of their masters without incurring unnecessary risk. Enslaved peoples using those weapons of the weak available to them recalls Michel Foucault’s observation that power is a dispersed, fluid practice and not a possession held by some and lacked by others (1991).

Relations on plantations in the American South reflect Foucault’s observation that “where there is power, there is resistance,” or rather “there is a plurality of resistance ... distributed in irregular fashion throughout the discursive field” ([1978] 1998, 95, 96). Corrective forms of discipline and slave resistance to oppression were two faces of the same coin. Like the powerless Asian peasants Kerkvliet studied, enslaved Africans felt “disgust, anger, indignation, or opposition to what they regard[ed] as unjust or unfair actions” (1986, 108). Slaves contested the prevailing power structure through rare acts of organized defiance (bloody revolts) and more often through “everyday strategies of resistance” (Scott 1989). “Instead of launching suicidal uprisings, bondpeople’s daily acts of resistance chiseled away at master’s power. Wielding the ‘weapons of the weak’,” observed Hillard, “bondpeople engaged in politically-conscious and communally-rooted behavior that fundamentally ‘recalibrated’ the master-slave relation” (2014, 4). Since “everyday resistance is informal, often covert, and concerned largely with immediate, de facto gains” (Scott 1989, 33), “coping with and surviving the regime” rather than “overthrow[ing] the power of masters as a group” were the endgame of subjugated slaves (Jones 2020).

Defining the enslaved as legally recognized chattel robbed them of their agency and personhood. Their presence in the US defined, through negation, the concepts of liberty and citizenship. Therefore, any slave behavior demonstrating agency and will, and thus transgressing stereotypical perception of slaves, was recognized as a dangerous, if not criminal, activity. Those failing to internalize and perform specific roles (Mandingo, the Brute, Sambo, Nat, Mammy, and Uncle Tom) provoked socially sanctioned violence, which was deployed to restore the plantation power structure and that of Southern society in general. Dehumanizing stereotypes defining Blacks as “slothful, animalistic, immoral, sensuous, savage, rapacious, unintelligent” (Roberts 2008, 80) and as “ignoble savages who were innately barbaric, ... lazy, cowardly, ... submissive, immoral, and stupid” (Blassingame 1979, 227) were used to justify the ideology of white supremacy,

enslavement of human property, and eventually segregationist policies. These demeaning stereotypes were contested by the enslaved, who refused “to accept the definition of oneself that is put forward by the powerful” (Janeway 1981, 167). Disputing definitions regarding one’s identity is, as Symon points out, a rhetorical means through which the weak can challenge the powerful.

Divide and govern was the most prevalent strategy planters implemented to control their human property. Fostering division among bondsmen – a definitional hierarchy of personal servants, general domestic workers, drivers, and field workers – broke solidarity among them (Aptheker 1974, 61). Maintaining an elaborated hierarchy was intended to prevent possible collusion among and rebellions by the enslaved. This is in keeping with Kenneth Burke’s view of division as a powerful means of rhetorically effecting social cohesion within a group by fostering their sense of separateness from outsiders (1969), as well as his contention that hierarchy is a divisive source of social tension that can be exploited (1966). For instance, the resentment between house servants, who had the status of “a sort of black aristocracy” (Douglas 1881, 48) and field hands was symbolically and materially enacted through consumption patterns: the former “et at tables with plates”, while the latter were “fed jus’ like hosses at a big, long wooden trough” (qtd. in Escott 1979, 60). Enmity among the enslaved arose as a result of the house servants’ assimilation of their masters’ expectations, leading to what Frantz Fanon called self-aggrandizement ([1952] 2008, 24). As reported by field slaves, “de house servants put on more airs than de white folks” and “hold that dey is uh step better den de field niggers” (Escott 1979, 60). This fostered in the house servants a sense of superiority.

Animosity between domestic servants and other slaves was exacerbated when the former were given token privileges for spying on behalf of slave owners (Douglass 1845, 19). They were “encouraged and trained up by [planters] to report every plot they know of being formed about stealing any thing [sic], or running away, or any thing [sic] of the kind; and for which they are paid” (Bibb 1849, 136). Snitches were rightly perceived as traitors to their own people. The willing cooperation of black slave drivers helped the plantation to run like a well-oiled machine. In exchange for privileges from planters, some slave drivers were given the responsibility of rationing food for both slave quarters and the Big House (Kemble 1863, 42-45); others, as in Solmon Northup’s narrative, distributed food among field slaves (Northup 1853, 331). Yet, despite such social conditioning, slaves would still bond in insubordination which did not openly “venture to contest the formal definitions of hierarchy and power” (Scott 1985, 33). This covert collective opposition took the form of sharing sensitive information about the planters on the grapevine, dubbed by Kelly Houston Jones as the “clandestine

news networks between farms and plantations” (2020). There was also cooperation between foreman and slaves while hunting for, smuggling and stealing food,¹¹ trading either cultivated or stolen foods, through “the market chain as suppliers, resellers, and buyers” (Yentsch 2008, 14).¹² The act of cooking for and feeding runaway slaves on the Underground Railroad under cover of the night “assumed heightened emotional significance for the black women involved, and, when carried out in such subversive ways, political significance for social relations on the plantation” (Jones 1985, 31).¹³

Food was used to discipline (the deprivation of food as a punishment, Lewis Clarke’s narrative 1845, 25). Food could also be used to rebel. The enslaved employed the three primary sources of food – food rations, food raised by themselves in slave quarters, and food garnered via gathering/hunting/fishing – as constructive, not disruptive, means of contesting white power. The most cost-effective way of compensating for the meager fare allotted to slaves was through theft of foodstuffs. Other forms of food resourcefulness – gardening and foraging for wild sources of sustenance – provided necessary nutritional supplementation and a break from culinary monotony (Wallach 2019, 50; Harris 2001, chapter 5). Cultivating garden patches represented “personified independence, spirituality, ownership, tradition, beauty, sense of community, and self-determination” (Eisnach and Covey 2019, 20). More importantly, gardens created a sense of common purpose and “commitment to family and to community” (Eisnach and Covey 2019, 18). Cultivating gardens carved out some autonomy for the enslaved, and in so doing they signified community resilience (Twitty 2011, 246-247, 249). According to Monica White, gardening enabled slave communities

to adjust, withstand, and absorb disturbance, and to reorganize while undergoing change. It emphasiz[ed] structural approaches and community engagement, including types of indigenous knowledge, emotional experiences, and intraracial/interracial exchanges that communities need in order to adapt to unforeseen conditions. (2018, 8)

Laziness, submissiveness and docility, as captured in the stereotypes of Sambo and Uncle Tom, were ascribed to enslaved African Americans, regardless of gender. Through coercive discipline plantation masters and ladies of the

11. One foreman confessed that he felt like a “black knight” chasing a chicken and giving it to a “black fair lady.” Such a cooperation and gift-giving, which made him feel “good, moral, heroic,” he deemed as “the best of my deeds. It was my training in the luxury of doing good, in the divinity of a sympathetic heart, in the righteousness of indignation against the cruel and oppressive” (Henson 1858, 21-23).

For a sense of solidarity embedded in theft of food and consequent “conspiracy of silence”, see Lichtenstein 1988, 419.

12. Selling their loot on the market gave the enslaved “a stronger consciousness of counter-morality and the inherent right to economic autonomy” (Lichtenstein 1988, 416).

13. Wood even explains that “it was a slave’s duty to steal on behalf of a runaway slave if they could get away with it;” such acts would be conscious and explicit redefinition of “the limits of property allowed to them by their masters” (2015). For cooperation between the enslaved and runaways, see Lichtenstein 1988, 419.

house made efforts to render their chattel deferential, loyal, compliant and self-effacing (Blassingame 1979, 256-7). In responding to unflattering stereotypical representations “everyday strategies of resistance” took one of two contrasting rhetorical approaches: enactment or transgression of the required code of behavior. Seeming accommodation to enslavement exemplifies covert insubordination. Performing stereotypical expectations had practical as well as subversive potential – in order to “lighten work loads” (Fox-Genovese 1998, 316) or get back at the mistress, house servants were “perennially slow” (Glymph 2008, 68) or “pretended not to understand instructions” (Jones 2020). This deliberate and subversive performance of stereotypes provided by the dominant white patriarchy is not unlike the act which Lucy Irigaray calls “playing with mimesis.” Irigaray’s term *miméticisme* is enacted by Black females who “try to recover the place of her exploitation by discourse, without allowing herself to be simply reduced to it” (Irigaray [1977] 1985, 76). Much like women who subvert the social order through stepping into and enacting prescribed sexual roles provided for them by men, these house servants undermined the system from within using the very tools the masters themselves made available (Fox-Genovese 1986, 153); they – referencing Irigaray – “make ‘visible,’ by an effect of playful repetition, what was supposed to remain invisible” (Irigaray [1977] 1985, 76). Such performances offer additional examples of the kind of rhetorical resistance Symon says is wielded by the weak; but in these instances the enslaved are not openly disputing definitions so much as exploiting their potential for subversion.

Resistance may take the subtle form of feigned accommodation or that of open confrontation (Escott 1979, 74). Transgression of servant etiquette, whether covert or overt, clearly demonstrates servant dismissal of cultural norms imposed by white society, which is yet another way of disputing imposed definitions. Refusal to perform household duties, as noted by Fox-Genovese (1998, 160), may be seen as “generative and strategic, a deliberate move [which] illuminates limits and possibilities” (McGranahan 2016, 319). Viewed thus, slowing or stopping housework is a rhetorical response registering both complaint and critique in a relatively risk-free way, except for possibly provoking the master or mistress’s transient ire. There were acts of culinary defiance as well, such as intentionally spoiling food. Ruining meals one is paid to prepare registers dissatisfaction with one’s role. Similarly, hatred of one’s owner and revenge for enslavement is frequently expressed in culinary acts of defilement – Litwack recounts the narrative of “Aunt Delia”, a former enslaved cook in North Carolina, who confessed to defiling food as a subversive act of sabotage: “How many times I spit in the biscuits and peed in the coffee just to get back at them white folks” (1979, 158-159).

Apart from the aforementioned stereotypes, slave owners also saw their dependents as infantile, primitive, and happy-go-lucky (Blassingame 1979, 227). Since bondsmen allegedly could not take care of themselves, planters thought themselves kind for paternally protecting their chattel.¹⁴ This “protection” helped codify the racial hierarchy on plantations. Interestingly, the enslaved consciously embodied certain stereotypical characteristics ascribed to them by white southerners in order to demonstrate their supposed naturalization to their enslavement. Through the rhetorical tool of feigned accommodation, slaves indirectly articulated their discontent. Pretending to be satisfied with conditions on the plantations was a subversive tool in the hands of slaves. What to the uninitiated might look like acceptance of bondage, in reality was a strategy for resisting slavery. By camouflaging their feelings, slaves dulled planters’ vigilance. In turn, planters’ obliviousness allowed for collusion and concealment among bondsmen, which according to Michael Adas are elements of avoidance protest (1992, 110).

Through various paternalistic acts, planters attempted to regulate slaves’ conduct and facilitate their naturalization of slavery. With plantation festivities slave owners aimed at breaking slave solidarity through the promise of rewards for compliant slaves (extra food, free time – eg. Jacobs, 1861, 13) or the threat of punishment for the unruly, even cancelling Christmas for them (Hillard 2014, 143). Through these tactics masters strove to create destructive competitiveness and foster disunity in bondsmen. Ritual pleasantries and gratuities reminded slaves of oppressive paternalism.¹⁵ Plantation parties and celebrations, particularly Christmas festivities, were “intended to seem benevolent and to inspire respect, gratitude, deference, and, importantly, obedience” (Camp 2002, 546);¹⁶ they were also meant to create a periodic carnivalesque release of pent-up frustration (Camp 2002, 546). Alcohol, extra food rations, cash bonuses, the ritual of gift giving,¹⁷ and “feasting, and frolicking, and fiddling” (Northup 1853, 213) were intended to encourage slaves to reconcile with their lot and quash any possible thoughts

14. Lansford Lane relates an interesting example of a mistress saving her house slaves from themselves – from their uncontrolled desires. Once she caught them stealing food from her kitchen, she punished them for fear of them succumbing to gluttony (1842, 13).

15. Hillard remarks that in ritual pleasantries and gratuities “slaveholders showcased their power: not by boarding and protecting bounty but by bestowing it; not by emphasizing material difference but by allowing momentary entry to the outermost fringes of their world. ... In gratuities given and rituals performed, slaveholders rooted reminders of their mastery in the quarters. Here we see the paternalist agenda of the master class functioning with repressive precision” (2014, 140).

16. Frederick Douglass claims that “the holidays, become part and parcel of the gross fraud, wrongs and inhumanity of slavery. Ostensibly, they are institutions of benevolence, designed to mitigate the rigors of slave life, but, practically, they are a fraud, instituted by human selfishness, the better to secure the ends of injustice and oppression. The slave's happiness is not the end sought, but, rather, the master's safety” (1855, 254).

17. The rituals performed in Christmas gift-giving, such as those described by Jacob Stroyer (1885, 47), were to remind slaves of the power structure on the plantation (Hillard 2014, 137). More about gift-giving as a transaction in James G. Carrier’s *Gifts and Commodities* and Igor Kopytoff’s *The Social Life of Things*.

of revolt (Camp 2002, 546, Genovese 1976, 314, Wallach 2019, 40, Harris 2001, chapter 5). Frederick Douglass recalled that Christmas feasting was “among the most effective means, in the hands of slaveholders, of keeping down the spirit of insurrection among the slaves” (1855, 253-54).

Despite “sanctioning black pleasure, the slaveholders’ gaze oversaw and contained that pleasure, ensuring that it would not become dangerous” (Camp 2002, 547), still bondsmen found ways to enjoy themselves outside of what Camp called, the “geography of containment” (2002, 535); that is, beyond the purview of planters’ gaze. Slaves refused to accept spatial constraints imposed upon their free time. As noted by Symon, such a refusal – through which slaves violated imposed boundaries in favor of their own symbolic and spatial geography – can be viewed as a form of rhetorical resistance. Realizing the oppressive paternalistic undertones of planters’ parties, some slaves “sought out secret and secular gatherings of their own making” (Camp 2002, 547) in an attempt to reinforce “the mentality of resistance and [strengthen] the group identity” (Escott 1979, 76). Escott explains that by

coming together in concealment, they helped make their secret lives and thoughts real, and thus gained strength to combat the master’s propaganda. Often a white-controlled meeting occasioned a later, secret meeting whose purpose was, in effect, to set the record straight. (1979, 76)

Hence, they created their own world and moved their celebrations to rival geography, such as the woods and swamps, which “provide[d] space for private and public creative expression, rest and recreation, alternative communication, and importantly, resistance to planters’ domination of slaves’ every move” (Camp 2004, 7). Organizing illicit dance and outlaw parties required elaborate planning. It was a collective endeavor constituting to what Monika White calls community resilience (2018, 8). At the risk of flogging, women “borrowed” goods from their masters, while other “‘knowing ones’ continued to plan the celebration, encouraging each other’s high spirits ‘with many a wink and nod’” (Camp 2002, 551).

Much like Mikhail Bakhtin’s concept of carnival (1968), official parties and periodical festivities (during corn shucking and hog killing seasons) effected no change in the social structure of plantations; they were mere show. And like the Roman’s *panem et circenses*, plantation festivities were meant to placate;¹⁸ however, they often fostered only superficial appeasement. Under the guise of festive frolic slaves conspired against planters. Both juba dances and corn shuck songs attempted to lull planters and overseers into a false sense of security. For instance, during corn-shucking contests, to the untrained eye the songs sounded

18. Much to Frederick Douglass’s chagrin (1855, 254), a portion of slaves simply enjoyed themselves during Christmastime celebrations, for instance Henry Bibb did not escape bondage, as he was allowed to celebrate his nuptials (1849, 41).

“nonsensical, but full of melody” (Northup 1853, 220), conveying the happy-go-lucky disposition of slaves who apparently are reconciled to slavery. For those initiated, these coded message songs gave hope through scriptural references, information about the Underground Railroad and/or slave insurrections on Southern plantations. Similarly juba songs and step dances on the surface showed acceptance of slavery, but on a deeper level offered a harsh critique of enslavement. Under the guise of playful nonsense those vernacular songs camouflaged dissent. One of the most famous lines from juba songs “Juba dis and Juba dat, / And Juba killed da yellow cat” veils a threat to planters’ safety: white folk who are yellow cats can get food poisoning from mixed-up food (Jones and Hawes 1972, 37).

Apart from their alleged laziness, docility and primitivism, the enslaved were also deemed treacherous and intentionally deceitful. Most planters saw their bondsmen as “unruly, savage, immoral” (Roberts 2008, 81). The slaves’ supposed degenerate nature purportedly made them especially prone to larceny. Planters believed theft to be slaves’ second nature, they even “defined ‘a thieving Negro’ simply as the one who stole much more than the average” (Genovese 1976, 599). Masters blamed slaves’ misappropriation of foodstuffs not on meager diet but on their dependents’ wicked nature.¹⁹ If bondsmen reputedly gained pleasure from defiant behaviors (Yentsch 2008, 67),²⁰ then such an explanation clearly did not blemish planters’ paternalistic positive self-image with allegations of neglect, cruelty and abuse. The enslaved internalized that logic and many slaves repeated after their masters that it was “just natural for Negroes to steal” (qtd. in Escott 1979, 77); in so doing they seemed to shift moral responsibility for pilfering from cruel and neglectful planters onto themselves. Not many white Southerners believed slaves were deceitful due to the exigencies of slavery but rather because of some inborn tendency. “That disposition to theft with which they have been branded,” Thomas Jefferson was one of the few to explain, “must be ascribed to their situation, and not to any depravity of the moral sense. The man, in whose favor no laws of property exist, probably feels himself less bound to respect those made in favor of others” (1785, 152). Booker T. Washington’s observation about his mother’s acquisition of food concurs with Jefferson’s conclusion:

How or where she got it I do not know. I presume, however, it was procured from our owner’s farm. Some people may call this theft But taking place at the time it did, and for the reason that it did, no one could ever make me believe that my mother was guilty of thieving. She was simply a victim of the system of slavery. (1901, 4-5)

19. Masters “attributed theft and stealing to blackness rather than to condition of servitude” (King 2003, 60).

20. Hillard remarks: “no amount of moral instruction or provisioning would curb slaves’ propensity to steal ..., the bondman was not motivated by ‘the advantage of obtaining a desired object ... but rather the excitement produced by the very act of stealing’” (2014, 106).

Not surprisingly, such an explanation – “when the enslaved stole, a ‘bad master ... made ’em that way’” (qtd. in Farrish 2015, 157) – was more popular among the enslaved than the enslavers. Put simply, for the enslaved defining what distinguished legitimate from illegitimate theft was an important rhetorical task as well as ethical concern. Those definitions, as well as the act of theft itself, were both wielded as weapons of the weak.

Petty thievery, and food theft in particular, was so common among slaves²¹ that “its everydayness underwrote its power” (Farrish 2015, 157).²² The system of rationing food and the practice of theft were interlocked in power relations; if “rationing was a form of violence, then theft was a form of resistance imbricated with the regulation of comestibles” (Farrish 2015, 157). Compensating for nutritional deficiencies of their woefully insufficient diets was one of the reasons the enslaved resorted to stealing their masters’ provisions (Douglas 1855, 188-189).²³ “Inadequate rations were a tacit license for theft,” as Yentsch noted (2008, 67). Using their position as cooks in the Big House, slave women facilitated access to goods in the slaveholders’ pantries and kitchens. Cooks abetted inconspicuous consumption for their starving children and underfed fugitive slaves alike (Escott 1979, 67). Many slaves did not see taking food without permission as thievery, but rather as a survival strategy necessary for taking care of one’s family under the exigencies of slavery. Charles Ball clarified in his narrative that: “[t]he master might call it theft, and brand it with the name of crime; but the slave reasoned differently, when he took a portion of his master’s goods, to satisfy his hunger, to keep himself warm, or to gratify his passion for luxurious enjoyment” (1859, 218-219). The act of taking and sharing food was not just a matter of acquiring sustenance. A strong sense of empowerment and “the satisfaction of outwitting Ole’ Massa” (Genovese 1976, 606)²⁴ also came with the ingenuity, so vividly depicted by Lewis Clarke in his narrative (1845, 26-27), necessary for outsmarting physically powerful owners. After all, some slaves were taught well by their masters – admitting in their narratives that some planters not only allowed them to steal from neighboring plantations (Stroyer 1885, 28; Jackson 1862, 14; Ball 1859, 69)²⁵ but encouraged the practice and taught their dependents how to steal as

21. Douglas 1845, 16, Lichtenstein 1988, 415, Hillard 2014, 116.

22. Many a slave would openly brag in their narratives about pilfering; a song relating accounts of misappropriation of foodstuff was widely known among slaveholders and bondsmen alike (qtd. in Escott 1979, 77 & Harris 2001, chapter 5).

23. Additionally, the awareness of “uneven resource distribution” between the abundance of food in the Big House and the deprivation of slave quarters “made the ‘taking’ of food understandable and justifiable behavior for many slaves” (Lichtenstein 1988, 417). See also: King 2003, 64.

24. Brown 2018, 165, Covey and Eisnach 2009, 31-2.

25. There is ample historical evidence that masters accepted casual and petty theft (Wood 2015).

another way of their taking care of their human chattel (Covey and Eisnach 2009, 10). Bondsmen certainly learned their lesson well.

Bondsmen employed remarkably sophisticated logical reasoning in assessing theft, what Lichtenstein called the “moral economy” of slavery (1988, 415). The enslaved employed three rhetorical strategies to reframe the act of pilfering, all three of which pivoted upon definitions used as a means of rhetorical resistance. Firstly, they turned the notion of them being human property back on the slaveholders. Bondsmen explained that since a slave is property and not deemed a legal person,²⁶ he cannot possibly be held accountable for stealing other property from the master. “I was property, – not a man, not a father, not a husband. And the laws of property and self-interest, not of humanity and love, bore sway,” Josiah Henson explained in his narrative (1858, 95). In such situations slaves used their legal status as “human property” to expose the faulty logic when property discourse and slavery converged – since a slave is not a “natural person” with legal rights and obligations, he cannot be held liable for stealing. As Mary Raines told a WPA interviewer: “I never call it stealin’. I just call it takin” (“Slaves Resistance” 2007). This applies only to the misappropriation of slaveholder’s property, not of their fellow bondsmen’s possessions. The slaves’ moral code did not condone filching among themselves (Aptheker 1974, 141; Genovese 1976, 607). “It was not always convenient to steal from master,” confessed Frederick Douglass, “and the same reason why I might, innocently, steal from him, did not seem to justify me in stealing from others” (1855, 189). Since stealing from other slaves negatively impacted the slave community, and could consequently enervate community resilience, it was considered a heinous act (Bush 1990, 31).²⁷ A similar observation was made by Chad Luck in his discussion of phenomenology of possession: “[s]tealing was an immoral act that could occur only when one slave stole from another; ‘taking’ was a justifiable appropriation of the master’s property” (2014, 167).

The bondsmen’s second argument justifying thievery also employs the rhetorical strategy of stressing their status as human property. If the slaveholder claimed ownership of the slave, and in so doing deprived the latter of his/her legal personhood, then the possessions of the slave automatically belong to the owner. Thus, in this line of reasoning, if the slave were to take something from his/her master, with permission or without, that would not qualify as theft. It would simply

26. Not surprisingly planters exploited the slaves’ legal status as property for their own ends. Loyalie King explains that since in the eyes of the law a slave was not a natural person, he/she was “forbidden to own property,” that is why whatever he/she acquired “necessarily defined as outside the law” (2003, 59).

27. John Wood offers a different perspective on slaves’ “customary sense of ownership.” The enslaved owned “property [solely] by the leave of the master, or by theft” (Wood 2015). He also explains that because of “the seemingly communal nature of property within the slave quarters” ownership was granted to the bondsmen as a whole, not to individuals. Hence, stealing from other slaves would mean stealing from oneself as well.

be redistribution of the master's property with no apparent loss (Fox-Genovese 1998, 96): "what I take from my master, being for my own use, who am his slave, or property, he loses nothing by its transfer" – declared one slave (qtd in Bush 1990, 31). Many slaves shared Frederick Douglass's explanation that "it was only a question of removal – the taking of his [the planter's] meat out of one tub, and putting it into another; the ownership of the meat was not affected by the transaction. At first, he owned the meat in the tub, and last, he owned it in me" (1855, 189). Genovese concurs, explaining:

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. (1976, 602)

This line of argumentation defines thievery as consolidation of two pieces of property owned by the same man, which "can best be understood as redistributions of the income of the plantation household as a whole" (Fox-Genovese 1998, 96).

Thirdly, the enslaved applied moral and economic rights to the discourse of agricultural production and ownership (Lichtenstein 1988, 415; Farrish 2015, 158). One slave announced to his master that "he could take the food he worked for when he wanted because 'the Bible says a man has a right to the sweat of his own eyebrows'" (Lichtenstein 1988, 420). This moral sense of entitlement to the master's property – "covert access to the items produced by their labor" (Farrish 2015, 158) – riffs off in many a slave narrative. For instance, as Henry Bibb admitted, "I consider that I had a just right to what I took, because it was the labor of my own hands. Should I take from a neighbor as a freeman, in a free country, I should consider myself guilty of doing wrong before God and man" (1849, 195). Lewis Clarke relates the story of one slave who believed "she had a right to eat of the work of her own hands. It was a kind of first principle, too, in her code of morals, that they that worked had a right to eat" (1845, 26). Slaves' moral philosophy dictated that if they grew, cultivated and produced food for their owners, the fruit of their labor was just as much theirs (Lichtenstein 1988, 416; King 2003, 60).

There is another side to the relation between agricultural production and ownership, which, interestingly, works within the constraints of plantation ideology. Rewarding slaves for backbreaking labor with insufficient food rations was an insidious practice, which the slaves remedied by taking what they believed they were rightly entitled to but unjustly denied (Escott 1979, 114; Kerkvliet 1986, 108; Luck 2014, 168). Since the enslaved lacked legal status and thus they could not openly make "the rightful claim to agricultural production" (Farrish 2015, 158),

they resorted to taking food without permission. This allocation, so the bondsmen claimed, was done as much for the benefit of their masters as for themselves. This manipulation of the logic of ownership to their advantage was clearly pointed out by Frederick Douglass:

Considering that my labor and person were the property of Master Thomas, and that I was by him deprived of the necessaries of life – necessaries obtained by my own labor – it was easy to deduce the right to supply myself with what was my own. It was simply appropriating what was my own to the use of my master, since the health and strength derived from such food were exerted in his service. (1855, 189)

In a similar vein, Steward justified thievery: “it can not [sic] be *stealing*, because ‘it belongs to massa, and so do we, and we only use one part of his property to benefit another’” (1857, 29). Such rationalization inverts the logic typically ascribed to thievery – instead of being robbed, the planter profits from his slaves’ acts of pilferage. In this way, slaves registered complaint regarding their enslaved status while seemingly, on the surface, recognizing the legitimacy of that same status; this is yet another instance of Scott’s (1985) weapons of the weak as well as an example of Symon’s rhetorical resistance through disputed identity.

“Incontrovertible animalism” (Roberts 2008, 80) is the final stereotypical depiction of those of African descent conjured by whites. By designating the black Other as bestial, white Southerners rhetorically justified segregation and subjugation of the black race. Among the strategies planters employed to symbolically erase the humanity of the enslaved were acts of culinary humiliation. This dehumanization was imposed at a young age – children and adults alike were fed out of communal troughs like pigs with only oyster or clam shells as utensils as noted in the slave narratives of Frederick Douglass (1845, 27 & 1855, 133), Lunsford Lane (1842, 13), and dozens of others. Such reduction of slave children to the status of an animal was a source of apparent amusement for planters (Escott 1979, 22-23). Next, adult slaves had to dance, sing or recite to obtain bread or other provisions; their subjectivity denied through those performative acts (Douglass 1855, 131). Racist logic dictated that since slaves were degraded by but ostensibly inured to such debased forms of amusement they were unworthy of the humane treatment they were denied. Hence, slave narratives are a repository of horror stories replete with food-related debasements. Mistresses would spit in meals the enslaved prepared and/or crammed the dish down the cook’s throat if the master found it not to his liking (Jacobs 1861, 22). One cook was forced to “eat large quantities of inedible food” prepared by herself (Sharpless 2010, 137). The most extreme cases of brutality perpetuated through the use of food – rubbing pepper and salt onto whipped lacerations (reported in numerous slave narratives), literally barbecuing

unruly slaves (Jacobs 1861, 71; Escott 1979, 41) and/or smoking them in smoke houses (Brown 1847, 21-22) – are spectacles visibly displaying the slave body in pain, and as such they both reproduce and validate the racist optics denying the humanity of the enslaved (Hartman 1997, 20).

Interestingly, even while committing heinous acts such as murder (and thus affirming their putative bestiality) some slaves used food as a rhetorical tool of restoring dignity and healing the humanity they were deprived of at the wooden troughs in early childhood. Before murdering Elizabeth “Betsy” Witherspoon, a South Carolina widow, her houseslaves indulged in her estate in a peculiar way: as recorded by Mary Chesnut, first they enjoyed “a rare fine supper and a heap of laughing at the way dey’s all look tomorrow” (Stern 2010, 214), after which they beat and suffocated her. This festive meal eaten before the actual murder is clearly irrelevant with respect to moral judgment of the horrific crime. Yet enjoying a celebratory meal replete with such civilized appurtenances as tableware and linen – as opposed to using shells to scoop slops from troughs²⁸ – served to restore not only their humanity but dignity as well. There is a world of difference between wolfing down scraps in the kitchen²⁹ or sharing breakfast with cows and pigs (Washington 1904, 151) and dining at the table in the Big House. The former defines one as a base animal, the latter as a civilized human being.

Defining the enslaved as immoral beings incapable of self-control proved to be a double-edged sword. If the enslaved were indeed “naturally” prone to criminal activities then it was only natural that they engage in forms of resistance connected with production and consumption of food. The presence of debased chattel provided white slave owners with visible evidence warranting inhumane treatment of their slaves, who were deemed little better than animals (Cerulo 1998, 24). Yet their very presence simultaneously highlighted both the black body in pain, a direct result of such treatment, and white vulnerability should the enslaved decide to take revenge. White fear of black retaliation was fueled by the justifiably terrified consciences of whites. Planters realized that their “brutal exercise of power” could give rise to murderous resistance (Hartman 1997, 62). The very thought that food – one of the tools whites used to dehumanize the enslaved – could easily be poisoned and served as an object of revenge in the hands of their supposedly subhuman bondsmen haunted many slave owners (Brown 2018, 166). Since “[p]oison was a much more common weapon than bullets” in the hands

28. The symbolical importance of tableware in this incident is a direct reference to shells used by the enslaved to eat from troughs. “The absence of silverware render[ed] the children animalistic and uncivilized, objectified as mere tools to complete the master’s work. The oyster shells and shingles are literal work-objects ... that become extensions of the children’s hands as they attempt to nourish their bodies” (Tsank 2021, 135).

29. Feeding leftovers, scraps or rotten food to the enslaved (Wallach 2019, 51-52) was yet another way planters used to dehumanize their human chattel.

of the oppressed (Fox-Genovese 1998, 316), attempted and successful murders of whites via poisoning are recorded in many slave narratives and interviews (Equiano 1789, 89; Grimes 1825, 194; and others).

The research presented here resonates with the shifting focus in the historiography of slavery identified by Theresa Singleton, who claims “studies of slave foodways have ... moved away from nutrition to consider social and cultural factors that also influenced foodways of enslaved people” (1995, 126). Analysis of food-related slave resistance from a rhetorical perspective – informed in part by Symon’s tools of rhetorical resistance and Scott’s weapons of the weak (1985) – illustrates the critical importance of such research by demonstrating how the enslaved used food as everyday strategies of resistance to planter’s oppressive rule. Slave narratives give plentiful descriptions of slave defiance through enactment and transgression of stereotypical depictions of the Other race (feigned accommodation to bondage in juba songs and subversive acts aimed at challenging the status quo through such acts as theft and poisoning). Thus, food in slave narratives is rendered as both a rhetorically symbolic as well as material enactment of slaves’ constructive and disruptive contestation of white power. Aware that direct confrontation with the white oppressor could lead to merciless retribution, the enslaved, through acts such as modifying work ethic, gardening, pilfering food, and organizing secret parties sought to ease the chokehold of chattel slavery rather than instantly overthrow it altogether. Hence, as Scott remarks, the “powerless”, regardless of whether they were peasants or slaves, were “concerned largely with immediate, de facto gains” in their daily struggles (1985, 33), putting the systematic and cumulative resistance of political or military revolt on a back-burner (Aptheker 1974). Scott’s observation that to “understand these commonplace forms of resistance is to understand what much of the peasantry does ‘between revolts’ to defend its interests as best it can” (1985, 29) may well be extended to slaves’ everyday resistance, which provided a fertile ground for slave collaboration and, to use Hillard’s phrase, afforded them a means of “wriggl[ing] out from under the thumb of oppressive masters” (2014, 5).

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