***Main Title:***

**"Woman’s Wuck”: Female Slave Labor in the Antebellum South**

By way of this interactive, screen-based, environment is an archive of the intermingled identities of worker, laborer, property, and individual due to the subjectivity of the enslaved Black African Woman. This work aims to uncover how we might we define the agency of the Black body through its objectification as both laborer and worker, and further understand the entanglement of cultural identity and practice that in a post-colonial world has become means of extraction for monetary gain.

Through this thought framework, harnessed within the limits of these pre-emancipation texts and recollections, there will be an uncovering and discovering some of the various methods of which the Black Woman’s body has become the central sustainer of American infrastructure, and how the study and speculation of African cultural practice has been commoditized for the sake of labor/work production. Through this process, it is the Black Woman who is pushed into a state of subjectivity.

The main case study under investigation in this project is the life of a field hand on a South Carolina rice plantation. More specifically, Elizabeth W. Allston Pringle and Alice R. Huger Smith’s recollection of life on the plantation in the diary, *A Woman Rice Planter*. A Woman Rice Planter, as a text introduces us to the issues, I am to address just in being. This text, entitled A Woman Rice Planter, follows the life of Elizabeth, rather than those that plant the rice. Despite the narrative power of presenting a powerfully wealthy southern plantation owner, all of the imagery and illustration focuses on the day-to-day tasks and lives of the Black Women who are enslaved on the grounds.

The rich primary sources of the direct records from the Allston family, and accounts of their estates, along with the dense history of African rice farming and the exploitation of such skills in American slavery, I would hope to provide some insight onto how the women on this plantation might have viewed their work and labor first-hand.

Agriculture has traditionally been a gendered practice on a global scale. The division of labor from hunter gatherer even to that of the plantation produces a very specific environment where value can be extracted from the work that one practices. The conception of this labor practice soon begins to infiltrate the object of identity, producing a person now in a subject position

Women from the ivory and gold coasts of Africa were particularly sought out by slave traders due to their expertise in sewing, growing, and cultivating, rice crops. It has been recorded that female slaves received higher purchase prices in South Carolina than in other plantation economies due to the value of their labor. Knowledge of the rice patty was quite specific to West African culture at the time, and specifically to women.

**Rice is Black, Rice is Gold: Rice Farming, Slave Labor, and Economics**

To be an enslaved woman of African descent at this time was deadly and wholly so, because this conglomerate of tissue and organ that is built to sustain life has been quite literally translated into the economic system as a machine. Rice processing involves three operations: threshing, milling, and winnowing. These processes take care of the removal of the talk, hulls, and pounding of the grains in order to harvest the rice. This process, was extremely grueling and strenuous, often taking hours at a time of consistent applied strength.

“Slavery shifted the temporal pattern of rice milling in Africa, characterized by women pounding the cereal for a short period of time each day of the year, to one that compressed milling into just a few months. The shift demanded that slaves spend grueling hours processing rice. Then, as the rice export economy placed ever greater demands on labor, rice processing required dissolving its African basis as a female responsibility to that both men and women processed the crop.” (Carney, 138).

R.F.W.Allston, father of Elizabeth Allston, and generational heir to the Chicora Wood rice plantation, “..described hand milling the rough rice as a process in which the grains were passed between wooden blocks, twenty inches in diameter and six inches thick, and worked by hand.” (Carney, p.130) These women would work deep into the night to produce triple their weight in grains of rice. Allston also commented, “The method was, that each male laborer had three pecks of rough rice in a mortar, and each female two pecks, to pound before day or sun-rise; and the same at night, after finishing the ordinary task in the field.” (Carney, p.133)

Chicora Wood, owned by the Allston family, was one of the largest producers of rice in the South. In the 1800’s there were recorded to be 600+ enslaved people on the plantation grounds. Being that this was a rice plantation, the majority of the enslaved population were women due to this identifiably gendered practice of rice harvesting.

The first map on this page identifies locations mentioned by Elizabeth Allston in her *Woman Rice Planter* diary at the. The second map displays the size of the Chicora plantation where all of the illustrations incorporated in the Chicora Wood Laborers tab were drawn.

As rice production grew in the colonies South Carolinas enslaved African population grew to 90,000 people in 1765. These people were recorded to have harvested approximately 40,000 tons of rice that was exported to Europe.

These were women’s hands, executing women’s skills through cultural practice. What does it mean to have your culture reappropriated for another cause, and to have yourself be the main agent of the stretching of what was once sacred?

“Because women figure so centrally in rice culture in West Africa, the question arises whether the patterns of labor with slave-produced rice bear any resemblance to the gender division of labor found historically in West African rice cultivation…Given the historical significance of women in African rice systems, the concern here is to illuminate whether patterns of rice development in colonial South Carolina and Georgia reveal the residue of a knowledge system transmitted by African women across the Middle Passage.” (Carney, 120)

**The Women Rice Planters of Chicora Wood; Work, Labor, and the Subjugated Self**

Chicora Wood, owned by the Allston family, was one of the largest producers of rice in the South. In the 1800’s there were recorded to be 600+ enslaved people on the plantation grounds. Being that this was a rice plantation, the majority of the enslaved population were women due to this identifiably gendered practice of rice harvesting. The laborers on the Allston plantation were recorded to have produced 840,000 pounds of rice between 1850 and 1860. The Allston’s were well invested in the production of rice, and therefore invested in making the most profit from this female body.

Hannah Arendt, identifies a particular idea of laboring by nature, in reference to the ways that Bees work. They produce honey to survive, but in that survival, there is labor. In the same way, It might be understoond that despite the recognition of the woman rice worker as an objecive character, part of the biological composition of these bodies is that they posess the ability to reproduce. It is not by nature that this reproduction process is part of labor, but the commonization and extraction of value from life practice for those that do not possess ownership of themselves, renders their intimacy to become means of profit. There is now the presence of a layered identity projected onto and through these women; subject, worker, laborer, and self.

As the institution of American Slavery prospered, it was productive to have able bodies for childbearing in order to reproduce laborers. In this way, it might be understood that the women on this plantation, and many others like it are double laborers.

“Those who would capture African women to exploit their labors in the Americas would have to grapple with, and harness those women’s dual identity as workers and parents; once having done so they would inaugurate a language of race and racial hierarchy in which hat dualism was reduced to denigration and demobilized as evidence of European distinction”. (Morgan, 25)

On this page is a collection of collaged and matched images of the illustrations of the rice field laborers overlaid on images recently taken of the plantation property. These images work to give agency in visibility to these women in their day-to-day tasks, not reading them as mere pieces of the landscape but acknowledging their presence in place and the work put forth by their persons.

The rice harvest was once a cultural piece of pride back in the homelands of these women. Rice is not native to the Americas, and all of the American practices in rice cultivation are directly by result of teaching and practice by these Black women. These women from Niger, Senegal, Ghana, Cote d’Ivorie, Mali Sierra Leone, and the Congo introduced an understanding and a skill far beyond what was capable of anyone else at the time.

**Bibliography:**

- Elizabeth W. Allston Pringle, (Author) and Alice R. Huger Smith (Illustrator), A Woman Rice Planter. Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, Jean Blackwell Hutson Research and Reference Division. 1913.   
  
- Hannah Arendt, “The Human Condition,” “Labor,” and “Work” in The Human Condition. University of Chicago Press. 1958.   
  
- US National Park Service, Discover American Life and labor at Chicora Wood: A Lightning Lesson from Teaching with Historic Places.   
  
- Judith A. Carney, Black Rice, Chapter 4, "This Was 'Woman's Wuck'". Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001.   
  
- Hayden R. Smith, Carolina's Golden Fields. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2020   
  
- Jennifer L. Morgna, Laboring Women.University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004   
  
- "Slavery on South Carolina Rice Plantations: The Migration of People and Knowledge in Earl Colonial America"