

# Books & arts

510. Afrique Occidentale - SÉNÉGAL - RUFISQUE - Les arachides en Gare



People gather among peanuts stacked for transport in Senegal in the early twentieth century.

## How the peanut trade prolonged slavery

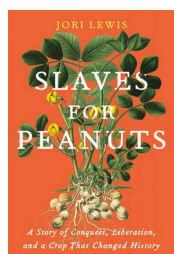
The legume's history in West Africa is intimately linked with conquest. **By Amy Maxmen**

**T**he peanuts we devour today, seeds of the legume *Arachis hypogaea*, originated in South America and spread around the world because of the peanut's popularity as a snack and a source of oil. But as with many commodities, their expansion is also a story about the conquest of land and of humans.

In *Slaves for Peanuts*, environmental journalist Jori Lewis reveals how the rise of the peanut crop was intertwined with slavery, abolition and religious conquest in West Africa during French colonization in the nineteenth century. To unearth this history, Lewis pored over archival documents, newspapers and botanical manuscripts stored in Senegal, Gambia and France, along with oral histories and the lyrics of griots – singers revered as historians and poets in West Africa. Her drive to tell the stories of people excluded from history books stems, at least in part, she writes, from her own curiosity as an African American whose ancestors were enslaved.

The hard facts of the material are made lively through a few main characters and Lewis's imagery as she traverses the land where the dramas of the book unfolded. "We traveled like the people whose steps we were retracing might have in the nineteenth century, in our horse cart that clip-clopped on a dirt trail toward the horizon," she writes.

The modern peanut dates back more than 10,000 years, to the lowlands east of the Andes Mountains, where it derived from a hybridization of two older types of peanut – possibly thanks to a chance pollination by



**Slaves for Peanuts:  
A Story of Conquest,  
Liberation, and a Crop  
That Changed History**  
Jori Lewis  
The New Press (2022)

a bee. By the time Christopher Columbus landed in the New World, people across South America were cultivating peanuts. As waves of European conquerors and clergy arrived on the continent, some returned with peanut plants as gifts for royalty waiting to learn what goods they might gain from foreign lands. It isn't clear when *A. hypogaea* reached West Africa, but Lewis suggests that the crop could have been flourishing in the region by the end of the sixteenth century. The peanut succeeded in its new home thanks to the climate and the farmers' familiarity with another crop that produces small, edible seeds in the ground: the Bambara groundnut, *Vigna subterranea*.

When the transatlantic slave trade began to wind down in the first half of the nineteenth century, French officials living in colonial outposts in what is now Senegal focused on the peanut in their search for alternative sources of revenue. Demand for vegetable oil and soap was rising in Europe, and peanuts offered a low-cost resource as long as ample supplies could be provided for a low price. Key to this was the availability of free human labour.

### Legal loopholes

Lewis delves into the powerful kingdom of Kajoor, which by 1850 was producing the majority of Senegal's peanut exports. Its peanuts were often grown by people enslaved by Africans, despite France's formal proclamation that it would end slavery in its colonies. A series of loopholes and justifications allowed the practice to continue. For example, France determined that slavery was permissible if enslaved people were classed as 'domestics' or 'servants'. French officials in the late nineteenth century wrote to their superiors in Europe about the "delicate question of captives", Lewis reports. One official warned: "If you suppress the supply of these captives to the colonies, you will destroy farming everywhere and in short order." He grotesquely argued that captive people had volunteered for servitude and that it would be "inhumane" to grant them freedom.

To meet the hunger for peanuts, France overthrew leaders who did not comply with its demands. When Kajoor's African ruler interfered with the Europeans' plans to build a railway through the region to export peanuts, the French military invaded violently. After burning villages, troops posted a decree stating that they had "come to carry out a great work of civilization among you". One captain wrote to his mother describing how a Black

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man had burnt to death when the troops had set fire to his home. Even in some of the darkest passages, readers will find relief in Lewis's prose. She imagines what the invading troops see: "The landscape and vegetation so riotous after the rainy season, its forests of baobab and gum trees, towering cailedrats, brilliant green tamarinds with clusters of rusty-colored drooping fruits and the flaming blooms of flamboyant trees."

### Drive for liberty

Seeking freedom, many enslaved people fled from Kajor and other interior regions to the French colonial outpost in Saint Louis, a series of small islands at the mouth of the Senegal River. Here, the colonial government had to make a show of supporting abolition. But it was a "false promised land", Lewis writes, because escapees would be returned to their captors if they couldn't establish residency in Saint Louis. One way to do that was to find Walter Samuel Taylor, one of the very few African pastors for the Paris Evangelical Missionary Society, who ran a shelter for escapees. Lewis tells the story of Moussa Sidibé, a young man whom Taylor hid until the three-month residency period had passed and he could obtain papers announcing his freedom. A striking document reproduced in the book certifies that Sidibé is "able to possess his own self".

Taylor bound his drive to abolish slavery to his goals as a missionary. At an 1878 meeting of the evangelical society in France, he told the audience that granting Africans freedom would give the church a competitive edge against Muslims who were trying to win hearts and minds. He also warned that a racist approach to missionary work that denigrates African cultures is alienating. In other words, the quest for souls would be more successful if it respected people's lives.

Still, Taylor didn't say much about slavery in Kajor and other peanut-producing regions – at least that was preserved in archives. Perhaps such advocacy did not seem worth the risk, given the threats he already faced to his career from some Europeans in the evangelical mission. But there is no way to know his sentiments because, as Lewis reminds us, history is only as complete as what's left behind.

*Slaves for Peanuts* is a valuable addition to agricultural and West African history. But part of what makes the book for me is Lewis's journey tracing this history in Senegal, a country she's resided in for more than a decade. When the archives don't contain the voices of people who tilled the land, she goes in search of stories, asking elders for the vanishing memories of those who came before. Even when she comes up empty-handed, the reader is richer because of her questions.

**Amy Maxmen** is a senior reporter at *Nature*, based in Oakland, California.

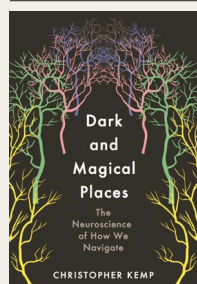
## Books in brief



### Control

Adam Rutherford *Weidenfeld & Nicolson* (2022)

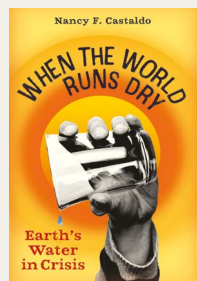
When Charles Darwin's cousin, Francis Galton, coined the word eugenics in 1883, he called it the study of the conditions under which "men of a high type are produced". This gross idea led to the gates of Auschwitz, reminds broadcaster Adam Rutherford (an alumnus of the Galton Laboratory, former name of University College London's human-genetics centre). It hasn't gone away, he explains in his timely salvo on the politics and history of notions that dog genetics, events up to and after the 'CRISPR twins' and the resurgence of white supremacy.



### Dark and Magical Places

Christopher Kemp *Profile/Wellcome Collection* (2022)

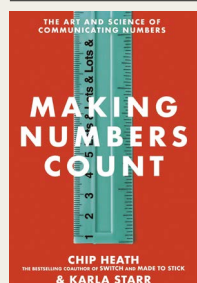
"I have no sense of direction," confesses molecular biologist Christopher Kemp – unlike his wife, "an effortless and intuitive navigator". Once, in a mirror maze, he was transfixed with alarm, and had to be pulled out by his seven-year-old son. Many others experience similar disorientation, sometimes with disastrous results, as when hikers get lost. Their stories vitalize this compelling study of the brain, memory and navigation, in which one psychologist compares our understanding of parts of the brain with knowledge of black holes.



### When the World Runs Dry

Nancy F. Castaldo *Algonquin* (2022)

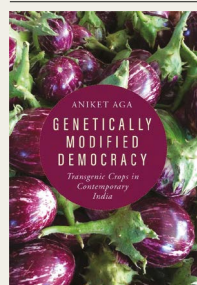
Globally, millions of people must walk up to 6 kilometres daily to get clean water, says environmental writer Nancy Castaldo. Moreover, each year, more children die as a result of water contamination than from violence, including war, said the United Nations in 2019. Castaldo's alarming book discusses many examples of shortages and tainting, ranging from drought in Cape Town, South Africa, to lead pollution in Flint, Michigan. She concludes with realistic steps to reduce domestic consumption and contamination.



### Making Numbers Count

Chip Heath and Karla Starr *Avid Reader* (2022)

Business scholar Chip Heath and science journalist Karla Starr are familiar with the need to "translate numbers into instinctive human experience", informatively and memorably. Unable to find a book on the subject, they decided to write their own. Their diverse guide bubbles with translated statistics. For example, there are about 400 million civilian-owned firearms in the United States – that translates into one for every adult and child, with around 70 million left over.



### Genetically Modified Democracy

Aniket Aga *Yale Univ. Press* (2021)

India's 1960s Green Revolution began without much deliberation. The government promoted high-yielding varieties of wheat and rice, and guaranteed purchase prices. This helped "already well-off, landed farmers", notes environmentalist Aniket Aga, but led to huge debts for the struggling majority. When genetically modified crops reached India in 2002, they cultivated much more scrutiny, involving scientists, seed companies, farmers, consumers and the state. Aga describes the debate, without claiming to provide an answer. **Andrew Robinson**