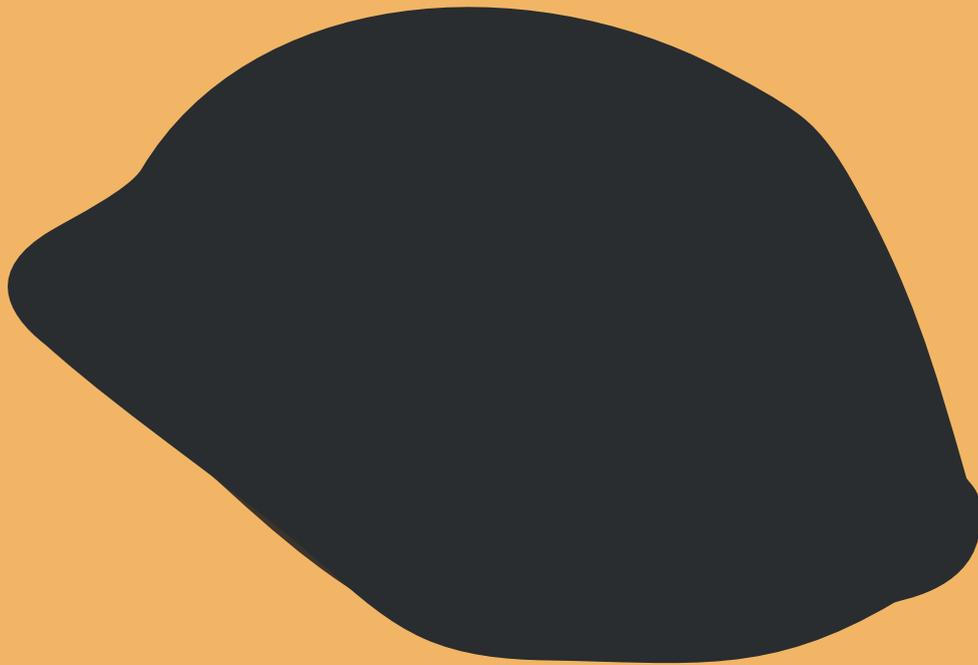


TO US IT JUST LOOKS LIKE A LEMON
a meandering collection of thoughts on movement

by Holly Graham



TO US IT JUST LOOKS LIKE A LEMON a meandering collection of thoughts on movement

*what looks to be a piece of fruit¹
with half a sour orange and a little burnt alum²
expels all the putrescence and pus from the gums³
loose teeth and stinking breath⁴
no medicine nor apothecary's drug⁵
the essential remedies⁶*

WHAT LOOKS TO BE A PIECE OF FRUIT

The lemon – that puckered lip inducing, yellow fruit – has begun to float as a motif of sorts through a body of work I've been developing in recent years. I first registered it clasped curiously in the hand of a porcelain sweetmeats figurine, held within the V&A Museum's collections, at the onset of embarking on my now ongoing research into histories and legacies of sugar. It surfaced again while combing through press cuttings at Southwark Local History Library a couple of years back, in the form of candied peel churned out by Bermondsey factories in the late 19th century. I liked its form, its texture and weight: here, as a collection of sliced half-moon segments, and glittering crimp-lined crescent rinds; and there, as a palm-sized globular fruit with pinch-stretched poles. I mapped the two references onto each other in visual and textual studio experiments, and began to look further back at its presence amidst colonial sea-faring exploits; adopted alongside other citrus fruits as a cure for sailors' scurvy, bobbing on the turbulent waves of naval histories that went on to form empires.

Last year, I was invited to take up a residency at Southwark Park Galleries as part of a project commemorating the 400 year anniversary of the Mayflower. In 1620, puritans and accompanying 'strangers' boarded the ship together on a stretch of the river just a stones-throw away from the gallery, in Rotherhithe. And now centuries later, the project sought to critically retrace the vessel's narrative as a point of departure for considering migration in a contemporary context. Before the residency, my knowledge of the Mayflower was minimal. I was aware of it only peripherally, as the birthing of the Thanksgiving story, with all the myth and contradiction it carries – a celebration of the putting down of roots of one group of people at the expense of the survival of indigenous populations; the birthing of a new nation on occupied land that would espouse ideals of universal freedoms while subjugating and exploiting others. The threads of movement and colonialism woven through previous citrus-studded research seemed inextricably tied to the European expansionist ideals that laid the foundations to enable the relocation of the Plymouth Pilgrims in 1620. So, when invited to take up the residency at Southwark Park Galleries, I thought of lemons.

The lemon as we know it today is a hybrid of other pre-existing species of citrus fruits. Originating in South-East Asia, it's now grown around the world, including throughout the Mediterranean and South and Central America.⁷ The fragrant thick-skinned fruit has travelled widely and has a multitude of stories to tell. The symbolic value projected onto the lemon is broad. While speaking of the V&A's fruit-grasping sugar bowl figure, a museum guide told me of the lemon's associations with wealth and fertility; emblematic of the bitterness encountered when one overindulges in luxury, and serving – like other fruits – as a signifier of both harvest and plenty alongside transience and mortality. 'To us, it just looks like a lemon,' she told me. According to Google, Catholicism projects fidelity and faithfulness onto it too.



Images collected by Holly Graham during her residency at the Bermondsey Bothy, 2019

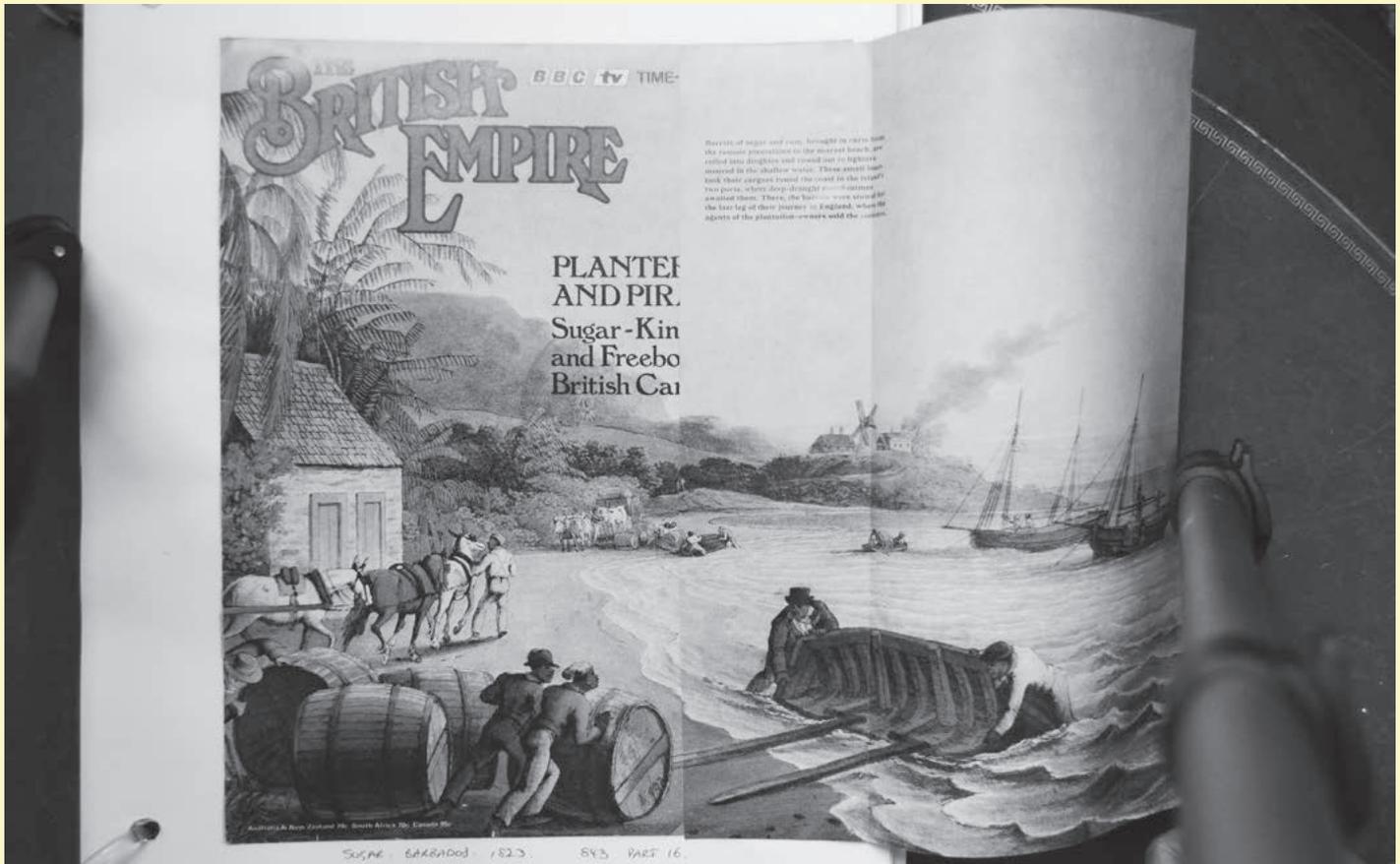
There is documented discussion over possible cures for scurvy dating as far back as the mid-16th century, and knowledge of the virtues of lemons and oranges by the end of the 1500s. Many of these early accounts and recommendations are from Portuguese and Spanish merchants, reflecting the naval supremacy of the two powers, who initially led the way in Europe's expansionist ambitions. But as it turns out, according to food historian Felipe Fernández-Armesto, the employment of citrus as a remedy was not widely used at this point due to issues of supply, storage and expense.⁸ We know from records that after a two-month long blustery journey on the Mayflower, followed by a winter on-board the docked ship, only half of those who set out remained; likely due to a combination of scurvy, pneumonia, and tuberculosis. With depleted resources at the outset, and a lengthy crossing ahead of them, perhaps it is unlikely that the Mayflower Pilgrims would have had many a lemon at their disposal.

In these early stages of research, while the loose threads I'd used to draw together the citrus and the Mayflower narrative began to slacken, I continued to reflect on the tangled relationship between food and movement, and to consider the entry points into conversation offered by traversing the common-ground subject of eating. As such, the residency would find itself – much like this text does – threaded through with bite-sized segues and tangents, morsels of culinary information, tying my preoccupation with food to thoughts around migration. I thought about dinner tables as spaces of collective sharing, forums for exchange, conversation, and story-telling. I thought about the potential of food and movement to feed each other. I thought about the familiarity of seeing consumable vegetable matter day-to-day in our supermarket aisles, quotidian and simple; and yet each imbued with stories and histories of their own, that may offer tangible ways into thinking and talking about pasts and presents of place. To us, it just looks like a lemon.

SEA LEGS

The Plymouth Pilgrims, as they came to be known, were not the first English arrivals to endeavour to establish colonies on American soil. Their act was predated by the famed first permanent settlement in what is now known as the USA, Jamestown Virginia (1607), and by several foiled efforts before that, including that of the Lost Colony of Roanoke (1585). Notably, albeit tangentially, the beloved potato that has formed such a staple of the British and Irish diet – a fundamental ingredient in both shepherd's and cottage pies, in stews and roasts, the mash to our bangers, the chips to our fish – was introduced to this here soil by one of these early exploits. Sir Walter Raleigh, the English who headed up the Roanoke expedition, is credited with introducing the humble potato to these isles. He obtained a charter from Elizabeth I to 'discover, search, finde out, and view', and furthermore to 'have, horde, occupie and enjoy' what the text refers to as 'such remote, heathen and barbarous lands, countries, and territories, not actually possessed of any Christian Prince, nor inhabited by Christian People'⁹. While he is said not to have actually visited North America himself, he funded multiple expeditions of this kind. Unlike those self-titled 'adventurers' and merchants who went before, the Puritans might instead be better understood as religious refugees; driven, by their Separatist ideals, first to the Netherlands and then – when the hand of the English state stretched out beyond the nation's borders to reach them there – onwards across the Atlantic. The written testimony of puritan William Bradford tells us that their journey was not an easy one. But the way ahead was prepared for them by those earlier European forays into the 'New World' and the disease it brought with it; the land cleared in advance of their arrival by the subsequent deaths of many of its previous Native American inhabitants.

It is to practice an act of partial or selective study, negligent and violent in its omissions, to consider the Mayflower story without taking in a view through a wider lens of broader colonial



The British Empire: BBC TV Time-Life Books, No. 16: 'Planters and Pirates', 1972; at Rotherhithe Picture Library

contexts at the heart of the formation of what we now know as the USA; self-appointed 'land of the free and home of the brave'. While the ambitions of the puritans, in their pursuit of religious freedoms, may be viewed as modest; their movements exist within a wider frame of entitled colonial conquest and exploitation that cannot be ignored. Indeed, they sailed with the Virginia Company, with the aim of settling - had they not been blown off course - in the northern part of the already established Virginia colony. It is perhaps worth noting, in view of this wider context, that just a year before the Mayflower touched down, the first enslaved Africans arrived on the shores of the Virginia settlement. Delivered on a British privateer ship, the twenty or so captured individuals had been seized from a Spanish or Portuguese vessel (reports differ) carrying many more to the Caribbean; an enforced displacement of people, and the beginning of a new racialized, highly-oiled and economically-efficient form of slavery that would go on to shape the building of a new nation.¹⁰ In these early days of empire, attempts were also made to enslave indigenous Americans, and indentured European labour was also employed. The Mayflower sailed, therefore, at a time of expansive and exploitative European power-building, colonial strategies that operated through active settlement drives and forced migrations.

For the pilgrims' own part, although their early relationship with neighbouring indigenous communities was cordial, it soon took on the forceful character and style of aggressive colonial expansion. Purchasing of additional land from the local Pokanoket people shifted, just over half a century after the sailing of the Mayflower, into an active purging of the land of its people through warfare and enslavement. It is estimated that during King Philip's War (1675-78), the Plymouth Colony sold over 500 indigenous people into slavery.¹¹ The later success of the colony for its puritan inhabitants can also be seen as inextricably linked to the wider context of English colonial settlement through the two-way food-based trade that operated between Plymouth Colony and the West Indies; fish, timber, grain and cattle in exchange for sugar and rum produced via slave labour.¹²

These complexities and dualities complicate singular narratives of a people's triumph over adversity, of a harmonious mutuality between the settlers and the surrounding indigenous populations, and of the pursuit of freedom. The wider picture pokes holes in the swollen narrative of Thanksgiving, calling into question re-enactments of celebratory feasting that remembers historical gains and masks human losses. It strikes me that there is a peculiar contradiction in the Western fear of mass migration, an irrational terror of immigrant takeover that is more reflective of the damaging colonial pursuits of European powers between the 15th and 19th centuries, than of the realities of any actual movement of groups of people today. From Conservative threats of 'a nigger for your neighbour'¹³ with a vote for Labour in the 1960s, to contemporary warnings of 'cockroaches'¹⁴ and 'swarms'¹⁵, a wild fear-mongering regarding the movement of others is pervasive in British political and media rhetoric. This signals towards a troubled and unresolved relationship to movement and migration in Britain, a hypocritical double-standard that governs who is entitled to freedom of movement, and an inability to reconcile historical actions of the nation that have shaped its contemporary positioning as a potential home for people all over the world.

When I think of contemporary experiences of migration, I think of the language of 'expat' vs 'immigrant'. I think of right to work status and the poverty-driven sickness and death caused by its withdrawal. I think of border crossings. I think of Calais and Dunkirk, and news images of small dangerously overcrowded boats. I think of Windrush and its more recent corresponding 'Scandal'. I think of my wonderful, bold Auntie Babs, a curious linguist who lived for years at a time in Japan and Kenya. I think of friendships forged on my MA course with artists on international student visas, that have garnered me a worldwide network of creative collaborators dotted between Paris, Singapore, Madrid, Chile, Shetland, Cyprus and more. And I think of Brexit and the hostile environment policy.



Stir to Fully Incorporate Workshop led by Holly Graham, 2019

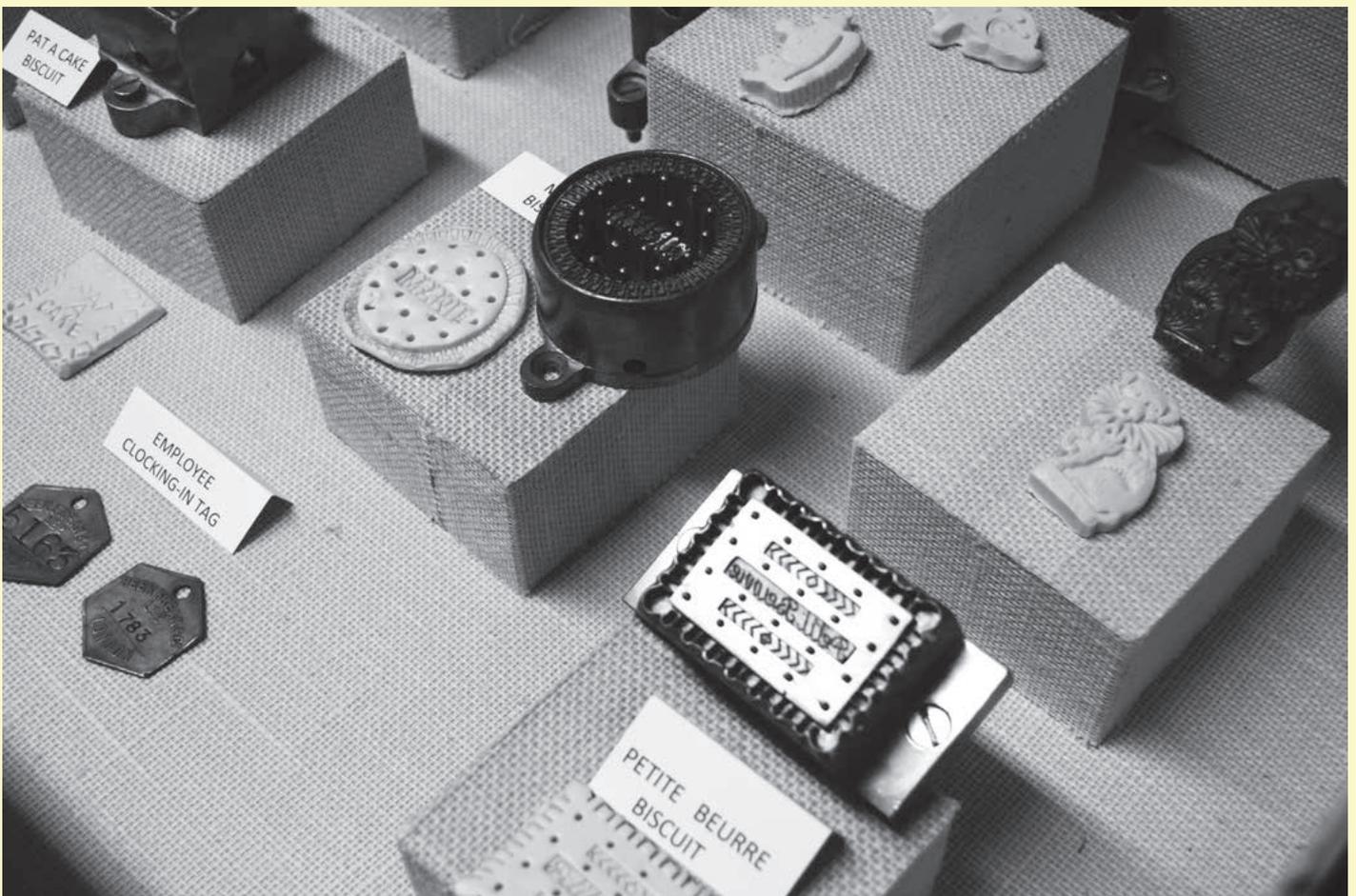


Workshops with young people from Bosco Centre at Rotherhithe Picture Library, 2019

SUGAR IN THE BLOOD

When I was invited to take up this residency, critically retracing the Mayflower narrative as a point of departure for considering migration in a contemporary context, I hesitated. Needless to say, migration and its contemporary context spans such a vast range of experiences that are not my own, and I felt overwhelmed by the potential breadth of the task at hand.

Even my own experiences of migration are not quite my own. They are cousins once or twice removed, a collective history, rather than a singular act. In conversations around diaspora, I've always been confused about whether I am classed as second or third generation immigrant. I believe the reality is that I'm somewhere in between. My father came to England from Jamaica in 1966 at the age of 7, along with his two older siblings, aged 8 and 10; not on the Windrush itself, but in its wake; not by sea, but by air. They were summoned to join their parents who'd answered the call of the 'mother country' in years prior, grandma Cynthia in 1964 and grandad William in 1961 - a teacher and a tailor, stitching together new lives in a cold Britain. My mother was born here, in South London in 1958. But her Bajan parents had also answered the Windrush call two years earlier in 1956, and set to work in British society; my granny Vera in schools as a dinner lady, and in the NHS as a nurse, and my grandfather Leon, as a carpenter.



Biscuit cutters on display at the Peak Freans Museum, 2019

These movements, locked into my family history, though relatively recent, might easily become lost in translation between generations, muted with details untold or forgotten. A few years back, in fear of the potential of generational amnesia, I instigated a project of opening up conversations with my family members; to trouble stuffy silences, and eek out space within them for voicing previously unanswered questions and listening for responses. What came forth sounded, to me at least, like a sigh. An exhalation of tension, a releasing of kept personal knowledge. The series of oral history interviews were conducted in pairs, threes, and sometimes more, where family curiosity piqued and bubbled over into determined sit-ins. Grandad William's interview along with his three sons garnered a whole audience of partners and grandchildren, eager to hear the measured words of this serious and guarded man, whose upbringing and motivations we realised we knew very little about. The conversations provoked an unravelling of names and pet-names, lost and found siblings, lost and found mothers, adopted parents and cross-generational care, knitted together and suspended in the frothy web of transatlantic crossings.

The routes and roots intertwined in this Caribbean heritage are sticky. Andrea Stuart writes of 'sugar in the blood'¹⁶; a channelling of further histories of enforced migration through enslavement of West Africans, indentured labour of Chinese, Indian, and Irish migrants, and extermination of indigenous communities of the Americas; all driven by a European sweet tooth for the wealth and power that colonial expansion and mass cane sugar production yielded. Legacies of these events are evidenced in British culinary culture: in afternoon tea, puddings, biscuits and jam on toast. These movements of people are baked into Bajan rum-soaked fruit cake; kneaded into Trinidadian paratha roti, or 'buss up shut' as it is often called; and stirred through Jamaican Guinness punch.

That the curve of the narrative arc later drew subjects of these far-flung islands to the small country that provoked many of these initial movements is then not wholly remarkable. As social theorist Stuart Hall noted of the relocated individuals of Britain's former colonies, 'we are here because you were there'. Galling then, for these former colonial subjects, after responding to calls to fight and work for Britain, after Rivers of Blood and decades of staying power, to be met with the Windrush Scandal. And this amidst a wider climate of the hostile environment, a closed-door policy for many individuals who today exercise their human right to free movement, out of choice or necessity, and at a time of global conflict, displacement, and economic, health, and environmental crisis. This legacy of sugar leaves a bitter taste in the mouth.

STIR TO FULLY INCORPORATE

In a mirroring of the combined assemblage of fragmentary thoughts, associations, and references that framed my initial response to Southwark Park Galleries' invite, my plan for the month-long residency involved a veritable stew of assorted activities.

I would make a second home of the beautiful Sands Films Image Library in Rotherhithe, itself housed within a former 18th century grain warehouse, with rafters fashioned from reclaimed ship timbers. There, I searched for images of food transportation on the docks, and sugar production both locally and further afield. There were ideas for a film, which now, following a year of gestation, is beginning to take shape within another project.

I would visit the museum of local former biscuit factory, Peek Freans, and interview one of the museum's two custodians, Frank, about the site and its relationship to wider stories of trade and food production in Bermondsey. At one time known as the 'larder of London', and positioned on the Thames, the area was a hotspot for the processing of imported and exported goods. The Peek Freans Museum is housed on the former site of the factory, and although its footprint remains largely intact, the museum itself is confined to a smallish 3-room unit within one of its blocks. The Victorian buildings now house a climbing wall, café, meeting rooms, and artist studios. In the vein of such industrial park developments, it has held a small part of its past in the names of the buildings – calling them 'Cocoa', 'Almond', 'Bourbon', and 'Jam' studios to name but a few. The site itself is listed on workspace.co.uk as 'The Biscuit Factory'. Frank, a former longstanding employee, spoke of the workers' community, and the impact of the factory's closure on the local area. He traced the company's origins from its early days of producing ships biscuits, through to innovating developments of sweet treats, shaped in moulded forms that have become imprinted on the national consciousness – the custard cream, the garibaldi, and the bourbon are now household names.

Back at the gallery I would initiate workshops on recipe-sharing, inviting participants to share favoured dishes or sugary snacks from home, wherever that may be. In a workshop with locally-based college Bosco Centre, we started with lemonade. We concocted a spiced version, somewhere between Delia's home-spun recipe and my mum's sorrel; a syrupy, wine-coloured, hibiscus flower cold-brew, infused with cinnamon and ginger, and often spiked with rum – variations on the theme are found in different parts of the Caribbean. We mixed the lemonade collectively in the gallery; multiple hands at work – a chopping team, a grating team, a squeezing team, a combining team. It was an almost frantic communal act. Many of the students on the EFL course are in the midst of navigating the arduous process of seeking asylum in the UK. The activity broke the shy quiet of the class, and Sudanese, Eritrean, Pakistani, Vietnamese, and English tongues knitted together in the air. Perhaps everyone was a little confused about why we were drinking lemonade in an empty gallery, but there was something satisfying about sipping this collaboratively produced refreshment together, and it served as an entry point for inviting those present to share their own recipes. We went on to create a photocopied cook book zine. It was an ambitious task for the time, and the group left with their teacher clutching stacks of un-bound pages, with a promise to finish them off later.

And that would have been it, but the students extended the project in the weeks that followed, cooking from their new books in the college kitchen. I was invited to join their lunchtime meal, and it was a joy. The reserve displayed in the gallery had dissipated and here in their own space they were at ease – bubbly, teasing, and eager to welcome a visitor. That day, young people from Eritrea led the cooking of injera and lentil stew. They shared tips and suggestions and argued over best approaches, though for several of them, this was their first attempt at



Cooking workshop at Bosco Centre, 2019

making the familiar dish themselves. The sense of achievement and delight at sharing this with their classmates was palpable. In the following weeks, they would continue to work their way through the book. Next time: Vietnamese chicken in tomato, and egg coffee!

I found on the residency that a month was not a long time at all. I was grateful for the flexibility and responsiveness of Southwark Park Galleries, allowing time where more was needed, and being open to shifting formats as the project evolved. Plans morphed from possibilities of screening events, into lunchtime zine launches, and on to this reflective text, which attempts to draw together some of the seemingly disparate strands of interest touched on in my time in the bothy. Many of the conversations had during that time formed the beginnings of new project strands that I am continuing to develop today, as part of an art practice that is sticky, lumpy and fluid in consistency – a muddy cocktail of lemons, sugar, potatoes, roti, sorrel, Guinness, injera, and more.

To Us It Just Looks Like A Lemon, commissioned by Southwark Park Galleries and generously supported by the Southwark Mayflower 400 Grants Fund from Southwark Council, British Land and United St Saviours.



1. *Sweet Swollen: Interviews with V&A Museum African Heritage Tour Guides*, conducted by Holly Graham, 2018
2. Fray Augustín Farfán, *Tractado Breve de Medicina*, 1592 – recommendations for the treatment of scurvy.
3. Fray Juan de Torquemada, *Manuscripts*, 1560s – ‘God gave this fruit [the pineapple] such virtue that it reverses the swelling of the gums, and makes them grip the teeth, and cleans them, and expels all the putrescence and pus from the gums, and after a couple of ingestions of this fruit the patient recovers sufficiently to be able to eat properly again and try any sort of food without trouble or pain.’
4. Lee R. McDowell, *Vitamin History, The Early Years*, 2013
5. Sebastián Vizcaíno, *Manuscripts*, 1569 – ‘[...] for there was no medicine nor apothecary’s drug, nor remedy nor doctor’s prescription nor any other human cure against this disease; or if there was such a cure it was fresh food alone and plenty of it.’
6. Felipe Fernández-Armesto, *Food: A History*, 2001 – ‘By the time of the voyage of Alejandro Malaspina, the most ambitious scientific expedition of the eighteenth century, from 1789 to 1794, scurvy was virtually banished from the fleet, thanks to the conviction of medical officer, Pedro Gonzales, that fresh fruits – especially oranges and lemons – were the essential remedies.’
7. Daniel Stone, ‘The Citrus Family Tree’, *National Geographic*, August 2017. – ‘Citrus, in many ways, stands alone. So many cultivated species have come from so few primary ancestors. Just three, in fact: citrons, pomelos, and mandarins, all native to South and East Asia before they started their journeys west, to places like Florida, California, and Brazil that built entire economies around fruits from the other side of the world.’
8. Felipe Fernández-Armesto, *Food: A History*, 2001 – ‘In 1592 a friar apothecary, Augustin Farfán, recommended the juice of half a lemon and half a sour orange with a little burnt alum. By that date, the effectiveness of such remedies had become widely known. English and Dutch navigators tried to get lemons, oranges, or other fruit for their men where they could, but the problems of supply, storage and – from the point of view of naval administrators – expense all remained insuperable’.
9. ‘Charter to Sir Walter Raleigh: 1584’, *The Avalon Project*. Yale Law School, Lillian Goldman Law Library: https://avalon.law.yale.edu/16th_century/raleigh.asp
10. Lerone Bennett Jr., *Before the Mayflower: A History of the Negro in America, 1919-1962*, 2016
11. Nathaniel Philbrick, *Mayflower*, 2006. In a slim final chapter of his 363 page tome on the Mayflower, titled ‘Conscience’ Nathaniel Philbrick acknowledges – ‘It has been estimated that at least a thousand Indians were sold into slavery during King Philip’s War, with over half the slaves coming from Plymouth Colony alone. By the end of the war, Mount Hope, once the crowded Native heart of the colony, was virtually empty of inhabitants. Fifty-six years after the sailing of the Mayflower, the Pilgrims’ children had not only defeated the Pokanokets in a devastating war, they had taken conscious, methodical measures to purge the land of its people.’
12. ‘African Slavery and the Mayflower Story’, *Mayflower Myths*: <https://mayflowermavericks.wordpress.com/2017/08/17/african-slavery-and-the-mayflower-story/>
13. Conservative MP Peter Giffiths won a seat in Smethwick in 1964 with the slogan – ‘If you want a nigger for your neighbour, vote Labour.’ The wider political landscape at the time is expanded upon in this article by Stuart Jeffries: ‘Britain’s most racist election: the story of Smethwick, 50 years on’, *The Guardian*, 15th Oct 2014: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/oct/15/britains-most-racist-election-smethwick-50-years-on>
14. Katy Hopkins, ‘Rescue boats? I’d use gunships to stop migrants’, *The Sun*, 17th Apr 2015. Hopkin’s comments received backlash via petition and press condemnation: <https://www.theguardian.com/media/2015/apr/20/katie-hopkins-sun-migrants-article-petition-nears-180000-mark>
15. David Cameron on ITV news, 30th Jul 2015: <https://www.itv.com/news/update/2015-07-30/pm-a-swarm-of-migrants-want-to-come-to-britain/>
16. Andrea Stuart, *Sugar in the Blood*, 2012.

