

Jesse Connuck locates the recipe as the site where hidden systems of colonialism and knowledge intersect in artworks by CONGOLESE PLANTATION WORKERS ART LEAGUE & RENZO MARTENS, ANNALEE DAVIS and TOROLAB

Pork Trotters, Bay Leaves and Chocolate

FOOD SITS AT THE VANGUARD OF CULTURAL EXCHANGE. The first introduction many people have to foreign cultures is through their cuisines. And, to this day, it is through produce that the Columbian exchange has pervasively embedded itself in Europe. Yet, this framing of cultural exchange as progress minimizes the fact that food is also a repository of the past. Food is a Trojan horse for historical systems – of knowledge, power, labour – to sneak into the present. Which is where the representation of systems around those foods and food cultures becomes so important.

Annalee Davis's performance (*bush*) *Tea Services* (2016) begins with the broken shards of pottery she found scattered across her family's property in Barbados – land that was formerly a sugar plantation and that is now home to a working dairy farm as well as the Fresh Milk art platform, which Davis founded in 2011. The fragments are from tea sets and assorted crockery, belonging both to previous owners of the plantation and to the enslaved people who laboured on it. Working with a local potter, Davis assembled the remnants into a new tea set, from which she serves bush tea – brewed from local wild plants – to guests while they discuss the histories of British colonialism, slavery and plantation agriculture in Barbados.

Wild plants – including cerasee, blue vervain and lemongrass – are gathered from the uncultivated plots between fields. In Barbados, plantation owners would set aside some of this land for indentured servants and enslaved people to grow their own food. To an extent, what grows in these spaces descends from the efforts of these servants and enslaved people, but is also still a product of chance or nature. At the same time, what is available for bush tea represents a transmission of knowledge over centuries. It is hardly a coincidence that many of the herbs growing alongside these fields are edible or have known medical uses. These plants are the ingredients in recipes to cure insomnia, settle the stomach, induce abortion.

In Davis's work, however, the tea is not a medical treatment. There is no recipe for the drink she brews. Rather, the recipe is for what happens next: how that tea is translated into an occasion. In this sense, the recipe transmits a different knowledge – not of how to prepare food or a remedy, but of how to share a meal in the fraught context of post-colonialism; that is, with respect for, and acknowledgment of, the incredible devastation that preceded it. Colonialism, in effect, wrote the recipe for the tea: limit the land available for enslaved people to farm, limit what they could possibly grow for nourishment or for medical purposes, add the passing of knowledge across generations and continents, add water.



La Granja Transfronteriza (Transborder Farmlab) is an initiative founded in 2010 by Torolab, an artist collective led by Raúl Cárdenas Osuna, whose members include Rodolfo Argote, Bernardo Gutiérrez, Enrique Jiménez, Ana Martínez Ortega and Shijune Takeda. The project aims to find novel ways to fight poverty in the Camino Verde neighbourhood of Tijuana. One of their first programmes was a series of creative-writing workshops that produced a set of annotated recipes – for example, *Recipe: Elvia – Pork trotters in vinegar* (2014) – and, eventually, a cookbook. The participants' recipes are also stories: about their personal and familial backgrounds, their experiences of migration and how those histories are translated into food. While the workshop was meant to help members improve their writing skills, collecting these recipes and stories was also a way to acquaint organizers with the neighbourhood they were working in and to better understand what sort of services and resources would make a meaningful difference in the community.

Recipes are a means of sharing knowledge: a way for someone who knows how to make something to inform someone who doesn't. But a recipe also institutes rules by describing how something should and should *not* be made. Tea is made from boiled water, not boiled milk; this dish is what it is because it is baked, never fried. Recipes create systems and guidelines and, importantly, they also reveal priorities. For example, the chocolate sculptures first produced in 2014 by the Dutch artist Renzo Martens and the Cercle d'Art des Travailleurs de Plantation Congolaise (also known as the Congolese Plantation Workers Art League or CATPC), which are intended to accumulate financial value so that the proceeds from the commodification of art can be transferred to plantation workers in the Congo. Rather than a luxury to be eaten, the chocolate gains value from its existence in the art world – the recipe provides for a visual



or intellectual pleasure rather than a gastronomic one. The intense smell of chocolate that wafts out from them is one of the few reminders that these statues could be eaten.

This series of chocolate sculptures has been produced through Martens's Institute for Human Activities (IHA) – an organization-cum-art project with the purported aspiration to gentrify the Congolese jungle. Martens takes up urban studies theorist Richard Florida's controversial idea that the arts are financially beneficial to the cities that foster them, but applies it to the agricultural hinterlands of central Africa in lieu of Western city centres. In an attempt to twist the economic value of art into a tool for fighting global inequality, members of CATPC – some of whom previously worked as agricultural labourers on chocolate plantations – mould sculptures from clay, which are 3D-scanned on location. They are then cast in chocolate in the Netherlands, where members can access the financial benefits of the international art market. Better than the small mark-ups on chocolate made for eating, the chocolate sculptures realize much higher profit margins. And, if chocolate isn't luxury enough, in 2019 several of the statues were re-cast in gold. Income from the sale of these works has since allowed the CATPC to purchase land near Lusanga for agroforestry and landscape restoration. It is a community organized through its financial terms.

In comparison, the community and convivial setting of Davis's bush tea service is not limited to the tea service itself: it also involves the arts organization she hosts on her family's farm. Fresh Milk offers residencies and programming with the goal of supporting artists from around the Caribbean, facilitating connection and exchange. Similarly, La Granja Transfronteriza and the IHA are much larger than a single project. La Granja also does a range of diagnostics and mapping projects, in addition to hosting lectures, vocational training, events, a computer lab and a community farm. IHA hosts exhibitions, events and conferences, and oversees an 85-acre 'post-plantation' that includes community-owned gardens and experimental forestry projects. Food is at the core of these works as

PREVIOUS PAGE
Cedrick Tamasala,
*How My Grandfather
Survived*, 2015, chocolate,
38 × 21 × 24 cm.
Courtesy: the artist,
Galerie Fons Welters,
Amsterdam, and KOW,
Berlin; photograph:
Ernst van Deursen

THIS PAGE
Annalee Davis,
(bush) Tea Services,
2016, installation
views, The Empire
Remains Shop,
London. Courtesy:
the artist;
photograph:
Tim Bowditch



much as it is an ancillary detail; it serves as an impetus, a beginning, an invitation.

Davis explains that the name Fresh Milk is partly a reference to milk's ability to nurture the young – just as the tea service attempts to foster difficult conversations, as La Granja is meant to help the neighbourhood, and as the added value of chocolate sculptures is meant to support plantation workers in central Congo. Of course, nurturing is not an apolitical act. There is something innately patronizing in it; nurturing is what parents do for children, what those with power do to help those without. It is the very act of 'nurturing' that risks reproducing the colonial relationships these works ostensibly seek to undo. Cárdenas Osuna, Davis and Martens are each outsiders in the worlds they desire to ameliorate. Cárdenas Osuna is from elsewhere in Mexico; Davis is a white landowner on a poor black island; Martens is a Dutch artist in the rural Congo. But something about food – its consumption and its histories – has offered them a way in: more specifically, something about food combined with the aesthetic capacities of art.

Common to these projects is an attention to community. Food offers a means of reaching outward, of making connections, of building relationships. They take advantage of the symbolic qualities of food, of nourishment and sustenance, and also the idea that food is something shared and something around which communities and cultures organize. Yet the slippage between thinking about food and thinking about recipes is crucial. With a recipe, the ends become the means – the object is not the final dish, but the rules and knowledge systems it takes to get there. Rather than simply aestheticizing the act or possibility of nourishment, these works ask: *How* to nourish? *What* is nourishment? And how can we adjust the world into something that is better able to nourish a wider range of people?

Davis's *(bush) Tea Services* is a project that can go in many different directions; while the situation is choreographed, the content of the conversation follows the interests and understandings of its participants. Likewise, La Granja Transfronteriza is an act of research, its cookbook and other activities attempting to help while also attempting to discover how to help. In Martens's work, however, the only unknown seems to be how the profits will be spent; Martens assumes that access to the financial and cultural resources of the art world will benefit the Congolese plantation workers, and cleverly designs a system to funnel those resources in their direction. The La Granja cookbook and the tea service use food as a way to listen, whereas Martens uses chocolate to tell – to tell Congolese farm workers how to exploit the system and to tell the art world about inequality.

The open-endedness of Davis's and Torolab's projects is reminiscent of a long history of artistic happenings and aleatory projects that hazard an unknown outcome. While more directly engaging with the art world at its core, the predetermination of Martens's project makes it seem closer to a political programme at times, like it should be the work of some sort of neoliberal NGO – which is perhaps the point. Martens is testing an iterable solution, a recipe that can be cooked by anyone at any time. Though to an extent Torolab and Davis attempt to offer models for redressing the wrongs of colonialism, these are recipes that rely on the skill and attention of the cook as much as the directions offered. The idea is not that any white person in Barbados can facilitate a meaningful conversation about the enduring legacies of settler colonialism or slavery or plantation economies. Even with a recipe, the cook is as important as the ingredients ●

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Torolab, 'La Granja', 2014, exhibition view, Galería OMR, Mexico City. Courtesy: the artist and Galería OMR, Mexico City; photograph: Enrique Macías

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ANNALEE DAVIS is an artist, educator and writer. In 2011, she founded *Fresh Milk* and she is a co-founder of the residency programme *Caribbean Linked* (2012) and the visual arts platform *Tilting Axis* (2015).

RENZO MARTENS is an artist based in Amsterdam, the Netherlands, and Kinshasa, the Congo. With Martens, the *Congolese Plantation Workers Art League* was founded in 2014 and includes artists, plantation workers and an ecologist.

TOROLAB is a collective founded in 1995 in Tijuana, Mexico. In 2010, they established *La Granja Transfronteriza*, a participatory and community-based project aiming to develop and support the low-income area of *Camino Verde*, Tijuana, through food and other practices.