

**From Issue 31:**

Politics of Food

[VIEW](#)

GOING BANANA, BECOMING PLANTAIN

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Bananas and plantain, although both belonging to the Musaceae family are not the same things. Examining the history of exploitation and displacement of both fruits, Akil Scafe-Smith unfolds their political significance, as well as the links they establish between the Carribeans and the diaspora.

In a Youtube video by the South-London-born comedian Michael Dapaah, an African man and Caribbean man, both played by Dapaah, engage in an argument about the pronunciation of the word “plantain”:

“Listen ‘ere’,” says the gold-tooth wearing Caribbean character, “is it mountAYN or mountIN, tell me dat smart man?” To which the African character replies, “You know, you are a kwasia [fool], it’s not an English quiz! This is called a plantAYN because you are not planting anything. Where’s the ground?”

At the end of the minute-long clip, an English man (also played by Dapaah) wades in on the debate. “Woah, woah lads, relax! This right ‘ere, is a banana mate,” he says, alluding to a plantain he’s holding in his right hand. “You know... small banana [now holding an actual banana in his left hand], big banana [alluding again to the plantain]. What’s all this plantAYN, plantIN stuff?”



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deeper global entanglement over the centuries of the trade paradigms, Española's battle is a critical entry point into a geopolitics of fruit that continues to influence how space is organized across the Black Atlantic. For the work of all those, myself included, who've used the banana as a lens through which to understand how flows of labor, commerce, and cultural capital have helped underpin Caribbean diasporic identity and spatial politics for over a century, it illumines a crucially overlooked question: what about all that plantain stuff?

Reading Food ///



Banana harvest in Costa Rica in 1879. / Gordon Shunway.

First, a few steps back. Though using a banana as anything other than something to eat (certainly not a “lens”) may sound strange; “reading food,” meaning looking critically at the histories, supply chains, preparation and consumption rituals, mythologies, nomenclatures, agricultural-technological shifts, and architectonics of foods, is a powerful way of understanding world histories. This is not only true in a Eurocentric sense, where we might perhaps think of certain spices, coffee, tea, or sugar as both archives and apparatuses of colonial expansionism. Reading food resonates just as much in how we tell our own stories and carve collective identities within and for our own communities.



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~~and up in them, researchers, practitioners, professionals, activists, and someone~~
 across the world have been able to make profound changes to the way we live with food and the spaces in which we live with it. Reading foods to understand space and politics can seed (pun intended) immediate, albeit often small-scale changes in our personal and collective food politics. Whether it's by dissuading the purchase of certain products, encouraging the cultivation of others, prompting conversations about recipes, rituals, histories, and identities, or merely providing the sustenance for those conversations and others, framing space through food posits change at the tip of our tongues.

Reading Diasporic Space with Food ///

To read food as a way of understanding diasporic spaces — spaces that are created, inhabited, and used by a people dispersed — is to read foods that register the *longue durée* of architectures or spatial politics caught at the littorals of stasis. Many unambiguously diasporic spaces across the world, defined by the movement to, through, and of them, bear distinct relationships with the infrastructures that facilitate these movements; of people, goods, and information. Diasporic urban markets and self-built housing settlements, for example, often share physical or ontological proximity to railways, highways, and ports, the urban trajectories of which profoundly shape the existential threats faced by these spaces of managed decline, discriminatory urban policies, landlord malpractice, and land speculation. These relationships precipitate a disconcertingly familiar, and notably spatial, triptych of practices — resistance, ephemerality, and “informality” — which are visible to varying degrees in the architectures of diasporic space, but by contrast often distinctly readable in the foods that are ritually produced, prepared and consumed in them.

In the case of the Caribbean diaspora in the U.K., diasporic space (family kitchens, restaurants/clubs/bars, public spaces, urban markets, and now a plethora of digital and textual spaces) are principle sites for the production of collective imaginaries of satellite nationhood and identity through food preparation and consumption: many of our earliest recollections of any notion of being diaspora will have undoubtedly been in some of these spaces, through our noses and with our tongues. However, when not consuming but reading these foods, we are often able to challenge the assumed fixity of diasporic identity and space and reveal their causal relationships with infrastructures of movement. This is evident in a plethora of food readings of Caribbean diasporic space, from what hardough bread can tell us about spaces of Chinese and Indian indentured labor in Jamaica, to what yam can tell us about the production of new folk cultures and social orders in slave spaces across the pre-emancipation Caribbean.



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Ports of the Great White Fleet 1917-1970. / Gordon Shunway.

The banana, as a commodity, a technology and an artefact, is particularly adept at framing events in the post-emancipation Caribbean; it is a unique point of contact between lived realities of post-colonial colonialism, intra-region fortune-seeking, syncretism, and the managerial logics of global modernism. Moreover, it bridges a temporal gap, allowing us to draw meaningful comparisons between our diasporic relationships to practices, spaces, and modern infrastructures now in the United Kingdom as well as in the Caribbean basin at the turn of the 20th century. Yet, through the banana the taste of modernity is perhaps an overstated flavor. By reading the banana, the demonstrably infrastructural role of phenomena like lyric networks, which transported syncretic-African traditions across the oceans by verse, risks being understood as only ancillary to infrastructure that physically governed the movement of consumable and corporeal commodities and not a means of spatial production in and of itself.

Beyond the Great White Fleets, the canals, the railway lines, and the plantations, and prior to the modernist logics of movement we read through the banana, is the plantain. Plantain is widely confused with bananas today although entirely bereft of modern readings from prominent “banana scholars.” The banana confusion is perhaps taxonomic, due to what botanist Normand Simmonds would refer to in 1991 as a “science in which the errors of the past are preserved by law to confuse the present”. It



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~~Despite the great ambiguity and its relative conceptual obscurity, plantain persists as~~
 an extremely evocative and almost incomparably embedded foodstuff for various African diasporas. In this way its prevalence is both pronounced and exhaustively quotidian; present in the revelry of the inter-diasporic “barber shop conversations” Michael Dapaah caricatures in his video, present in the frying pans and pestles of our kitchens. It occupies a space in collective African and Caribbean diasporic imaginaries that seems to ignore, or at least be ignored by, agricultural commodification and non-African food discourses, hiding strategically in the shadow of the banana for others until it is time for us to discuss how to pronounce its name. Importantly, plantain is a robust way of framing the pre-emancipation Caribbean, from the dynamics of internal plantation economies to the culinary inhibitions of the white slave-owning populations. But more than this, their reading offers, where the banana does not, new inferences of what diasporic spatial relationships to infrastructure might be outside of the prefigurative dance with practices that differentiates yet drains us.

This text is a dual reading of the banana and “that plantIN stuff” which hopes to offer more than just food for thought. Together, these readings inform a richer understanding of these resistance, ephemerality, and informality that have become so unquestionably familiar to Caribbean diasporic spaces, engendered by their relationships with infrastructures of movement. There is a desire, in these readings, not just to analyze but to encourage: to move those of us in the diaspora today to utilise our profound relationships with these foods in order to creatively change and affect the precariousness of many of our realities.

Bananas: Permanent Infrastructures, Precarious Spaces ///

During the early 20th century, in the post-emancipation Caribbean, the intra-regional movement of labor, commerce, and cultural capital was forging a Caribbean identity at the geographical and political margins of the region. In this period, the global banana trade was controlled by an organization called the United Fruit Company (UFCO), a large U.S. corporation whose stranglehold on the Caribbean and Latin America is often argued as having been a form U.S. crypto-colonialism in the region. From facilitating coup d’etats and prompting a civil war in Guatemala, to massacres in Colombia and the ability to pay off countries’ national debts with single loans, the UFCO aptly became known as “El Pulpo”; a monster with its tentacles gripping the breadths of the Caribbean basin.

UFCO set parameters that reshaped entirely novel geographies of labor and capital in the Caribbean and Latin America, controlling agricultural production through the coercion of political leaders and military factions, but also through the construction of vast amounts of infrastructure and ownership over the territories it dissected. This infrastructural yoke not only transformed the Caribbean coastal regions of Latin America into tributary states of a voracious U.S. food industry but also guided and



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Contrasting poetically with the permanence and fixity of colonial infrastructure in the Banana Republics, was the ephemerality and mobility of Black British West Indians, a consequence of their relative youth and the stagnant post-emancipation economies of their homelands. As a guaranteed supply of young, resilient workhands, with no apparent desire to naturalise and sovereign rights that were largely abandoned by the British Crown, these laborers made up an essentially dependable yet expendable workforce. Life in this way was often insufferable. They were subject to numerous racist campaigns, economic repressions and even deportation. Their physical conditions were deplorable:

diasporic space in the form of the banana enclave was designed for infrastructural resilience and human precarity. The archival work of the anthropologist Phillipe Bourgois' in his book *Ethnicity at Work: Divided Labour on a Central American Banana Plantation* (1989), unearths a quote from an unknown/unnamed contemporary commentary that is perfectly summative of this relationship: "A banana plantation is a poor place to live unless you're a banana."

However, the movement of Black bodies formed the basis for a syncretic Caribbean identity that reflected not the confines of an island's shore but the vast expanse of an ocean and its moving currents. During this period, despite the perceived (or indeed, desired) Afro-Caribbean ephemerality, familial and social networks were spread across the Caribbean and the Latin American coast, dialects and aesthetics converged, and places became intrinsically connected through song, poetry, language and spiritualism. Consequently, Latin American cities in the former Banana Republics such as Colon, Limon, Puerto Cortés, and Bluefield are still shaped today by their remarkably Afro-Caribbean identity. Lyric networks play an important part in connecting and having connected an intra-regional diaspora between the islands and continental littoral banana enclaves. Generations of children in the former British West Indies will have grown up with a sense of the Hispanic reaches of the Caribbean as a recurrent cultural motif through folksongs and poems such as "Colon Man" and the story of Solomon's Grandpa without having ever been there. The calypso lament "Matilda" recorded by the artist King Radio in the 1930s and popularized by Harry Belafonte in 1953, discloses a familiar leitmotif at the time of an intimate relationship stretched by the regional connections between the islands and the basin's shoreline regions. In the song, Belafonte depicts an imaginary woman who takes her lover's money and runs away to Venezuela, with the song becoming so popular in Jamaica it became the melody for the "Happy Birthday" song. Similarly, poetry like the work of Afro-Costa Rican poet Eulalia Bernard Little, whose oeuvre constructs a political and aesthetic reclamation of the Black body in Costa Rica, and also more recently artists like West Indian-born Panamanian early reggaetoneo, Leonardo "Renato" Aulder, and Afro-Panamanian reggaetoneo "El General," works to reveal Black Caribbean identity



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United Fruit Company (UFC) check (1967). / Gordon Shunway.

Demonstrably, the inequitable relationship with infrastructures of movement which left Black Caribbean laborers bereft of political rights and visible permanence in the Banana Republics, are not estranged from the asymmetries that threaten diasporic spaces in places like the United Kingdom today. Caribbean markets such as Brixton exemplify this relationship where banana boxes, an essential infrastructure in these spaces, have become a currency on which the market's day-to-day running entirely depends. Rarely do they ever contain bananas and instead they become tables, chairs and display plinths by day, and storage cupboards, shelters, and bins by nights, exhibiting a resilience that posits them in distinct contrast to the volatile circumstances of some of the businesses and vendors. Printed on the boxes are almost always the names of the old Banana Republics and very rarely the Trinidads, Jamaicas, and Barbadoses that populate our collective imagination of the archetypal West Indies. Today the Banana Republics are still the world's leading banana exporters and, though UFCO no longer exists, its successor, Chiquita, alongside other household names,



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~~provisional spaces of provisioned diasporic cultural originities, these companies~~
 boxes in Brixton Market disclose an asymmetry where diasporic identity inauspiciously rests, sometimes quite literally, on unwavering commercial infrastructures in urban spaces. And by reading diasporic space through the movement and trade of the banana, this is as true for the containers that construct Afro-Caribbean urban markets now as it does for the railways and shipping routes that constructed an entire Caribbean region then.

Plantain: Proselytizing Infrastructures, Preservative Spaces ///

Both plantain and bananas were carried to West-Central Africa via an unknown route around 3000 BCE, with the botanical histories of the *Musa* family group bearing important implications for theories of early human movement between Africa and the Oceania, across the Indian Ocean. They both reached the Americas after the 16th century, however, through Iberian transportation via the Canary Islands, along routes and sea lanes that also facilitated the industrialized movement of enslaved African lives. Notably though, prior to early U.S. (and UFCO) expansionism in the Caribbean, the banana was a fruit of comparative insignificance.

During the centuries of African slavery in the Caribbean, “provision grounds” were communal slave spaces that countered the logics of the plantation complex. These were spaces, born out of planters’ desires to reduce plantations operating costs, for enslaved persons to grow their own food and were often away from (or out of sight of) the plantations. Provision grounds were usually located on rocky, mountainous ground, unsuitable for cane cultivation, and as such, whatever was grown was often testament to the resourcefulness of many slave societies. Amidst a plethora of other plants recorded as having been grown in these spaces, such as yams, corn, dasheen (coco), the banana made up a small minority. However, contemporary sources suggest plantain was prolific.

Provision grounds, having held significance as creolizing, economic, and spiritual spaces, communicate the experience of slavery through the agency of the enslaved; they are an insight into what was grown by enslaved persons, for enslaved persons, when and why. That plantain was so ubiquitous in these spaces gives some insight into the nature of the agency, internal economy, and even relative autonomy present in slave space in the pre-emancipation Caribbean. African or creolised-African plantain recipes in the Caribbean then and today help piece together a cultural archaeology of the provision grounds as particularly African diasporic space in a violently oppressive colonial but also highly syncretic Caribbean. These recipes hold as much culinary archival value as they do lyric archival value, retaining uncommonly precise West African names amidst a context of widespread linguistic creolization in the provision grounds and systematic eradication of African dialects and beliefs across the regions’ plantation complexes. One powerful example of this retention is *fufu*, a version of



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~~variation: these powerful instances of cultural persistence cannot be satisfactorily~~
 explained by a relationship between diasporic space and infrastructures of corporeal movement and subjugation that methodically led to human and cultural erasure and ephemerality in the Caribbean; not just of enslaved Africans but also indigenous Taíno, and later indentured South and East Asians. Instead, they reveal the primary importance of lyric infrastructure, the transmission of language and narrative, in driving the historical logics of diasporic space and spatial practice in the Caribbean.

The primacy of plantain, coupled with the primacy of lyric infrastructure over infrastructures of physical movement also challenges assumptions of the nature of resistance, ephemerality, and “informality” in diasporic space in the Caribbean. During the 18th and early 19th century, plantain began to be grown in both the provision grounds and as a crop of the plantation complex, straddling a dichotomy between “plot and plantation” that Jamaican philosopher Sylvia Wynter would later describe as central to an understanding of Caribbean history and literature. Multiple colonial contemporary commentators in the 18th century in Jamaica describe the white partiality for plantain (and plantain recipes, which were accompanied by their African names), with Edward Long, author of the controversial work *The History of Jamaica* (1774), even stating: “many white persons, after being accustomed to it for some time, actually prefer it to bread.” Almost prefigurative in its mobility and global connection to the 20th century banana, the plantain, though still profoundly African in its implication, transected domestic and agricultural space for both slave and master. Its preference on the plates of colonists, however, is suggestive not merely of a lyric infrastructure that statically retains the “African-ness” of diasporic space as an act of resistance, but of an infrastructure that operationalizes retention orally and connectively; absorbing new customs, products, and bodies into the remit of African Caribbean diasporic space by exuding words and tastes, as a critical means of persistence. Exemplifying this, the popularity of West African technologies such as *conquintay* (the name stemming from the Twi and Ga *kokonte/konkote*), a flour made from dried sliced plantain, amongst slave-owning classes can be read as the proselytization of (the oppressor’s) space, imbuing their languages and kitchens with the logics of African Caribbean diasporic space; a quietly subversive resistance planted directly in the mouths of the masters.

Even today, after the end of slavery and the rise of the banana, which coincided with a diminishing prevalence of plantain, the fruit is still an incomparably powerful way of understanding a global relationship between diasporic space and lyric infrastructure that works to both persist and proselytise identity. In Caribbean, in Cuba and the Dominican Republic, two islands whose relationships to plantain and African spiritual traditions through slavery are still particularly distinct, the word “**aplatanada**”/“**aplatanado**” (sometimes literally translated as “plantainized”) is used colloquially when a foreigner has become fully integrated in the islands’ customs and



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~~forward by her, uses the plant as means of starting conversations that centre~~ diasporic lives, bringing together our narratives through textual space with an ethos that Abaka-Wood brilliantly calls “people with a side of plantain.” In doing so this the zine powerfully echoes the provision grounds by facilitating the persistence of connective African identity within a type of diasporic space. It also demonstrably exists in dialogue with a lyric infrastructure that proselytizes, in this case, European means of visual and textual production, in order to propagate and make accessible the logics of African diasporic space to a community of plantain-lovers and eaters across the world.

Reading plantain, regardless of how you eat or pronounce it, offers a reinvigorated understanding of resistance, ephemerality, and informality in diasporic space. It allows us to think of these practices as not merely acts and consequences that we are habitually forced to by the infrastructural violences that dispersed and disperse us. They instead become acts and consequences that others are brought into, imprinted by, and made cognate with. Perhaps “plantIN” is an accurate pronunciation for this reading since, contrary to Dapaah’s humorous retort, we are actually planting something: the potential to, if nothing else, consolidate different infrastructural relationships for the connection and persistence of our diasporic spaces. ■

AKIL’S RECIPE /// Banana Fritters & Fried Plantain



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Banana Fritters ///

Perfect for a delicious Sunday breakfast.

A couple of soft, brown bananas.

Beat these with a fork and add flour to make a puree.

Add one or two eggs, depending on preference.

Add brown sugar, nutmeg, cinnamon to taste.

A pinch of salt.

Heat oil to a high temperature in a frying pan.

Spoon into the hot frying pan until golden brown — it should look and have the consistency almost of a pancake.

Turn regularly.

Enjoy with syrup!



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going in Babylon!

Cut a whole plantain in two.

Slice lengthways holding one half in the palm of your hand — this takes practice to not get the slices wonky!

Alternatively cut short rings.

Heat oil to a high temperature in a frying pan.

Fry until golden brown, adding salt to taste.

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