
Follow the Thing: Papaya

Ian Cook et al*

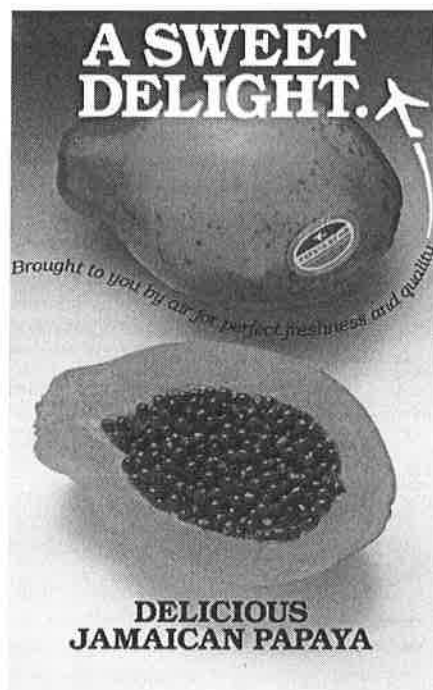
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In a recent round table about *Antipode's* radical geographies, contributors argued that the journal needed more papers which stimulated debate, were accessible to academics and non-academics alike, didn't "preach to the cognoscenti", were written to fit into radical teaching agendas, and were diverse and eclectic in style (Waterstone 2002:663; Hague 2002). This paper has been written to fit this bill. It outlines the findings of multi-locale ethnographic research into the globalization of food, focusing on a supply chain stretching from UK supermarket shelves to a Jamaican farm, and concluding in a North London flat. It addresses perspectives and critiques from the growing literature on the geographies of commodities, but presents these academic arguments "between the lines" of a series of overlapping vignettes about people who were (un)knowingly connected to each other through the international trade in fresh papaya, and an entangled range of economic, political, social, cultural, agricultural and other processes also shaping these connections in the early 1990s. The research on which it is based was initially energized by David Harvey's (1990:422) call for radical geographers to "get behind the veil, the fetishism of the market", to make powerful, important, disturbing connections between Western consumers and the distant strangers whose contributions to their lives were invisible, unnoticed, and largely unappreciated. Harvey argued that radical geographers should attempt to de-fetishise commodities, re-connect consumers and producers, tell fuller stories of social reproduction, and thereby provoke moral and ethical questions for participants in this exploitation who might think they're decent people. This paper has been written to provoke such questions, to provide materials to think through and with, for geography's ongoing debates about the politics of consumption.

The Idea

...if we accept that geographical knowledges through which commodity systems are imagined and acted upon from within are fragmentary, multiple, contradictory, inconsistent and, often, downright hypocritical, then the power of a text which deals with these knowledges comes not from smoothing them out, but through juxtaposing and montaging them ... so that audiences can work their way through them and, along the way, inject and make their own critical knowledges out of them. (Cook and Crang 1996:41)

The Thing



The Following

Producing Papaya



Figure 1: Left: 30 foot trees. Right: packing papaya¹

Once they're picked, they start to die. Twisted off the stem. Just as they have "turned". From fully green, to green with a yellow streak. By farm workers. Men. Walking slowly along an avenue of "trees". Alongside a trailer, full of green plastic crates. Pulled by a tractor. Work that's undertaken in the hot sun. But they're shaded by the leaves splaying out from the tree top. Leaves that shade the fruit

growing around that column. "Turning" fruits at the bottom and flowers at the top. These "trees" are perhaps ten feet tall. And eight months old. Picking is easy. But, in the next field, the "trees" are eighteen months old. Thirty feet tall. And soon to be felled. The leaves finally succumbing to "bunchy top". The sprayer can't reach them. But, picking is still going on there. Thirty feet up. On a platform made from scaffolding. Welded to another trailer. Pulled slowly along by another tractor. Wheels following undulating tracks in the baked mud. Eight pickers leaning precariously off that platform. Four a side. Jerked about. Slowly moving. Looking for those colour changes. Cupping the bottom of the "turning" fruits. Carefully twisting them off. Each a good handful. Placing them in crates for the packing house, where they're washed, weighed, graded, trimmed, wrapped and packed neatly in boxes. Primarily by women. All trying to prevent the white latex oozing from the fruits' peduncles from dripping onto *their* skin. It's nasty. We're on a papaya farm. Picking for export. To the USA and Europe. *Fresh*. Sold in mainstream supermarkets. "Product of Jamaica".

The Papaya Buyer

I know that if I was going to buy, you know, mangoes (or) papayas, I wouldn't go into (my stores). But then I wouldn't go into (our competitors') either... "Ethnic" shops... have a lot of good lines. So I'd probably go there 'cause I know it would be a lot cheaper (laughs)... I know my mum would never go into (my stores) to buy mangoes. I don't think I would either, purely because it's an image that we've created in the supermarkets. Everything's got to look perfect. But, just the fact that it's got a blemish in there, I mean, it's edible.

In 1992, Mina had been a speciality fruit and veg buyer for eight years. Buyers don't usually last that long in one department. She worked at a supermarket HQ just outside London. Most of this work revolved around her phone and computer. Keeping tabs on the market. What crops had done well in which parts of the world. That month or week. And how this should influence their supply and price. All of her produce came via three big suppliers. Never directly. Each supplier able to offer her a wide range of produce. From huge volumes of mainstream fruits like pineapples, to dozens of boxes of obscure fruits like sapodillas. People in the trade expected papaya to go mainstream. Soon. Alongside mangoes. Following kiwi fruits before them. Broken into the market through promotions: low prices and high volumes. £1 per fruit too expensive for the consumer. A psychological barrier. But 99p was good value. She said.

There was a weekly rhythm to Mina's work. Early in the week, she got a "feel" for the market. What's out there. What's coming "on line" from where, when. At what price and quality. To keep everything on

the shelves year round. Regardless of season. How had sales gone, line by line, during previous week? What were the figures from checkout scanning? Each fruit was bar-coded, or had an ID photo at the till. To accurately register sales. She placed her orders every Tuesday. Set her prices that day. What she was going to pay her suppliers. What she was going to charge her consumer. To achieve a 37–38% profit margin. Which she wouldn't make overall. Because of wastage. Manky or unwanted fruits left on the shelf. Damaged, rotting or past their sell-by dates. Their shelf lives. Perhaps only three days long. One of her rivals placed his orders on Thursdays. His company had better computers. So he could buy stock closer to the day it reached the shelf. Keeping his money for a couple more days. New stock started to arrive on the shelves on Sundays. In all supermarkets. They'd be on sale for the same price. For seven days. Changing the following Sunday.

Supermarket shoppers usually pass through the fresh fruit and veg first. Not pet food. Those colours. Shapes. Smells. Textures. Mundane, strange and plain weird. From all around the world. Questions were being asked in the trade press. Was the speciality or exotic produce there to make money? Or was it a statement about supermarkets' global reach and sophistication? Photographs of exotic fruits were used in annual reports and promotional materials. To symbolise something. The decreasing cost and increasing popularity of package holidays to the tropics meant first-hand exposure for many British consumers. To fruits in their "natural" settings. And what about those Indian, Chinese, and other so-called "ethnic" restaurants in the UK where this took place closer to home for many more people? Mina assumed that these two exposures were responsible for 90% of her sales. Consumers wanting to recreate at home what they had experienced elsewhere. The rest were probably impulse buys. But how did her new product development work? How did she change her offering? Suppliers would offer something new at the right price and volumes. She'd take a sample and try it out with a "taste panel" made up of her work mates, other buyers, secretaries, cleaners. She'd get a home economist to prepare it fresh, or in a recipe. Then ask what her panel thought about it. Would they actually buy it? For how much? £1? They had kept prickly pears and tamarillos off her shelves. They didn't like them. The seeds in one were annoying. And the other looked great, but tasted like an unripe tomato. To them.

Mina vividly remembered the first time her panel sampled Jamaican papaya. It was delicious. Jamaican airfreight tasted so much better than the Brazilian seafreight she was used to. The quality was much higher. People raved about it. It was brilliant. And the price was competitive. How could she *not* stock it? If she could be sure of the supplies. *These* papayas could become mainstream sales. Like kiwi. But they'd need promotion. Lower prices for suppliers. Increasing volumes. Dropping

her profit margin to 16%. Producing leaflets free from the shelf fixture. Making papayas look attractive. Explaining what they were. What they tasted like. Where they came from. Jamaica! How you knew they were ripe. And how you ate them. Providing preparation and recipe ideas. Borrowed from her exotic fruit book or suggested by her home economists. Suppliers used promotions to get their foot in the door in order to up the price when the market was broken. Sometimes. Like Tony's company had. That was "taking the mickey". So she dropped them for a cheaper Jamaican papaya supplier. Yet, as a British Asian woman whose mum wouldn't buy mangoes from her stores, she knew her produce was unnecessarily blemish-free and too expensive. You could get a much better deal at a local "ethnic" store, or a market stall. She said. But these were the standards her bosses and consumer wanted from her. You couldn't sell lower quality produce than your competitors. Her performance was reviewed monthly. Occasionally, she went on big trips. With a company technologist: an expert in plant physiology, husbandry and packing technologies. Visiting sites of production. Maintaining relationships with big suppliers. Advising them on quality standards. Recently she'd visited a pineapple farm in the Ivory Coast. That really upset her. Seeing all that poverty. First hand. Knowing that she was directly involved. But these experiences and feelings went with the territory. They were discussed back at the office. But were bracketed out when facing the figures on their spreadsheets, and computer screens. They had to be.

Papaya Political Economy

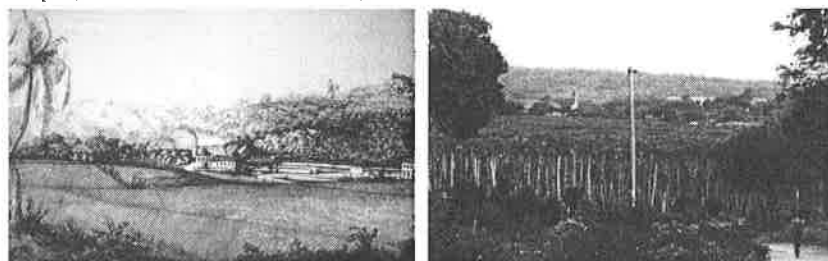


Figure 2: Left: nineteenth century sketch of sugar estate. Right: ruined factory chimney amid the papayas

A fifty-two acre farm in Jamaica. Where sugar cane used to be grown. The plantation's great house, sugar factory, and rum distillery in ruins at its centre. Ancient equipment rusting away inside. The farm manager's house built in the ruins of the overseer's. Traces of the agricultural, export-oriented society Jamaica was set up to be. When world trade was in its infancy. Capitalism had its clothes off. Starting in the 1500s. Much has changed. But, in 1992, this land was still

devoted to export agriculture. Jamaica was still an impoverished country. The farm workers were descendants of enslaved African people. Its owners and managers weren't. But at least they weren't still farming sugar cane. That's a horrible business. Back breaking. Seasonal. With unpredictable yields and prices. No predictable or steady income. Grinding poverty. And with that historical connection. To slavery days. Sugar's reliant on preferential markets now. Quotas. An uncompetitive industry kept afloat. But threatened by the WTO. The "free market". And from EU expansion. Involving countries with no colonial obligations. Changing voting patterns. On international trade agreements. For sugar. And bananas. Jamaica has needed to diversify exports for some time. To service debts. US\$4.5 billion in 1991. US\$1800, or J\$14,000, per person. At the 1990 exchange rate. Or J\$ 38,000. At the 1993 rate. Or 38,000 J, as this would be described locally. Export diversification should help to tackle rural poverty, too. Identifying niche markets. Overseas. For high value commodities. Like tropical fruits. Like papaya.

The Papaya Importer

Most of the population in this world are using sunshine to turn into dollar bills because they haven't got an awful lot going for them ... It does precious little good for the average man in the street ... but it creates wealth for a few individuals who reckon to hold onto the wealth and not spread it around too much. You can try and give yourself some sort of comfort and believe it leaks through and everybody becomes a little better off. Most of that is bullshit ... I don't have any sleepless nights over it. I hate it when I have to go and visit it and have it pushed in my face. And I'm honest that I'm a bit hypocritical about it ... My first priority is my wife and children.

Tony's family had been in fresh produce for three generations. He'd recently set up a specialist fruit importing business in a small suite of offices in central London with two Israeli partners. They had good contacts in the diaspora of Israeli agronomists working on small and medium sized farms in the "third world". Mina bought her Jamaican papayas from Tony. Sometimes. He, in turn, was an agent for a large number of suppliers in Israel, Zambia, Egypt, Brazil and the Caribbean. He spent a lot of time on the phone. Talking to buyers and suppliers. Negotiating a balance between what one needed and what the others could provide. Week by week. Which fruits, volumes, prices, quality? His company didn't handle these fruits. That was contracted out. To a specialist "pre-packer". Who picked up shipments from (air)ports. Trucked them to a central depot. Unpacked them. Re-graded or rejected them. According to supermarkets' specifications. Put a sticker on each one. With information and a barcode on it. Fruits of equal size

and ripeness placed together. Fruits not yet ripe enough placed together. In huge, atmosphere-controlled ripening rooms. Alongside other fruits. As long as one's gases didn't affect the others' ripening. Like bananas can. All kinds of fruit and veg, often in small quantities, delivered straight to the stores. Uniform produce. Ready to eat. During the next three days. Perhaps.

Tony had met Jim, the manager of a Jamaican papaya farm he acted for, via his colleague's contacts with a man he had shared a tent with in the Israeli army. An agronomist headhunted to run an experimental farm growing Jamaican strawberries for export. The experiment had failed and he moved to a pioneering papaya farm on Jamaica's north coast. Owned by an American billionaire. Who'd made his fortune in grain and animal feed. This was where Jim learned his trade. Before setting up on his own. Adding to the Jamaican papaya supplies handled by Tony. Tony regarded Jim as his mate. He visited him once a year. But had no worries. Jim's operation was smooth. He could see that. But that wasn't the case everywhere. Trust and confidence in your suppliers had to come from personal contact. So, you had to visit people. Talk to them. See what their farms were like. How they were run. How they could produce what you wanted. Better. But these visits—taking up six or seven weeks a year—meant Tony continually had to face up to the ugly realities of world trade. Rich getting richer. Poor getting poorer. The rich often using that trickle-down argument. Their money-making was good for everyone. To him, this was "bullshit". But he wasn't trying to change the situation. How could he? His wife and children were his main responsibility. Not the thousands of people whose lives he might only have glimpsed. His greatest business pleasure was "turning a penny into tuppence". He was a hypocrite. He said. But he didn't lose any sleep over it.

It wasn't people like him or Mina or Jim who were responsible for ripping off poor farm workers. In the third world or anywhere else. Of course. The New Zealanders were being "totally and utterly ripped off in kiwi fruit". Having a disastrous time. Losing a fortune. But it was "supply and demand" that was ripping them off. Demand had grown. So more farmers got involved in supply. They over-produced. So prices dropped. So low that many went bankrupt. And stopped growing them. Meaning there were less on the market. So prices increased. Leaving those still producing having a "nice time". But New Zealand had a welfare state. Unemployment benefits. Unlike Jamaica. Where, if export prices went down, you could cut wages. "If nothing is your option", he said, "you'll do it for less. ... Third World suppliers are still over-supplying the market with produce. Getting less, earning less, receiving less, but still coming back for more punishment. Because there's nothing better for them".

This was a cut-throat business. Mina could easily get her fruit from someone, somewhere, else. Offering identical quality, but a better price. To get a foothold in the supermarkets. Tony had persuaded Jim to sell cheap to get a following there. Price promotion. It had worked for kiwis! Once the market was broken, they could up the margin to make some “proper money”. But the buyers had been “bastards”. Tony and Jim had helped them to break papaya into the mainstream. Lower prices increased sales. Consumers gave their 99 p papayas a go. But they were dumped when they claimed their “reward”. Other Jamaican papaya growers were desperate for the business. At that lower price. And they got it. But this hadn’t really affected Tony. Suppliers came and went. If there was a scandal. An exposure in the British press of child labour, dodgy management practices, below the headline poverty of farm workers, or anything else. A supplier could easily be dropped. And some went bust. Unable to survive on the price cuts they constantly had to offer. Or, if exchange rates changed, their produce became too expensive on the world market. Tony talked a lot about exchange rates, and how the international trade in fresh produce was connected to currency markets. He could make money out of both on, say, a shipment of Brazilian mangoes. Currency devaluations subsidised trade. Making mangoes cheaper to buy in sterling, while costing the same amount in reals. This was an up and down business. So, someone like Jim had to make and stash as much money as possible. Quickly. While conditions were favourable. Supply and demand, currency markets, any number of factors outside anyone’s control meant that disaster could be just around the corner. Jim would need the capital to ride this out. But the world of fresh produce didn’t like a vacuum. Tony said. When one supplier disappeared or became too expensive, another one always turned up. Just when you needed them. He had faith in that. He had the contacts. People were always phoning him. Desperate to get their produce on the shelves of British supermarkets.

The Papaya Plant

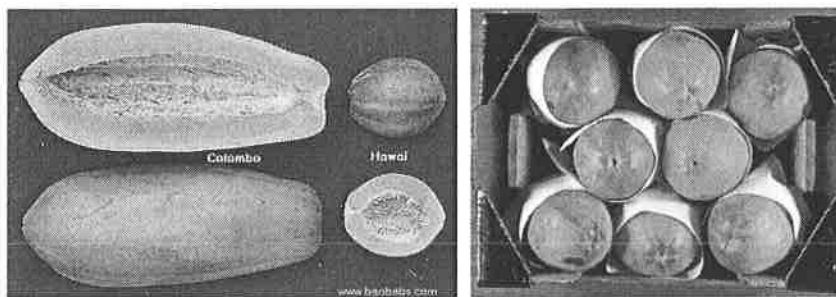


Figure 3: Left: variation in fruit size. Right: a standard box²

The spread of papaya in central America and the Caribbean marks the historical travels of the Carib/Arawak people. After their increasingly ugly encounters with Columbus and his followers, papayas followed the colonial exploits of the Spanish and Portuguese. Their copious, durable seeds travelled well. Germinating and becoming naturalised in tropical environments with plenty of rain and fertile, well-drained soils. In the “wild”, or in people’s back yards, papayas are far from uniform. They can be monsters. Ten pounders! There are male, female and hermaphrodite trees (big herbs, really). With hollow fibrous trunks. Males pollinate. Females produce round fruits (berries, really). The export markets doesn’t want these fruits. It wants hermaphrodites. They’re smaller. And more pear-shaped. But papaya trees change sex with the climate. Soil nutrients affect the taste. Fruit size is inversely proportional to tree height. And the taller a tree the slower it grows. Fruits get closer together. With less space to grow. Each bearing imprints of those around it. Compacted. Misshapen. And extremely vulnerable to viral diseases. Like “bunchy top”. Which stops the fruits’ carbohydrates being converted into sugar. And the “ringspot” virus. Which stunts growth. And deforms the fruits. Yet the ones on the supermarket shelf are (almost) identical. Size. Shape. Colour. Look. Ripeness. Price. Available year round. Like cans of beans. Commercialised. Standardised. Most notably in the FAO/WHO/WTO’s (1993) *Codex Alimentarius volume 5B*. Setting global trading standards for “tropical fresh fruits and vegetables”. In the name of “consumer safety”.

The Papaya Farmer

Humming bird. You see that humming bird?... Generally I spend most of the morning running in between the field and the packing house. Checking each picking trailer. Making sure they’re picking OK. Going out to each job at least every 15 minutes. Circling round and round ... Some days I don’t know what I’m gonna do to get them motivated ... I tried so many things ... The packers don’t start packing seriously until half past four ... When my orders are disrupted ... it’s not worth losing a market for.

Jim ran the papaya farm with his wife. Both in their thirties, they had two young children. Then at primary school in Jamaica, but likely to get secondary education in the US or UK. Like he had. He was a second generation white Jamaican whose parents had emigrated from the UK just after the second world war. His father worked as an engineer in a sugar factory before setting up a small dairy farm. Jim and his wife met at agricultural college in England. They moved to Jamaica and his first job was on the estate where his father worked. He next job changed his life. Working on a farm on Jamaica’s north coast owned by an American billionaire. He’d bought it as a tax break

cum tropical holiday retreat. He'd invested J\$1 million to see if and how papaya could be grown there. The first crop failed. Papaya is notoriously difficult to grow commercially. Nobody there had the right experience. Even the Israeli agronomist brought in to oversee the experiment. They were all learning "on the job". Their second attempt was more successful. This was how Jim learned to grow papaya. And he knew its export potential. His bosses had commissioned some market research in Europe. It showed the benefits of Jamaican production. The easy airfreight. The superior taste of fruits picked a little later. The added value of being "Produce of Jamaica". An iconic place. Conjuring up plenty of positive associations.

So Jim took his chance. Rented 52 acres from a wealthy white Jamaican friend. Along the coast. On an old sugar estate then run as a horse farm. Which had excess land. Borrowing money to set things up. Taking a core group of workers with him. Working through the other farm's contacts in the export trade. To supply the same, expanding, markets. In the USA and UK. The first graduate of that "papaya school". Setting up on his own. A terrifying but thrilling prospect. A brave move, taken in 1990. Two years before this research was done. An incredibly successful gamble. Everything had just fallen into place. Local labour was easy to recruit. The Jamaican dollar had been devalued. Exporters had been allowed to trade entirely in US dollars or sterling. The demand for fresh Jamaican papaya continued to grow in North America and Europe. And he'd got a PhD student studying his "success". Already. The timing couldn't have been better. He'd worked hard. But also been lucky. An "overnight" success story. That was bound to go horribly wrong. His bubble could burst. At any moment. He thought. So, he had to keep on top of things. That plant. Which he'd come to know so well. Producing those gorgeous fruits. Was so awkward. And vulnerable. Especially to viral diseases. Like ringspot and bunchy top. Ringspot had devastated commercial papaya growing in Oahu in the 1950s. Much the same was happening in Puna, Hawaii as we spoke. It delayed the Jamaican government's planned expansion of papaya production between 1991 and 1994. It *had* all gone horribly wrong. For others. He knew it. So he feared those virus-carrying bugs. Sprayed his trees with insecticides. And got his workers to clear the tracks between them of weeds, dropped fruit, and fallen leaves. Potential homes for those dangerous bugs. These weeds could have bound that soil together. Prevented it from becoming so muddy and uneven. And stopped those pickers being jerked about on those trailers. But, if those bugs didn't go, everyone else would.

Jim spent most of his time trying to get his ninety workers to do their jobs properly. In the fields. And in the packing house. They were too slow, unwilling to multi-task, and showed no initiative. He said. He introduced incentive schemes. And engaged in multiple acts of

surveillance. He saw “them” as a big wheel that he had to get rolling. Through enormous efforts. Every day. Because he had to produce what he’d promised. Perhaps 1200 boxes in one shipment. Over 10,000 export quality fruits. Picked, processed and packed in a couple of days. Orders to be satisfied. Predictions and promises kept to. So they had to work until they were done. Whatever time that was. Those orders had to be on those flights. Or they’d all suffer. He couldn’t tell importers he had labour problems. He had to be seen to be in control. When they missed a shipment, he blamed the weather. You can’t pick when it’s raining hard. There are difficulties, as well as advantages, in doing business with people you rarely see. The flip side of this weather argument was being told that a shipment wasn’t up to standard. After reaching the pre-packers in the UK. Where it was unpacked and checked against the “specifications”. He wouldn’t get paid. He’d make a loss. If those fruits didn’t measure up. But how could he be sure that he wasn’t being ripped off? If he’d seen his papaya onto the plane. In perfect condition. Had they been cooked as the flight was delayed in Montego Bay? Had they been bruised when an airfreight container fell off its trailer at Gatwick? He didn’t know. So much was out of his control. So he needed to visit these places. Talk to the people involved. See how they did things. Make personal contacts. With Tony and those supermarket buyers who seemed to change jobs so regularly. He’d also pop into a *Sainsbury’s*, a *Safeway*, or a *Tesco* store. To see *his* fruit on their shelves. What a buzz! A little guy running a tiny farm in the Third World. Making it. *There*.

Papaya Routes

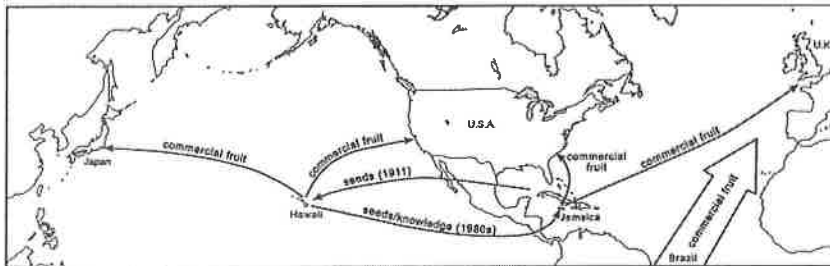


Figure 4: Papaya routes

Carica papaya L. was the one grown on Jim’s farm. Also known as the “Solo”. Found in the Caribbean. Taken to Hawaii in 1911. Its only commercially grown papaya by 1936. Setting the standard for the Japanese and US west coast markets. But also selling the seeds, knowledge, expertise for others to grow the solo elsewhere in the tropics. To boost exports to other wealthy markets, too far from Hawaii. Like the rest of North America. Europe. From places with

the right conditions, connections and needs. Like Jamaica. Which has to do things “properly”. Using “advanced” agro-technology and agro-chemicals. Modern tractors, sprayers, drip irrigation, water pumps, fertilisers, insecticides, fungicides, plastic crates. Training and supervising pickers and packers. To be careful. Accurate. On time. Or else. Washing. Checking. Weighing. Trimming. Wrapping in paper. Papayas which fill standard 4 kg gross—3.5 kg net—boxes. With fruits of the same size. Twelve of 290 g. Ten of 350 g. Seven of 500 g. Or thereabouts. They’re flown to Miami or Gatwick. On direct, regular *BA* or *Air Jamaica* flights. Taking tourists home. Making diasporic and business connections. Not like Brazil which produces 90% of papayas sold in Europe. There’s little or no commercial air traffic to/from its papaya growing regions. They go by sea. It’s a longer journey. Fruits picked a little earlier. Possibly over-ripe on arrival. Or never ripening. Variable quality. A big problem. But not for Jim.

The Farm Foreman

...mi se go out in di fiil an gwaan go wiid som graas. Se yuu and sombadi els gwaan fers. You fers come, you fers go out dier. Shi se shi naa go go wild no graas. So shi kom an kaal ar mada. Mi neva nuo se shi kaal ar mada. “...She shouted ...‘You no raas white man, you black man!’...What did she mean by that?”³ Laik se mi a tek op fa di wait man ...Laik me a fait gens di blak wan dem fa di wait man ... I no haad fi mek som a dem tink dat wie ...“What do you have to do?” Jus shuo likl muor powaz ...dem se yu hav a wait man haat.

Philipps was the man Jim trusted to run things. To get those fruits picked and boxes packed. On time. His work overlapped with Jim’s. But he dealt with day-to-day decisions about job allocations, discipline, illness and time off. He’d worked alongside Jim for most of his working life. They met on the sugar estate where Jim had his first job. When Jim moved to the “papaya school” farm, he took Phillips with him. The same happened when Jim left there to start his own farm. Philipps wasn’t the only “school” worker who made that journey. Jim took a core team with him. Trusted workers. Who had learned their trade alongside him. On the other farm. During this move, Philipps became seriously ill. He needed expensive hospital treatment. But had no medical insurance. He couldn’t get free treatment from the state. So Jim paid for it. Perhaps saving Philipps’ life. Everybody on the farm knew this. It explained why Jim paid his workers’ medical insurance. It also explained why Phillips was so loyal to Jim. Jim also provided Philipps with somewhere to live. A small house within shouting distance of his own. Right at the centre of the farm. You wouldn’t know it, but Philipps’ house was made out of a container. The kind that goes on the back of a lorry. In the hold of a ship.

Phillips had a relatively good standard of living. Relatively high wages and the free use of a pickup truck. But his was a lonely life. He didn't like to socialise with the pickers and packers because this could undermine his authority. Especially because of the rumours that could spread. Like the ones that got back to his wife about his affairs with various women on and beyond the farm. He had to keep his distance. He'd learned that from Jim. Watching how he conducted himself all those years. When dealing with Jamaican farm workers, you have to be calm but authoritative. Give them a "bly" sometimes. A break. Let them take a day off now and again to shop in the local town. Or for sickness. Especially "female" ones. But always check that it's genuine. Make use of the fact that almost everybody has family members who also work on the farm. Ask them how things are "at home". See if what they say corresponds with what you were told. If not, confront the person when they get back to work. But don't necessarily suspend or sack them. There are rules here, which everyone knows about. You get a short suspension for disobeying orders, and a much longer one for fighting. Especially if export quality papaya are flying around the packing house. That's a serious offence. But only if you get caught stealing, or running a scam, would you get sacked. Workers living on the poverty line are sometimes tempted by opportunities to augment their pay. By doing things right under your nose. Which is another reason why they need to be watched. They could be up to something.

Another thing Philipps had learned from Jim was to never let the workers see when you're rattled. Never lose your temper. Whatever happens. Even if you're getting "traced", harangued, by the angry mother of a person you have suspended from work. For repeatedly disobeying orders. Even if she does this in the open space between the canteen and the packing house. A packing house whose sides are open. Meaning that there's a big audience. On both sides. Watching someone trying to humiliate you. Stopping work to watch someone trying to humiliate you. An elderly woman screaming at the top of her voice. Gesticulating wildly. Right in your face. Reminding you, and everyone else, that you're a black man, not a white man. But that you must have a white man's heart. Judging by the way you treat black people. You should be ashamed of yourself. When this happens, just stand there. Take it. Wait until she has had her say. And then move on. Embarrassed and humiliated. But trying to hide it. By getting behind the wheel of your pickup and driving out of there. Away from that place where you are constantly surveying others. But also being surveyed yourself. At work and at home. Living on the farm means you're constantly on duty. So you need to find a place like a crowded town square. Where nobody really knows you. At night, so you won't be spotted by anyone who does. There, you can think things through.

Show your emotions. Sort yourself out. So that you can drive back to the farm and resume your role. The cool, calm but authoritative foreman. A managed role. Performed so that people don't really know what you're thinking. Including your boss. Undetected in 1992, Philipps had a scam going. Making extra money off papayas which weren't export quality. The ones sold to local hoteliers. A scam that came to light much later. When Jim sacked him. After all those years of service. And trust. In 1999, Jim told me that Phillips was in the UK. In prison. For drug smuggling.

Papaya Payments

Money. The "bottom line". Exchange rates constantly monitored. Between the pound, Jamaican dollar, and US dollar. Exporters weighing up margins to be made selling to the US or UK. Importers weighing up the option of buying from Jamaica or Brazil. In 1992, there were big changes in exchange rates. The J\$ was devalued. In 1990, US\$1 would get you J\$8. In 1993, it would get you J\$21.5. This was handy for Jamaica's "Registered Exporters", like Jim, who ensured their workers paid taxes. Allowing them to conduct their international business entirely in foreign currency. Converting to J\$ only for domestic purposes. Like paying workers. So, labour costs plummeted without pay cuts. And workers had to cope with soaring prices for everyday goods imported into this export-oriented economy. Inflation, in May 1992, was 90%. Jim's farm workers didn't enjoy this squeeze. But his UK and US importers and retailers did. Devaluation made Jamaican papayas more "competitive" on the world market. Exchange rates weren't the only monetary calculations shaping this trade, though. The price paid by Jim's US importer varied from week to week (from US\$4.50 to US\$7.50 a box) and between boxes (depending on the size of the fruits). Tony paid Jim £4.00 a box, regardless. But the supermarkets Tony supplied had different demands, catered to by a UK-based "pre-packer". They unpacked, re-graded, ripened, stored and packed papaya differently for different supermarkets. "Twelves" (ie 12 × 290 g) for *Asda*. "Nines" for *Sainsbury's*. "Eights" and "sevens" for *Marks and Spencer*. With longer or shorter shelf lives, more or less scarring. Some were happy with the farm's packing. Others wanted them re-packaged into haggis trays. All set out in supermarkets' specifications. Closely guarded secrets. Most of the value was added to these fruits after they left Kingston or Montego Bay. Perhaps six-sevenths of the final shelf price. A box of carefully wrapped Jamaican air would have been only slightly cheaper in *Asda*, *Sainsbury's* or *Marks and Spencer*. Their shoppers weren't just paying 99p for a nice, discrete thing. They paid for boxes, wrapping, agrochemicals, fuel, wages, insurance, dividends, wastage and so much more.

The Papaya Packer

Som a di taim ai prefa di fiil, yu no. Uuzwali hav nais taim duon dier. Wi uuzwali get a res, sit doun an hav a nais res. "Do you find that you can't get a nice rest in the packing house then?" Noo. Evri sekon dem kaal yu. You cannot sit down far yu get faiyad. Dem doun waant yu get eni res ... Dem se if yu waant res yu fi go houn. "So Phillips keeps an eye on you?" Ye, kiip aiz an yu all di wail... (It) haad werk. Tu moch presha. "... How much did you get paid last week?" Laas wiik me get ... trii hondred an fifti dala ... "A hundred went to tax?" Ye ... Tumara nou a goin tu maakit. An a bai di fuudz an bai som biskit fa di kidz dem an milk an suop an raip bananaz, kawnmiiil, shuga and flowa an rais. Last week I went an I spend 350 dollar.

Pru was twenty-one and lived at home with her parents, brother and four sisters. Her mum had had nine children. Her father had one outside. One of her sisters had had four. But two died very young. Pru had two daughters. Six and four. She couldn't afford more. In the current financial climate. Unlike her mother, twenty odd years ago. She worked with her mother and sister on the farm. Getting paid around 300 J per week. But spending more on her weekly trip to the market. Where devaluation had vastly inflated prices. Jim had given Pru and her colleagues above average pay rises. But they were still well below inflation. They'd all experienced a financial squeeze. She continued to put 40 J a week into a "partner" that gave back 600 J every 15 weeks. To buy big items. Like clothes. But she still had to find the money for her kids' school fees, books and lunch money, her family's electricity bill, and more besides. She saw few benefits from the taxes she had to pay. Much helping to pay off those huge government debts. She did have better pay and benefits than other agricultural workers. Like cane cutters. However. Things could have been worse. Jim told me.

Given the standard shift pattern, Pru saw her kids off to school early in the morning, but was only able to come home when those boxes of papaya were packed. Whatever time. Nine in the evening. Or one in the morning. Sometimes. They stayed at their grandmother's in the evenings. Unless Philipps gave her a "bly". Let her go home early. She found work tiring, especially in the packing house. Three pairs of eyes were constantly on the women working there. Jim's, Phillips', and Mavis the packing house supervisor's. Jim was relocating his office to one end of the packing house. Five feet up, on stilts. A container, panelled, with windows cut out of the sides. Windows so high that, when sat at his desk, the packing house workers wouldn't see him. Or know if he was there. But he'd be able to see what they were doing. If anything. Any time. By simply standing up. The fear of being caught red handed, or slacking off, was supposed to keep their minds and

bodies focused. Mavis' surveillance was more overt. She stood at the back of the packing house. Making notes in her book. About who worked the hardest. Did the best job. Notes taken alongside the packing house stats. Crates in. Boxes out. Numbers of sevens, eights, and so on. For Miami. Gatwick. Data for Jim's computer. Its spreadsheets. Wages software. And farm management programme. Her observations helped him to identify the "worker of the month". Who was awarded 500J. Quite an incentive. He thought. The carrot to go with the stick.

Papayas of all shapes, sizes and conditions arrived there in plastic crates. Freshly picked. The "pickers" tipped them into tanks of Benlate solution. A fungicide. Helping "washers" to clean the fruits. Which were passed to the tables behind. There, "weighers" selected those of the right shape, ripeness and blemish for export. Weighed them. Individually. On kitchen scales. Marked not in ounces or grammes, but in segments marked 7, 8, 9, 10 and 12. These fruits were placed on the wrapping tables behind. Those of the same size grouped together. Rejects put in crates underneath for "Indian". Who collected them daily to deliver to local hotels. Cut price. The "wrappers" trimmed the peduncles of export quality fruits to the quick with sharp knives. Scraped out dirt, dead caterpillars, or anything else, from the crease and divot at either end. Wrapped each one in white paper. Double thickness. Like a towel around your waist. Peduncle end down. Finished off with a twist and a fold. Placed in the standard box. Face up. A small sticker with the farm and importer's name put on some. The paper preventing fruits from rubbing against each other. In transit. Causing abrasions. Making them worthless. Possibly. At their destination. Jim had to get exactly the right fruits, in the right condition, at the right time, ready for export. He felt he had no choice but to be strict with his workers. His importers, retailers and consumers demanded it.

The packing house workers were supposed to wear gloves to handle this fruit. Gloves you might use when washing dishes. Marigolds. Gloves which were supposed to protect their skin from that latex, oozing from peduncles, freshly snapped and trimmed. But they wore out quickly. Developed cracks and holes. On fingertips and the sides of thumbs. That latex burned through rubber. And human skin. So latex burns were common. A constant topic of conversation. In that packing house. Some of the women had had to take time off. Because they couldn't handle anything. Their blistered fingertips and thumbs hurting so much. These gloves were uncomfortable to wear. In that heat. And the management wouldn't just "give away" new pairs. So many didn't wear them. Preferring to handle the papayas quickly. Gingerly. Or else.

Pru didn't enjoy her job. She said she'd prefer to work elsewhere. Like the USA. She had family there. They'd offered to pay her air

fare. To put her up. Just for a visit. But, like the vast majority of Jamaican people without thousands of dollars in the bank, she wasn't entitled to a visa. To travel in a passenger jet. Which could be carrying fresh papaya. For export. Down below. They had much more freedom to travel than she ever would. She'd wanted to become a seamstress. But this hadn't happened. She could never afford a sewing machine or the right classes. Or to travel to Montego Bay to buy or take them. Buses and taxis were expensive. So few people in Ibrox, the village next to the farm where she lived, worked far from home. Most of the farm workers lived there. It was a short, free journey. By foot. Yet there wasn't a lovely village atmosphere at work. There, she had no real friends. The boredom, monotony, pressure and stress made people do mischievous things to liven up the day. Like spreading rumours that she'd said that Philipps had begged her to marry him. The rumours got to him, as they knew they would. He confronted her about them, as they suspected he'd have to. She argued with him. To keep him in his place. Acting like a white man from the slavery days. Always pressuring the black people.

Papaya Fetishism

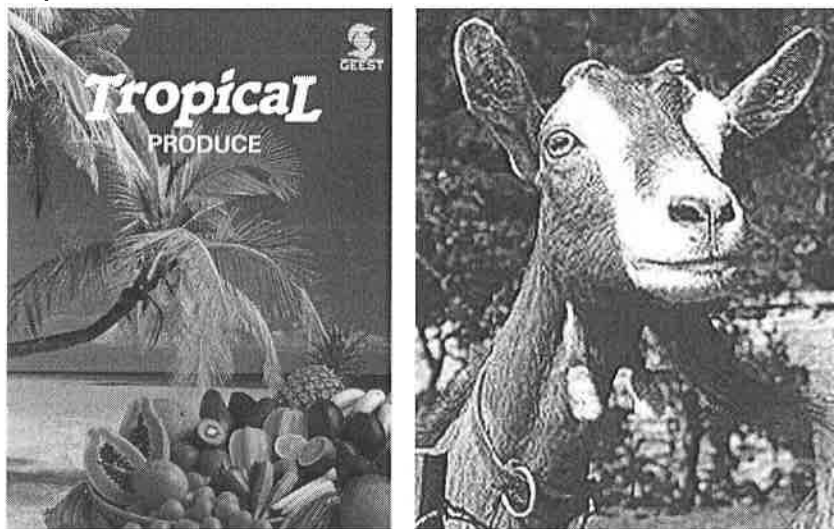


Figure 5: Left: papaya in a basket beneath a palm. Right: a goat⁴

Tropical fruits just fall from the trees. Pure, lush, nature. Yours for 99p. In the books, brochures and fliers addressing the concerns of the (imagined) "British" consumer. Who needs to know what these fruits look like. What you do with them. How you know when they're ready to eat. Which bits are edible. What they taste like. Where they come from. The "geography"! Often fetishised. Linking tropical fruits to

Europeans' imperial "adventures". Through photographing them on crumpled maps of tropical oceans and islands. And to representations of tropical paradises. With their standard issue palm trees. Under which the fruits can lie. In a basket. Or spread out on some palm leaves. Or on a woman's head, Carmen Miranda style. Takes you there. Doesn't it? To somewhere "exotic". To the tropics. Where you may have been on holiday. That's the idea, anyway. Buying these fruits could help to take you there. Magic! Even if only for a short time. And even if you know that the tropics really aren't like that.

Tropical crops have fetish-like powers in the places where they are grown, too. But the imagery and magic associated with them is often quite different. Many, like sugar, growing in places where their cultivation for export was initiated during colonial times. Descendants of plantation workers often see them as perpetuating those unequal and exploitative relations between colonisers and colonised. That's a political fetish. But other crops are more sexual. Papayas are known as "lechosa" in some Spanish-speaking Caribbean islands. That's street slang for female genitalia. Cut out a slice and use your imagination. Like Frida Kahlo did in her 1943 painting *The bride frightened at seeing life opened*.⁵ For others, their shape and the way they hang from the tress brings to mind breasts or testicles. In Jamaica, though, Papaya can do sexual harm. Folklore has it that tethering a male goat to a papaya tree will make him impotent. Planting one too near your house, gentlemen, will do the same to you. Papaya can "cut your nature". Tenderise your meat. Although it hadn't happened to any of the men who worked on the farm. They were keen to point that out. The fear that it might, however, promised to reduce praedial larceny. So one visitor to the farm told me. Men would think twice before breaking into a papaya farm to steal fruit from the trees. Or so he hoped. When he started growing papaya for export.

The Papaya Consumer

I'd love to buy lots of fruit and so on. But I don't because I know I wouldn't get enough time to eat it and it would go off... (And) you know everyone else had been picking them up and prodding them... I always have apples and nectarines when they're in season, and strawberries when they're in season, and melons if they're good value for money. And I always have lemons and limes. But, apart from that, they're probably the only fruits I'll go for. Purely for the fact (that)... if I bought a mango, it'd go off... Mango is an acquired taste. So I wouldn't want to eat a whole mango in one go. Unless I was making something like a sorbet... I don't like to eat a lot of it in one go. If I have mango, I'd normally buy it... dried.

Nine percent of British consumers buy “exotic” fruits. So called. “AB” consumers. Wealthier people. “Better educated”. Professionals. Like Emma.⁶ 25. Single. Living in a North London flat. Art school and a Textile Design degree under her belt. She enjoyed food. Read cookbooks, home and food magazines. Getting inspiration. For cooking. Eating out. And work. Designing fabrics. Collections. Colours. Textures. Patterns. British food had internationalised. In her lifetime. She loved that. Her grandmother wouldn’t even *consider* eating pasta. But she’d just been to her local Afghan restaurant. With a friend who’d just returned from Afghanistan. Travelling to the Far East had given her a taste for Thai and Indonesian food. Bringing back cookery books. And ingredients. Looking up Green Thai Prawns in her Delia Smith cookbook. Trips to restaurants made Emma want to travel more. The taste of fajitas, chilli and guacamole drawing her to Mexico. To experience the “real thing”. She could get what she needed to approximate them at home. Ready-made or from scratch. A quick meal for herself. A big meal for friends. Or an evening in with Ed. Her boyfriend. But shop-bought food was nothing like the “real thing”. Like those *Sainsbury’s* ready-made Thai fish cakes. £3 for “six little round things”. They looked, and tasted, awful! And that *Sainsbury’s* lobster didn’t taste anything like the one she’d eaten in New England. Chosen from that tank. Cooked/killed for her. There and then. Fresh as you like.

Emma worked four days a week. And had flexible hours. She shopped when *Sainsbury’s* was quiet. Ambling up the aisles. Taking her time. Looking around. But shopping systematically. Taking all week to write her list. For one “big shop”. Noting what she’d run out of. Things she’d seen on the TV. In cookbooks. Magazines. Wherever. And thinking about things she’d like to buy. Expensive or unusual food with money off. Making their purchase worth the risk. She couldn’t resist “offers”. She sometimes wrote her list in the order she’d encounter things. In store. Fresh produce, first into the trolley. If it looked nice. Clean. Frustrating for those growing and shipping it with such care. Because it was likely to be damaged. Punctured. Bruised. Abraded. By shoppers. Like Emma. Handling them. Squeezing them. Seeing how ripe they are. Returning them to the shelves. Or putting them into their trolleys to be further damaged. Perhaps. By other goods. Placed on, or around, them. Unloaded at the checkout, scanned and packed into bags. Placed back in the trolley. Stuffed into a car boot. And/or carried home. In bags swinging against one another. Perhaps unlikely to be eaten when they get home, anyway. Because of busy lifestyles. AB ones, in particular. People who eat a lot of ready meals. Have little time or energy to prepare food. But value fresh produce. Buy it. Store it in fridges. Display it in bowls. And reunite much of it in binbags. Past their sell-by dates. Off. Waste.

Decomposing. No longer “food”. Purchased but not consumed. What people feel they ought to eat not matching what they can and do eat. But still piling it into those trolleys. In hope as much as expectation. A problem Emma recognised. Not buying fresh produce when she was going away for the weekend. Not buying what she’d never get round to eating. Because it was too fussy. Too specialist. Or too big for one person. Like mangoes. She left much of her produce buying to “little shops”. Several times a week. Popping out. Picking up “bits and bobs”. From her local *Tesco Express*, deli, or greengrocer. They kept things fresh. Better than she could.

Emma often imagined where her food came from. She couldn’t help it. Believing she could experience faraway cultures. Through magazines. Getting a picture in her mind. Like the “Vietnamese in those hats and things”. Right or wrong, she “still got that feel”. A feel also gained from her favourite TV cookery shows. Where chefs went to places where dishes and/or ingredients originated. Rick Stein cooked crabs on an Australian beach. So she wanted to eat crab. And visit Australia. Ideally at the same time. She’d also grown up on a pig farm. With a vegetable garden. That made a difference, too. She valued fresh, home-cooked food. Like her Mum made. But not chicken. She’d seen chickens running around one day. And on her plate the next. She stopped eating them, aged 7. Hating the taste and texture. The mere mention of the meat provoking a vision, “a chicken just popping up in my head”. She had “a thing about chickens”. And their eggs. Eating them only when scrambled. Or an ingredient. Never eating an “actual egg”. Her brothers had stayed at home. Become farmers. Teasing her about being “a vegetarian”.

Like Pru, Emma worked on a fruit farm. In 1992. Picking strawberries. A summer job. While she was at art school and university. Earning money to pay off debts. Saving for a holiday. In the sun, perhaps. Unlike Pru, she’d enjoyed it. Picking with everybody else from 7 to 9 am. The right fruit from the right parts of the farm. The biggest, most attractive, ones for the top layer of each standard box. Destined for the same supermarkets as Pru’s papayas. She’d sit in her deck chair. Once they’d gone. In a field. All day. Working on her tan. Making little baskets. Weighing and selling fruits. Picked by members of the public. Picking their own. She had to answer their questions. About how they were grown. They’d say, “You don’t put any pesticides and sprays on it, do you?” And she’d reply, “No, not at all”. Knowing that wasn’t true. The ones people would buy couldn’t be grown without them. You had to lie to sell them. She said. Picking strawberries had made her “very careful and aware ... of what I buy now”. Thinking about where her food came from. Some of it, anyway. Chickens and eggs. Horrible in their “actual” form. For reasons she couldn’t quite explain. And strawberries. Coated

with agrochemicals that were bad for her health. Probably. Her dad insisted she wash her fresh produce when she got it home from the shops. She didn't, though. And the "origins" she imagined and spoke about never included people like Pru or Phillips. Or anyone else. Or what they talked about. That poverty and exploitation. But she didn't buy fresh papayas from that *Sainsbury's* or that *Tesco Express*. So why's she in this paper?

Papaya Consumption



Figure 6: Left: in the flesh. Middle: clear beer. Right: shrink-resistant wool⁷

A papaya consumer is supposed to pick the fruit fresh off the supermarket shelf. Exchange it for cash. Take it home. And follow the instructions: ripen it; cut it in half for breakfast; scoop out the seeds; slice off the skin; cut the flesh into strips; sprinkle some lime juice over them; eat them. A taste of the tropics. Delicious. One per person. *Solo* production for solo consumption. Exactly! Part of that recommended daily intake. Five fruits a day. This one rich in vitamins A and C, potassium and folic acid, low in calories, and a digestive aid. But that's not all. Face-lift treatments. Slipped disc operations. Beer clarification. Chewing gum. Toothpaste. Contact lens cleaning materials. Indigestion remedies. Canned meats. Leather goods. Shrink-resistant woollen fabrics. Vegetarian cheese. More complex commodities. Some much more likely to be part of Emma's weekly shopping than papaya. But all containing papain. Commercially extracted. From that white latex you wouldn't want to drip onto your skin. From an unripe papaya's peduncle. Because of its unique protein-digesting enzymes. Commercially farmed. In East Africa and Sri Lanka. Another part of this trade. Its nature far from pure. Or simple. An invisible part of countless people's lives. In countless ways. Papayas are impossible to avoid. Perhaps. Even if you've never eaten one. Because they're not discrete things. By any means. Like any thing you could try to follow. Unravelling and becoming more entangled in the process. Attempts to

de-fetishise commodities raise tricky but important questions. Like, what can any “radical” and/or “sustainable” politics of consumption realistically involve? If things are so. Discuss.

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Endnotes

* For an explanation of why the author refers to himself in this way, see Ian Cook et al (in press) “Positionality/Situated Knowledge” in David Atkinson, Peter Jackson, David Sibley and Neil Washbourne (eds) *Cultural Geography: a critical dictionary of key ideas*. London: IB Tauris. A draft copy is available at <http://www.gees.bham.ac.uk/people/index.asp?ID=118>

¹ For a more detailed step-by-step photographic journey of a papaya’s life from seed to box, see the story of “Papaya Joe” at <http://www.exportjamaica.org/papaya/story1.htm> (accessed 12 March 2004). Unless indicated in these endnotes, all unattributed photographs are either the author’s own or the copyright owner is now out of business.

² Left photo source <http://www.baobabs.com/fruitiers.htm>, used with kind permission.

³ Words not in italics are the author’s.

⁴ Right picture source http://www.coachhousecrookham.com/ch_gall/goat.jpg, used with kind permission

⁵ See http://www.honmex.com/paintings/frida_kahlo/fk028.jpg (accessed 19 May 2004).

⁶ “Emma” was interviewed in 1997 by Mark Thorpe as part of the *Eating Places* project undertaken with Phil Crang. Thanks to them for allowing me to use this here.

⁷ Middle photo source <http://image.guardian.co.uk/sys-images/Guardian/Pix/pictures/2000/04/10/beer.jpg>; right photo source http://www.artfibers.com/Chunky_Gauge/60.14.jpg, used with kind permission.

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