

INTRODUCTION

Kajette Solomon: This is the Trading Earth Soundwalk. My name is Kajette Solomon, and before I talk about any of the objects in this room, just for a moment, I want to tell you a story about my childhood.

When I think back to being a kid, I have particularly strong associations with the sound of clinking tableware. It reminds me of my mom taking forks and knives out of the china cabinet, of ice cubes jangling against the edges of my dad's glass mug.

But most of all, that sound reminds me of the moment every Sunday when my mom put a casserole dish fresh out of the oven on the dining room table.

That dish would hit the table with a sound that rang out like a massive cymbal, vibrating through all of our bodies. Because even though the dining room table was only 10 feet from the oven in our little Queens apartment, when that dish hit the table, it felt like we had reached across the sea.

I lived in New York for most of my childhood, but it was traditional Jamaican rice and peas, ackee, and breadfruit that were in that serving bowl at the dining room table—made with ingredients directly from Jamaica. My family lived there until I was four, and whenever we went back to visit, we'd pluck ackee, which is a type of fruit, from the tree in my grandma's backyard...

Janette Bloomfield: We had to wash it and freeze it. Then we wrap it in foil paper.

That's my mom. Recently, I spoke with her about how we brought ackee back on the plane from Jamaica.

Janette Bloomfield: So you pack it tightly so it don't melt and then when we come to customs they would probably take it and throw it out. When it comes frozen, they don't bother us. So we find ways to bring things in that we love and want to introduce to our families who wasn't growing up in Jamaica.

So for us, food traveled long distances to get to our table. I'm sure you're wondering, what do my Sunday dinners have to do with any of the ceramics in this gallery?

I'm spent a lot of time in the room you're standing in—I'm an educator at the museum. And when I look around at all of these porcelain teacups and spice containers, I can almost hear that same seismic sound that I heard when my mom put a bowl of traditional Jamaican food on the dining room table.

Because believe it or not, these old vessels were once filled with food and drink—coffee and sugar and spices. And like the ingredients in my own Sunday dinners, these goods once took long and winding paths to arrive at people's tables.

In the empty spaces of these containers, I hear echoes of the journeys these foods took across seas throughout time.

The clanking of alcohol jugs as they're hauled onto a ship to the coasts of West Africa, the shuffling of Chinese tea canisters as they're arranged at a New England storefront.

Every clank and clatter is the sound of moving things and moving people. It is the sound of capital, of labor, of trade. That's what ties all the objects in this room together.

Chris Roberts: This exhibition is about the movement of money, of people, of wealth, of resources, of artistic skill... So much of what is in here is a story of the politics of movement.

That's RISD professor Chris Roberts amid the bustle of downtown Providence. You'll hear more from him later.

Elizabeth Williams: A lot of distance, a lot of ground was covered to get the commodities from one place to another.

That's Elizabeth Williams, curator of this exhibition.

Elizabeth Williams: As that happened, food stuffs that were common in one area were exported to areas where they were not as common, changing the landscape of how people ate and how people drank across the world.

In this soundwalk, I'll share three stories about the movement of commodities: alcohol, hot chocolate & coffee, and clay. We'll talk about the invisible paths between these goods, the people who toiled behind the scenes so that they could arrive at dinner tables, and their legacies today. What you'll find is that we always have and always will reach across the sea when we reach across the table.

After this introduction, the soundwalk is split into three parts. I recommend listening to them in order, but of course, feel free to jump around, pause, and revisit them later if that suits you. You're welcome to roam around as you listen too—this gallery may seem small, but there are over 200 objects in here. So let's get started.