

Who we Beans

AN EXHIBITION BY
THERESA LOLA

*West African food &
community affection.*

12TH- 16TH SEPTEMBER 2023
BERMONDSEY PROJECT SPACE



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WHO WE **BEANS**

A FOUR PART VISUAL POETRY EXHIBITION

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Supported using public funding by
**ARTS COUNCIL
ENGLAND**

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Theresa Lola is a British Nigerian poet based in London. She has held poetry residencies at places such as Wellcome Collection, Bethlem Museum of the Mind. She has written commissioned poems for National Gallery, Selfridges, and Tate. Her poetry collection 'In Search of Equilibrium' was long listed for the 2021 Michael Murphy Memorial Prize. Her work cycles between themes of heritage, belonging, and hope. *Who We Beans* marks her first exhibition.

WHO WE BEANS

Who We Beans is a visual poetry exhibition that explores how West Africans in the diaspora use food to exercise communal affection. In her debut exhibition Theresa Lola combines text with bio resin, woven art, film, and a specially created board game. The works explore migration, community resilience, and hybrid identity. Beans, specifically black-eyed pea appears as a motif through the exhibition. Used in staple meals across West Africa, and in meals they have inspired in the diasporas, the crop represents resourcefulness and durability.



ACARAJE DA BHALU

Acaraje Da Bhalu is a recreation of a street food stall in Brazil. Staple West African recipes were brought by slaves to Brazil and used to channel community resilience and connectedness. Acaraje evolved from the West African fritter Akara, made from mashed black-eyed pea and fried in palm oil. The Brazilian variation of the snack is sliced open and stuffed with a creamy paste. The fritter is often sold by women from Bahia and has been passed down through family ties. Today Acaraje is recognised as an intangible heritage in Brazil, and their community power became evident when strong protests caused FIFA to reverse the trading ban they had imposed on Baiana women at the 2012 FIFA World Cup in Brazil.

Theresa Lola has recreated the acaraje using bio-resin with poems visible inside. Resin possesses a viscous nature with an ability to solidify their existence in any space. Each poem is contained in their acaraje, inherently part of the food and unavoidably digested by the visitor. The poems are written from the voice of 'we', the women behind the stalls, and speak to themes of community resilience, affection, and reclamation. In one poem, the speakers celebrate "the family busy-ness of hooting our heirloom.", and in another they invite the visitors to "Come feast and drink from our World Cup." At Acaraje Da Bhalu the stall owner is 'Bhalu', a shortened version of Theresa mother's middle name.



WHO WE BEANS

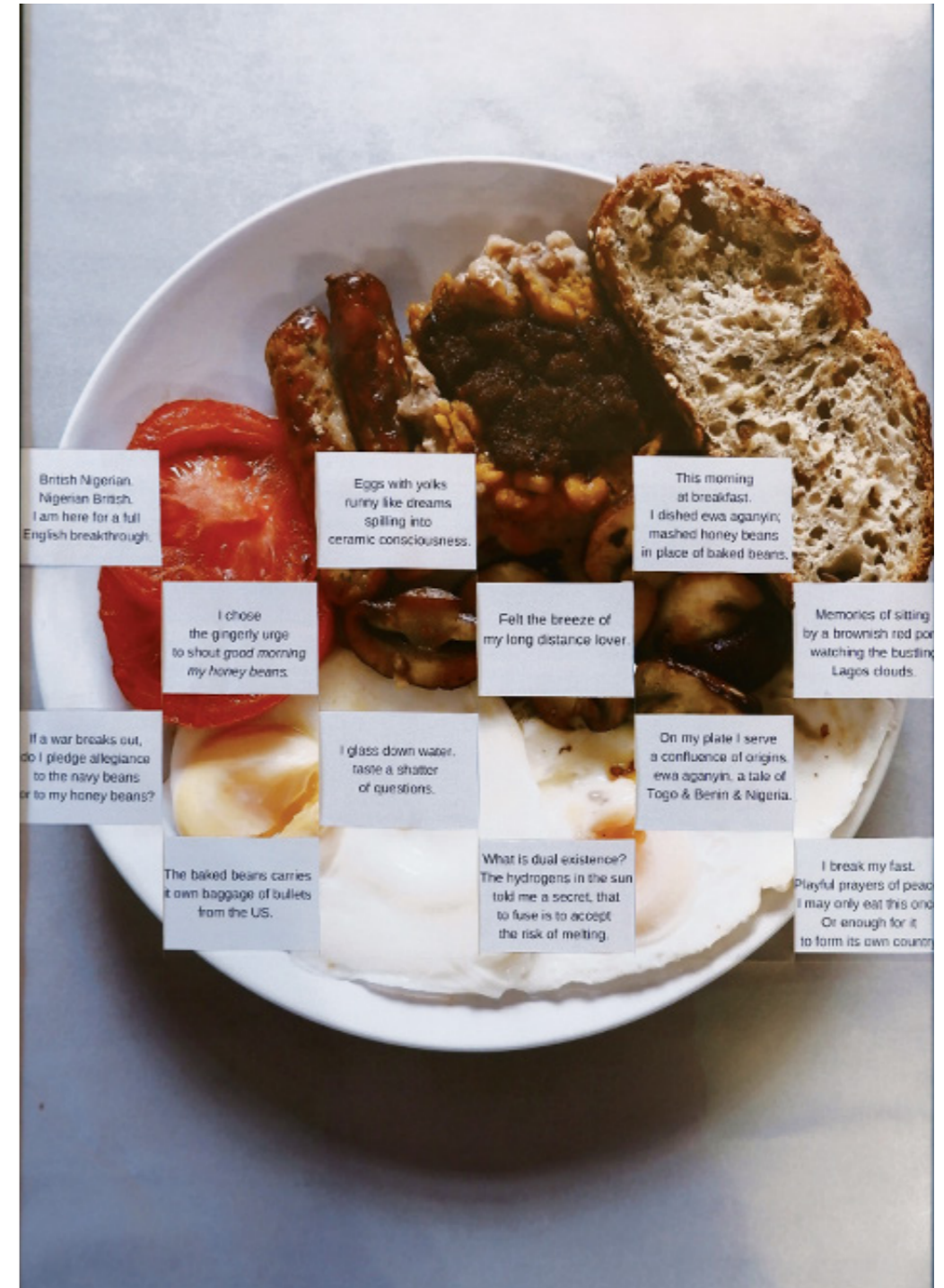
Who We Beans is a poetic documentary follows three West Africans restaurant owners in Southwark, a London borough with a large number of Africans. The hospitality sector was dented during the COVID-19 pandemic and saw many restaurants close. The documentary journals a passion for food vital to run a restaurant, the importance of community support, and the influence their heritage has on their restaurant decisions. The interviews are punctuated with poems that weave the words of the restaurant owners and act as galvanising declarations. We meet Mama Lolak of Nigerian heritage who runs Lolak Afrique, Khadim of Little Baobab which offers Senegalese food, and mother and daughter duo, Grace and Mercy hailing from Ghana.



FULL ENGLISH EWA

Full English Ewa renders food fusion that exists because of woven identities, and the beauty and tensions that exist in hybrid existence. The base photograph captures a full English breakfast with the usual baked beans replaced with ewa agoyin, a mashed beans and sauce dish popular in Nigeria. Ewa Aganyin was made popular in Nigeria thanks to migrants from Benin and Togo in the 1960s and 80s, post a wave of independence in West Africa. While baked beans, the British favourite, became popular due to food rationing during World War Two. By replacing the baked beans for ewa aganyin, Theresa explores how fusion food can be a space to exercise freedom.

One poem asks, "If a war breaks out, do I pledge allegiance to the navy beans or to my honey beans?" Text become a flexible body moving within the dish, each strip of poem weaves in and out and emerges with a new reflection.



BREAKTIME CHOP

Breaktime Chop is a board game inspired by Ludo created by Theresa Lola and designed by her brother Samuel Diamen. The game is at the base of a food tray and is filled with photos of Nigerian snacks and phrases that determine the steps of the player. Break time is a word often used in schools to mark a short break. The game invites visitors to explore the small necessary windows where we playfully interact and snack with one another, breaking from the meatier worries of food accessibility, if possible.

In Ludo game players leave their home and race others, aiming to survive and return home. This installation highlights the unavoidable interaction between players/people, the risk and hustle of living in a time of food insecurity and rising food cost that Nigeria, West Africa, and many countries are experiencing today. Food becomes a means to forget about food, buffered by companionship, heated games, and discussions.



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