BLACK SEEDS OF FREEDOM

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Photograph by Taigi Smith

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The Editors of the Linewaiters' Gazette are re-running this timely article by Taigi Smith from the summer of 2020. Taigi has been a member of the Coop for many years and as worked as both a reporter and development editor on the Linewaiters' Gazette.

By Taigi Smith

It was June 18th and after four months of seclusion, I was on my way to tape an interview at the historic Abyssinian Baptist church in Harlem. I had been producing television from my home for the past four months, and I was desperate to get out and see the world again. It was one day before Juneteenth, the day enslaved African-Americans were finally granted their freedom, and so for me, it was an incredible day to be uptown. As a black woman who had been sequestered in an upscale, mostly white suburb, for almost 4 months, it felt especially liberating to be around black folk. Until this moment, I had no idea how much I had missed being in a majority Black space. As I walked the crowded streets of Harlem, there was an energy in the air that desper-

ately missed after being surrounded by mostly upper class white people for so many months.

The sounds of Harlem moved me—sirens blaring, horns honking, narrow streets jam packed with midday traffic. I felt alive amongst the street vendors selling colorful masks, incense, and fabric. I spent a few hours roaming the streets of Harlem and taking in the energy. Although many parts of Harlem were gentrified years ago, these blocks felt unapologetically Black.

I had a few hours to pass before my shoot and I felt a curious sense of urgency. In those moments before my shoot, I felt desperate to take in all the Blackness that I had been missing social isolation. With Juneteenth just one day away, I was feeling especially liberated. Despite all that was happening in the world—the civil unrest, the police shootings, the protests—I was free. Near 135th street, I stood in a long line unshaded from the sun and bought fried fish and bright red watermelon drink from a group of men cooking on the corner. While waiting for my order, I visited a bakery across the street and purchased 5 slices of red velvet cake and a few cups of banana pudding from a local bakery. I was determined to bring as much of Harlem home as I possibly could. As I was leaving the bakery, I walked a few blocks north and stumbled across a truck overflowing with giant, striped, oval-shaped SEEDED watermelons. These watermelons were the stuff of my childhood dreams.

I had stumbled upon a pot of gold. Watermelons were a dime a dozen, but these black SEEDED watermelons, the mythical species that they had become, were like manna from heaven. Heavenly sweet. A gift from God himself. History tells us that watermelons first appeared in Africa almost 5000 years ago. Egyptian Hieroglyphs revealed etchings of big, circular watermelons, and history tells us that dead pharaohs were buried with watermelons, to be used as sustenance in their journeys towards the afterlife. So for $20, I bought the biggest watermelon I could carry to my car. I strapped that baby into my daughter’s car seat and drove it home like a newborn.

Fast forward. It’s now about 7 p.m. and I walk into my home after my shoot loaded

down with red velvet cake, banana pudding, and this fat ass watermelon. “Savannn-nahh!!! Come see what Mommy has. Look at this. This watermelon right here is about to change your life.” I cut her a piece and at first, she’s a little confused. You see, her generation had grown up on seedless watermelon, and unless they’d been to the south or to Harlem, most of these middle class black kids have no idea real watermelons contain big, black seeds. She had one piece, then two, then three….that watermelon never had a chance. We destroyed that $20 watermelon in just two days.

Photograph by Taigi Smith

“Seeded watermelons, despite passion from some buyers, are not big sellers,” says Cecelia Rembert, a produce buyer at the PSFC. Because of this, fewer distributors grow organic seeded watermelon. According to Cecelia, prime watermelon season is Memorial Day to Labor Day. “When the weather starts warming up, people want their watermelon. At that time, we can only get Mexican watermelon. We get them be-

cause people want them but they're like the place holders," says Cecelia of the lighter colored, less sweet, seedless Mexican watermelons. The warmer it gets, the tastier and sweeter the watermelon becomes.

A few days later, I begin suffering from seeded watermelon withdrawal. The pools are closed, camps are shuttered, and it's hot as hell outside. I turn to my daughter Savannah and say, "Let's drive to Harlem and get another watermelon." At first, she looks at me like, "Mommy, are you serious right now?" but then she just says, "Nope. I'm practicing social distance." Lately, when my 8 year old doesn't want to do something, she says she's practicing social distance. Like many kids, COVID-19 has her wracked with anxiety, so I don't push. But I'm now addicted and willing to do almost anything to get my hands on another seeded watermelon. I Google. I search Twitter and Instagram for a closer purveyor. Certainly, I tell myself, there has to be another watermelon truck somewhere. Nothing comes up. So finally, in a last ditch attempt to avoid the drive to Harlem, I turn to Facebook. "Anybody know where I can find a watermelon man around here??? I want a watermelon with seeds." And I wait. A few days later I get a PM from my Godmother. "There used to be a guy near Vailsburg Park who sold watermelons. He's right near the exit off the Parkway." My good friend Lisa pings me a day later. "There's a watermelon truck in Vailsburg Park," she writes.

While Savannah is unwilling to drive to Harlem for a watermelon, she gladly accepts an invitation to Newark, just 15 minutes away from our home. We mask up, hop in the car, and take the ride. As we get off the parkway near Vailsburg Park, I begin looking for the watermelon man. Like Big Foot, he's nowhere to be found. I drive up to a group of guys sitting on a porch across the street from the park. "Hi. Um…is the watermelon man around here?" Now I say this like I know for sure there's actually a watermelon man. "He's usually over here," says one guy. "Naaa…he's not here today," says another. "It's a little early for him," says the third brotha. Early, I think to myself. It's already 4 p.m. So Savannah and I return home empty-handed, and while I'm disappointed, I am also determined to meet the mysterious Vailsburg Park Watermelon Man face to face.

A few days later, I take the same drive down the Garden State Parkway and once again, exit at Vailsburg Park. As I come off the parkway, I see a U-Haul truck and a small sign that simply says “Watermelon.” And this is where I meet, Yah-Yah aka Watermelon Man. As I drive up to his truck, I see a line of cars waiting. Everyone seems to have the same idea. How could it be that I was the only person who didn’t know about Yah-Yah?

Photograph by Taigi Smith

I tell him I’ve been looking for him and am desperate to know why seeded watermelons are so rare. Once he confirms that I’m not a police officer, he settles in for a nice conversation about the virtues of seeded watermelons. “The seedless watermelons… that’s not a real watermelon. That’s not real. Because everything comes from the seeds,” says Yah-Yah, and then he picks up a beautiful deep red piece of watermelon to make his point. “It’s sweet. Take a picture of that. See how red that is? You ain’t

gonna find this everywhere. The seedless watermelon. It ain't like this. It's got all those little white seeds. Those are fake. That's man made."

Yah-Yah Livingston, who is from Columbia, South Carolina has been selling watermelons near Vailsburg Park for 10 years. He inherited the business from his father who sold watermelons and produce in the exact same spot for 35 years. On a typical day, Yah-Yah sells 70-100 watermelons a day. "Corona messed up everything but people…they gonna get watermelon."

> THE WATERMELON PIPELINE BEGINS IN MEXICO, THEN FLOWS TO CALIFORNIA, FLORIDA AND GEORGIA.

"My father, Mr. Rims, put me on the corner when I was 13 years selling roses. Everybody in the neighborhood knew my father. Rims' Fruits and Vegetables. He used to tell me how they would go in the fields down in South Carolina. They would go out into the field and punch a hole in the watermelons and take out the heart. That was the sweetest part," remembers Yah-Yah.

The stream of customers is steady and the business runs like a well-oiled machine. Most people never even get out of their cars. They drive up and one of Yah-Yah's family members greets them. They request a melon —the choices are big and bigger—and within seconds, someone from Yah-Yah's team is loading a watermelon into their car. "Everybody wants black seed cause it's natural," says Yah-Yah. "Due to the Black Lives Matter more people are supporting Black Businesses, too. My father started it. People out here know. Just come out here to get watermelon."

Photograph by Taigi Smith

While most of the watermelon purchased at the PSFC is seedless, the Coop does sell mini seeded watermelons later in the season. “They come from Lancaster Farms, where they originate in Pennsylvania, and that’s the beginning of the real local watermelon,” says Cecelia.

The watermelon pipeline begins in Mexico, then flows to California, Florida and Georgia. According to Cecilia, the local watermelon season starts in July. “They need heat to grow well. The melons, cucumbers….that whole family, zucchini. They are plants that like heat.” While most of the watermelons carried by the PSFC are organic, the Coop will sometimes purchase conventional watermelons from Texas.

On this hot July afternoon, business is going well for Yah-Yah. “It’s been non-stop. This morning, I’ve already sold 70 watermelons.” When asked why big grocery stores don’t sell black seeded watermelons Yah-Yah tells me:

“A LOT OF PEOPLE SAY THE WHITE PEOPLE FEEL IT’S EASIER TO EAT A WATERMEL-

> ON THEY DON’T HAVE TO PICK SEEDS FROM. THEY PREFER A SEEDLESS. SO, THEY SELL THAT IN THE WHITE COMMUNITY. BUT WE WANT THIS. THAT’S WHAT WE’RE RAISED ON. WATERMELONS WITH SEEDS. WHEN I WAS A KID, WE USED TO SPIT THE SEEDS. IT WAS A GAME. WE WOULD SEE WHO COULD SPIT THE SEEDS THE FARTHEST. IT’S ABOUT HEALTH. MOST PEOPLE TAKE THE SEEDS, THE RIND, YOU JUICE IT. IT’S GOOD FOR YOUR HEART, HIGH BLOOD PRESSURE. PROSTATE.”

Yah-Yah even tells me, “Viagra is in the rind.” Watermelon, how I love thee. Let me count the ways…

As I talk to Yah-Yah, I remember my own summer days, spent in Irvington, New Jersey with my Granny. I have vague memories of eating cold, sweet, watermelon on hot summer days. I remember watermelon at summer camp and eating seeded watermelon with my cousins. The memories after so many years are vague, but they are etched somewhere in the recesses of my mind. It’s those memories that send me searching for black seeded watermelon so that my own daughter can know what it means to be black and do black girl things like spit out watermelon seeds on a balmy summer day.

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This summer I am reclaiming my right to eat watermelon because for years, I was too embarrassed to eat it around white people. Historically, watermelon has been used to demonize and embarrass Black folk. As slaves, African-Americans were forced to pick and harvest watermelons, but when we won our freedom, African-Americans began to grow and sell watermelons as a way to build wealth. White southerners, angry that Blacks were no longer slaves, began to depict us as lazy, big-eyed watermelon eaters. According to *Smithsonian Magazine*, "many Southern whites reacted to this self-sufficiency by turning the fruit into a symbol of poverty. Watermelon came to symbolize a feast for the 'unclean, lazy and child-like.' To shame black watermelon merchants, popular ads and ephemera, including postcards pictured African Americans stealing, fighting over, or sitting in streets eating watermelon."

These racist caricatures appeared in newspapers, advertisements, even on salt and pepper shakers. These images were hurtful and infuriating, and while I didn't know then why I wouldn't eat watermelon around white folk, I certainly do now. The irony of Yah-Yah selling this delicious fruit is not lost on me. Years ago, my people were ridiculed for attempting to better themselves by selling this fruit, but out here in Ne-

wark, here's this proud brother selling the sugar sweet melon to his community in exactly the form that it is meant to be eaten—with big, black seeds. To me, those black seeds symbolize the joy of summer and the strength and resilience of my African-American people. Just as so many of us have been weeded out, displaced, or forgotten about, we have survived and thrived. And we are here. Just like the black seeded watermelon.

It would be fair to say that I am on a watermelon crusade of sorts. I cut up Yah-Yah's melon and shared it with just about every friend and family member who crossed my path. No one has been spared a chance to taste the bright red deliciousness. I sent Savannah on a playdate with a big hunk of watermelon and later that afternoon, the child's mother sent me a simple text. "This watermelon is EVERYTHING." With the seedless watermelons, no one ever sent texts, but their black seeded cousins demand we pay attention.

A few days after I meet Yah-Yah and haul home two of his watermelons, my daughter is playing outside of our home with her friends. It feels like a perfect time to slice up the melon and hand it out. Her friends are white, and unlike me, she is not shy to share her love of watermelon. In fact, she takes the slices outside proudly, knowing the joy the sweet taste of Yah-Yah's melon will bring on a warm summer day. I watch Savannah's friends from the window, and they seem perplexed by the black seeds. I watch them as they pick out all of the seeds, inspect them, and discuss the seeds amongst themselves. I watch as they ponder the seeds, and before I know it, I'm yelling out of the window. "Just spit them out. Spit them out in the grass."