



**A watermelon must
be listened to**

Waterproof, LA
Julia Sharpe

In the photograph, Aunt Anna looks back at Lysa who snaps the camera. It's 1978, at Aunt Helen's house in Waterproof, Louisiana, during the annual summer reunion. All fifty members of the Howell clan camping out, drinking and eating for two weeks. Anna wears a light-weight, blue-jean dress with red and white check trim, and a pocket made of the same material, on which Aunt Helen had sewn a tea kettle. Anna leans, ever so slightly, on the counter with her fingers spread, palm down, pressed against two or three plates on the counter. She feigns annoyance, but then at the last minute, just before the snap, half smiles. Behind the plates, just to the back of Aunt Anna's left arm is the watermelon. The size of Anna's head, fleshy and burnt pink, like the color of Lysa's thighs after lying on the levies all afternoon. Stomach down, straps down, back open to the wet Louisiana sun, body cool on the hazy teal grass.

In the photo, Aunt Anna wears a watch that Uncle Bill gave her as well as a large diamond ring that can't be seen. The watch was a birthday present after years of marriage, whereas the diamond ring was a gift just after their engagement in Vietnam. Lysa always said the ring was a down-payment for their marriage, Anna's moving back to the states, and nursing him into old age. But, after all, she'd managed to make a life for herself here, she'd even opened up a restaurant, Anna's Kitchen over in Natchez, a small Vietnamese diner serving southern comfort food.

When Uncle Bill died in the early eighties he left behind his small oil fortune. Anna got most of it, and was also in charge of divvying it up: their kids Billy and Rebecca split half the money, while Anna got the other half. Lysa and the other cousins got polished stone necklaces or ivory bracelets or guns; Bill's living brothers and sisters got a sapphire or diamond or ruby; his children in Argentina, Iran, and Cote d'Ivoire got solid gold bars, which they came immediately to retrieve without so much as a thank you. Aunt Helen said Anna hid most of the money in the restaurant so as the kids couldn't get to it, cause if they did, they'd drink or drug it all away. Then, just like that, twenty or so years after Bill's death, the restaurant burned to the ground overnight, struck by lightning. An act of God that sent Anna back to Vietnam, as if the past forty years hadn't happened.

The photograph is mostly unremarkable, but when Lysa pulled it from a family album that'd been sitting in Aunt Helen's attic for at least twenty years, she'd become obsessed. It sat by her bed

at night and on her desk during the day. She'd look at it with a screwed-up face, like someone trying to remember something they'd never been told. Finally she took it to Aunt Helen at the nursing home, and asked, what's the watermelon story? Helen paused before answering, then asked for her stash of whiskey, which Lysa promptly found and poured for them both. She looked deeply sad, and said, "it's like this:

You can't live a life you've already lived again, you only have one, and whatever decisions you make, they happen for the whole family sometimes, sometimes they don't. Mama Howell, my mother, your grandmother, had a watermelon patch, a watermelon garden if you will. The first year she grew was 1911. Well, that year, the Mississippi broke every levy and flooded every town but ours, and that's how we got the name Waterproof. Some people said it was the watermelon that did the trick. The patch was so big, it sucked up all the underground water that the river didn't swell up over the levies like in other places. Instead, it went underground and fed the watermelons. On account of her Baptist superstition, Mama Howell grew that watermelon patch every year, just in case it really was the watermelons that saved us. So, every year Mama lived, the patch grew and grew, and we ate watermelon like it was going outta fashion. Every summer, there'd be watermelon after watermelon on the counter with a knife right in the middle, so as anyone who was passing through and wanted some could take it. Those years were golden. The family was happy, without pain. The country wasn't at war, the brothers were all home. Then Mama Howell died. Then Bill died, then Roland, then Curly. Anna replanted the watermelon patch for almost twenty years after, but then she got tired of the work, and that died too. The first year she didn't plant, the town flooded. That's when your Uncle Buddy and I moved outta Mama Howell's old house, the family house for nearly a century, and into something smaller and farther out from the river. Tika, my daughter, started a watermelon patch again, but the floods kept coming."

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I.

**hush hush
the concrete's breathing
the fabric is grey,
shiny and damp.
metal whirs, throats giggle
with copper sound.**

"slow down a little bit."

**somnambulant, buzzing, sibilant
snapping, ignition
anticipatory sizzle,
oblong bubbles of speech
the trip is already—outrage
the way bugs bounce
against screen door**

**a murmur like a bedrock
that disrupts and vibrates
in my intestines**

**wind-drone bi-arterial
hot vaunted revving
screech or skids to a stop
the nearness textures fritter
(thump of an unspent fricative)
pitter-patter to the hollow
four-to-the-floor**

**water slapping
against a shore, woodpecker.
let me in! let me in!**

Up Parrotfish Rock
Parker Hatley & Cameron Zarrabzadeh

I go looking for my watermelon outside of Albuquerque with Cameron, a friend from North Carolina. We end up at a huge Smith's Supermarket, where he thinks we might find one, even smack-dab in the middle of the off-season. He's right, but they're not very attractive specimens—seedless things, smaller than usual, and underripe to boot. We buy three of them anyway (they're on sale), plus a case of beer to wash down the kebabs he'll make later that evening. Before dinner, we head for a walk in the mountains just outside of town with Cam's dog, Rodeo. Cam is stuck in the middle of trying to feel better about a difficult relationship. We discuss his options on our way to an outcropping that he has geotagged in his phone as "parrotfish"—textured cleavage in the rock face looks akin to fish scales, and there's a feature off to one side of the mass that looks like a beak—trading generic and occasionally heartbreaking stories about the previous year. One of the melons falls out of the bag on the way up, and Rodeo chases it down the trail, tripping over himself like a dung beetle.



Jacinto unrolled the blankets and threw the driest one about the shivering priest. Then he bent over the pile of ashes and charred wood, but what he did was to select a number of small stones that had been used to fence in the burning embers. These he gathered in his sarape and carried to the rear wall of the cavern, where, a little above his head, there seemed to be a hole. It was about as large as a very big watermelon, of an irregular oval shape.

There are two competing theories as to how the mountains got the name Sandia. The first, more popular, interpretation is that the name refers to the pinkish hue that the range's granite and feldspar takes on every night around sundown. The latter, more interesting, is that the name was given by the Spanish after seeing the vast, terraced fields of a green and yellow squash loping up the mountains dividing the valley from the western mesas. In 1923, the ethnobotanist Lyman Carrier proposed that indigenous communities in the Americas readily accepted watermelon because the fruit could be successfully cultivated with the same methods used for that native squash (*Cucurbita spp.*). The buffalo gourd (*Curcubita foetidissima*) looks an a lot like a watermelon and seems to have been a popular cultivar in the region. The Isleta Puebloans boiled it to extract a liquid to treat chest pains, and the Tewa dried and ground it up for use as a powder laxative. At Zuni, the seeds and flowers were mixed with saliva to reduce swelling. It was also used as a purgative, a treatment for snakebite, an insect repellent and, later, a floor polish by New Mexican housewives.

Holes of that shape are common in the black volcanic cliffs of the Pajarito Plateau, where they occur in great numbers. This one was solitary, dark, and seemed to lead into another cavern. Though it lay higher than Jacinto's head, it was not beyond easy reach of his arms, and to the Bishop's astonishment he began deftly and noiselessly to place the stones he had collected within the mouth of this orifice, fitting them together until he had entirely closed it. He then cut wedges from the piñon faggots and inserted them into the cracks between the stones.

Watermelons probably originated in Africa. The Spanish word for watermelon, Sandia (or "sandilla", a more modern spelling), comes from the Arabic and suggests a secondary diversification center in India. Moor D' Ibn-Al-Awam of Seville, Spain, in his Book of Agriculture written in 1158, describes six kinds of melons, two of which may refer to watermelon: "the melon in the shape of a jar, because it resembles this sort of vessel; the melon of Palestine, which is the melon of Constantinople, the melon of India or the Scinde, includes two varieties; the one has a black seed and the rind of this one is very dark green passing to black; the other one has a pure red seed and the green color of its rind passes to yellow."

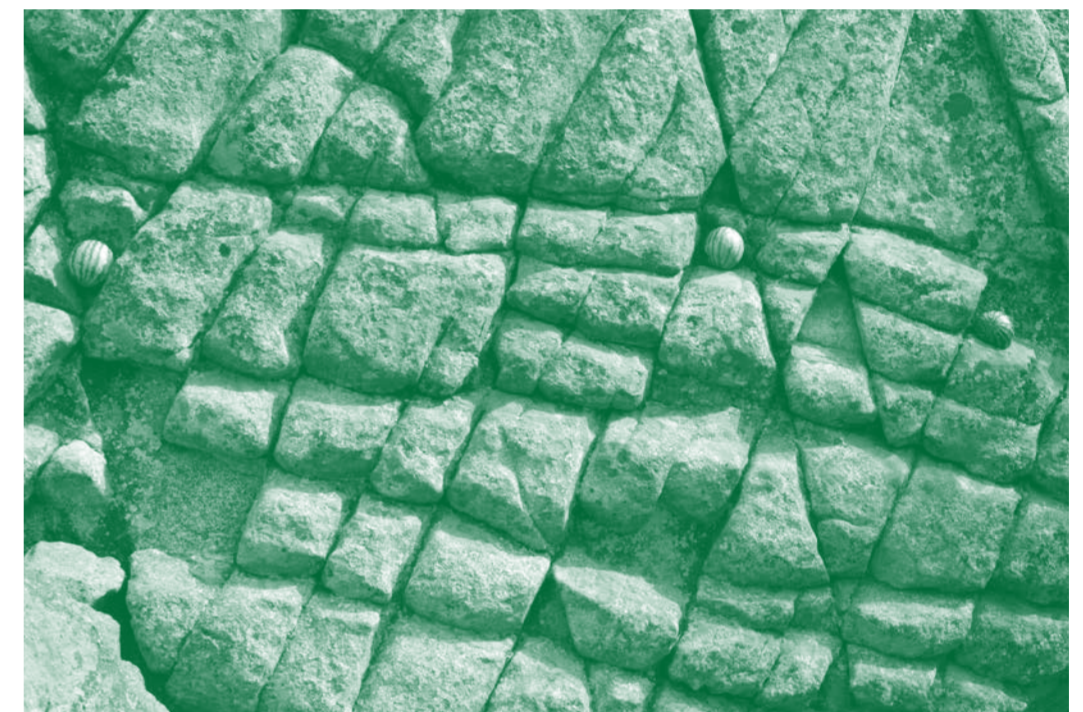
The character of the fruit's evolutionary success is preserved explicitly in its name in English. Watermelons were historically store crops that could provide supplies of emergency water during periods of drought. The fruit got redder as breeders developed a taste for their sweetness (there's a genetic link between the former and the latter), and desert melons, adding an s, became "dessert" melons, the name that botanists use to refer to the popular modern-day cultivar of the fruit. The book of Exodus chronicles the longing of the Israelites in the Sinai Desert for five particular vegetables that they had known in Egypt: snake melons, leeks, onions, garlic, and watermelon. The Hebrew name for the melon derives from its Egyptian name. In the second volume of *On Medical Matters*, Dioscorides wrote that watermelon rind should be applied to the brow of a child afflicted by heat stroke, Pliny called it a *refrigerant maxime*, an extremely refreshing or cooling fruit, and Galen described it as cold and wet—"rather chilling"—and that it could be used to cure freckles, facial moles, and epidermic leprosy.

Finally, he took a handful of the earth that had been used to smother the dead fire, and mixed it with the wet snow that had blown in between the stone lips. With this thick mud he plastered over his masonry, and smoothed it with his palm. The whole operation did not take a quarter of an hour.

It was a cold day in late April when we took our walk in the mountains, a little too chilly for watermelon. A storm had come through the night before, and it was still overcast, but the mountains up ahead of us still shone with a faint red glow, like coral. We didn't eat much and instead ended up playing with the fruit, posing the melons between the scale-like folds of parrotfish rock.

Without comment or explanation he then proceeded to build a fire. The odour so disagreeable to the Bishop soon vanished before the fragrance of the burning logs. The heat seemed to purify the rank air at the same time that it took away the deathly chill, but the dizzy noise in Father Latour's head persisted. At first he thought it was a vertigo, a roaring in his ears brought on by cold and changes in his circulation. But as he grew warm and relaxed, he perceived an extraordinary vibration in this cavern; it hummed like a hive of bees, like a heavy roll of distant drums. After a time he asked Jacinto whether he, too, noticed this. The slim Indian boy smiled for the first time since they had entered the cave.

As early as 1598, Juan de Oñate, the murderous conquistador and purported founder of Santa Fe Nuevo Mexico, observed Pueblo Indians of the Southwest cultivating watermelon. Later, archaeologists recovered two kinds of seeds (watermelon and muskmelon, a close relative) from the remains of the turkey pens at Abo Mission, at the southern edge of the Sandia mountains (they also found the remains of peaches, coriander, grapes, chili pepper, plums, pumpkins, corn, pinyon nuts, yucca, prickly pear, cholla, amaranth, and juniper). Two popular varieties that grow well under semi-arid conditions are "Hopi Red" and "Hopi Yellow," named after the famous pueblo nations nearby.



He took up a faggot for a torch, and beckoned the Padre to follow him along a tunnel which ran back into the mountain, where the roof grew much lower, almost within reach of the hand. There Jacinto knelt down over a fissure in the stone floor, like a crack in china, which was plastered up with clay. Digging some of this out with his hunting knife, he put his ear on the opening, listened a few seconds, and motioned the Bishop to do likewise.

On the way back into town, Cam drives us past the Sandia National Laboratories, a nuclear weapons system research facility that is also named for the watermelon. It sits on 9,000 acres of land at the base of the Sandias and has an annual budget of \$3.6 billion. The supercomputer Red Storm, originally known as Thor's Hammer, is housed there, and so is the Z Machine, the largest X-Ray generator in the world. We snap a few photos before getting spooked—Cam is half-Iranian, and the day we do our drive-by is just a week after one of Iran's nuclear sites was hit by a blackout attack that they suggested was sabotage by Israel, further imperiling the Vienna talks around reestablishing the 2015 nuclear deal. There is something about this associative chain that we're chasing on that day—taking us from supermarket watermelons, to parrotfish rock, to Sandia laboratories—that primes us for ambient paranoia. We go home and make kebabs. The next morning, we blend the leftover watermelon with ice, a little salt, and an overripe mango for our hangovers, and I depart for North Carolina.

Father Latour lay with his ear to this crack for a long while, despite the cold that arose from it. He told himself he was listening to one of the oldest voices of the earth. What he heard was the sound of a great underground river, flowing through a resounding cavern. The water was far, far below, perhaps as deep as the foot of the mountain, a flood moving in utter blackness under ribs of antediluvian rock. It was not a rushing noise, but the sound of a great flood moving with majesty and power.

"It is terrible," he said at last, as he rose.

"Si, Padre." Jacinto began spitting on the clay he had gouged out of the seam, and plastered it up again.

Indented text excerpted from *Death Comes for the Archbishop* (1927), by Willa Cather.

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II.

monkeyspanked with the
palm of the eye
of the mind, a descanted
third furls out
tuned to a neolib intervallo

five, five, five fingers
increasingly insistent,
more bone, more knuckle
now the palm, the lines in that
palm spreading outward
to an edge, a blade of hand
a private moment, obstinate
against the air

To Carry Two Watermelons Under One Armpit
Pauline Shongov

Като бях малка, моята баба често ме питаше когато трябва да разрежем диня, искаше от мене да позная дали е червена или е жълта. И естествено, аз жълта диня не бях виждала и винаги казвах че е червена. Тя ми разказваше че на времето когато тя е била малка, наистина е имало жълти дини и червени дини. И на времето, наистина децата са играли на този вид игра да познаят каква ще е динята.

When I was young, my grandmother often asked me when it was time to cut a watermelon to guess whether it was red or yellow. Of course, I had never seen a yellow watermelon and would always guess that it was red. She would tell me that when she was a child, there really were both yellow and red watermelons, and children really did play this type of game.

Няма семена в дините тука. Тука защото са инженерни. Като отишъл в България и го питали, „Харесва ли ти в България“? Той казал, „Много ми харесва, обаче рибата е с кости а динята с семки.“

There aren't any seeds in the watermelons here because they are modified. When he went to Bulgaria and they asked him, "Do you like it in Bulgaria?" He said, "I really like it, but the fish has bones and the watermelon has seeds."

Едно от приказките която моята баба ми е разказвала беше за едни добри съседи - един дядо който жевял в колипка от динени кори и една баба която жевяла в колипка от сол. По принцип много си помагали като добри съседи. Обаче един път, дядото си направил салатка от домати. Нямам откъде да си вземи и си казал, "Дай да видия дали моята баба ще ми даде малко солчица." Отишъл, потропол, и казал, „Бе бабо може ли малко солчица да ми дадеш.“ Тя казала, „Солчица не мога аз да ти дам от моята къщичка, че какво ще остани за мен“? Той се прибрал, хапнал си салатката без солчица. Минало пак време. Направил си боб. Пак нямам солчица. Отишъл пак при нея. „Бабо моля ти се, аман за аман, дай ми малко солчица.“ Бабата казала, “слушай какво, не мога да ти дам солчица защото ще остана без къща. Яш както да е.” Отишъл си, пак си изял бобчето без солчица. Обаче вечерта задухал един силен вятър, започнали едни гръмотевици и светкавици и започнал един силен дъш и дядото казал, „Бреи, какъв силен дъж. Тая баба какво ще прави с тая къща.“ Погледнал на вънка, и какво да види, бабата стои на този дъш самичка мокра до кости. Къщичката била стопена от дъжда. И той казал, „Бабо ти солчица не ми дади, ама ала да се стоплиш и да те прибера при мене. Виш моята къщичка нищо и няма. Ела да се стоплиш при мене. Заповядай.“ Бабата отишла при него, и от тоя ден разбрала че винаги трябва да помага на приятели.

One of the stories that my grandmother would tell me was about two good neighbors – a grandpa who lived in a house made out of watermelon peels and a grandma who lived in a house made out of salt. They helped each other out like good neighbors usually do. One day, however, grandpa made a tomato salad. He didn't know where to find salt, so he said to himself, "Let me see if grandma will give me a little salt." He knocked and asked, "Grandma, can you give me a little salt?" She answered, "If I give you salt from my house, what will be left for me?" He returned and ate his salad without salt. Time passed. Then one day, grandpa made beans. Again, he didn't have salt. He went to see grandma and asked, "Grandma, please, lend me a little salt." The grandma said, "Listen, I cannot give you salt because I will be left without a house. Eat your beans as they are." He returned home and again ate his beans without salt. In the evening, a strong wind blew. There was thunder, lightning, and rain. The grandpa said, "What strong rain. What will the grandma do with that house of hers?" He looked outside, and there he saw grandma standing alone, soaked to the bone. The house had melted from the rain. He said, "Grandma, you didn't give me salt, but let me take you in. Nothing has happened to my house. Come for some warmth." The grandma went inside, and from that day on, she knew that one should always help out friends.

Имаме такава приказка че някой те е пуснал или подхлъзнал по динени кори което означава че така те излъгал че не си разбрал как те излъгал.

We have a saying that if someone lets you slip on watermelon peels that means that they have lied to you in such a way that you can't figure it out.

Един от най често употребяваните изрази в българския е когато някой се самотовари с много работа, с различни видове работа/проекти. Обикновено не бих казала че се проваля обаче някой от проектите изостават защото две дини под една мишница не могат да се носят. Тоест, работата му е прекалено много за да може да свърши всичко наведнъж. Ти носила ли си две дини под една мишница физически? Не никога не съм носила защото винаги съм била много слаба в ръцете. Две дини в една мрежа съм носила, но две дини под една мишница никога не съм носила.

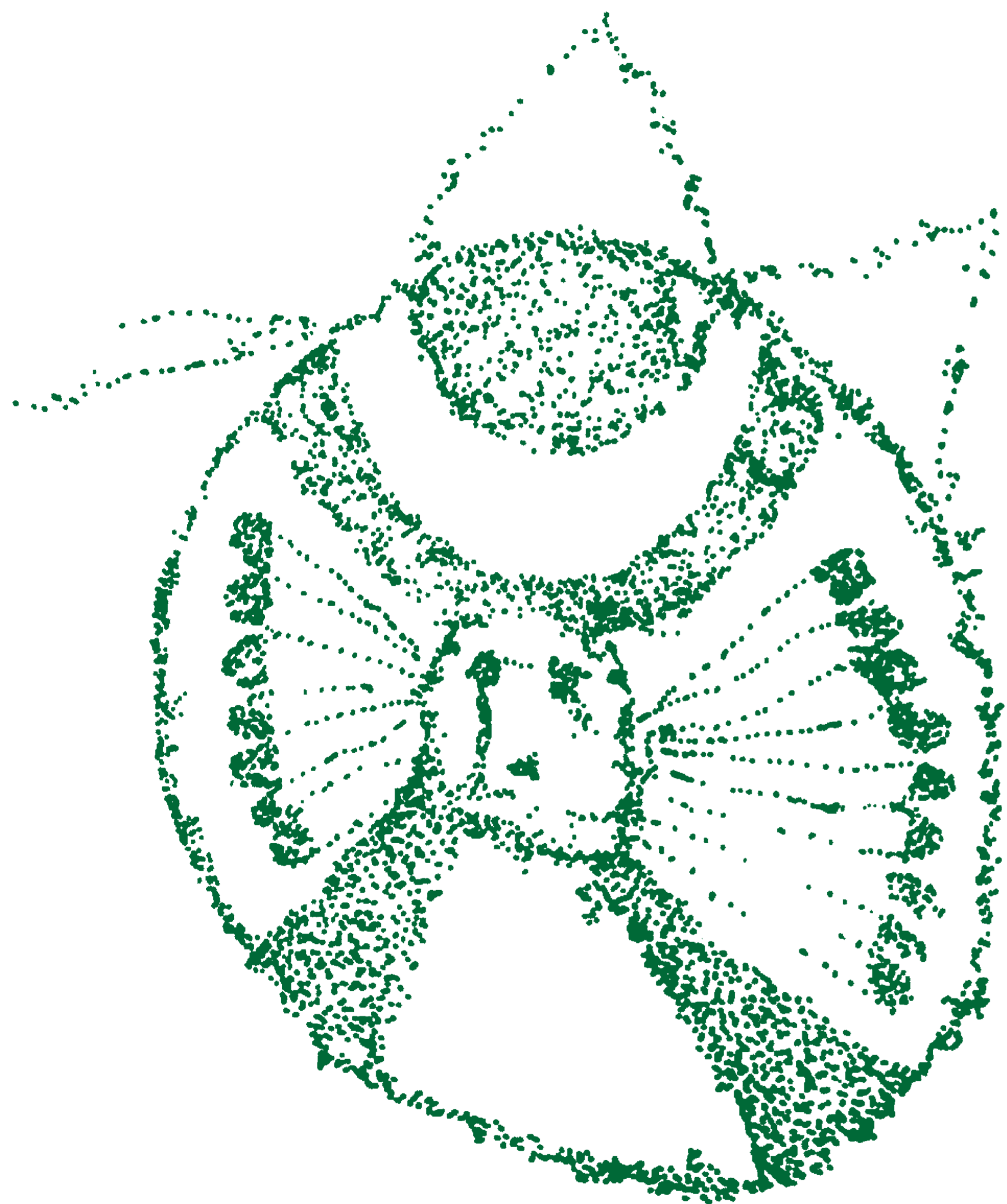
One expression in Bulgarian is frequently used to describe the condition of overloading oneself with too much work. When projects begin to lag behind, we say "you cannot carry two watermelons under one armpit," meaning one has too much work to be able to complete it all at once. Have you carried two watermelons under one armpit, physically? No, I have always been weak in the arms. I have carried two watermelons in one net, but not two watermelons under one armpit.

Карпуст е чуждица в българския. На руска диня е карпуст.

Карпуст is foreign to the Bulgarian language. Карпуст means watermelon in Russian.

Pauline Shongov is an artist and PhD student in Film and Visual Studies at Harvard University. Her practice engages experimental ethnography, infrastructures of care, and material histories within archeological methodologies of media and landscape theory.





III.

blue cage choir
steel to stutter
the squeezed nozzle releases
skirt-high demoiselles
fruited up like Hong Kong neon

a stereo reminds you of more
exciting times
that were also significantly sick,
though promising.
what's wrong with you? how could
you say that to me?

a song
my Chinatown mall

parakeets metal with the music.
sweet flutes, pipes, blow.
cash comes clunking in.

returning and still green as if the city
were closed in on itself
and bursting in packets
finding in itself again the dull roar of
expectation
thuddering inquisitions

steps accumulate to nowhere,
on this crowded sidewalk stand
imagine the insides
strewn in the gutter.
people are mad, just in a normal way.

Fruits of Freedom
Bill Black

A Black woman named Clara was selling watermelons in the streets of Houston, Texas, when she recognized a white boy whose family used to enslave her. She had actually been his nanny until that summer, when the Union’s victory secured her freedom. The boy, little Henry Evans, cried for days when she left—but that grief had apparently hardened into resentment. When Clara offered Henry a watermelon, perhaps as a token of reconciliation, he rejected her and kept walking. He told her “he would not eat what free negroes ate.”

It was in exchanges like this, as well as in jokes and cartoons, that a racist trope was born: the idea that African Americans are overly fond of watermelon. This stereotype still has the power to provoke shame and snickering, and many Black people today are reluctant to eat watermelon in public lest they confirm someone’s prejudice. Every year or so there is some new controversy over the fruit; in 2018, students at NYU balked when a dining hall served watermelon-flavored water in honor of Black History Month, and there was a social-media outcry when the singer Madonna posted photos of her adopted Malawian daughters posing with watermelons. Every time this happens, the inevitable question emerges: what is so bad about watermelons?



Perhaps the earliest printed caricature of African Americans enjoying watermelon, published by *Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper* in 1869. The adjoining article explained, “The Southern negro in no particular more palpably exhibits his epicurean tastes than in his excessive fondness for watermelons. The juvenile freedman is especially intense in his partiality for that refreshing fruit.”

It is a good question. How and why did this stereotype emerge? Why watermelon? The answer partly lies in certain characteristics of the fruit itself. Well before the American Civil War, watermelons connoted various things that would later be incorporated into anti-Black imagery: (1) uncleanness, because watermelons are rather juicy and messy; (2) idleness, because watermelons are too large and cumbersome to eat while you’re working, unlike, say, an apple; (3) childishness, because watermelons are sweet and colorful; and (4) public celebration, because watermelons can be sliced up and divided among a large group of people.

In the Western imagination of the early 19th century, the prototypical watermelon-eater was a languorous peasant in the Mediterranean or the Orient. A British officer fighting Napoleon’s army in Egypt wrote that the watermelon was “a poor Arab’s feast,” with watermelon rinds littering the streets of Rosetta and the locals devouring the fruit “ravenously ... as if afraid the passer-by was going to snatch them away.”

But despite these cultural connotations, the watermelon was not an anti-Black symbol in antebellum America. There is no evidence the fruit appeared in the minstrel shows popular before the Civil War. An American in 1850 was just as likely to associate watermelons with a Kentucky hillbilly or a New Hampshire rube as with a South Carolina slave.

This is somewhat surprising given how prominent the watermelon was in the lives of enslaved Americans. Because watermelons are relatively easy to grow, requiring little time or acreage, many slaves would use what free time they had to grow their own watermelon patch. Southern city-dwellers knew well the melodic cries of Black watermelon vendors, who would come into town to sell their crop and earn a little cash: “I got de watermelons and dey are de watermelons”; “Got ‘em, got ‘em, got ‘em nice; got ‘em sweet; got ‘em cheap.” It was common for enslavers to give their slaves a holiday during the summer to eat the first watermelon harvest.

But when slaveholders saw slaves enjoying watermelon, slaveholders understood this as a sign of their own supposed benevolence. And slaves were usually careful to enjoy watermelon in a way that would not alienate their enslavers. Henry Barnes recounted in the 1930s how, as an enslaved child, his overseer would cut up some watermelons and expect all the children to run to get their slice. Henry refused to run, however, and when he got his slice he dashed off to the slave quarters to eat out of the white people’s sight. His mother later whipped him for being “stubborn.” She understood that her son had to perform the act of watermelon-eating in a certain way, to maintain the illusion that masters and slaves were one harmonious family.

The Civil War shattered that illusion, and as a result, white Americans saw Black watermelon culture in a different light. When Black people cultivated watermelon patches and sold watermelons at crossroads and train stations, it was no longer a token of white people’s generosity; it was a way for Black people to escape white people’s control and earn money outside the plantation system. When freedpeople celebrated the Fourth of July by slicing up a bunch of watermelons in the courthouse square, white people no longer saw it as a sign of interracial harmony—they saw it instead as a sign that childish Black people were flaunting their freedom.

It was only at this point, when the Confederacy was defeated and African Americans gained their freedom, that anti-Black watermelon jokes began to proliferate in print. In 1867, a Charleston newspaper belittled Black watermelon vendors, writing, “The sale of the fruit affords an occupation to numbers of industrious (?) freedmen who lazily pursue their calling.” (Only a few months later, this same paper praised a white farmer for making “one hundred dollars from the sale of Watermelons.”) In 1870, the *New-York Tribune* claimed that the former slave “lives in the present, thinking little of the past or the future; a bottle of whisky or a watermelon today is more prized by him than a farm or a fortune twenty years hence.” In one joke, a Black man approaching the gallows lamented, “I wish dey had put it off till after watermelon time.”

The main theme of the racist watermelon trope was that Black people were not yet ready for freedom. As white Americans saw it, freedpeople’s proclivity for a childish, messy fruit—a fruit more conducive to relaxation than labor—was evidence that they were unfit for citizenship.

This became the dominant public memory of Reconstruction, which most whites saw as a failed experiment in granting political power to Black people. During the 1880 election season, Democrats accused the South Carolina state legislature, which had been majority-black during Reconstruction, of having wasted taxpayers’ money on watermelons for their own refreshment; this fiction even found its way into history textbooks. D. W. Griffith’s white-supremacist epic film *The Birth of a Nation*, released in 1915, included a watermelon feast in its depiction of emancipation, as corrupt northern whites encouraged the freedpeople to stop working and enjoy some watermelon instead.



By the early 20th century, the watermelon had become central to anti-Black iconography. The advent of sheet music allowed the racist trope to proliferate wider than ever. From: *The coon’s trade-mark* (1898). Music Division, The New York Public Library.

By the early 20th century, the watermelon stereotype was everywhere—on paperweights and potholders, on sheet music and salt-and-pepper shakers. Probably few Americans realized how recent the stereotype was, and today the stereotype seems to exist outside of history. But the trope was very much born at a specific historical moment and served a specific political purpose. Black freedpeople grew, ate, and sold watermelons, and in doing so made the fruit a symbol of their newfound freedom. White Americans, who felt threatened by that freedom, responded by inverting the fruit’s symbolic meaning—making the watermelon an avatar of Black people’s supposed uncleanness, idleness, and childishness. The trope’s ability to obscure that history, and make all the jokes and postcards seem relatively innocuous, is the source of its power.

Bill Black is a teacher in Houston, Texas. He received a PhD in history from Rice University, where he studied religion and culture in the 19th-century United States. He is a founding editor at *Contingent Magazine*.

The Watermelon Woman
Claire Mullen

When one thinks of an archive, they likely imagine a set of photographs or slides, reams upon reams of paper, boxes, records, and perhaps a catalog. It is likely to consist of objects that contain information regarding a specific moment in history, a cultural movement, or a catastrophic event. They imagine it is probably housed in an institution of some kind, a library or a museum, which has the resources to gather and maintain a collection.

Archives are generally thought of as collections that inform us about the past. They allow us to view the past from the present, to consider the materials of a time and place as evidence of the contours of its reality. As much as we might like them to, archives can never contain a complete past. We can never know, for example, all of the details of the lives of each person that appears unnamed, or as one among statistics on a page.

Writer and academic Saidiya Hartman delves into the violence inherent in archives in her seminal essay *Venus in Two Acts*, about the recurring mention of Venus, or the Sable Venus, as a stand-in for the many anonymous women that appear in the archives of Atlantic slavery.

The archives that we have hold the stories of slaveholders, sailors, and traders, but not one autobiographical narrative of a female captive who survived. “The loss of stories sharpens the hunger for them,” Hartman writes. “[I]n these circumstances, it would not be far-fetched to consider stories as a form of compensation or even as reparations, perhaps the only kind we will ever receive.”

In 1996, Liberian-American director and producer Cheryl Dunye released and starred in her first feature-length film, *The Watermelon Woman*, which is arguably a film about such stories. It became an instant classic in queer cinema, as the first US feature-length narrative film written and directed by an out Black lesbian about Black lesbians.



Cheryl Dunye appearing as Cheryl in the film *The Watermelon Woman*.

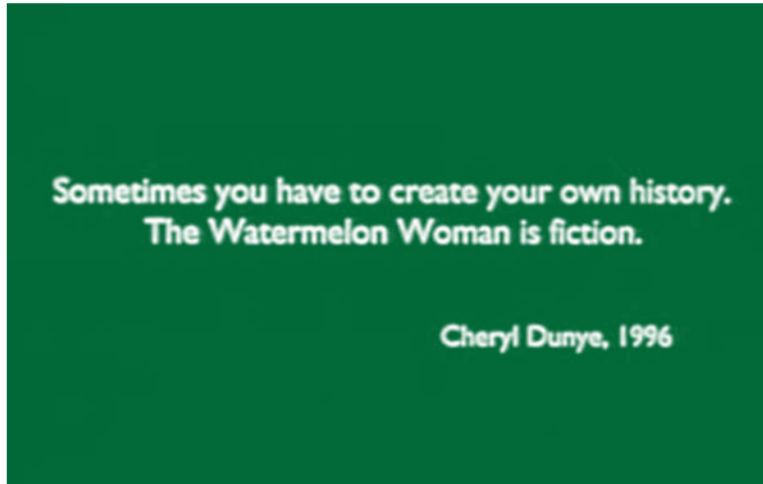
In the film Dunye, who stars as the main character, also named Cheryl, is a young Black lesbian woman working in a video store in Philadelphia in the 90’s (for the sake of clarity, the director will be called Dunye while the character she plays in the film will be called Cheryl.) She works there with her friend Tamara, played by Valarie Walker. Cheryl begins taking films from the 1930’s and 40’s home to watch, and notes that many of the Black actresses are named in the credits only by their roles. One actress in particular draws her attention, a woman credited as “The Watermelon Woman.” Cheryl convinces Tamara to join her on a quest to find out everything they can about this woman, saying, “I’m going to make a movie about her. I’m going to find out what her real name is, who she was and is, everything I can find out about her, because something in her face, something in the way she looks and moves is serious, is interesting. And I’m going to just tell you all about it.”

Cheryl’s journey to create a film about Richards is framed as a film within a film. As the project takes off, the scenes of Cheryl and Tamara’s lives in the video store begin to be interspersed with video-cam recordings of Cheryl speaking to the camera as she explains her process as a filmmaker, along with her interviews with family members, archivists, and historians. This creates a layered, fragmented sense of “reality” cut between moments of commentary and reflection, which establishes a sense of discovery for the viewer, who is pulled along with Cheryl’s own discoveries, hurdles, and dead ends.

The film’s tension is held in Dunye’s quest to uncover the past. Dunye used an extensive amount of archival footage and photographs that serve as points of discovery throughout the film, which she originally tried to source through the Lesbian Herstory Archive and the Library of Congress.

“While the Lesbian Herstory Archive was filled with juicy material from African American lesbian life, including the Ira Jeffries archive (she appears in the film), it had no material on African American women in Hollywood. The Library of Congress, on the other hand, had some material from African American women in Hollywood, but none on African American lesbians. And as those resources were beyond my budget at the time, I decided to stage and construct the specific photos that I needed for the film, and did that in collaboration with Zoe [Leonard].”

Frustrated by the lack of formal scholarship and archived materials, Dunye conscripted the queer, New York-based artist and photographer Zoe Leonard to help create a “false” archive for the film. Leonard began her career as an active voice in AIDS advocacy and queer politics in New York in the 1980s and 1990s, becoming known for her 1992 treatise, *I want a president*, and 1995 installation piece *Strange Fruit*. Dunye and Leonard worked together to conceive of an archive for Richards, one that would double as a visual representation of this knowledge gap. Leonard then produced photographs and newsreels shot in black and white, with dated cameras and techniques. As Matt Richardson notes in his book *Out Stories Have Never Been Told: Preliminary Thoughts on Black Lesbian Cultural Production as Historiography in The Watermelon Woman*: “the viewer does not know whether these snapshots of black life from the 1930s and 1940s are of real people, thereby challenging the division between fact and fiction, past and present.” Since the film’s release, the archive has become recognized as a work of importance in itself, *The Fae Richards Photo Archive*, 1993-96.



In her same essay, *Venus in Two Acts*, Hartman coined the concept of *critical fabulation*, a style of creative semi-fiction that brings the suppressed voices of the past to the surface by means of hard research and scattered facts, but which includes aspects of fiction due to the scarcity of archived information. How do we confront the lack of such individuals’ stories? Hartman references scholar Michel de Certeau’s proposition for two methods to include such stories in archives: “one is attending to and recruiting the past for the sake of the living, establishing who we are in relation to who we have been; and the second entails interrogating the production of our knowledge about the past.” If the past proves incomplete due to lack of documentation, we must interrogate the means of documentation, and imagine alternative narratives. *The Watermelon Woman* suggests that there is space within art and archiving practice to imagine the kinds of stories that Hartman claims are perhaps the only available form of compensation. Fiction can inform our narratives just as much as proven fact. It also has the ability to make coherent what has been lost or misunderstood, to reframe the gaps in written history, to play with and reimagine that history, and to attempt to, in some ways, replace it.

Claire Mullen is a writer, critic, audio producer, and film photographer based in Mexico City. She is a current fellow with the National Book Critics Circle.

IV.

clinical inquiries into pitch,
auscultating the sweetness of love,
thinking of love, and mealiness of
the heart.

i have enough knuckles to bear it.

that one's a good one.
oh, that one is better.

here sweetness sweetness,
here sweet sweet.
clack clack, clog clog, kang kang,
marimba. skin skin skin.
what is skin and what is rind.
shhhhh says the camera.
quiet while i see.

(is there quiet?)

oh sweet, styrofoam when i get you
home. fabric. paper, plastic, tape, tear,
rips, slurp, chomp, chaw, loot, loot it
of its insides, slick chaw, jawing up in
the night, but sun is dripping.
quench quench quench.

halve, and halve, and halve, and snap
and digestion follows no geometry,
is not a decision to make.

fingers spread or fingers clenched?

grandma drank the juice like soup
from her bowl.

They Put in Their Stomach a Summer Watermelon
Manar Moursi

On hot July days, those who had returned from Kuwait to spend the summer months in Cairo's cooler nights would invite their friends and family once the temperatures dropped. The friends or family would arrive late, around 9 or 10pm, often with a watermelon, priding themselves for perfecting their techniques of selecting the best one by checking its skin color. The underside of the watermelon, the part that touched the ground, had to be buttery to dark-yellow in color. The friends or family would laugh about selection failures. Those who had returned would sit on their hard-earned, prized balconies, in their new apartments in Nasr City which they had finally bought after 15 years of labor in Kuwait. Now that they had accomplished their dream, and their children were about to leave for college, they no longer knew if they should stay in Kuwait or move back to Cairo permanently. Why they left and why they stayed, would become a life-long haunting inquiry. This inquiry on where to settle was dutifully passed down to their children.

The more red, rather than coral-pink, the center of a watermelon is, the more likely it will turn out sweet, but not only sweet, sweet and grainy in texture — hence the expression *miramila* in Egypt to describe perfect watermelons which means sandy. This unexpected connection between sand and sweetness has always pleased me. On the flip side, if your watermelon is more pink than blood red, it's called *araa'* — bald — and as I grow bald now, this association of baldness with a lack of sweetness — and a lack of utility — since a *battikha araa'* is simply not edible — disturbs me. Many years ago, I went to a dermatologist on account of an eczema attack. As he examined me, he said that he thought I had come to visit him to discuss my thinning hair and forthcoming baldness. I was aware my hair was thinning, something I had inherited from my late mother, but I did not realize that I was going to be completely bald as a result. To convince me to start using Rogaine immediately, Dr. Ibrahim used a simile that has since stayed with me. He said: "You're still young Manar, the more you wait, the more your scalp will become like a desert and we all know how hard it is to reclaim agricultural land once it is fallow."

On the dating app Hinge I see a profile with the by-line: "Dating me will be like eating a seedless watermelon." In the market in Montreal I find seedless "personal" watermelons. They are smaller watermelons that have been genetically modified to be kinder to lonely folks like myself who will have to carry them back home and consume them alone, but are also too lazy to spit out the seeds. The black watermelon seeds, which have been edited out for the convenience of North American consumers, are actually considered to be highly nutritious, rich in amino acids, proteins and vitamin B complex. When I think of vitamins, I always think of Mimi. Mimi, the only grandmother I ever met, insisted on the importance of vitamins so much that all my drawings as a child always included a giant human sized vitamin. I would typically label them: Girl. Boy. Vitamin. Perhaps in the abstraction of what a vitamin meant to me, it became another body that transcended gender, that was similar and equal in size and stature as girls and boys. Mimi had lost her daughter Magda to brain tumors when Magda was 17. Some part of Mimi likely blamed this loss on malnutrition, and vitamins haunted us like a lingering ghost.

When my sister is in a good mood, she punctuates her sentences with *battikha* instead of fullstops, as a joke. Egyptians dub anything a watermelon that raises expectations, but fails you. The political transition in Egypt after protests overthrew Hosni Mubarak in 2011 is one such watermelon. So were the apartments in Nasr City, emigration, Rogaine, and vitamins.

Manar Moursi is a researcher and artist from Cairo. Her artistic work comprises the fields of installation, performance, photography, artist books, video, and writing.

Old Man With A Melon
Supratik Baralay

Exiting my flight from Delhi, I stood at the immigration desk, where the officer asked whether I was "with them", gesturing with his chin towards the raucous gang of Indian men waiting in line behind me. "No" I said. He stamped my passport. As I loaded my single suitcase into the back of one of the taxis waiting outside, I asked the driver who was assisting me whether he saw many other Indian travellers. "Many" he said "looking for entertainment". As the conversation went on, I learned about the well-known and well-frequented sex-tourism route between Delhi and Tashkent: the horny male youth of India's middle-class would travel, scoping out sex-workers who were deemed fairer-skinned than those back home. This explained the suspicious and judgemental glances that would be flung my way in every city by everybody. I was neither the correct kind, nor the right quality, of visitor. Any Silk Road charms began to unravel quickly.

Turquoise-tiled domes, lofty minarets, and regal *ivans*-squares in Samarkhand, cool madrasas in Bukhara, the mighty walls of the old city of Khiva. After a life spent in Delhi, its environs dotted with the reminiscent architecture of the Mughals, descendants of the 16th century Uzbek warlord Babur, the impact of such quintessential central Asian monuments diminished quickly. The cavernous Soviet buildings that housed the wet-markets were a novelty, but their cacophonous hum, the jostling of bodies, and most products, were familiar too. And yet, it was melon season: late autumn in a country culturally enamoured by the fruit. Every market I entered sold dozens of varieties, in greens and yellows, small and many times the size of my head, smooth, striated and knobbly, watermelons, musk-melons, winter melons. Little wonder that Babur complained in his autobiography of Hindustan that "there are no good horses, no good dogs, no grapes, no musk-melons or first-rate fruits..."

Around two weeks into my journey, field research completed documenting the mud-brick Khorezmian fortresses of the last centuries BCE and first centuries CE, I had decided to drive for three hours further northwest, deeper into the Autonomous Republic of Karakalpakstan, to the city of Nukus. Here, the Savitsky Museum, founded in 1966 by the Ukrainian archaeologist and collector Igor Vitalyevich Savitsky, is well-known among art-historians and hipster tourists for its vast collection of avant-garde Soviet artworks that were rescued from censorship at the metropolises. At the edges of empire, works of Constructivism, Cubism, and Expressionism, especially those produced either in Central Asia or by Central Asians, were gathered, hidden, and eventually displayed. And it was my first encounter with Soviet Orientalism. Remarkable paintings with well-worn tropes: Uzbeks working in fields and marketplaces, women in bright traditional clothing, textiles and thick-carpeted with floral designs, and all the produce of the land, especially grapes and watermelons. Kipling and Thackeray, the paintings of John Frederick Lewis, of Eugène Delacroix, I saw them all.

One painting in particular struck me: on a dark yellow background, was the portrait of a gaunt old man, with sunken eyes, dark wrinkled skin, and a wispy grey beard, all consumed under the shadow cast by his enormous brown and white cloth turban. His shoulders are draped in a plain crimson garment and he holds up his two hands sideways, their long spindly fingers cradling a thin slice of yellow-green melon. Enfeeblement and exotica entwined. A tour guide told me that the painter was one German Jeglov, born in 1935 in Baku, graduating from its art institute in 1963, then from the Moscow printing school in 1969, before returning to central Asia, and passing away in 2010. I looked up again: the man's face is dour as he stares down at the meagre fruit. His frown accentuated by his prominent furrowed brow, crows-feet, deep "smile lines", and the taut sinews in his neck. This time I saw the aftermath of Soviet imperialism: desolation, destitution, and despair. Proud Socialist Realism, the celebration of workers, industry, the Union, carefully replaced by a resistive Expressionism, with its chaotic and feverish brushwork summoning the anguish of its subject. Shaped by empire, embodying it, and even replicating its practices, an artist tries something different. That day I moved away from the painting wondering whether this troubled act of defiance, this complicated attempt to reshape the narrative, was a success. Now I appreciate that even the attempt to see differently is enough.

Supratik Baralay is a historian of the ancient world and story-teller. He grew up between Bombay and London, and now lives in Cambridge, MA.



Watermelon Whispers
Daphne Xu

I know how to pick the best watermelon. Don't ask me how; my memory isn't great and I'm not good with words. We used to buy one watermelon a day in the summertime. My dad would spoon it from his half directly, while my mom took an ice cream scoop and prepared watermelon balls to snack on with the other half. She would place them carefully into stacked plastic tupperware and pour the juice over the top like sauce on a fish.

Whenever I'm on the hunt for a watermelon, I find myself bringing my ears close to watermelon piles and rolling up my fingers to knuckle tap as many of them as I can. I love to discern their potential sweetness, and to have my intuition be proven correct.

A hollow resonance indicates juiciness. And an oblong shape indicates the time it has taken to ripen. Hold the watermelon, because a watermelon grows too heavy when it is overdue. Those watermelons sound flat when you smack them with your palm; their insides whiten as their juice dissipates. The perfect watermelon still feels alive. It is preserved in the state where it vibrates when touched, and its insides are bright red. Each bite is half liquid, half solid. Too soggy, crumbling red, and it's no good either.

On May 8th, I went on a quest for the best watermelon in Toronto's downtown Chinatown. On May 11th, I shared sounds from my quest with friends who are good at listening – musicians, poets, a psychiatrist-in-training. Oles Chepesiuk, Yoyo Comay-Newman, Manar Moursi, Fan Wu, and Justine Yan helped me translate sound into language, resulting in the composition I-IV (red) throughout this issue. To listen to the original audio:



Daphne Xu is an artist and filmmaker from Toronto exploring the politics and poetics of place. She is a fellow at the Harvard University Film Study Center (FSC).

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