Watermelon: Stereotypes of Race and Class

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Watermelon: The Food of Angels

Bulgarian watermelon

Mark Twain once said that the watermelon “is the chief of this world’s luxuries, king by the grace of God over all the fruits of the earth. When one has tasted it, he knows what the angels eat.”[1] Though today the word “watermelon” calls to mind a sturdy gourd with refreshing, sweet, red flesh, for most of its millennia-long history as a cultivated crop it was known as a pale, hard, sometimes bitter fruit with relatively tender rind. Not until the sixth century CE were watermelons associated with sweet fruits such as figs and grapes; and it was not until well into the 1400s that the uniformly red, thick-rinded watermelons that are familiar to us today began to appear. Throughout its history across the globe, the watermelon was primarily a source of food, medicine, and drink. Its cultural history, however, reveals not only stories of racism, but also of contagion and disease, a darker side to the delicious summer fruit that we know and love.

Whose Vine Is It Anyway?

The precise historical origins of the watermelon are obscured by its broad geographical spread today and many existent varieties, as well as the fact that its most iconic component—the tender, watery flesh—does not survive well in the archaeological record. When we refer to watermelon, we usually mean the “sweet dessert” cultivars of *Citrullus lanatus*, but the *Citrullus* genus includes at least six other species, including the citron melon (*Citrullus caffer*), egusi melon (*Citrullus mucosospermus*), and colocynth melon (*Citrullus colocynthis*).[2] Though the watermelon’s origins have been located throughout the African continent, current hypotheses point to its first domestication in northeastern Africa around six thousand years ago. Wild desert watermelons have been found throughout Sudan, Egypt, Ethiopia, Libya, and Kenya, adjacent to the Nile Valley.[3] Some of the earliest iconography of oblong melons—an indication of their domestication—can be found in Egyptian tombs and Roman and Byzantine mosaics, with seeds also found in the tomb of the famous King Tutankhamen.[4]

Citrullus caffer

In Africa’s arid savanna regions, watermelons were originally welcomed as sources of liquid, their flesh generally being cooked or beaten to a pulp to extract the juice. In the Kalahari Desert in southern Africa, the multiple uses of the flesh, rind, and seeds that were eaten fresh, cooked, and dried also helped some population groups to remain sedentary and hydrated throughout both wet and dry seasons.[5] As they became domesticated, watermelons were bred to yield softer and sweeter flesh and exclude such less desirable traits as the mucilaginous egusi seeds or the hard, bitter flesh of the citron melon, although western and southern African cuisines still make use of them today.[6]

Kalahari watermelon. GBIF, https://api.gbif.org/,...

More Than Just a Fruit…

Watermelon-like fruit were referenced in ancient Greek and Roman texts using a variety of terms including *pepon*, *melopepon*, and *kolokynte*, suggesting that these plants proliferated in the Mediterranean region during antiquity.[7] At that time, they were still likely to have sturdy and pale flesh—not quite as red and soft as it is today. Pliny the Elder dedicated a section of his *Naturalis Historia* to *pepones*, which, he wrote, made a very refreshing food, but also had a laxative effect. Various parts of the fruit were used to alleviate pain, induce vomiting, and even cleanse the skin and clear spots.[8]

Jombert, Charles Antoine, 1712-178...

“Anguriae” in...

Watermelons were cultivated in Spain after the Arab conquest, with evidence of their agricultural use, mostly in the form of seeds, dating to the tenth century. Illuminated manuscripts from southern Italy illustrate the varieties of watermelons grown there. Early health treatises, such as *Tacuinum Sanitatis*, show harvesters who taste-test them in the fields. However, sweetness did not appear to be a consistent characteristic of watermelons. Writing in the late sixteenth century, John Gerard, in his *Herball*, described their flesh as “spungie and of a flimsie substance,” which could be “eaten rawe, but more commonly boiled”; whereas the plant itself was still associated with curative properties: “it ingendereth a waterish bloud, mitigateth the extremitie of heat of the inner parts, and tempereth the sharpness and fervent heat of choler.”[9]

Watermelon in the...

Citrull cucumber i...

In fact, centuries later, in 1888, watermelons were still being promoted as a face cleanser in U.S. newspapers. A certain Miss Carrie Townsend from St. Louis, Missouri, recommended them to girls with freckles who looked “as if they had been about when a bran bin had exploded,” claiming that no matter what was wrong with the face, the juice of the watermelon would rectify it.[10] Although perhaps not quite as powerful as Miss Townsend suggests, watermelon-based treatments are re-emerging as a natural skin cleanser today, including West African kalahari or ootanga oil that is traditionally extracted from the fruit’s seeds.

C. Bennette Moore, Untitled (two children eating...

Watermelons in Art around the World

By the ninth and twelfth centuries, watermelons had spread, respectively, to India and China, travelling regional trade routes.[11] Distinguished by its sinewy vines, the fruit was associated with vitality and playfulness and soon became the object of artistic attention. Fourteenth-century Japanese representations of arhats—those who reached nirvana in the Buddhist tradition—for instance, show watermelons as a religious offering. Korean paintings from the Joseon Dynasty by the female artist Shin Saimdang (1504–1551) depict watermelons alongside flowers, butterflies, and mice, with their arching vines and exposed seeds symbolizing a wish for healthy and abundant children.[12] One of Shin's depictions of watermelons appears on the 5,000 won banknote today.[13]

‘Satsubari, the...

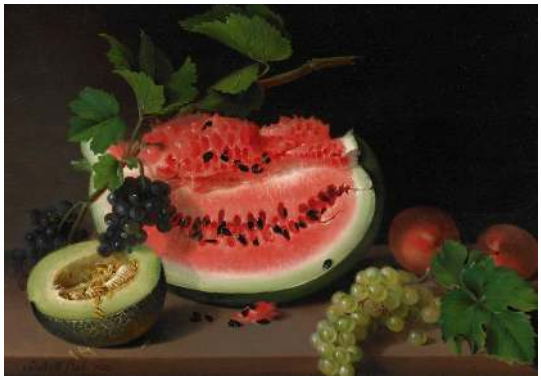
Plants and insec...

5000 won serieV reverse

As the watermelon became common in European kitchen gardens, it began to appear frequently in still life paintings. Seventeenth-century paintings by Albert Eckhout and Giovanni Stanchi reveal whorls of red flesh among white rind, showing how much the fruit has changed since antiquity. The inclusion of watermelons in still lifes also provides insights into the multitude of cultural meanings associated with the plant. While American still lifes, such as those by the prolific Peale family in the early nineteenth century, featured the watermelon amid overwhelming images of abundance and plenty, Baroque artists would quite literally cut through that fantasy with the abrupt imposition of a knife as a symbol of the fleeting nature of life.

‘Pineapple,...

‘Watermelons, peaches, pears an...



‘Still life with watermelons' by Sara...

Another artistic context in which watermelons were occasionally featured concerns representations of botanical specimens. In this case, they are shown in isolation, as in Maria Sibylla Merian's *Metamorphosis insectorum Surinamesium*. An example from across the globe is from the album of Asian fruits held by Dumbarton Oaks, which was likely executed by Chinese artists working in Malaysia or Sumatra. Different stages in the growth of the melon's flower and the fruit are shown alongside representations of seeds and a vivid cross-section, giving a full array of botanical information.

'Melon d'Eau,' in Maria...

Watercolours of fruits from Asia, early 19th centu...

Watermelons, Race, and the American South

African Americans dancing around a pile of...

Paradoxically, the bright and appealing nature of the watermelon also lent itself to racist tropes in nineteenth-century America. Watermelons were introduced there in the sixteenth century and were cultivated widely, from colonists' kitchen gardens to those tended by African slaves. The ease with which watermelons were grown and sold meant that after the 1863 Emancipation Proclamation, they became a source of income for freed slaves.[14] Their cultivation and consumption became a means of enacting newfound freedoms as a public and communal activity. Emblematizing the potential for African Americans to escape the plantation economy, the watermelon soon became perceived as a threat by white southerners, who proceeded to transform it into a symbol of Black people's unfitness for freedom and citizenship.

Aspects of the fruit became bound up with representations of African Americans, showing their taste for it exaggerated to the point of the grotesque: It was messy to eat, which connoted uncleanliness; easy to grow, implying laziness; and its bright color and sweetness were associated with childishness. Watermelon's African origins were also cited as an explanation for Black Americans' apparently insatiable appetite for the fruit. Nineteenth-century newspapers were filled with reports and anecdotes that repeated these racial tropes, which masqueraded as facts.

Richard Felton Outcault, Postcard...

Ashtray in the form of a...

[3 African American boys...

Stories of watermelon theft contributed to the perception of Black criminality following the enactment of the thirteenth amendment, which abolished slavery. The seemingly irresistible lure of the watermelon suggested that it did "more to tempt the colored race to steal than all other fruit combined," with countless anecdotes supposedly citing the words of African Americans who claimed that stolen watermelons tasted better than those bought.[15] The narrative of African American watermelon-stealing was so entrenched that the Tennessee state bill that criminalized such trespasses in 1870 was commonly known as the "watermelon bill." These cultural tropes continued to shape the exclusionary racial politics in the United States well into the twentieth century and are still pervasive today.[16]

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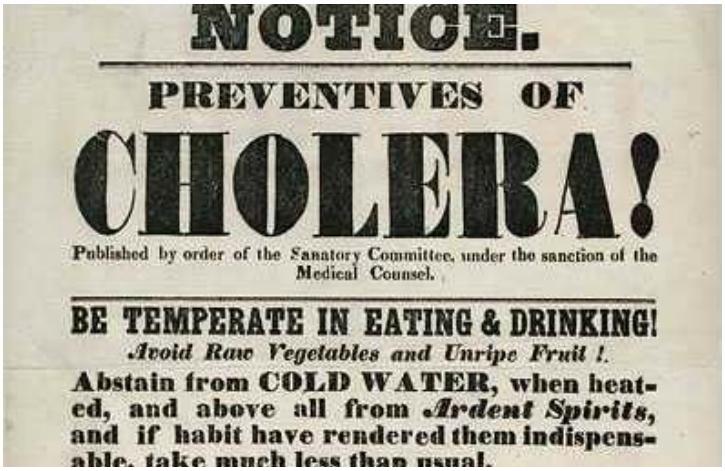
“Cholera Bombshells”



1849 Cholera prevention poster by the Sanatory…

The racist notion that watermelon consumption revealed unhealthy habits of African Americans was not an isolated phenomenon: it was paralleled by nineteenth-century associations between watermelon and disease. There was a common belief that eating too much watermelon, especially when overripe, could lead to cholera, which led some cities in the United States to ban the fruit’s sale during epidemics, with watermelons being referred to as “cholera bombshells.”[17] While it is unclear whether these direct causal connections between watermelons and disease were accurate, contemporary evidence has shown that raw fruits and vegetables can be a frequent source of cholera infection, especially if fields where they grew had been fertilized with uncomposted manure or irrigated with contaminated water. While the role of watermelons as opposed to other types of fruit in transmitting cholera in the United States was almost certainly exaggerated to serve racial narratives, similar associations were common in other parts of the world.

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At the turn of the twentieth century, for instance, British mine owners in Korea banned watermelons from their workers’ camps to prevent outbreaks of cholera. The logic behind this decision seemed to be based on the “immense quantities” of watermelons consumed by Korean workers, including the rind (probably the white pith, which was considered good for indigestion). The racialized attitudes toward over-indulging in certain types of food were joined here by the moralizing of disease. The campaign was effective in preventing cholera, but it is unclear if its success was due to the watermelon ban.[18] Similarly, posters from the Soviet Union during a cholera epidemic that lasted into the early 1920s used watermelons to illustrate how poor hygiene could lead to disease, from drinking unboiled water to eating unwashed fruit.

Commodification and Ecological Costs

Square watermelon

Citrullus lanatus

The intensified commodification of the watermelon during the twentieth and especially early twenty-first centuries transformed the fruit's appearance. In many countries around the world watermelons have grown smaller, rounder, and more uniform in size in order to stack better for transit and sale. These so-called "personal melons" are more practical for transportation and refrigeration. Importantly, they bring farmers bigger profits per acre, heralding a shift from the watermelon as communally consumed to a commodified fruit.[19] Yet watermelons continue to vary significantly in shape and size. Novelty square and heart-shaped watermelons were introduced in the 1980s in Japan for easy refrigeration storage and sold at higher prices. They are used, however, almost exclusively for decorative purposes, as they are always underripe due to the constrictive molds in which they are grown.[20]

Another major transformation is the success of seedless cultivars. The commercial production of seedless watermelons began in the 1990s using colchicine—a chemical derived from the seeds of crocuses—to produce a sterile seedless hybrid, crossbred to have three sets of chromosomes instead of two.[21] While such cultivars now dominate the market, their hybridized sterility presents new ecological challenges. Watermelon plants are bee-pollinated, and since the insects that forage in seedless watermelon plantings carry a mixture of viable and non-viable pollen, more bees are required for effective pollination. Without that, watermelons may grow with a "hollow heart"—cracks and spaces within the fruit—and cannot be sold. Watermelon farmers in the United States have turned to renting bees to meet such pollination needs, especially following the decline of the wild bee population from mass colony collapse disorder in recent years. Yet there is increasing evidence that the transportation of bees for such purposes puts significant stress on their colonies due to changes in temperature and humidity,[22] the market demand for convenience thus coming at a considerable ecological cost.[23]

Yangzhou - supermarket - watermelons - P1070029

Today, market forces are among the chief factors that, alongside taste and tradition, continue to determine the watermelon's transformation since its origin as a small bitter crop. The sweet red flesh that we enjoy bears witness to a range of cultural and historical meanings accumulated throughout the fruit's rich history.

Children sitting on a bench outdoors, eating...

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