

CONTRIBUTION

Introduction:

*Black Lemons*

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I love to cook. If I were not writing this, I imagine I would be a restaurateur, or chef. I often research the origins of global spices used in cuisine. That is how I learned about black lemons.

Black lemons are, in fact, limes that have been dehydrated, looted of their juice, oil, zest, and moisture until they are hardened on the inside and the out. Those limes, once dried out, are grated as an essential spice to add a uniquely vibrant flavor to otherwise mundane cuisine. The flavor is said to be sweet and acidic, with a taste that has no known substitute. Generally, when I learn of a new culturally profound spice, I am excited, and I want to use it in a dish immediately. However, this time I questioned why black lemons had to grow up this way. The story of the black lemon felt like kin. And my reaction was soaked with intimacy.

The heritage of Black folk is often—and, in my opinion, too frequently—conflated with our energetic story of being killed, yet never dying. Like black lemons, Black folk had juice, and oil, and zest, and moisture before all the attempts to kill our fruits. The usefulness of black lemons' uniquely sweet and sharp flavor, that cannot be duplicated, is most certainly a benefit. Yet to wait for any living thing to dry and die before acknowledging its value is obscene, crooked, and depraved.

As I wrote *Black Washed*, I went through various changes in how I presented content. As I see it, much of the optics of Blackness treats Black folk like the black lemons—only useful to the narrative after we have been exhausted, dried, grated down, and dead. In much of the public sphere, especially those curated for white eyes and those who value white things, Black life has been codified to exist in stages that begin with our death or fight to live. Making the essence, the juice, the oil, the zest, the moisture in Black life an allegory that exists in some place alien to Black folk.

I finished writing *Black Washed* four times. I have been announcing its arrival for about four years. While I wish I would not have shared such a lengthy promotional period, I am so glad I waited before I published. Much of its earlier penning centered us as black lemons with limited to no acknowledgement for our beautiful Black lives. This was not my intention, yet it was a symptom of how constructed narratives and white terror influence my understandings of us and me.

What you are preparing to read is a collection of thoughts and opining and writing and ideas and emotions spanning the past decade—curated to celebrate Blackness, Black life, and Black folk with the respect we are due. Our stories are not the various ways we have been killed, abused, oppressed, and maligned, solely. Our stories are also how we swaddled ourselves in Black life before we knew it was being attacked. We are fresh limes and black lemons, and while both are valuable, for far too long, narratives have not centered our juice, our oil, our zest, and our moisture.

We are greater than a world held hostage. As a Black writer my job is to reveal evidence. I hope *Black Washed* proves that the existence of Black lives is the best ontological argument that there is a God and devils. The value of Black lives cannot be bastardized as the spice grated into this trite stew of invented myths. Black life does not begin when the systems and practices of this world wear us down. We were a juicy, oily, zesty, well moisturized collection of somebodies before terror and pain. In this, I am contributing my celebration of Black life into our literary canon.

I have been—and still am—scared that I will shift to the other side of the soil without making a profound, unbending impact. I know the pressure and longing to empty every bit of yourself, so you can return it to the world and all its supervising deities. I know the terror of pushing myself to my ends, because the idea of leaving with my gifts unopened feels obscene, irresponsible, and ugly.

Everything I do... Everything I write... Everything I produce... Everything is symptomatic of my personal fight against the anxiety of not opening every gift inside of me, so that I may give them all away. My fear of not leaving this earth empty is a loneliness that I cannot adequately explain, yet it is this panic that has pushed me to publish *Black Washed*. My greatest hope is that what I have compiled in this collection speaks to Black folk with decency and respect and honors our anointing.

Welcome.

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