

Planting Seeds

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I remember as a little girl riding in the car down Salem Ave, a concrete road in Dayton, Ohio with cracks in the ground and stoplights that don't work, to visit my grandparents every two weeks. I can still see the broken-down houses with boarded up windows, tall dandelions growing from front yards, and the forest green ivy vines devouring the bricks. The neighborhood where I grew up is surrounded by drive-in liquor marts, dollar stores, and fast-food chains; we are a predominantly-Black community and one of the worst cases of food apartheid in Ohio, and in the country.

Black, Indigenous, and Latinx communities across the United States, particularly in urban areas, face disproportionate rates of food insecurity and have been systematically forced into food deserts, or what food justice activist, Karen Washington, would call "food apartheid." Washington, an urban agriculture elder from the Bronx, gave me the language to finally describe the world I saw around me. This environment of scarcity became so normal that I began to believe that was all I was worth, which was exactly how I felt throughout my adolescence attending almost all-white schools.

Most of my experiences in the education system have been made up of being the only Black girl in the room; getting kicked out of class or sent to the principal's office, sometimes just for laughing; and being made to feel disposable. I began to question my worth and question my place. James Baldwin once wrote, "It comes as a great shock to discover that the country which is your birthplace and to which you owe your life and your identity has not in its whole systemic reality evolved any place for you."

Being raised as a Black student in America, everything around me made me feel that I was less than or not worthy of attention and care, but that was never the truth. A central step towards me discovering what was — that my life as a Black student *does* have worth — has been mending my relationship with the Earth and re-grounding myself in soil. The moment I decided to reconnect with nature, I became part of something bigger than myself: I learned what it meant to plant a seed and believe it would grow.

Food justice activists, like Karen Washington, have shown me the world I can create in just a small patch of green that I decide to call a garden. When I dedicated myself to being in right relationship with the land beneath my feet and trees that help me breathe, returning to the soil that made me, I found myself. Reconnecting with the Earth has radically transformed not only how I envision the future of my community, but how I see myself as a Black person in America, and as an artist. I now dream of rebuilding fast-food chains into locally-sourced restaurants; drive-in liquor stores into community centers and church gardens; and forgotten homes into colorfully painted classrooms for nature art workshops and agricultural learning.

I am a student of nature; I listen to the breeze that curls through blades of grass, the sprouting of buds, the coming of spring and paint communities who look like mine into that picture. Black

students are deserving of spaces that reflect our inner truth: that beauty and promise lives within us. When we are allowed to open ourselves up to all the lessons nature has to offer us, walls come down; differences become trivial; and our realities become more magical because it is shared in unity with our environment and the people around us.

By simply planting seeds in the ground, I have learned what it means to care for myself and believe that I am worthy of growth. Seeds are forgiving and patient, and they have shown me what I am capable of giving to others. Every tree has a place to stand; every mountain has a cloud to touch; every dandelion has a field to graze and I learned to trust that I also have a place and never have to question my worth again. I am here for a reason. I am here. I am here. I am here and like a seed, I will grow.