

The 7th Circle: Racism, Illusion and Violence

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United States

I'm in Philadelphia--the birthplace of American freedom, justice and liberty for all. As a 21st century African American woman whose ancestor arrived early during the 1700's, survived the slave auction blocks in South Carolina and later the low country rice plantations. I wish to elaborate on the incredible irony of these words--freedom, justice and liberty for all.

I thought I would be in Berkeley for my talk today--spending more time on Dante's 7th mythological circle of hell for murderers. The allegory about those who are thrown into pits of boiling blood for committing violent murderous acts. When they try to escape, they are pushed back into the blood by centurions. When I first planned to speak today Ahmaud Arbery, had not yet been murdered. Breanna Taylor had not yet been murdered. George Floyd had not yet been murdered. All by police officers or those who had previously been police officers. These murdered African Americans, all of them younger than 50 years of age, could have anticipated an early death due to their skin color. However, would Breanna Taylor have thought it would happen at two o'clock in the morning as she laid in bed with her boyfriend? George Floyd as an African American male surely knew of the risks of being such a man--even in this 21st century. However, would he have thought his death would come, witnessed by others--eventually millions, around the world? Knee on his neck, choking the life from his body. Taking his breath away.

Ahmaud Arbery could feel the wind around him, as he ran on a country road as familiar to him as any other, near the place of his birth in Brunswick, Georgia. However, could he have imagined that on this day two white men would kill him with a shot gun? For running down a quiet country road. These are only three of the tragic stories of the

circle of hell experienced by African Americans who lost their lives due to acts of violence and racism.

The imaginal story that I anticipated weaving regarding political violence drawn from Dante's story of hell disappeared from my own imagination. The harsh reality of *real* murders taking place, live, on television suddenly took precedent over the imaginal. The centurions had taken shape in the form of "peace" officers who were stealing the lives of the innocent.

Now in Philadelphia, not Berkeley, I want to really be here in considering freedom, justice and liberty for all. I'm also thinking about American political and societal violence, racism and illusion. This always includes physical violence when applied to Africanist people. Political violence was the creation of an American Constitution that made Africanist people 3/5 of a citizen, no--of a human being. Political violence is the continued creation of judicial laws for centuries that validated the taking and enslavement of Africans and then African Americans to build an American economic system of which they were never intended to be compensated. This includes today when the fight for African American reparations is considered by some to be unjustified. Ask me or others of an African ancestral lineage if *we* believe our enslaved ancestors did not deserve better treatment as human beings. Certainly, once slavery ended via the Emancipation Proclamation, to be compensated for all the centuries of lost lives. The labor of the slave work is worth mentioning but how does it compare to the millions of the African Holocaust? This last being the ultimate horrific act of condoned physical, political and racial violence.

The struggle for political freedom existed in the lives and groups of the African Diaspora for all of the centuries of slavery. American history, as myself and most others

were taught, would have us believe that slaves were docile and willing participants as captured human beings. How could this have been possible? It defies logic. Even more so it defies the nature of our spirit. The spirit that wants more freedom--never less.



Image 1 Octavius V. Catto Sculpture

The image that appears here is of Octavius V. Catto. This sculpture of him was designed by Branly Cadet and established at Philadelphia City Hall in 2017 as a

memorial entitled, “A Quest for Parity”. Octavius V. Catto was an African American who fought for de-segregation of Philadelphia public transportation, to improve education for black children, and to create constitutional amendments for giving African Americans the right to vote. On the day of his murder by white vigilantes, he was engaged in the political action of registering black men to vote. This was in 1871. He was 32 years of age. Political violence that engages physical violence are customarily intertwined when African Americans are targeted. The political violence of denying political rights--most often defined as the right to vote, has haunted American politics for centuries. Many individuals and groups who support the American political system are not in favor of voting rights for African Americans. Our history of the fight for this right dates back for centuries. Today, we still fight for this right because the power to vote means the power to choose politicians who are in support of your civil, economic and educational rights. The right to vote means you can decide who speaks for you in Washington, D.C. and in state legislatures across America. It is as if some Americans will do anything to keep black Americans from their voting rights. We continued to witness this as members of the Donald Trump political party began an anger-driven campaign to stop black and brown people from voting across America. The states targeted with attempts at voter suppression included Georgia, Michigan, Nevada, Pennsylvania, South Carolina and North Carolina. Trump and his allies tried every way possible to keep black and brown people from voting, and finally as a last resort claimed that all the votes by individuals in these states were fraudulent.

The specific areas of contention always seem to center on black urban areas such as Philadelphia and Detroit. The Trump battle to prevent black votes from being counted eventually led to the siege at the United States Capital building on January 6, in

order to disrupt the final tally of election electoral votes by each state. Police officers died attempting to protect Congress women and men, and the vice-president of the United States. Rioting individuals engaged in attacking the Capital and police officers died. Political violence and political action caused the death of 8 individuals that day as the Confederate flag was waved and carried through the building by insurgents. This is the America that we continue to live in and must acknowledge as a continuing aspect of our political psyche. This reality accepts that racism was established at the beginning of America's freedom and nurtured by her Founding Fathers. America's first freedom was not for men and women of color--it was for white males. This is a key element--both conscious and unconscious, that we continue to engage in as we try to achieve political, economic and educational freedom for black Americans.

African Americans are not in denial of the necessity for political action. We understand that our most basic human rights--not even considering political rights, will need to be fought for, with the possible loss of lives. Most often this is on the streets as well as in the voting booth.

Dr. Martin Luther King understood this and was a political activist until the day he was murdered by a white man at a political rally supporting city sanitation workers.



Image 2 Dr. King mural

This is an image of Dr. King's bust on the corner of 40th Street and Lancaster in Philadelphia. Four days before his assassination in 1968, Dr. King gave his last sermon at the National Cathedral in Washington, DC. The title of his speech was "Remaining Awake Through a Great Revolution". He said the following:

It may well be that we will have to repent in this generation. Not merely for the words and the violent actions of the bad people, but for the appalling silence and indifference of the good people who sit around and say, "Wait on time."

Somewhere we must come to see that human progress never rolls in on the

wheels of inevitability. It comes through the tireless efforts and the persistent work of dedicated individuals who are willing to be co-workers with God. And without this hard work, time itself becomes an ally of the primitive forces of social stagnation. So we must help time and realize that the time is always ripe to do right.

We have reached a profound marker in the fight against COVID-19. More than half a million Americans have died from Covid virus related deaths. Blacks have the highest death rate from all of the ethnic groups, LatinX individuals follow blacks in this regard. The failure of the Trump administration has negatively impacted the high number of deaths from the virus--this has been felt even more so in the black and brown communities. The way in which individuals in these communities have been treated in terms of first being included in statistics regarding those dying from the virus, to testing people of color, to providing the vaccine to them in their communities has been shameful. However, we have seen that the political leaders who controlled the White House and the Senate had barely any shame as their energy and focus was on winning another term in government. This effort failed, which will hopefully be the salvation of our American way of life--troubled though it may be. We live to fight another day.

The American politics of the last four years has been one of gas-lighting and illusion. This continued through the beginning deaths of Americans being told that the virus was like a flu and would be “gone in a few weeks”. As black and brown people went out into the world as essential workers, being of service to others, they began to die at higher and more extremely painful death in hospitals. We did not have the right medicine for their bodies and we could not get the right information from political leaders to protect ourselves from sickness and death. And so, we died at alarming rates.

The harmful legacy of American medical apartheid against Africanist people has been documented in many ways. The political actions of 2019 and during the rage of the virus, could have been anticipated. The fight, and it is a fight for survival, continues as we in Philadelphia attempt to find locations, vaccine and the political voice to scream out our frustrations at not getting the medical care to which we are entitled during this pandemic. We are still recovering from a national election where Philadelphia was targeted and accused of “stealing” votes to ensure President Biden’s victory. This is part of what has become known as the “Big Lie”. One perpetrated by the former president and his political allies, in essence steal votes from Americans--particularly black Americans. Did they think we wouldn’t see or just not care? They are mistaken because black lives *do* matter.



Image 3 Cherry Blossom Trees

A tree blooms pink and beautiful in Fairmount Park. It reminds me of how some of us must suffer and still bloom, suffer and still bloom. To give breathe, life, to those of us who are left. George gave us this through his death.

The last words of George Floyd:

It's my face man

I didn't do nothing serious man

Please

Please I can't breathe

Please man

Please somebody

Please man

I can't breathe

I can't breathe

Please

Man can't breathe, my face

Just get up

I can't breathe

Please, a knee on my neck

I can't breathe

Shit

I will

I can't move

Mama

Mama

I can't

My knee

My neck

I'm through

I'm through

I'm claustrophobic

My stomach hurt
My neck hurts
Everything hurts
Some water or something
Please
Please
I can't breathe officer
Don't kill me
They're gonna kill me, man
Come on man
I cannot breathe
I cannot breathe
They're gonna kill me
They're gonna kill me
I can't breathe
I can't breathe
Please sir
Please
Please
Please I can't breathe



Image 4 The Johnson Abolitionist House



Image 5 The Johnson Abolitionist House

I am at the last standing house in Philadelphia of the Underground Railroad that was used to help shelter men, women and children escaping from slavery. It was built in 1768 and owned by Quaker Abolitionists. Today it is the Center for Social Advocacy. In post-Civil War, Reconstruction times, Frederick Douglass said the following:

Where justice is denied, where poverty is enforced, where ignorance prevails, and where any one class is made to feel that society is an organized conspiracy to oppress, rob, and degrade them, neither persons nor property will be safe. It is not light that we need, but fire; it is not the gentle shower, but thunder. We need the storm, the whirlwind, and the earthquake.

Is this a good time?

On February 23, 2020, Ahmaud Arbery, a 25 years old African American was out for a run in the town of Brunswick, Georgia, a neighboring community next to his childhood hometown. As his parents sat at home, living, their son lay on a dirt road dying--because he was a black man. He was killed by three white men who accused him of stealing from a house that was in the process of being built. Nothing was in the house--it had only a wooden frame.



Image 6 President's House, Downtown Philadelphia

This is the outline, the wooden frame of a house that sheltered George Washington and four other early American presidents. George Washington owned 8 slaves when he lived here in what was once his Philadelphia home.

In the early years of the 20th century, black women worked alongside white women to get voting rights.

When white women got this right to vote in 1920 by way of the 19th Amendment to the Constitution, black women were still denied voting rights due to racial discrimination in the form of political and physical violence. It took until the Voting Rights Act of 1965 for black women to get their *protected* right to vote. The black and brown vote is being suppressed all over America by the political violence of racism that wishes to prevent us from this expression of political freedom.



Image 7 The Delaware River, Independence Seaport Museum

This is where slaves disembarked from ships in Philadelphia as early as 1639. At least two million African ancestors, died coming across the Atlantic Ocean. Millions of the survivors worked as slaves for hundreds of years on cotton and rice plantations.

Building the American economy. The mostly white men who have held power in the United States Congress have fought against reparations for African Americans for decades. The voices of those who today demand reparation are not only speaking for themselves. They are speaking for all of the millions of our lives lost while America became the wealthiest country in the world.

Black men and women were lynched as sport in American towns and cities up until the 1940's. It is documented that more than four thousand African Americans died while white people watched, many laughing at the sight of our swinging, lifeless bodies. Legislation against lynching proposed as a federal hate crime was introduced into the United States Senate by Kamala Harris, Cory Booker and Tim Scott in December, 2018 and passed. The bill, known as the Emmett Till Antilynching Act at first failed to pass in the House of Representatives. The legislation finally became law in February, 2020.



Image 8 Lynching of Laura Nelson and her son. 1911, Oklahoma.

POEM

The Bridge

It's the water that first catches your eyes

You barely glance at the simple bridge arching itself across the North Canadian River.

Sunlight shimmers on water, holding an intense glow that says it must be late morning.

Trees on both side of the banks are in full bloom.

Men, women and children stand on the bridge, some bending over the railing to watch what swings below, as river water flows soft as tears.

If you look closer, you can see what photographer G.H. Farnum caught, reflected, on the river's water. The two photographic down river views of this scene are historic and known as Farnum's number 2899 and number 2898.

But he was late.

Hundreds had already seen the image he made famous that day.

What hangs off the bridge deck, catching the photographer's eyes on May 25, 1911, was not such an uncommon sight and yet the standing bridge viewers probably thought themselves lucky, to be captured in the frame of the camera's eye.

The photographer caught the trees, the shiny river, the blossoming river bank shrubs, and all 35 men, 6 women and 17 children who came to the lynched Laura Nelson, and her fourteen year old son LD.

That bridge from that day, in that place, Okemah, Oklahoma, is no longer there. It has been replaced by another, but this is the one we see:

Raped mother hangs across from her son.

They face one another, rope tight around their necks,
Caught forever in the shadow of the bridge.

Mother and son move with the breeze.

The sun shines.

Their shadows ripple across flowing river water.

That bridge, from that day, in that place is no longer there,
Yet this is the only one I can still see.

(By author)



Image 9 Paul Robeson's House

Paul Robeson was an African American actor, singer and political activist. He was persecuted by Joe McCarthy and the Congressional House on Unamerican Activities in the 1950's. Like many others--performers and activists, Paul Robeson was seeking civil liberties and protection for himself and others, against political violence.

Is this a good time?

I conclude with the words of authors William Grier and Price Cobbs from their book *Black Rage*:

The culture of slavery was never undone for either master or slave. The civilization that tolerated slavery dropped its slaveholding cloak but the inner feelings remained.

The "peculiar institution" continues to exert its evil influence over the nation. The practice of slavery stopped over a hundred years ago, but the minds of our citizens have never been freed.

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