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When others go low, and you die: The loss of safe spaces for Black bodies

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Hundreds attended the funeral of Atatiana Jefferson after she was murdered in her home by a Ft. Worth cop on Oct. 12, 2019.

A talk given at the event “People Fight Back at Home and in South America” at the Harriet Tubman Center for Social Justice in Los Angeles on Nov. 2.

The abutting murders of Botham Jean and Atatiana Jefferson by police in Texas seem to be pertinent markers of the degradation of safe spaces for Black bodies.

I reflect on the few moments of rest and joy a Black person may find; a moment of privacy to enjoy a snack in your home, family time with a young child that you love. I also reflect on the constant unrest a Black person always feels, even in those moments; the impending sense of doom, knowing it could be taken at any time.

Before Botham and Atatiana there was Aiyana Stanley Jones and Kenneth Chamberlain Sr. and all of the endless cases in between. Every 28 hours and there are only so many of us.

Unwillingly, an incident that happened to me this summer will not let my mind rest as I reflect on these cases. I want to dismiss it, I want to not give this malefactor any more time or space in my life, and yet her tale so perfectly encapsulates the sentiment of the white ruling class against Black bodies. I feel it necessary to call out this woman by name to hopefully help other Black artists avoid her exploitation.

The tale of Shirley Morales

During a group trip to Senegal that was centered on celebrating Black artists, I was introduced to a white gallery owner, Shirley Morales. During the activities and excursions, Shirley somehow found a way to, time and time again, insert her opinion on how she thought the Black, Muslim nation should be run.

I ignored her for days as she complained about how the cab drivers didn't deserve the money they were making and how inconvenienced she was at the people celebrating Ramadan. In a large group, it was easy enough to avoid her, yet it was as if she was following me.

One day at a group brunch, I was sequestered in a quiet corner after everyone else had finished eating, deep in a personal conversation with a brother from Ghana about police brutality in the United States. Suddenly Shirley appears, she makes herself at home at our table even though there are plenty of open spaces.

I continue, unphased, as I refuse to censor myself in a majority-Black country trying to have a majority Black conversation. I am in the middle of describing the pointedly systematized way in which police officers hunt down Black people, when Shirley interjects, "Well everyone has a choice."

I am confused, stunned that she felt it her right to interrupt me and honestly unsure of what she could mean. "Excuse me?" I counter.

She is emboldened. "Well if that happens, it means people had a choice to be in those situations." I pause, I really wonder if she is saying what I think she is. "So are you saying Black people choose to get shot by the police?"

I can tell she is uncomfortable with saying this explicitly, but she shoots back, "Well ya. If they are in those situations, they made a choice and I don't want to hear this anymore, so it's my choice to leave." And in true Mephistopheles form she scuttles away as fast as she can after trying to ruin someone's whole day.

I was truly confounded. I'm sure my head was floating at a solid 3 o'clock angle for more than a few moments. The audacity, the total pomposity, had left me truly speechless, a rare and stunning occurrence.

Does this in any way touch the horror of the murders we have experienced, the lives lost to white people thinking they can shoot into the homes of Black folks? Of course not, but I do believe this is where it starts: white people who have the gall to invade Black spaces and violate them. It's just a comment or a "joke," a violation of personal space, a purse clutch, an interruption — but what happens when those people are armed? The people who think Bothem and Atatiana and Aiyana and Kenneth had choices. And even when you are not in the alleged safe space of your home, that you should die for selling loosies, or smoking joints or walking or breathing. The same people who think they should be able to thrive off of the labor and exploitation of Black bodies.

I later realized that I had actually been to Shirley's gallery before I met her on that trip. I went to see a Black performance artist whose work I admired. Now I know what he represented to her: a paycheck. The same thing our bodies have always represented to the ruling class. Just another way to make a dollar.

What safe space?

I often think about Michelle Obama's famous line, "When others go low, you go high." But no matter how high you put your hands in the air they will still squeeze the trigger, posthumously assigning your thugness as your cause of death. When they go low, but you should have went lower, hit the ground so maybe the bullet would miss through that open window. When they go low, but all you have left is the blood pooling around your body, your last breath when you can't breathe, your back snapped hogtied. All of the choices. Just go high. I wonder — is high an afterlife? Is that the last safe space?

We are seemingly in the golden age of Black artists. Millions being spent to own a little piece of Black talent that has always been, yet now is worth acknowledging since there is money to be made. Hang it on the wall where it will stare back but remain silent. The owner can assign whatever feelings and values they choose to their new purchase. An image of a Black body forever stuck in servitude, the entertainment of their master.

Black bodies are currency, both actual and social. Labor sold in prisons, talent exported and exploited. What can a safe space mean when we are merely inconveniences or dollar signs?

There is a growing emphasis on "safe spaces", but how safe can we make them when at any time they are scared, confused, bored — we become target practice, a pin cushion for their spare bullets. When they can kick down the door, shoot through the window, bomb us out, gentrify our neighborhoods, give us predatory loans?

I think of India Kager in her car with baby in tow, 30 rounds. In a parked car, 9 seconds, they saw the baby. But they did not see the baby, not as a human, not as our future. I won't continue to expound, I can't imagine what type of being shoots at a baby. I would not feel it necessary to kill a mosquito 30 times over, to delight in its

suffering, plan for it, stalk it, make memes about, start hate groups about it, celebrate it.

Capitalism and Black artists

We cannot be viewed as more than currency under capitalism. The legacy of white supremacy's monumental growth under capitalism will always mark us as dollar signs, something to be bought, manipulated, traded, wasted.

As an artist, I feel it my duty to analyze and discuss the modes in which art can be used to ignite the revolution and the ways it is misappropriated by the ruling class. The artworld is just catching up to sports and entertainment for exploiting Black artists. Though they were late to realize the infinite cultural capital and talent created by Black artists, they are now methodically cashing in on our creative skills.

We are surviving in abject fascist conditions, we cannot consider our collective freedom under any conditions until we collectively end capitalism. It is the only way to build any space that can be safe.

As fascism collectively strains the lives and work of Black art makers, we must make a concentrated effort to keep Black art in the community and support the work of emerging artists as they create art to uplift our communities.

