

FLORENCE DELVA

What is it then to act or to make an effort beyond emergency without neglecting the emergency or missing the essential, and without considering that at the origin of this drama reign invisible forces?

—Patrick Chamoiseau, *Migrant Brothers: A Poet's Declaration of Human Dignity*

We are in a global moment of emergency, where extreme violence, mercilessly sanctioned by the state, ensures death at every turn at rates that are increasingly difficult to keep up with. From crises of migration to police killings to, now, a worldwide pandemic, it is quite clear that in the reign of seemingly invisible forces painfully visible cruelty is the point. Bad imagination. How can we interrupt these living nightmares and take urgent action in ways that imagine beyond the emergency?

There is imagination and there are imaginaries—portals, locations, points from which people depart. These imaginaries are shaped and particularized by distinct sounds, colors, numbers, flavors, textures, and rhythms gathered from a multiplicity of lived experiences all over the world. But what happens to an imaginary when all of those sounds, colors, flavors, textures, and more fall into a deadly abyss where, in the face of profit and greed, nothing can be redeemed?

A loss of ethics is a collapse of aesthetics. Or, as writer Patrick Chamoiseau tells us in his manifesto, *Migrant Brothers: A Poet's Declaration of Human Dignity*, “When ethics fail, beauty falls.” This cruel, abysmal descent we find ourselves falling deeper and deeper into touches every aspect of daily life, making it more and more difficult to activate imaginations in service of creating sustainable lives and building accountable communities.

On April 14, 1978, Arthur Miller Jr. was killed by police in Brooklyn. An unsurprising forbearer of any number of recent murders of Black people by police officers, the encounter that led to Miller's untimely death began with his brother's suspended license, the only clear and completely innocuous detail in the otherwise murky and confounding killing of a man who was such a visible fixture of his community.

Arthur Miller Jr. was a community leader, activist, and businessman who lived and worked in Crown Heights, a neighborhood made up of predominately Caribbean and Jewish residents. At the time of his death, Miller was involved in a variety of ventures that aimed to strengthen the neighborhood he lived in. Unlike the “re-vitalization” efforts of gentrification, which tend to mow down entire swaths of cities, replacing everything with generalized notions of cosmopolitan life, Miller was working with his neighbors to better the lives of everyone living in the area. One of his projects included the purchase of a multi-story building that would house a roller-skating rink for young people in the basement, a nightclub for adults on the ground level, and office space for his construction company on the top floor.

Immigrating to New York from the Bahamas by way of Florida, Miller and his wife Florence settled in Crown Heights in the 1960s, where they raised their children. Miller worked as a super for the apartment building where he lived as he made his way toward becoming a business owner and community leader, building with a sense of pace, strategy, and togetherness, from planning community centers to organizing neighborhood patrol groups. The latter was part of the reason why Miller legally owned a registered handgun and went out of his way to form relationships with police from the local precinct. Yet, still, always, his willingness to play by America's rules

did not grant him what should have been his right to an American life, which is to say a guarantee of “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness,” as the Declaration of Independence so poetically pretends.

Though the details of Arthur Miller Jr.’s death remain unclear to this day, it is quite obvious that he was killed by very nameable forces, “And it was pushed under the rug as usual when they kill a black man,” as his widow Florence Miller reflected in a 2017 interview with Amaka Okechukwu for the Brooklyn Historical Society’s *Voices of Crown Heights* oral history project.

From lynchings to police killings, Black death in the United States has always been routine and necessary for the sustainability of whiteness. Simply put, white life cannot be imagined without Black death. Willful ignorance or forgetfulness of this fact permits this violence to occur over and over again. An absence of ethics creates not just an ugly, but a murderous and amnesiac imaginary, where the kind of death that should be totally illegible to any human being is recognized and named most truthfully by the very people who keep dying, while those who allow this death from the sidelines or center of the square feign an inability to fathom.

The imaginary of the United States is an imaginary deeply committed to whiteness: bad imagination and drunk history and paranoid myth-making and murder: of Native people, of Black people, of Latinx people, of Asian people, of anyone who does not pledge allegiance to genocide and the hoarding of wealth through the disenfranchisement of anyone perceived as “other.” But these are not strictly tendencies of the US. We see it all over the world, from the shores of the Mediterranean, where, for years, European governments have encouraged their coast guards to watch migrants die at sea to Palestine, where the Israeli government continues to build settlements on top of displaced Palestinian families.

That “who gets to be a person” is still a question being asked at this moment in the world denotes an obvious and unacceptable failure of imaginations that have dominated world history. This failure has historically meant success for too many people investing in and irrevocably committing themselves to a lifelessness for others that will surely come home to them in due time. That time is now, as we watch the U.S. government flail in its attempts to convince people to sign up for death in order to keep a gasping economy going.

In describing her support for her husband as he worked to uplift their Crown Heights community, notably during a time of economic panic in New York City in the 1970s, Florence Miller affirmed:

I will back you up. I will push you. I will help get you to where you want to go...

How can we, as people committed to the beauty of life, pledge to do this every day, in small intimate moments as well as larger public events? How can we act from a place that would offer such support to a stranger and lover in the same breath?

We need to imagine new ways of living.

In the midst of this global pandemic with no end in sight, New York City finds itself opening its eyes after spring’s deadly fog. Brooklyn often feels bordered by a country trying to persuade its citizens of the rewards of tyranny. While people in New York City would be the first to proclaim,

“We are different,” or “Never here,” there are too many ways in which the insidiousness of state violence creeps into places that bask in the romance of perceived immunity. The muscle that detains infants and separates families at the border is the same muscle that picks up a phone to call the police on a Black person seeking shelter from the rain, or a Black person eating their lunch, or a Black person entering their own home. The muscle that refuses to extend unemployment benefits for millions of people is the same muscle now looking to flee the very city it has gentrified for greener pastures of comfort.

Liberalism is married to a misremembered, idealized fantasy of this country, where the U.S. constitution outlines the rights of the enlightened man. But those men owned people they willfully chose to exclude from the right to life. “Not all people are people” is the ethos they began a country with, killing most of the Native population before inking their ideas in time immemorial. The myth of America, and all it stands for, is the worst of our imaginations.

How do we break free?

Writer Colin Dayan begins their book *Haiti, History, and the Gods* with this admission:

Let me admit at the outset that I am obsessed by Haiti, for reasons that have much to do with my own vexed and haunted childhood, the uncertainty of my family origins, and my confrontation with an always blocked, silenced, or unspeakable history.

I am obsessed with the United States in similar ways, for reasons that have to do with my own haunted childhood, uncertainty of family events, and confrontations with unspeakable, seemingly illegible histories. I cannot unravel the life I’ve live in Flatbush from what is currently happening in the rest of the country and abroad, living in the world at a time when death certificates are signed like checks.

Much later in Dayan’s book, we meet a woman from the Haitian countryside named Erosmène Delva, who expounds:

What comes from the garden is mine; I don’t need to give him anything. And yet, I’ve already given him [something] and I’ll keep on giving [something] to him.

While Madame Delva is explaining intimacies between men and women, I can’t help but think of her words in relation to people’s interactions with the countries they live in. Whatever I get from the garden I tend should be mine. I don’t need to give this country anything; but giving to people is a different story. And I’ll keep giving so long as those practices of generosity and exchange continue to cultivate life. In my imagination, this brings forth practices of community, organizing, education, interdependence, intimacy, love, and most of all, care.

How can we imagine new gardens?

How can we tend to and cultivate new lives?

Why do we keep moving forward?

Pou moun, pa nasyon. For people, not nations.
Avec moun san nasyon. With people without nations.