MOVE Bombing: The Day That Shook the City of Philadelphia

Melanie Horton

Web Site
Senior Individual Division

Interview with Andrea Walls

Author of *Ultraviolet Catastrophe*

Q: What inspired you to write about the MOVE bombing?

A: It's one of those things that it's really difficult to come to terms with: the fact that your city bombed your neighborhood. And, I had a sense of unease for many, many, many years. And, I'm a person who has lived in a lot of different cities in the United States, and I've found that people in other cities knew more or were more interested in having conversations about how it happened than people who live in Philadelphia. And, I think that happens around the World; people who live in combat zones sometimes don't want to talk about it or admit that they're at that much risk and so, somehow, you try to cultivate an amnesia around things that are very painful. And just in many years—and again this was an arc of 20 years—being constantly asked how it happened and kind of knowing the facts of the thing and knowing how it happened are two different things. So just really over many, many years I just tried to think of not just what happened to the people who lived in the neighborhood or the MOVE family w ho was occupying the building that was bombed but understanding the cultural context that allowed the whole thing to happen. So, what are people who are ignoring it feeling? What does the historical arc have to do with the stories? I was born kind of into the Civil Rights movement, so how did those decades inform what happened in 1985? How did the previous MOVE altercation with the city under the Rizzo years…how did that make this moment in history almost inevitable? And, you know, what is it like to be the guy who is piloting the helicopter? What does that feel like? I have a poem that's not in this book—that's in the larger collection—that imagines the person who's the helicopter

pilot as a little boy probably laying down with his back on the dirt and his eyes up watching a bird or a plane thinking, “Wow, one day I want to fly.” And, how does that moment, through the course of a lifetime, translate to you being the man who pilots the machine that drops the bomb into the house that burns the children and decimates a neighborhood?

Q: Initially, what was your opinion about the MOVE bombing?

A: Of course, bombs: bad. End of story. And, there’s so much political maneuvering around the move family. Philadelphia politics, especially born of the Rizzo years. You know, but overall, bombs are bad. Burning children alive: bad. Not fighting the fire…So, it doesn’t seem like there’s a lot of room for interpretation. But, you know, I guess trying to figure out how to make sure this never happens again means you have to really try to go beyond that simplistic…because obviously everyone doesn’t agree that bombs are bad. We have wars all around the world. But this was such a personal moment in my life memory that I just needed to know as much as I could.

Q: What were your neighbors and friends saying about the bombing?

A: You know, I just have a sense; again, that it’s not something we talk about at all. You know…it’s not. Most of my conversations about this are with people who aren’t from the neighborhood. Every now and then, you’ll get back together with friends, and you’ll remember in some really small, one-sentence way. And, that’s interesting. I probably should push a little bit further, and dig a little deeper into that. And, I think, in many ways, that’s the job of the poet: to

make a nuisance of yourself and get to the emotion of it…the thing that makes people want to disappear from this and that. And, I guess, when you're from a place that's destroyed in this way you really want to distance yourself from the fact that you're so easily erasable so, yeah, but I think, Melanie, you're going to have a lot to do with me poking the stick at some of the people who are closer to it. I thank you for that.

Q: Did you consciously or unconsciously take sides while you were writing this?

A: You know, the only sides that I think that you could take are the people who were burned alive, regardless of what the political narrative that surrounds it—to knowingly drop a bomb into an inhabited home in a residential neighborhood. So, on a human level that's, for me, the only kind of thing that really matters: is the spirits carrying on that spirit. But, in the larger context, it's not a matter of taking sides, it's a matter of to honor the dead I kind of felt like I needed to understand the way—I don't even know what to call it—down to the people who signed the warrants that started the chain. I have a poem that's called "Chain Reaction," and it's just Mayor Goode, the first black mayor in the city, like what did that have to do with the events that followed? What did every single person's life leading up to that moment have to do with how that moment could happen? And when Abrams, when she became the district attorney for Philadelphia years later—w ho became known as the Queen of Death because she sentenced so many, particularly African American, to death row—what does her story have to do in this chain reaction of like, every moment seems so important to what finally happened? So, it's not taking sides so much as taking up the stories and the narratives that lead to that moment.

Q: Your poems depict the bombing from a variety of perspectives. Was it difficult for you to adopt different perspectives on such a controversial issue?

A: It was difficult, not as a concept, to start it, but to embody, and in some of the poems in the larger book I tried to imagine what that feeling of burning alive is, and I tried to imagine being the police chief—whose whole life is about, you know, law and order and safety—removing himself from the safety of these particular people and my neighbors. What it’s like to be a fire chief who has sworn to fight fires and save lives to stand there in that moment and not fight a fire knowing lives are at stake, to let sixty homes burn to the ground knowing what that devastation is. So, it was difficult to hold what I imagine those emotions to be in my body, in my consciousness, and it’s been very difficult to let go of those embodiments. And, I think it’s kind of been my defining artistic journey as a poet.

Q: Did the process of writing change your opinion of the bombing?

A: No, bombing: bad.

Q: There was a great deal of build up before the bombing. In your opinion, what are the contributing factors? Are there social and political factors?

A: Absolutely. It’s all social, all political, all deeply embedded in the historical racism of America, the city of Philadelphia in particular. I think Frederick Douglas has a quote—and this is a former person who was a slave—who says that there’s no other city as affected by color

consciousness as Philadelphia, and that's saying something for a person who was formerly a slave. And then, within Philadelphia, you have these two different narratives. You have that historical narrative of liberty and freedom, the signing of the declaration of independence. So, you have this sense that the language tells you there is freedom, but the reality…So, how do you hold that language at the same time that someone is signing a paper that allows this chain reaction to happen. So, there's a previous altercation with the move in 1979, so there was a long historical context. And, also, there is just the natural human fear of difference so, you know, I'm noticing your natural hair. That played a big part, and it's something that you probably do as a decision that you might or might not have wrestled with, but, at that time the fact that the move family wore dreadlocks, natural hair…that was something that allowed people to think that it was okay because it felt like, in some context, "Oh, these are animals, these are radical Africans," which equated to something which meant easily destroyed, not important, less than me. So, you know, these are things that we're still wresting with, this decision that you've made, you know. And, I imagine that in some context you still pay consequences for making that choice in certain areas or certain neighborhoods, so it's still political. Something that should be simple…

Q: What do you see as the lasting effects of the bombing?

A: Well, I mean, just from a sense of being a member of the neighborhood—my brother still lives in the house that we grew up in—the block of 62nd and Osage is a ruins. The houses were rebuilt at something like a cost of a million dollars per home to the city. They're condemned. It's still a ghost street. It's still a testament to all types of failures, political failures, so it's still a scar

on the neighborhood: a physical scar. And, for those of us who carry that either claimed or unclaimed memory, a reality that, you know, at any moment your life can—life decisions that have nothing to do with who you are or who you believe in. You know, people went to work, got up every day; it was such a wonderful neighborhood to grow up in the 60s and 70s. It was a segregated neighborhood, but we were safe within the confines of the neighborhood. We used to play on that street, and, for me, it's a big reason I wanted to tell the story, not only from the political and social sides, but from the fact that, look, this is not just a political battle. We were kids that used to go play double-Dutch and hide and seek, and Cobbs Creek was such a great…we kind of had that urban, inner city experience that was really special at that time and then we had Cobbs Creek that was kind of like our Mississippi River, where we played Huck Finn and, you know, going on wild adventures. It was just a beautiful memory for all of us who were there at that time, and then you have this moment where it kind of is the end. And, then the crack epidemic happens around the same time, so just you have this mark where it kind of was over, and in some way you lose some aspect of that beautiful—and I guess that's…and I think it might happen anyway—but this is just such a clear kind of, you know. Your childhood was murdered in a way, so it doesn't get to be that idyllic nostalgic moment because it was stolen; I mean it was really obliterated more than stolen.

Q: What type of feedback have you gotten regarding the book *Ultraviolet Catastrophe*?

A: It's interesting. There are my artist friends from—I'm a part of an organization called the Voices of Our Nation's Art Foundation and so we're a national, really an international, collective of writers of color—and, within that family of artists, it has been very well received, but as far as

Philadelphia, again, it's like one of those things people don't really want to have a conversation about. Mumia Jamal, there's like very two very extreme camps. Same thing with the MOVE bombing. People don't want to be confronted with it. Friends of mine who are not my artist friends, who know me from a time in my life that I was just a regular, working-class-with-aspirations-of middle-class-ness, like that moment in my life friends that I have from that time, "Oh, you're so radical." "What are you starting trouble for?" So, it's interesting. Just, I have so many categories of friends, and it's very difficult for some of those groups to hear. Or, I guess it's because they really want to believe that we've come a long way, a lot of success has been made, progress has been made. And, why disrupt the waters? Why worry about the people who are still at risk because that puts us all at risk? So, you know, it's an interesting situation. I guess I'm considered a political writer. I don't' feel like it's particularly political, or a political agenda is not what's at stake. But, this is my life my story, my memory, my…it's what I have to say. So, that feels poetic to me. So, I tried to make a distinction between politics and poetry; I don't mark a line between the two, so the response has been very informative to me about how far we have come and how far we haven't come.