

Missouri to Palestine. Racism and the Criminalization of Justice. The Execution of Marcellus “Khalifah” Williams for a Crime he Did Not Commit

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The state of Missouri murdered Marcellus “Khalifah” Williams on Tuesday, September 24th, at 6 pm central time. His last meal was chicken wings and tater tots; his last words were, “All praise be to Allah in every situation!” His execution was the third execution in Missouri this year and the 100th since Missouri reinstated capital punishment in 1989.

Khalifah had hundreds of thousands of supporters behind him worldwide for decades. Millions making calls online and signing his petitions, hundreds in person bringing their grievances to the Missouri Supreme Court, and the prosecution lawyers AND family of Lisha Gayle, the social worker and former newspaper reporter who was murdered during a burglary of her home, whom this case revolves around, calling for the death penalty to be dismissed during this case.

Khalifah has also held his innocence since the beginning of this trial in 1998, with no forensic evidence supporting Khalifah as the offender. Each time he was set to be executed, his execution was halted due to further DNA and forensic research, which never got to conclude before his death, nor did the impending Supreme Court case.

Khalifah never had a fair trial. When first tried in 2001, he was not granted his constitutional rights to a fair jury. Instead, Black jurors were barred from entering the jury because they “looked like Williams.” In his reasoning for going forward with Williams’ execution, Gov. Parsons said that Williams had “exhausted due process and every judicial avenue.” However, Parsons denied Khalifah’s clemency request to change his sentence to life in prison and also rejected a request to cancel the execution so that a lower court could make a new determination about the discriminatory circumstances of his 2001 jury. Gov. Parsons has never granted clemency for a death penalty case.

According to the Death Penalty Information Center (DPIC), 16 prisoners have been executed in 8 states in the United States this year, and 48 more executions are scheduled throughout 2024.

The death penalty and the cruelty of cases like Marcellus “Khalifah” Williams exemplify the systemic racism and throughlines of enslavement that are still housed within the U.S. Criminal Justice System today. Capital Punishment has been around since enslavement, with states like North Carolina using it as a way to squash rebellions and those working to free enslaved individuals. The Jim Crow Era continued with lynchings and public executions seemingly becoming interchangeable, with almost all cases of the death penalty being

against Black men. And with the 1990s era of mass incarceration, the war on drugs, and a renewed surge of the death penalty – The United took the reins of the highest incarceration population in the world. Today, despite making up 13% of the U.S. population, Black folks make up 42% of those on death row ([according to a 2020 Prison Policy Initiative Report](#)).

Robert Dunham, the DPIC Executive Director, writes,

“What is broken or intentionally discriminatory in the criminal legal system is visibly worse in death-penalty cases. Exposing how the system discriminates in capital cases can shine an important light on law enforcement and judicial practices in vital need of abolition.”

The disparities found in Khaliifah’s case are ones systemically embedded in the groundwork of death penalty trials and throughout the entire criminal justice system in the U.S., with many other past cases resurfacing because of Khaliifah’s murder.

Like many others, I recount these facts about Khaliifah with tears running down my face and anger in my heart – and all I can think about is time. Khaliifah spent two decades in prison for a crime he did not commit.

President Biden sits in a long line of masterminds that got us to the prison industrial complex that we have today, with many who were sentenced to death while Biden was gunning for the 1994 Crime Bill, still awaiting their fate. A prison industrial complex that has not only murdered and harmed millions of Black and Brown people in the U.S. for centuries but has weaved its web throughout the world, implementing torture, starvation, and capital punishment of its own sort throughout places like Palestine, Lebanon, Yemen, Sudan, the Congo.

And as we run into a new election cycle fueled by feminism and a new wave of young organizers ready to believe in the system at large because of who is heading it, I must ask, where is feminism in this? Where is feminism when we have so many women as elected officials in the U.S. who could not even utter his name, not the name of any individual who the heinous system has touched? Where is feminism as we look out onto almost a year of genocide and nearly 76 years of occupation in Palestine? Where is feminism when our tax dollars go towards the public execution of innocent mothers, fathers, and children who got no jury, no trial, and no time?

From Missouri to Palestine, not even time is a human right.

Below, The Perplexing Smiles of the Children of Palestine by: Marcellus “Khaliifah” Williams

The Perplexing Smiles of the Children of Palestine

despite the actions of the few,
and excessive retaliation,
drones,
planes,
bombs,
tanks,
rubble,
buildings demolished,
vanished houses and neighborhoods,
hospitals targeted,
U.N. shelters disrespected,
murder,
death,
deliberate killing of noncombatants,
babies buried alive,
amputations,
hunger and political starvation,
lack of or no water,
strategic sanitation,
daily terror,
and terrorized daily,
military maneuvering,
moving here and there,
to return back again to nowhere,
trauma with all its manifestations,
international parleys and hesitation,
defiance to the realization of two nations,
global aid thwarted,
global amnesia,
siblings and relatives gone forever,
parental worries -
in the face of apex arrogance
and ethnic cleansing by any definition...
still your laughter can be heard
and somehow you are able to smile
O resilient Children of Palestine!

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Featured image: Marcellus Williams. (Image: Courtesy of Marcellus Williams' legal team)

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