



Cave of American sins



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Canto Illustration Rationale

My project represents two sins of the USA: egocentrism and deceit. In a cave, two rivers meet to form a whirlpool. Beneath this whirlpool, a stalagmite tower (formed by water dripping from the whirlpool) reaches up to the basin of the whirlpool. On the top level, the egocentrics spin in the whirlpool. Yet, they never reach its vortex because a bald eagle grabs the sinner with its talons and drops them anew into the outer edge of the water. On the lower level, the deceitful must climb the stalagmite, but they always fall from the tower before they can reach the top. A golden light shines down on the deceivers through an opening in the cave.

For decades, the United States has remained a center of attention in politics and popular culture. Many outsiders dream of living in this country, as ideals like the American Dream have established it as the “land of opportunity.” Yet, some Americans have gotten too used to having all eyes on them. From a culture that values individual achievement at the expense of others to Donald Trump’s “America first” inauguration speech, many Americans commit this sin to different extremes. The whirlpool punishment fits the sin because, while living, the sinners acted as though everything revolved around them and their country. Now, they revolve around the vortex of a whirlpool. Those who were the most self-absorbed spin the quickest in the whirlpool, meaning the eagles pick them up more frequently, which causes more pain as their talons are sharp. Additionally, the state of disorientation caused by the spinning replicates the experiences of those in a foreign land or culture, something these sinners failed to empathize with in their

lifetimes. Because the egocentrics did not recognize the other perspectives independent from the US or themselves, they were never in a state of humility caused by exposure to something they were not familiar with. This is something those immigrating to the United States experience. The bald eagle grabs the sinners because it is the national animal of the US, and Americans use it as a symbol of their pride. The irony is, instead of taking them out of the whirlpool, the eagles drop them back into the whirlpool as a rejection of their kind by their country.

The person with a Q on their head represents the far-right conspiracy group, QAnon. I chose to represent this group of people among the egocentrics because its American followers tend to link affairs completely independent from the US to their country. For example, they believe the COVID-19 pandemic was created to cover up the network of sex-trafficking, Satan-worshipping Democrats in the US (Spring). These people are so self-absorbed that they interpret an international crisis that has devastated people worldwide as an attack on righteous, Republican Americans. Yet, QAnon is not the source of our problems, those who deceived them are.

Whenever someone claims the US is the best country in the world, I hear another victim of deceit. Deceit signifies “concealing or misrepresenting the truth” (Oxford Dictionary). These sinners deceived the American people by concealing the flaws and problems of their country. This system of justice takes place in a cave because those in power in the US often try to bury their country’s problems underground, like in a cave. The stalagmite tower the sinners must climb represents all their deceptions, so even if they got away with their deceit in the living realm, the tower of their lies built up like a stalagmite, ready to be climbed when they die. The deceitful climb the stalagmite to get the magnitude of their past sins out of their line of sight, but they always end up falling from however far they have reached. As they climb, a golden light

from an opening in the cave unveils their every move, preventing them from hiding the truth any longer. The worst deceivers have a harder time climbing because their feet weigh them down. This extra weight represents the guilt they carry for their lies. The tower is uneven and disjointed because our lies often overlap and contradict each other, as is especially the case for one of the sinners depicted in this illustration.

At the very bottom of the tower stands President Donald J. Trump. I could have placed Trump in the level above with the egocentrics (as implies my reference to his inauguration speech), but his multitude of sins merited the lowest level of Hell possible. The first deception of Trump's that comes to mind is how he downplayed the COVID-19 pandemic "because [he didn't] want to create a panic" ("Trump Says"). The result? Hundreds of thousands of American lives lost. This is only a drop in the ocean of Trump's attempts to conceal the truth in his favor. The concept of the stalagmite tower is also a nod to Barbara Res' book, *Tower of Lies: What My Eighteen Years of Working With Donald Trump Reveals About Him*.

The other two people depicted in this illustration are Phyllis Schlafly and Elon Musk. Phyllis Schlafly was a female conservative activist who campaigned against the Equal Rights Amendment in the 1970s and ultimately prevented it from ratification into the US Constitution. Schlafly argued that the ERA would have stripped women of the "privileges" they got by avoiding the draft and not having to financially support their families (Cunningham). Many would argue that not carrying the burden of financial support was not so much a privilege, but the societal pressure for women to be homemakers and support their husbands' careers. Schlafly made women out to have more rights than men, despite facing a pay gap and restricted access to abortions. Thus, she deceived the public. Meanwhile, Elon Musk, along with other top billionaires, like to pretend they are passionate about closing the widening wealth gap in the US.

Many billionaires invest money in ambitious projects to help underserved communities, including Musk, who has donated \$17 million “to nonprofits focused on scientific research and education” (Cuccinello). Yet, as of December 14, Musk wields a net worth of \$142.7 billion, and in the past twenty-five years, he has donated a total of \$100 million to nonprofit organizations (“Elon Musk”; Cuccinello). That amount of money is more than most Americans will ever own, but less than 1% of Musk’s net worth. In addition, Musk recently moved from California to Texas, which does not enforce personal income tax (Duffy). Musk deceives the world everyday by pretending he is concerned with the good of humanity, but his wimpy philanthropy and effort to dodge income taxes demonstrate how Musk still prioritizes gaining money.

I placed the egocentrics lower than the deceitful in severity because this sin is often unintentionally committed by many Americans and usually causes less harm than deceit. Meanwhile, fewer people have the power to deceive the American public, and it always benefits one person/group of people of the one percent. This played a role in how I ordered the featured sinners in the illustration of the tower of deceit. I placed Phyllis Schlafly the farthest up because, even though she propagated misogynistic ideals and gender norms, Schlafly was certainly not immune to sexism. Her political work ultimately benefitted straight, white men who wanted to control women’s lives, not herself. Meanwhile, Donald Trump and Elon Musk (two straight, white men) deceive people to put money and power directly into their own pockets, so they must carry more guilt.

My punishments resemble those of Dante’s Inferno through the incorporation of natural elements. Dante included geographic landmarks like the Dark Forest, the River of Acheron, and the frozen Lake Cocytus in his Inferno, so I incorporated the rivers, cave, and stalagmite in mine. Additionally, we both used reoccurring numbers in our setting. The number two appears in both

illustrations of my punishments with two bald eagles above the whirlpool and two sinners falling from the tower. Dante often charged creatures with keeping the sinners in check, like the Centaurs in Canto XII, who shoot the violent against their neighbors who try to emerge out of the river of blood beyond what they are allowed. In this case, the bald eagles guard the egocentrics and keep them from reaching the vortex of the whirlpool, which would cause everything to revolve around them. Dante's punishments also allowed different levels of severity within each circle. For example, the Lake Cocytus in Canto XXXIII contained multiple rings where the sinners were frozen into the lake at varying depths. My system of justice includes these sublevels too, with the worst egocentrics spinning in the whirlpool faster and the deceitful with the most guilt having more difficulty climbing due to their heavy feet.

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