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## White Terror: Toni Morrison on the Construct of Racism



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“To lose one’s racial-ized rank is to lose one’s own valued and enshrined difference,” writes Toni Morrison in The Origin of Others. In a 2016 post-election essay entitled “Mourning for Whiteness,” this sense of loss and the ensuing disorientation become Morrison’s focus. In today’s America as “people of color” are increasingly occupying everywhere including the Senate, the Supreme Court, and the White House, white people

can no longer hold onto the “conviction of their natural superiority,” Morrison argues, and continues:

To keep alive the perception of white superiority, these white Americans tuck their heads under cone-shaped hats and American flags and deny themselves the dignity of face-to-face confrontation, training their guns on the unarmed, the innocent, the scared, on subjects who are running away, exposing their unthreatening backs to bullets. Surely, shooting a fleeing man in the back hurts the presumption of white strength? The sad plight of grown white men, crouching beneath their (better) selves, to slaughter the innocent during traffic stops, to push black women’s faces into the dirt, to handcuff black children. Only the frightened would do that.

It is not only the KKK members and men with AK-47s who are grieving the loss of their illusions of superiority. Describing the herd of people who have come together to give their support to Donald Trump, a presidential candidate who is emboldened by racial violence and enthusiastically inflames it, Morrison writes: “These people are not so much angry as terrified, with the kind of terror that makes knees tremble.”

A terror that makes knees tremble. A terror that takes hold of the whole mind. A terror that annihilates all notions of morality and dignity, even a most elemental understanding of humanity. This is precisely what we witness in the tragedies from Charlottesville to El Paso. Not power, but an overpowering sense of terror. Because in essence every act of terrorism, which seeks to inflict fear in others, stems from a place of fear itself. And the seed of white terrorism is white terror.

Though Morrison speaks of a fear which has resulted from the loss of status and privilege following the civil rights legislation, white terror has been present in America all along—as the earliest settlers fought the wilderness, Natives, starvation, and diseases; as the colonies were troubled by riots and uprisings; as the rupture of the American Revolution settled in.

While life in the New World proved to be an ongoing struggle for many white colonists, for some, slavery made it possible to cling to illusions of power and mastery. “Black slavery enriched the country’s creative possibilities. For in that construction of blackness and enslavement could be found not only the not-free but also, with the dramatic polarity created by skin color, projection of the not-me,” explains Morrison in Playing in the Dark. So looking at the slave, she points out, the white American came to know itself as:

“not enslaved, but free; not repulsive, but desirable; not helpless, but licensed and powerful; not history-less but historical; not damned, but innocent; not a blind accident of evolution, but a progressive fulfillment of destiny.” These projections were imperative to the construct of racism. And though slavery was abolished over a hundred and fifty years ago, they still are.

“It is as though they are shouting, “I am not a beast! I’m not a beast! I torture the helpless to prove I am not weak,” Morrison describes the plea of the slave owner. At the very heart of all supremacist ideologies lie this devastating weakness and self-doubt. And this is what makes white supremacy both pathetic and pathological.

So when one is stripped of the destitute illusions of power and superiority, this unbearable weakness gets exposed. Defenseless against the white terror within, the white supremacist attacks the defenseless out in the world. In the past there were lynchings, beatings, hangings, burnings. Today, mass shootings. The manifestos published to explain the motive of the attacks may talk about immigrant invasion, but they are really saying: I am not a beast! I’m not a beast! I murder to prove I am not weak.

In her 1993 PBS interview with Charlie Rose, Morrison asks: “If I take your race away, and there you are, all strung out. And all you got is your little self, and what is that? What are you without racism?” In her eyes more sadness than scorn, she wonders out loud, “Are you any good? Are you still strong? Are you still smart? Do you still like yourself?” Her novel Beloved says it the best: “She is a friend of my mind. She gather me, man. The pieces I am, she gather them and give them back to me in all the right order.” Thank you, dear Toni Morrison, for having been such a friend to this nation’s mind. Gathering its pieces and giving them back to the American people in all the right order. You will be missed.

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