

Toni Morrison's Questions

Her famous Charlie Rose interview is instructive for today

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Toni Morrison, 1970 — Public Domain photograph

Years ago, in an interview on the Charlie Rose Show, the Nobel Laureate, Toni Morrison asked and said what millions of people try to ask and say everyday about American

racism.

Here's an excerpt:

***"What are you without racism? Are you any good?...
Do you still like yourself?"***

Morrison, in the same interview, also stated that she was not "a victim" and refused to be one (my parents always told all of their children to hold fast to this). She stated growing up she always felt she was morally superior to white people even though they treated her second class and denied her access to a normal life in America. It was an amazing response.

It is the question that yet is not faced collectively and individually in America. It is the question that African Americans and other Americans are talking about when they say, America has yet to deal with race or its racial past. This is because dealing with race, according to Morrison, has little to do with African Americans.

She refers to people who perpetuate racism, who practice it, and who are not trying to struggle with it, as "bereft." They are suffering some kind of sickness, a "neurosis," she said.

Her point is do they even understand that "race" is not real. They have created something and live something that is not an actual reality but is a created construct. The race question is mostly viewed, according to Morrison by what

white supremacy does to the African Americans. Yet, Morrison stated that racism has a destructive effect on those who call themselves white as well because they are the perpetrators of something evil.

This is where the [*Brown v. Board of Education*](#) decision got it all wrong and much of the civil rights jurisprudence that comes out of *Brown*. The decision, though necessary and important, focused completely on the damage done to African American children. It did not focus upon the damage that had been done for generations to white children and white people.

Even more destructive, the decision does not dismantle the racial caste system of whiteness. It does end "separate but equal" as a legal doctrine, but the caste system remained in place. If you were Black, the goal then became enter the caste system and you have a better chance to make it.

Ever since *Brown*, courts have mostly followed this template. The case left white supremacy intact and never questioned or probed into what damage had been done to millions of white people. Yet, the damage was clear. A system of privilege had been created to uplift white people.

Not just in actual advantages in society, politically and socioeconomically, but ultimately psychologically. This is what Morrison means by bereft. Here is another piece of that same interview where Morrison further elaborates:

"If you can only be tall because somebody's on

their knees then you have a serious problem and my feeling is white people have a very very serious problem and they should start thinking about what they can do about it but take me out of it..."

— *Toni Morrison*

Morrison is quite passionate and sincere in the interview when she said this. Her words, in some manner, have been expressed by many Americans over the years. David R. Roediger, the historian, and author of ***The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the White Working Class***, also explains this phenomenon.

In that book, he writes:

"In America, where the formally neutral concept 'civil rights' and the word 'race' generally convey a black concern, to link the social construct of whiteness with race remains uncommon. White Americans, as a rule, cannot see race in relation to themselves, and are therefore convinced that racism only poses problems for 'others.'"

Morrison and Roediger are saying the same thing. Roediger, I note, is inspired by Morrison's quote as well. This is also where the United States of America is stranded in a very destructive posture right now. At some point, and other societies have tried (and are trying), America has to face its history and that should include damage to white people.

Sources

Toni Morrison Interview, with Charlie Rose, [LINK](#)

The Wages of Whiteness, David R. Roediger, Haymarket, 2007