

The Origin of Others

The Charles Eliot Norton Lectures, 2016

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TONI MORRISON

The Origin
of Others

With a Foreword by Ta-Nehisi Coates

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I_N THE spring of 2016 Toni Morrison delivered a series of talks at Harvard University on “the literature of belonging.” It is no surprise, given the nature of Morrison’s remarkable catalogue, that she turned her eye to the subject of race. Morrison’s lectures came at an auspicious time. Barack Obama was then entering the last year of his two-term presidency. His approval ratings were rising. The insurgent Black Lives Matter movement had pushed police brutality to the front of the national conversation, and unlike most “conversations on race,” this one

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netted results. Obama's two black attorneys general, Eric Holder and Loretta Lynch, had launched investigations into police departments across the country. Reports emerged out of Ferguson, Chicago, and Baltimore substantiating the kind of systemic racism that had long been confined mainly to anecdote. This aggressive approach was expected to continue under the country's first woman president, Hillary Clinton, who was, at the time Morrison began her series, heavily favored against a man the world considered a political lightweight. All of this testified to a country intent on defying the precepts of history and at last approaching the justice end of the moral universe's long arc.

And then the arc got longer.

The first reaction to Donald Trump's victory was to minimize what it said about American racism. A cottage industry sprang up asserting that the 2016 election was a populist uprising against Wall Street fomented by those left out of the new economy. Clinton was said to have

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been doomed by a focus on “identity politics.” These arguments often carried the seeds of their own undoing. No one ever explained how it was that those most often left behind by this new economy—black and brown workers—never found their way into the Trump coalition. Moreover, some of the very critics of Clinton’s “identity politics” had no problem deploying those politics themselves. Senator Bernie Sanders, Clinton’s primary opponent, could be heard one week extolling his roots in the white working class, and then the next urging Democrats to get “beyond” identity politics. All identity politics are not created equal, it seems.

The Origin of Others—Morrison’s new book derived from the lecture series she gave at Harvard—is not directly concerned with the rise of Donald Trump. But it is impossible to read her thoughts on belonging, on who fits under the umbrella of society and who does not, without considering our current moment. *Origin* conducts its inquiry on the field of American

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history and thus addresses itself to the oldest and most potent form of identity politics in American history—the identity politics of racism. This is a work about the creation of aliens and the erection of fences, one that employs literary criticism, history, and memoir in an attempt to understand how and why we have come to associate those fences with pigment.

Morrison's book joins a body of work, evolving over the last century, that has effectively argued for the indelible nature of white racism. Her confederates include Sven Beckert and Edward Baptist, who've revealed the violent nature of that racism and the profits reaped from it; James McPherson and Eric Foner, who've shown how that racism birthed the Civil War and then undermined the country's effort to reconstruct itself; Beryl Satter and Ira Katznelson, who've explained how racism corrupted the New Deal; and Kahlil Gibran Muhammad and Bruce Western, who've shown how, in our

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time, that racism paved the way for the era of mass incarceration.

But the closest cousin to Morrison's work is probably *Racecraft*, the book by Barbara Fields and Karen Fields that argues Americans have sought to erase the crime of racism, which is active, with the concept of race, which is not. When we say "race" as opposed to "racism," we reify the idea that race is somehow a feature of the natural world and racism the predictable result of it. Despite the body of scholarship that has accumulated to show that this formulation is backwards, that racism precedes race, Americans still haven't quite gotten the point. And so we find ourselves speaking of "racial segregation," "the racial chasm," "the racial divide," "racial profiling," or "racial diversity"—as though each of these ideas is grounded in something beyond our own making. The impact of this is not insignificant. If "race" is the work of genes or the gods, or both, then we can

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forgive ourselves for never having unworked the problem.

Morrison's inquiry proceeds from the less comfortable space which holds that race is only tangentially about genes. From there she aids our understanding of how a concept that seems so flimsy could have such a strong hold over millions of people. The need to confirm one's humanity while committing inhumane acts is key, Morrison argues. She looks at the accounts of the planter Thomas Thistlewood, who records his serial rape of enslaved women in his diary with all the ease of reporting the shearing of sheep. "Sliced in between his sexual activities are his notes on farming, chores, visitors, illness, etc.," Morrison tells us chillingly. What manner of psychological work did Thistlewood have to do to become so callous to rape? The psychological work of Othering—of convincing oneself that there is some sort of natural and divine delineation between the enslaver and the enslaved. After

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analyzing the vicious beatings that an enslaved Mary Prince receives from her mistress, Morrison says:

The necessity of rendering the slave a foreign species appears to be a desperate attempt to confirm one's own self as normal. The urgency of distinguishing between those who belong to the human race and those who are decidedly non-human is so powerful the spotlight turns away and shines not on the object of degradation but on its creator. Even assuming exaggeration by the slaves, the sensibility of slave owners is gothic. It's 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." The danger of sympathizing with the stranger is the possibility of becoming a stranger. To lose one's racialized rank is to lose one's own valued and enshrined difference.

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Morrison is speaking of enslavers and the enslaved, but her point about rank holds true today. The past few years have seen a steady parade of videos in which American police officers are shown beating, tasing, choking, and shooting black people for relatively mild infractions or no infraction at all. African-Americans, as well as many other Americans, have been horrified. And yet the language of justification has proven familiar. When Officer Darren Wilson killed Michael Brown he reported that Brown appeared to be “bulking up to run through the shots,” an act that rendered Brown as something more, but ultimately something less, than human. The sub-human aspect to the killing was reinforced by the decision to leave Brown’s body to bake on the concrete in the middle of summer. Rendering Brown as a kind of monster justifies his murder and allows a force of officers who—according to the Justice Department report—were little more than gangsters to consider themselves legitimate, to consider themselves perfectly human.

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Racist dehumanization is not merely symbolic—it delineates the borders of power. “Race,” writes the historian Nell Painter, “is an idea, not a fact.” In America, part of the idea of race is that whiteness automatically confers a decreased chance of dying like Michael Brown, or Walter Scott, or Eric Garner. And death is but the superlative example of what it means to live as an “Other,” to exist beyond the border of a great “belonging.” The kind of “economic anxiety” that allegedly drove voters into the arms of Donald Trump would represent a significant step up for most black people. In the Republican primary, the median household income for a Trump voter was roughly double the median income for the average black family in America. The current wave of sympathy confronting a mostly (though not entirely) white opioid epidemic is of a different piece from the wave of condemnation that was brought to bear during the crack crisis of the 1980s. The current wave of concern greeting the increased mortality

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rates among certain white men is of a different piece from the resigned apathy which accompanies the high mortality rates that have always haunted black life in this country.

Racism matters. To be an Other in this country matters—and the disheartening truth is that it will likely continue to matter. Human communities rarely cede privileges out of simple altruism, and thus the only world in which one can imagine the subscribers of whiteness renouncing their religion is a world in which its privileges become a luxury they can ill afford. We have seen moments like this in American history. A prolonged civil war led whites to conclude that blacks were fit to die in their ranks. A cold war with the Soviet Union turned the Jim Crow South into a global embarrassment and a propaganda boon for the country's enemies. And the governance of George W. Bush, the quagmire of war on two fronts, an economy in free fall, and the federal government's massive failure in the wake of Hurricane

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Katrina paved the way for its first black president. A wave of hope greeted each of these cases, a sense that the country had somehow defeated history. And in each of these cases that hope was ultimately frustrated.

To understand why we find ourselves here again, we are fortunate to have Toni Morrison, one of the finest writers and thinkers this country has ever produced. Her work is rooted in history and pulls beauty from some of its most grotesque manifestations. But that beauty is not fantasy, and so it should not be surprising that she ranks among those who understand the hold that history has on us all. *The Origin of Others* expounds on that understanding, and if it does not demonstrate an immediate escape from the grip of the past, it is a welcome aid in grappling with how that grip came to be.

The Origin of Others

I

Romancing Slavery

WE STILL played on the floor, my sister and I, so it must have been 1932 or 1933 when we heard she was coming. Millicent MacTeer, our great-grandmother. An often quoted legend, she was scheduled to visit all of the relatives' houses in the neighborhood. She lived in Michigan, a much-sought-after midwife. Her visit to Ohio had been long anticipated because she was regarded as the wise, unquestionable, majestic head of our family. The majesty was clear when something I had never witnessed before happened as she entered a room: without urging, all the males stood up.

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Finally, after a round of visits with other relatives, she entered our living room, tall, straight-backed, leaning on a cane she obviously did not need, and greeted my mother. Then, staring at my sister and me, playing or simply sitting on the floor, she frowned, pointed her cane at us, and said, “These children have been tampered with.” My mother objected (strenuously), but the damage was done. My great-grandmother was tar black, and my mother knew precisely what she meant: we, her children, and therefore our immediate family, were sullied, not pure.

Learning so early (or being taught when one doesn't know better) the ingredients of being lesser because Other didn't impress me then, probably because I was preternaturally arrogant and overwhelmed with devotion to myself. “Tampered with” sounded exotic at first—like something desirable. When my mother defied her own grandmother, it became clear that “tampered with” meant lesser, if not completely Other.

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Descriptions of cultural, racial, and physical differences that note “Otherness” but remain free of categories of worth or rank are difficult to come by. Many, if not most, textual/literary descriptions of race range from the sly, the nuanced, to the pseudo-scientifically “proven.” And all have justifications and claims of accuracy in order to sustain dominance. We are aware of strategies for survival in the natural world: distraction/sacrifice to protect the nest; pack hunting/chasing food on the hoof.

But for humans as an advanced species, our tendency to separate and judge those not in our clan as the enemy, as the vulnerable and the deficient needing control, has a long history not limited to the animal world or prehistoric man. Race has been a constant arbiter of difference, as have wealth, class, and gender—each of which is about power and the necessity of control.

One has only to read the eugenics of the Southern physician and slaveholder Samuel Cartwright to understand the lengths to which

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science, if not politics, can go in documenting the need for control of the Other.

“According to unalterable physiological laws,” he writes in his “Report on the Diseases and Physical Peculiarities of the Negro Race” (1851), “negroes, as a general rule, to which there are but few exceptions, can only have their intellectual faculties awakened in a sufficient degree to receive moral culture, and to profit by religious or other instruction, when under the compulsory authority of the white man. . . . From their natural indolence, unless under the stimulus of compulsion, they doze away their lives with the capacity of their lungs for atmospheric air only half expanded, from the want of exercise. . . . The black blood distributed to the brain chains the mind to ignorance, superstition and barbarism, and bolts the door against civilization, moral culture and religious truth.” Dr. Cartwright pointed to two illnesses, one of which he labeled “drapetomania, or the disease causing slaves to run away.” The other illness he

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diagnosed as “dysaesthesia aethiopica”—a kind of mental lethargy that caused the negro “to be like a person half asleep” (what slaveholders more commonly identified as “rascality”). One wonders why, if these slaves were such a burden and threat, they were so eagerly bought, sold. We learn at last their benefit: the forced “exercise, so beneficial to the negro, is expended in cultivating . . . cotton, sugar, rice and tobacco, which, but for his labor . . . go uncultivated, and their products lost to the world. Both parties are benefitted—the negro as well as his master.”

These observations were not casual opinions. They were printed in the *New Orleans Medical and Surgical Journal*. The point being that blacks are useful, not quite like cattle, yet not recognizably human.

Similar diatribes have been employed by virtually every group on earth—with or without power—to enforce their beliefs by constructing an Other.

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One purpose of scientific racism is to identify an outsider in order to define one's self. Another possibility is to maintain (even enjoy) one's own difference without contempt for the categorized difference of the Othered. Literature is especially and obviously revelatory in exposing/contemplating the definition of self whether it condemns or supports the means by which it is acquired.

How does one become a racist, a sexist? Since no one is born a racist and there is no fetal predisposition to sexism, one learns Othering not by lecture or instruction but by example.

It was probably universally clear—to sellers as well as the sold—that slavery was an inhuman, though profitable, condition. The sellers certainly didn't want to be enslaved; the purchased often committed suicide to avoid it. So how did it work? One of the ways nations could accommodate slavery's degradation was by brute force; another was to romance it.

In 1750, a young upper-class Englishman—a second son who probably could not inherit

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under the laws of primogeniture—set out to make his fortune first as an overseer and then as an owner of slaves and his own sugar plantation in Jamaica. His name was Thomas Thistlewood, and his life, exploits, and thoughts are carefully researched and recorded by Douglas Hall as one of a series of scholarly texts, in Macmillan's Warwick University Caribbean Studies Series, later reprinted by the University of the West Indies Press. This particular volume contains excerpts of Thistlewood's papers along with Douglas Hall's comments and was published in 1987 as *In Miserable Slavery*. Like Samuel Pepys, Thistlewood kept a minutely detailed diary—a diary minus reflection or sustained judgment, just the facts. Events, encounters with other people, weather, negotiations, prices, losses, all of which either interested him or he felt required notation. He had no plans to publish or share the information he recorded. A reading of his diaries reveals that, like most of his countrymen, he had a seamless commitment

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to the status quo. He did not wonder about slavery's morality or his place in its scheme. He merely existed in the world as he found it and recorded it. It is this, his divorce from moral judgment, not at all atypical, that sheds light on slavery's acceptance. Among the intimate marks of his exhaustive note-taking are details of his sexual life on the plantation (not different from his youthful and primarily casual British exploits).

He noted the time of the encounter, its level of satisfaction, the frequency of the act, and, especially, where it took place. Other than the obvious pleasure were the ease and comfort of control. There was no need for seduction or even conversation—just a mere notation among others about the price of sugarcane or a successful negotiation for flour. Unlike Thistlewood's business notations, his carnal record was written in Latin: *Sup. Lect.* for “on the bed”; *Sup. Terr.* for “on the ground”; *In Silva* for “in the woods”; *In Mag.* or *Parv. Dom.* for “in

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the great” or “small room”; and, when not satisfied, *Sed non bene*. These days, I suppose, we would call it rape; those days it was called *droit du seigneur*, right of the lord. Sliced in between his sexual activities are his notes on farming, chores, visitors, illnesses, etc.

An entry from September 10, 1751, reads in part: “about 1/2 past 10 A.M. *Cum* Flora, a congo, *Super Terram* among the canes, above the wall head, right hand of the river, toward the Negro ground. She had been for water cress. Gave her 4 bitts.” The next day, in the early hours of the morning, he writes: “About 2 A.M. *Cum* Negroe girl, *super* floor, at north bed foot, in the east parlor, ‘unknown.’” And an entry from June 2, 1760, reads in part: “Cleaned about the works, threw up the wood hoops, carrying out pond earth, &c. P.M. *Cum* L. Mumber, *Sup Me Lect.*”

Different, but no less revelatory, are the literary attempts to “romance” slavery, to render it acceptable, even preferable, by humanizing, even cherishing, it. Control, benign or rapacious,

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may ultimately not be necessary. See? Says Harriet Beecher Stowe to her (white) readers. Calm down, she says. Slaves control themselves. Don't be afraid. Negroes only want to serve. The slave's natural instinct, she implies, is toward kindness—an instinct that is disrupted only by vicious whites who, like Simon Legree (significantly, a Northerner by birth), threaten and abuse them. The sense of fear and disdain that white people may have, one that encourages brutality, is, she implies, unwarranted. Almost. Almost. Yet there are in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* signs of Stowe's own fear, literary protection, as it were. Or perhaps she is simply sensitive to the reader's apprehension. How, for example, do you make it safe in the nineteenth century to enter Black Space? Do you simply knock and enter? If unarmed, do you enter at all? Well, even if you are an innocent young boy, such as Master George, going to visit Uncle Tom and Aunt Chloe, you need excessive, benign signs of welcome, of safety. Tom's house is a humble shack,