Toni Morrison

The Slavebody and the Blackbody

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The Slavebody and the Blackbody

In 1988, the same year James Cameron opened America's Black Holocaust Museum here in Milwaukee, I responded to an interviewer's question. Having published a novel investigating the lives of a family born into bondage, I was being asked about the need for, the purpose in articulating that unspeakable part of American history. The need for remembering the men, the women, the children who survived or did not survive the three-hundred-odd years of international commerce in which their bodies, their minds, their talents, their children, their labor were exchanged for money—money they could lay no claim to. Since the argument for shunning bad memories or sublimating them was so strong and, in some quarters, understood not only to be progressive but healthy, why would I want to disturb the scars, the keloids, that civil war, civic battle, and time itself had covered? The slavebody was dead, wasn't it? The blackbody was alive, wasn't it? Not just walking, and talking, and working, and reproducing itself, but flourishing, enjoying the benefits of full citizenship and the fruits of its own labor. The question seemed to suggest that, whatever the level of accomplishment, little good could come from writing a book that peeled away the layers of scar tissue that the blackbody had grown in order to obscure, if not annihilate, the slavebody underneath.

My answer was personal. It came from a kind of exhaustion that followed the completion of my novel. An irritability. A sorrow.

"There is no place," I said, "where you or I can go, to think about or not think about, to summon the presences of, or recollect the absences of slaves; nothing that reminds us of the ones who made the journey and of those who did not make it. There is no suitable memorial or plaque or wreath or wall or park or skyscraper lobby. There is no three-hundred-foot tower. There's no small bench by the road. There is not even a tree scored with an initial that I can visit or you can visit in Charleston or Savannah or New York or Providence or, better still, on the banks of the Mississippi."

"Somebody told me," I continued, "that there is a gentleman in Washington who makes his living by taking busloads of people around to see the monuments of the city. He has complained because there is never anything there about black people that he can show. I can't explain to you why I think it's important, but I really do. I think it would refresh. Not only that, not only for black people. It could suggest the moral clarity among white people when they were at their best, when they risked something, when they didn't have to risk and could have chosen to be silent; there's no monument for that either." Except in the names of institutions that pay homage to a white person's care, or generosity: Spingarn, General Howard, Spelman, etc. "I don't have any model in mind," I said, "or any person, or even any art form. I just have the hunger for a permanent place. It doesn't have to be a huge, monumental face cut into a mountain. It can be small, some place where you can put your feet up. It can be a tree. It doesn't have to be a statue of liberty."

As you can tell I was feeling quite bereft when I made those comments.

When I use the term "slavebody" to distinguish it from "blackbody," I mean to underscore the fact that slavery and racism are two separate phenomena. The origins of slavery are not necessarily (or even ordinarily) racist. Selling, owning people is an old commerce. There are probably no people in this auditorium among whose ancestors or within whose tribe there were no slaves. If you are Christian, among your people were slaves; if you are Jewish, among your people were slaves; if you are Muslim, among your people were the enslaved. If

your ancestors are European they lived under the serfdom of eastern Europe, the tenancy of feudalism in England, in Viking Europe, Visigothic Spain, or fifteenth- or sixteenth-century Venice, Genoa, and Florence. The majority population of ancient Rome and ancient Greece—all were deliberately constructed slave societies. Medieval Ghana; Songhai Mali; the Dahomey and Ashanti kingdoms. Slavery was critical to the world of Islam and systematic in the Orient, including a thousand years in Korea alone. We are all implicated in the institution. The colonists of the New World, patterning their economies on those earlier and contemporary societies that were dependent on free or forced labor, tried to enslave indigenous populations and would have imported any foreign group available, capable, and survivable. Available because highly organized African kingdoms could provide laborers to Europeans; capable because they were clever, strong, and adaptable; survivable because they were creative, spiritual, and intensely interested in their children—foreigners from Africa fit the bill.

Not only the origins but the consequences of slavery are not always racist. What is "peculiar" about New World slavery is not its existence but its conversion into the tenacity of racism. The dishonor associated with having been enslaved does not inevitably doom one's heirs to vilification, demonization, or crucifixion. What sustains these latter is racism. Much of what made New World slavery exceptional was the highly identifiable racial signs of its population in which skin color, primarily but not exclusively, interfered with the ability of subsequent generations to merge into the nonslave population. For them there was virtually no chance to hide, disguise, or elude former slave status, for a marked visibility enforced the division between former slave and nonslave (although history defies the distinction) and supported racial hierarchy. The ease, therefore, of moving from the dishonor associated with the slavebody to the contempt in which the freed blackbody was held became almost seamless because the intervening years of the Enlightenment saw a marriage of aesthetics and science and a move toward transcendent whiteness. In this racism the slavebody disappears but the blackbody remains and is morphed into a synonym for

poor people, a synonym for criminalism and a flash point for public policy. For there is no discourse in economics, in education, in housing, in religion, in health care, in entertainment, in the criminal justice system, in welfare, in labor policy—in almost any of the national debates that continue to baffle us—in which the blackbody is not the elephant in the room; the ghost in the machine; the subject, if not the topic, of the negotiations.

This museum's projects have enormous powers. First is the power of memorializing. The impulse to memorialize certain events, people, and populations comes at certain times. When what has happened is finally understood or is a forthright assertion of civic or personal pride, tombs and palaces are built, flowers heaped, statues rise, archives, hospitals, parks, and museums are constructed. Time being such an important factor in this process, most of the participants in the events being remembered never see them. But the growth of this country in the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries, resting heavily on the availability of free labor, is complicated and exceptional. Exceptional because of its length and its chattel nature; complex because of its intricate relationship to the cultural, economic, and intellectual development of the nation. That is what must be remembered. There is another power this project has: of making us aware of the ever flexible, always adaptable, persistently slippery forms of modern racism in which the slavebody is reconstructed and reenters the blackbody as an American form of ethnic cleansing in which a monstrously large number of black men and women are carefully swept into prisons, where they become once again free labor; once again corralled for profit. Make no mistake, the privatization of prisons is less about unburdening taxpayers than it is about providing bankrupt communities with sources of income and especially about providing corporations with a captured population available for unpaid labor.

The third power of the museum's project, perhaps its most important, certainly its most gratifying, is the gaze it has cast on the ameliorating, triumphant aspects of the history of the republic—in black and white. This is what I sense: in spite of all the commercial and political strategies to separate, divide, and distort us, young people seem to

be truly tired of racism's control over their lives. The art community is exhausted by and rebellious toward its limitations. Low-income people who discover how entangled and held down they are in its divisive economic grasp loathe it. Scholars unintimidated by its cling are disassembling it. We are becoming more industrious in substituting accuracy, other perspectives, other narratives in place of phantom histories, polluted politics, and media manipulation.

I am pleased that my appearance coincides with the exhibition of African American artists whose eyes encountered at every level the stereotyping and visual debasement prevalent elsewhere. Through their art, their taste, their genius we see African American subjects as individuals, as cherished, as understood. Viewing this display of their force, their life-giving properties, their humanity, their joy, their will ought to be enough to forestall the reach of racism's tentacles. Ought to be enough to protect us from its uninformed, uneducated, relentlessly toxic touch. Just as the commitment of this community ought to be enough. Don't you think? Thank you.