

How People are Categorized and Dehumanized by the Term “Other”

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Passages

Difficulty Passage

“That is what indices are like, of course. Not the fan-shaped spread of rice bursting from a gunnysack. Not the thunder roll of barrels of turpentine cascading down a plank. And not a seventeen-year-old girl with a tree-shaped scar on her knee—and a name. History is percentiles, the thoughts of great men, and the description of eras. Does the girl know that the reason that she died in the sea or in a twenty-foot slop pit on a ship named **Jesus** is because that was her era? Or that some great men thought up her destiny for her as part of a percentage of national growth, or expansion, or manifest destiny, or colonialization of a new world? It is awkward to differ from a great man, but Tolstoy was wrong. Kings are not the slaves of history. History is the slave of kings.

The matrix out of which these powerful decisions are born is sometimes called racism, sometimes classicism, sometimes sexism. Each is an accurate term surely, but each is also misleading. The source is a deplorable inability to project, to become the “other,” to imagine her or him. It is an intellectual flaw, a shortening of the imagination, and reveals an ignorance of gothic proportions as well as a truly laughable lack of curiosity. Of course historians cannot deal with rice grain by grain; they have to deal with it in bulk. But dependence on that discipline should not be so heavy that it leads us to do likewise in human relationships. One of the major signs of intelligence, after all, is the ability to make distinctions, small distinctions. We judge an intellect by the ease with which it can tell the difference between one molecule and another, one cell and another, between a 1957 Bordeaux and a 1968, between mauve and orchid, between the words “wrest” and “pry,” between clabber and buttermilk, between Chanel No. 5 and Chanel No.

19. It would seem, then, that to continue to see any race of people as one single personality is an ignorance so vast, a perception so blunted, an imagination so bleak that no nuance, no subtlety, no difference among them can penetrate.”¹

Engagement Passage

“She is determined and differentiated in relation to man, while he is not in relation to her; she is the inessential in front of the essential. He is the Subject; he is the Absolute. She is the Other. The category of Other is as original as consciousness itself. The duality between Self and Other can be found in the most primitive societies, in the most ancient mythologies; this division did not always fall into the category of the division of the sexes, it was not based on any empirical given: this comes out in works like Granet’s on Chinese thought, and Dumézil’s on India and Rome. In couples such as Varuna—Mitra, Uranus—Zeus, Sun—Moon, Day—Night, no feminine element is involved at the outset; neither in Good—Evil, auspicious and inauspicious, left and right, God and Lucifer; alterity is the fundamental category of human thought. No group ever defines itself as One without immediately setting up the Other opposite itself. It only takes three travelers brought together by chance in the same train compartment for the rest of the travelers to become vaguely hostile “others.” Village people view anyone not belonging to the village as suspicious “others.” For the native of a country inhabitants of other countries are viewed as “foreigners”; Jews are the “others” for anti-Semites, blacks for racist Americans, indigenous people for colonists, proletarians for the propertied classes. After studying the diverse forms of primitive society in depth...”²

¹ Toni Morrison. “Moral Inhabitants,” in *The Source of Self-Regard: Selected Essays, Speeches, and Meditations* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2019), 60-61.

² Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany Chevallier (New York: Vintage, 2011), 26.

“Moral Inhabitants” by Toni Morrison, a twenty-first century American novelist, poses many questions on dehumanization and how people are seen as “other.” I chose this as my difficulty passage because Morrison utilizes many metaphors and rhetorical questions when discussing the term “other” and how people have been dehumanized throughout history. However, what does “other” mean, and how does it play into dehumanization? She compares humans to inanimate objects, but the comparison is vague and left up to the interpretation of the reader. To shed light on this, I chose Simone de Beauvoir’s book *The Second Sex* because she mentions the category of “other” when exploring feminism and how people are dehumanized by it. People see each other in various ways, and putting someone in the category of “other” allows humans to only see the differences among each other instead of seeing everyone as one species. Morrison discusses how human beings sometimes treat each other as less than human and something disposable by categorizing people into the group of “other.” De Beauvoir elaborates on this concept of “other” and how it enables dehumanization to occur in society.

To begin, Morrison argues that no one should be considered as an item. When describing items, such as “rice” and “turpentine,” she repeats “not the” at the beginning of the sentence.³ People are not objects; she does this to remind the readers that no one should be seen as such. It is also emphasized because it feels it should be apparent. It seems like it should be a natural reaction to only see people as humans no matter the differences among us. No one should see a human being as an object, but for centuries groups of humans were dehumanized this way. Morrison uses words such as “bursting” and “cascading” to narrate how the products are treated on a ship.⁴ These words are harsher than the rest of her diction because the objects are just

³ Morrison, 60.

⁴ Morrison, 60.

commodities thrown around. No one cares if they break or get lost among the way. It becomes a problem when no one distinguishes humans from these objects. But why did she choose these items as a metaphor to humans when there are many more examples of dehumanization?

To explain this, de Beauvoir mentions how we are sometimes “the inessential in front of the essential.”⁵ People in the category of “other” are seen as inessential to the workings of the whole. The inessential group is in the background with the essential believing they serve no purpose. Morrison may have used these words to show how items and humans are not essential individually. If one “barrel” or human is lost along the way, it would not disrupt the economy or community.⁶ After describing these items, Morrison illustrates “a seventeen-year-old girl with a tree-shaped scar on her knee.”⁷ The use of the word “girl” and the “tree-shaped scar” show how this person is still innocent.⁸ She is young with scars that will not always stay that small, and she is forced to grow up. The scars will become more painful because she was taken from her home and stripped of her identity. The girl has a “name” and a life that everyone dismissed as well as an identity no one cared about preserving.⁹ Her life meant nothing to people, and she was categorized as one of the objects Morrison describes. She and many others forced into slavery were dehumanized all for what? Maybe for the economy, but I do not understand how someone can look at a human being and see them as nothing but a commodity.

In order to explain this, Morrison argues how “history is percentiles, the thoughts of great men, and the description of eras.”¹⁰ History depends on the current economy and the era the

⁵ De Beauvoir, 26.

⁶ Morrison, 60.

⁷ Morrison, 60.

⁸ Morrison, 60.

⁹ Morrison, 60.

¹⁰ Morrison, 60.

person is in. She goes on to explain how the seventeen-year-old girl died because of the era she was in that made her board a slave ship against her will.¹¹ If she lived in a different era, she may have survived and kept that innocence she deserved for a bit longer. She had her fate decided for her by the “great men” who wanted more numbers for either “national growth... or colonialization of a new world”.¹² But how were these men considered great? De Beauvoir mentions how a group “defines itself as” the “One,” and how the individuals see themselves as “the Absolute.”¹³ These men wanted to be seen as the sole subject. They wanted to grow the national economy, but the cost was inhumane. To them, they saw themselves as the main authority and wanted more power. They took thousands of people and made them suffer all to be lost in a number. Groups of people were forgotten in order to make it easier to dehumanize them.

One concept that allows for this dehumanization is the idea of “other.” To explain this, de Beauvoir explores how “the duality between Self and Other can be found in the most primitive societies.”¹⁴ People are categorized by being lumped together because it is easier to strip them of their individuality. De Beauvoir sees this concept as something “primitive.”¹⁵ When we think of something as primitive, we dismiss it as something that should not be done anymore, something almost barbaric. The categorization of lumping people into the group of “other” is old, something that we know for a fact is wrong and needs to be stopped. She also mentions “the duality,” which creates even more of a separation between the “Self and Other.”¹⁶ We have warped the idea of

¹¹ Morrison, 60.

¹² Morrison, 61.

¹³ De Beauvoir, 26.

¹⁴ De Beauvoir, 26.

¹⁵ De Beauvoir, 26.

¹⁶ De Beauvoir, 26.

homo sapiens to make it seem like some people are less and can be put into a group even if it is barbaric to dehumanize a living being.

In order to describe the “other,” Morrison mentions how the categorization is “an intellectual flaw” for “intelligence... is the ability to make distinctions.”¹⁷ We are smart enough to know the contrasts between luxury items, but for some reason certain people are not able to tell the difference between items and human beings.¹⁸ One thing we are good at is blinding ourselves with our biases. We put up walls made of prejudices, so that we cannot see what is in front of us. It distorts our morals and intelligence to the point where we cannot tell the difference between something disposable and a human being with a life and an identity. Morrison mentions how it is an “imagination so bleak” that “no difference” between us “can penetrate” our views.¹⁹ We can only see the label we place on groups even though we belong to the same species. Humans always seem to group each other based on our differences, and then we only start to see each other that way. In order to stop these categories, we need to accept the differences between people and allow our views to expand.

So, how can human beings treat each other as something less than human and something disposable? To Morrison, it depends on the era, people, and economy. Someone may have a different story if they were born in a time when the economy did not have slave labor. De Beauvoir explains how people are seen as “inessential” in groups, and how this categorization is something “primitive” that is of little value now.²⁰ Morrison sees categorization as an irrational

¹⁷ Morrison, 61.

¹⁸ Morrison, 61.

¹⁹ Morrison, 61.

²⁰ De Beauvoir, 26.

and ignorant thing that diminishes our intelligence.²¹ This categorization may have occurred no matter the circumstances because people are always striving for more power and rank in society. It is hard to imagine how people could have seen human beings and treated them as items instead of living creatures; however, the categorization of “other” enabled them to do this. Even now, sometimes we only see the differences among us, but we are all human. We all have an identity, an innocence that should be protected instead of ignored.

²¹ Morrison, 61.

Bibliography

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