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14 March | 2019 | Photo from the personal archive of Paulo de Medeiros

## WITH A *MOUTH FULL OF BLOOD*: ON THE RESPONSIBILITY OF INTELLECTUALS (3)

Paulo de Medeiros

The graves are bleeding trauma,  
The memories say, *let me out*  
The massacres say, *remember me*  
The graves say, *it still hurts*  
The skeletons point to where it does

Koleka Putuma (1)



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When Misan Harriman posted a photograph he had had taken of a young woman, Darcy Bourne, holding up a sign at a Black Lives Matter march in London in June 2020, he might or might not have guessed [the impact that image would have](#). Leaving aside the specific visual attributes of the image that make it appealing on both a political as well as a simply aesthetic level, the message carried in the sign specifically addresses one of the thorniest issues concerning the struggle against racism. The question contained in Bourne's sign, 'Why is ending racism a debate?' points to the glaring fallacy surrounding questions of 'race' that enables the systemic oppression of people to continue as a hallmark of our advanced societies. In spite of all that has been done to combat racism, and in spite of the many real advancements that have been bitterly fought for, 'race' as a tool for the dehumanization of large segments of the population endures.

Indeed, in spite of some hopeful, and some misguided, notions of the possibility of envisaging a society where 'race' no longer matters, the opposite is true. It is not even that 'race' as a category has ever left us, so we are not witnessing any return. No, it was there all along, even if some of us had forgotten, or would like to forget, about it. Yet, because of that pretended banishment of racism to the confines of History, it is now more urgent than ever to confront racism and all that it entails by a deployment of memory and postmemory.

Toni Morrison, one of the greatest writers of our time – or of any time for that matter – incessantly asked us to confront the legacies of slavery, especially the imbrication of racism in our society. Her novels strike one through the sheer intensity and beauty of her language as well as through the fierce sense of the need to testify, for the dead but also for the living, to incessantly confront us all with the pain of our shared humanity and the desolation, misery, and unbearable suffering brought upon millions, across generations all the way to the very present, because of the scourge of racism. *Beloved*, widely considered one of her most important novels, presents us with a haunting that will not go away, cannot go away until our society, instead of occasionally repeating pieties about progress and civilization, would eradicate racism once for all (2).

But it is in *A Mercy*, published just after Barack Obama was elected President on November 2008, that Morrison goes further and actually imagines what it might have been *if*, in spite of the oppressive structures of capitalism and slavery, racism had not also been set as the cornerstone upon which modern societies were to be built. All along Morrison also wrote many essays and speeches that are fundamental for any of



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us to understand how difficult the process of emancipation still is, and what our shared intellectual duty is to work towards exposing and dismantling the structures of systemic racism (3).

Toni Morrison died on 5 August 2019, but left us one of the most significant legacies, both a tremendous gift as well as a hard duty, not only to remember the millions of dead victims, but to act so as to bring about change to make life worth living for all, and that too is an intellectual duty, though so often ignored. A few months before she had published a book collecting many of her essays and other critical writing, with the title of *A Mouth Full of Blood*.<sup>(4)</sup> This too is a profound legacy and at the moment I want to focus on only two points: one, the way in which Morrison structures the book as a kind of extended address to the dead; second, how she does not hesitate to link racism with fascism.

The question of memory, or to be more precise, 'rememory', cuts across all of Morrison's writing, but became very visible in *Beloved*, as Morrison notes: 'Rememory as in recollecting and remembering as in reassembling the members of the body, the family, the population of the past. (...) "Nobody in the book can bear too long to dwell on the past; nobody can avoid it' (324). The tension between remembering and forgetting has a parallel in postmemory. But whereas postmemory represents an effort at assembling a form of narrative as unified as possible against all the silences, gaps, and ruptures, across the generations, rememory exposes those gaps, recognises the voids, and accepts that a compromise between forgetting and remembering at times become necessary in order to survive. Nonetheless, Morrison's imperative is still one of witnessing, no matter how abject the reality or how painful the remembering.

Each of *A Mouth Full of Blood*'s three sections is headed by an address to the dead: first *To The Dead of September 11*, followed by a *Tribute to Martin Luther King Jr.*, and then *James Baldwin's Eulogy*. Speaking to the dead is both a form of remembering as well as a claim for belonging. A belonging predicated on inclusivity, rather than exclusion, a belonging that includes all of humanity though represented by the victims of September 11, and focuses both on a legacy of courageous struggle to bring about a freer society and a rigorous intellectual responsibility to speak. James Baldwin and Toni Morrison were not only contemporaries (Morrison was seven years younger) of each other, they were friends and allies. Their personal struggles differed, yet both were deeply committed to changing the world through their writing, to make a more inclusive, less painful place. And they remain extremely contemporary. This can be seen, for instance, in the lucidity with which Morrison addresses the symbiotic relationship between racism and fascism, even if under new guises: 'In 1995 racism may wear a new dress, buy a



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new pair of boots, but neither it nor its succubus twin fascism is new or can make anything new. It can only reproduce the environment that supports its own health: fear, denial, and an atmosphere in which its victims have lost the will to fight' (5).

How much more urgent even that critique has become in 2020 when we see not only the escalation of open racist violence everywhere, but also the seeming impunity that still goes with it. Morrison never ceased speaking about abject horror, unspeakable cruelty and haunting pain. When she explicitly linked racism with fascism she did not forget capitalism and her indictment of it goes hand in hand with that of the other two: 'Fascism talks ideology, but it is really just marketing—marketing for power'. Morrison lists several of the changes this fascism as a marketing for power enacts on people, turning 'citizens into taxpayers' and 'neighbors into consumers' to conclude, '[a]nd in effecting these changes it produces the perfect capitalist, one who is willing to kill a human being for a product (a pair of sneakers, a jacket, a car) or kill generations for control of products (oil, drugs, fruit, gold)'.

One way of resisting such emptying out of the core of humanity is to remember and not let death bring about silence. When George Floyd, Marielle Franco, Bruno Candé, and so many others, are killed in the open, we must resist the fear, draw on the memories of resistance, and speak. Because as Morrison also points out, fascism destroys everyone step by step: "Let us be reminded that before there is a final solution, there must be a first solution, a second one, even a third' (14). Even if our mouths too have become full of blood by witnessing the renewed assaults on our fellow human beings, their degrading, dehumanizing, and killing, we must keep speaking. Morrison did note what could seem a paradox: 'Speaking to the broken and the dead is too difficult for a mouth full of blood. Too holy an act for impure thoughts. Because the dead are free, absolute; they cannot be seduced by blitz' (3). But we must keep on the conversation with the dead no matter how haunting, because as South African poet Koleka Putuma put it, 'The graves say, it still hurts /The skeletons point to where it does'.

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(1) Koleka Putuma, 'Ressurrection'. *Collective Amnesia*. Cape Town: Uhlanga, 2017, 108.

(2) Toni Morrison. *Beloved*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1987. Toni Morrison. *A Mercy*. London: Chatto & Windus, 2008.

(3) Toni Morrison. *A Mercy*. London: Chatto & Windus, 2008.

(4) Toni Morrison. *A Mouth Full of Blood*. London: Chatto & Windus, 2019.

(5) Toni Morrison. 'Racism and Fascism'. *A Mouth Full of Blood*. London: Chatto & Windus, 2019, 14-16.



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