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Just Thinking, 09/08/03:

The Discordant Harmony of Racialized America

by Justin Katz

“Ebony and ivory live together in perfect harmony, side by side on my piano keyboard; oh Lord, why can’t we?”

So sang Paul McCartney and Stevie Wonder on the radio as I drove through the gates into the town dump. I pulled up to the first compactor pit, popped the car’s back hatch, opened my door, and hopped out to unload. As I turned, I noticed that the fellow townsman who had parked next to the second metal pit was the proverbial ebony. How to act?

If I were to treat him with my usual lack of attention toward dump goers, he mightn’t discern my intention to live together in perfect harmony. At the very least, I oughtn’t give the appearance of avoiding eye contact; yet, if I were to look for it too conspicuously, I might give the impression of staring, as if surprised to find so much melanin this far north. With eyes watching our every move from the many vehicles in line (assessing efficiency, no doubt), both my townsman and myself unloaded our burdens without eye contact.

As I drove to the post office, I considered the foolishness of such awkward social moments. There is no reason that skin color ought to require more or less reaction than usual as we go about our daily lives. Still, there it is – on the radio and television, in magazines, on billboards. The image of dark fingers interlocking with pale ones is visually striking. “There is an obvious

distinction, here,” the pervasive message seems to say, “but good people don’t notice it.” Except when they construct public interest messages or write pop songs on the subject.

I slid out of my car, crossed the parking lot, and opened the entrance to the post office. Walking toward me, a number of steps outside the range within which I generally would hold the door, was another dark-skinned Rhode Islander. Should I wait, propping open the door, perhaps appearing solicitous, or should I let the door close behind me, as I would for any other man, woman, or child who happened to be that far from it? What if I let the door close but made a casual attempt to smile as we passed? These are weighty questions to resolve in a split second.

In some ways, the studies that secured my undergraduate degree can be seen as designed to enable me to make these crucial, immediate calls when interacting with society. In college, questions of race were *everywhere*. Around campus, there were the race-based groups, some of which could be seen staging symbolic marches. In the student paper, apropos of nothing, letter writers would decry the freely chosen housing of racial groups. And in the English classroom, race was nearly as important as grammar. Yet, despite the universal effort to highlight questions of race, distinctions by it were verboten.

In a short book of literary criticism, *Playing in the Dark*, Nobel-winning author Toni Morrison takes the position that the presence and treatment of those with African heritage represent the defining attribute of the United States of America. She writes, “Africanism is the vehicle by which the American self knows itself as not enslaved, but free; not repulsive, but desirable; not helpless, but licensed and powerful; not history-less, but historical; not damned, but innocent; not a blind accident of evolution, but a progressive fulfillment of destiny.”

Within a limited application, Morrison is right on. Slavery in the midst of freedom is a powerful tool in the hands of an author, and one of which many American writers have availed themselves. Of course, it is also true that at least an equal number of authors have used racial

symbolism to illustrate the *different ways* in which whites were enslaved (usually more intrinsically) and less desirable (usually related more to who they are rather than where they stand on the social hierarchy). Either way, it is right of Morrison to suggest that race “has become metaphorical – a way of referring to and disguising forces, events, classes, and expressions of social decay and economic division far more threatening to the body politic than biological ‘race’ ever was.”

The hazard of this arises because – as with the pop song and the striking image of hands – the metaphor is too easy. Thus do academics argue that all aspects of humanity that cause difference be seen in terms of race. Thus do homosexuals and other special interest groups lash their causes to the history of blacks under the pivot-point of “minority.” And thus do complacent moderns uplift themselves morally through exploitation of superficial attributes – skin, fashion – so as spuriously to claim the glory of emancipation.

In all of these cases, real people are objectified, and it is a dreadful mistake to forget the real for the sake of the poetic. I rather doubt that the average plantation owner felt any freer because he had a ready example of enslavement. Most pale sinners of early America did not think their sins forgiven because they were not dark, and those who strove not to sin had no need to look beyond their own social groups for contrast. The literary and historical records show that some did align these ideas with race, particularly those casting about for tangible metaphors for abstractions. Without a doubt, some authors phrased their works in racial tones for the purpose of combating the real and lamentable conclusions and policies that derived from racial classification. However, perpetuating – expanding – these allegories in our own times is to subordinate real people to false pretension.

Doing so also incites tension where there would otherwise have been none – like at the entrance of the post office, where I let the door swing shut. I would have smiled at my fellow postal patron, but he didn’t look my way. Served me right.