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"Black" Romance and the U.S. Empire's Policing
And Control of Memory

Represent Our Resistance

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BC Editorial Board

When our fears have all been serialized, our creativity censored, our ideas 'marketplaced,' our rights sold, our intelligence sloganized, our strength downsized, our privacy auctioned; when the theatricality, the entertainment value, the marketing of life is complete, we will find ourselves living not in a nation but in a consortium of industries, and wholly unintelligible to ourselves except for what we see as through a screen darkly.

-Toni Morrison, "Racism and Fascism," speech, Howard University, March 2, 1995

At 22 years old, a gentleman of Mississippi's aristocracy, Quentin Compson is losing his memory. All that he remembers is fading. For as long he could remember, he has been dead. Dead! He can no longer live in the collective memory of his community's legacy of heroics, its chivalry is the absurd white gloves of butlers, of nanny's breasts, of ragged, gray-haired errand boys, of fields of toil, of averted eyes, "yes sirs" and "yes ma'ams," and of graves unmarked and surrounded by the whole of the Mississippi River. Sinking in the shifting milieu, for him, all is lost. He has inhaled the stench of fear and welcomes death, sinking, willingly, to the bottom of the river.

This is truly risky business in the 1920's for William Faulkner to articulate a set of ideas about white America's relationship with the practice of creating fanciful narratives of origins and the necessary

foundational practice of extermination, enslavement, and repression. His work threatened the legitimacy of the Confederacy, its dream of racial purity, and its legacy of racial privilege and for Southern apologists and liberals who preferred to allow for the memory of the Great Old South. This writer of literature challenged the justification for U.S. imperialist expansion at the "end" of the Civil War.

But what were the options for a writer of U.S. literature when confronted with the "tragedy" of American history? In his Nobel Prize Acceptance Speech, (1950), Faulkner spoke of the "tragedy" we all face but particularly writers, "is a general and universal physical fear" sustained for so long that we can now endure it. "There are no longer problems of the spirit." The writer today, he Faulkner continues, has forgotten the problems "of the human heart in conflict with itself which alone can make good writing because only that is worth writing about, worth the agony and the sweat."

The writer must learn of these conflicts of spirit and heart:

He must teach himself that the basest of all things is to be afraid; and, teaching himself that, forget it forever, leaving no room in his workshop for anything but the old verities and truths of the heart, the old universal truths lacking which any story is ephemeral and doomed - love and honor and pity and pride and compassion and sacrifice. Until he does so, he labors under a curse. He writes not of love but of lust, of defeats in which nobody loses anything of value, of victories without hope and, worst of all, without pity or compassion. His griefs grieve on no universal bones, leaving no scars. He writes not of the heart but of the glands...

The poet's voice need not merely be the record of man, it can be one of the props, the pillars to help him endure and prevail.

Faulkner stayed the course, hunkered down in his little town of Oxford, where he took note of the Southern aristocracy's dealing with the nation's Robber Barons, J.P. Morgan and the Rockefellers and other powerful men, newsmen included, controlling the destiny of the "little people." There was no book contract leading to millions of sales. No Oprah or celebrity status or glitzy fame. Faulkner damned the hard headed, the ignorant, the hateful and he wrote, determined to use language to help humanity "endure and prevail."

Contrary to his pronouncement about writers of his era, he was not alone. Faulkner's work followed in the tradition of confronting the "tragedy" in order to recover the human spirit. The "incredible paradox" Faulkner depicted in *Absalom! Absalom!* tested the metal of writers such as Hawthorne, Melville, Twain, Sinclair Lewis, Steinbeck, and others who heard and saw what Faulkner did:

...the black bones and flesh and thinking and remembering and hopes and desires, was ravished by violence...a soil manured with black blood from two hundred years of oppression and exploitation until it sprang with an incredible paradox of peaceful greenery and crimson flowers and sugar cane sapling size and three times the height of a man and a little bulkier of course but valuable pound for pound almost with silver ore...

rather than reflections of fantastical images of glory, or of freedom, of democracy or of love...

and of a "deferred" dream prancing over the world like a whore

And you've taken the sweet life
Of all the little brown fellows
In loin cloths and cotton trousers,
When they've resisted,
You've yelled, 'Rape,'
At the top of your voice
And called for middies
To beat them up for not being gentlemen...
("Columbia")

and to kill, above all - to kill and senselessly destroy as Hemingway witnessed during the First "Great" War:

At the start of the winter came the permanent rain and with the rain came the cholera. But it was checked and in the end only seven thousand died of it in the army. (*A Farewell to Arms*)

and the absurdity of war, the legacy of terrorizing profiteers, gleeful and of terrorized cannon fodder, survivors, doomed to live life as a walking memory of what is dead, lost.

Oh, what have we have lost!

Are there no poets and writers to ask what is wrong, to lament the loss of the writer's heart and soul?

To be sure, there were also writers of what is classified as literature in the U.S. happy to imagine, as William Byrd of Westover, the Black chattel on Southern plantations as "gardeners in the garden" - paternal gardens, no less, in a capitalist's enterprise.

Our negroes are not so numerous or so enterprizeing (sic) as to give us any apprehension or uneasiness nor indeed is their Labour any other than Gardening & less by far that what the poor People undergo in other countrys (letter to Peter Beckford of Jamaica, cited in *The Dispossessed Garden*).

The image of the "savage" and the accompany narrative of Indigenous brutality against the white settlers obscured the systematic violence and removal of native people from their lands by "outsiders."

These works of literature offer us depictions of fear and alienation and serve as discourse, that is, documentation on the reasoning and justification of white Europeans to exact violence against those they perceived as different.

U.S. literature made progress! But what good is true progress to the advancement of capitalism?

Today, U.S. Literature is but a chronicle of the lost writer floundering in image after image of pathological fear of an indefinable terror. Writers lost in "innocence," drifting hearts and spirits, sinking knee deep in market-driven murky waters, unable to untangle themselves from the seaweed to which they have become entrapped by the material residue of things quite apart from the heart or spirit. How are these writers today to apprehend the "tragic" loss of the literary tradition in the U.S. from such opaque depths? It is no wonder from them we are treated to a steady rising from below of gratuitous violence and lust.

Hemingway emerged from the "innocence," that land of la la of myths and of legends to the fields where the wholesale slaughter and the suffering of millions could be viewed and understood without the obstruction of language dipped in the red, white, and blue and not reported with "embedded" caution.

On the contrary, for Hemingway, to write bravely and honestly began first in self-reflection. Writing of his first "innocent" years as a writer in transition from serving as a war correspondent to a novelist, Hemingway refers to a parable of the "Pilot Fish and the Rich," the title of his essay (*A Moveable Feast*). He remembers being eager, too eager, to appease promoters, agents and publishers, and the Master tellers of the Dream. In that "innocent year," he was greedy for fame and momentarily forgot what he had done in his short stories that even attracted the attention of the Pilot Fish. They saw "talent" and a malleable and therefore marketable young writer. Hemingway had been above wars, across fields, at hospitals were the dead and the survivors and the absurdity of the Dream commingled:

The doctor came up to the machine where I was sitting and said: 'What did you like best to do before the war? Did you practice a sport?'

They [the wounded veterans] met in the hospital's "new brick pavilions," every afternoon. They "were all polite and interested in was the matter, and sat in machines that were to make so much difference" ("In Another Country," *Men without Women*).

I said: 'Yes, football.'

'Good,' he said. 'You'll be able to play football again better than ever.'

My knee did not bend and the leg dropped straight from the knee to the ankle without a calf, and the machine was to bend the knee and make it move as in riding a tricycle. But it did not bend yet, and instead the machine lurched when it came to the bending part. The doctor said: 'That will all pass. You are a fortunate man. You will play football again like a champion.'

We only knew then that there was always the war, but that we were not going to it any more.

We all had the same medals, except the boy with the black silk bandage across his face, and he had not been at the front long enough to get medals...He had lived a very long time with death and was a little detached. We were all a little detached, and there was nothing that held us together except that we met every afternoon at the hospital.

Now, in the first year in Vorarlburg, the Pilot Fish had come for him! The Rich has sent the Pilot Fish Hemingway to check out the young writer. Here was the Pilot Fish, he recalled, someone "always going somewhere, or coming from somewhere, and he is never around for very long...Nothing ever catches him and it is only those who trust him who are caught and killed."

The good, the attractive, the charming, the soon-beloved, the generous, the understanding rich who have no bad qualities and who give each day the quality of a festival and who, when they have passed and taken the nourishment they needed, leave everything deadlier than the roots of a grass Attila's horses' hooves have ever scoured.

But what did his "innocence" allow him to know then? To the pilot fish and the rich who followed, he read "aloud parts of the novel" he had rewritten, ("which is as low as a writer can get"). The pilot fish said: "It's great, Ernest. Truly it's great," and he, Hemingway, "wagged" his tail "in pleasure." He recalls, in the pilot fish, he saw a life in which "every day" would be "a fiesta."

He did not hear those hooves of Attila's horses as did Toni Morrison's Sethe, in *Beloved* - the Four Horsemen, true to their creed, bringing chaos and insanity and leaving death and spiritlessness.

But in this "winter of horror," he awoke to "a nightmare and a murder year disguised as the greatest fun of all." Why had he not asked himself the question he should have asked:

"If these bastards like it what is wrong with it?"

Ann Petry, James Baldwin, Joseph Heller, Leslie Silko, June Jordan and others asked.

Today, U.S. writers of literature do not ask this or any questions except maybe how much and how fast. The reading public is to be "entertained" with boy meets girl, girl meets boy - oh, but it is not love! In the language from the depths of the defeated and decaying, the "couple" flogs and humiliates each other because flogging, humiliation, cruelty, torture are entertaining. The reading public in the U.S. has been set on this road to corporatization, that is, death, to use Morrison's words, by the "forces interested in fascist solutions to national problems" ("Racism and Fascism").

Fascism, she writes, may talk "ideology" but it is "just marketing - marketing power." Fascism in the U.S. is recognizable by its need to purge, its strategies to purge and by its terror of truly democratic agendas ("Racism and Fascism").

It changes neighbors into consumers - so the measure of our value as humans is not our humanity or our compassion or our generosity but what we own...And 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."

The Black bourgeoisie and the intelligentsia sold our ancestors to the market (to women's studies, which is, *white* women's studies and to the corporate-sponsored "diversity" agenda and both gutted the Black history of struggle). The resulting legacy for a new generation of the bourgeoisie and intelligentsia, budding "writers" and "thinkers," is the celebration of a "progressive agenda" and the "values" of the Rich - the corporate rulers.

For the generation of writers today, it is all about the "New" because there is an "Old" of past days, past eras, unmarketable unless subservient to capitalism. In this milieu, "work" is the dissemination of the message (knowledge of the everlasting goodness of corporate benevolence). You cannot imagine the "progress" Blacks have made unless you remember that the knowledge acquired by Harriet Tubman, Frederick Douglass, Ella Baker, Malcolm, King, Huey Newton, George Jackson, the Attica prisoners threatened, not empowered, the U.S. Empire.

Today, as Morrison observed "racism may wear a new dress, buy a new pair of boots, but neither it nor its succubus twin fascism is new or can make anything new." But for those without knowledge of history it is *the* world and no alternative is imaginable because the imagination has been deadened. Creativity is copying, and faster!

Post racism is the marketing of "Black Romance!" *White supremacy is the hooded ones or the lone stockpilers of guns and heavy duty ammunition (unless the ones in the hoodie or turban, that is, the "terrorists."*

So let us have the New, the Black Romance novel! *You can bet it is not about love!* Two million mug shots of mostly Black and Brown and

Red imprisoned and enslaved behind bars - and the market produces the Black Romance! Politicians betray Black Americans and those now campaigning betray too because it has become necessary, indeed, a prerequisite for any corporate endorsement and money - and the Black Romance is the hottest commodity on the market!

Look over here and see all is well in the U.S.A.!

That some Black Americans as well as white Americans cannot point to Iraq or Afghanistan on a map but newly enlisted American Black teens and young adults pack their bags with iPods and laptops with the appropriate corporate logo and internal parts wrestled from the blood of Congolese youth as they imagine themselves sitting atop a tank or sweeping clean villages and neighborhoods of homes with rifles and grenades - does not seem to be a subject of interest to "Black" writers here in the U.S.

Power, writes Michel Foucault, "must be analyzed as something which articulates or rather as something which only functions in the form of a chain" ("Lecture One," *Power and Knowledge*, January 7, 1976). "Power is employed and exercised through a net-like organization."

Foucault continues:

The individual, that is, is not the vis-à-vis of power; it is, I believe, one of its prime effects. The effect of power, and at the same time, or precisely to the extent to which it is that effect, it is the element of its articulation. The individual which power has constituted is at the same time its vehicle.

As constituted vehicles for the Empire, for the maintenance and survival of capitalism, these writers, if we can call them writers, will not ask *what is wrong if these bastards want Black Romance*, for they are linked, arm in arm and bank to bank, to global domination. How can we expect such writers, "vehicles," of power to respond honestly to the winters of horror when, in fact, their "work," in language, effects violence not just to the living memory of the ongoing violence but also to the historical memory of struggle, of resistance?

As I see it, there is a selling on the market of memories associated with defending one's right to reject the happily enslaved caricature for the right to be human, and these memories, once sold, are repackaged by state institutions, social, educational, cultural, for dissemination that is beneficial for the continuation and expansion of

the state (U.S. Empire's) as a capitalist state. The rationale for the Empire's admittance of "Black Romance" is bound with the Empire's relation to its economic system and its aim to continue to expand, that is, survive. Most importantly, this selling and repackaging of memories incorporates the mechanism for policing, which, too, is the "work" of the Black writer of this state instrument called "Black Romance," for the "work" enhances the Empire's control not just over a certain population and its readership but also over the memories, the thoughts, the ideas, the images, and the narratives of that population and its readership.

The Empire's friendly smile toward "Black" romance writers is not a change of heart. It has nothing to do with love or the inclusion of "free" human beings but everything to do with control!

Just as it is convenient and beneficial to the corporate rulers of the U.S. Empire to spend millions producing Barrack Obama for consuming consumers of innocence, these "Black" writers serve as the *NEW* Storm Troopers, who now join a whole cadre of "Black" collectibles (everybody's gotta' have their sambos and jezebels ready for their "new" assignments!) in transforming the narrative history, the history of traditions of resistance, in "innocence." *Mindless bliss such as no enslaved Black ancestor ever embraced!*

"No commodity is quite so strange/As this thing called cultural exchange."ⁱⁱ

La De Da!

*Romance, lady! ROMANCE! Consumers will believe it is progress!
Away with the "Old" and cumbersome memories!*

As Faulkner wrote of the American tragedy, it is not love and the past is not past.

What is fascist about the state of literary production in the U.S.?

Look for the large gatherings of lights, cameras, "journalists" and "critics," television and radio hosts and, of course, the newest celebrities, the writers, shouting and applauding. Against a peoples' revolution, these writers today are the friendly face of Empire! As Hemingway discovered, if you take away an individual's mind, you take his or her memory of being alive with ideas and thoughts, and with mechanisms for self-defense when in danger - and with that is

the Final Solution: the death of a people - without the overt accouterments of camp ovens and gas chambers.

Death waltzes with our literary past! U.S. Literature is but a spectacle, complete with festive attire, slogans and symbols...

"It takes steps," Morrison said, to reach the "Final Solution." "It takes one step, then another, then another." One of them is this:

Reward mindlessness and apathy with monumentalized entertainments and with little pleasures. Tiny seductions: a few minutes on television, a few lines in the press; a little pseudo-success; the illusion of power and influence, a little fun, a little style, a little consequence.

One day, if humanity is lucky, if it is brave, if it out lives the innocence of the ignorant, the new writers of U.S. literature may wake up to discover that like Quentin Compson, they are dead. That they have never been alive! Their obituaries will state a foregone conclusion but a truthful one - at last.

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I thank KPFA host, Jennifer Stone ("Stone's Throw" program) for reminding us about Toni Morrison's "Racism and Fascism."

From a song written by Dave and Iola Brubeck in their musical with Louis Armstrong,



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