THE SOURCE OF SELF-REGARD

Selected Essays, Speeches, and Meditations

TONI MORRISON

Winner of the Nobel Prize in Literature

ALSO BY TONI MORRISON

Fiction

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Love

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God Help the Child

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Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination

The Origin of Others

The Source of Self-Regard

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Contents

Peril

Authoritarian regimes, dictators, despots are often, but not always, fools.

But none is foolish enough to give perceptive, dissident writers free range

to publish their judgments or follow their creative instincts. They know they do so at their own peril. They are not stupid enough to abandon control (overt or insidious) over media. Their methods include surveillance, censorship, arrest, even slaughter of those writers informing and disturbing the public. Writers who are unsettling, calling into question, taking another, deeper look. Writers—journalists, essayists, bloggers, poets, playwrights—can disturb the social oppression that functions like a coma on the population, a coma despots call peace, and they stanch the blood flow of war that hawks and profiteers thrill to.

That is their peril.

Ours is of another sort.

How bleak, unlivable, insufferable existence becomes when we are deprived of artwork. That the life and work of writers facing peril must be protected is urgent, but along with that urgency we should remind ourselves that their absence, the choking off of a writer's work, its cruel amputation, is of equal peril to us. The rescue we extend to them is a generosity to ourselves.

We all know nations that can be identified by the flight of writers from their shores. These are regimes whose fear of unmonitored writing is justified because truth is trouble. It is trouble for the warmonger, the

torturer, the corporate thief, the political hack, the corrupt justice system, and for a comatose public. Unpersecuted, unjailed, unharassed writers are trouble for the ignorant bully, the sly racist, and the predators feeding off the world's resources. The alarm, the disquiet, writers raise is instructive because it is open and vulnerable, because if unpoliced it is threatening. Therefore the historical suppression of writers is the earliest harbinger of the steady peeling away of additional rights and liberties that will follow. The history of persecuted writers is as long as the history of literature itself. And the efforts to censor, starve, regulate, and annihilate us are clear signs that something important has taken place. Cultural and political forces can sweep clean all but the "safe," all but state-approved art.

I have been told that there are two human responses to the perception of chaos: naming and violence. When the chaos is simply the unknown, the naming can be accomplished effortlessly—a new species, star, formula, equation, prognosis. There is also mapping, charting, or devising proper nouns for unnamed or stripped-of-names geography, landscape, or population. When chaos resists, either by reforming itself or by rebelling against imposed order, violence is understood to be the most frequent response and the most rational when confronting the unknown, the catastrophic, the wild, wanton, or incorrigible. Rational responses may be

censure; incarceration in holding camps, prisons; or death, singly or in war. There is, however, a third response to chaos, which I have not heard about, which is stillness. Such stillness can be passivity and dumbfoundedness; it can be paralytic fear. But it can also be art. Those writers plying their craft near to or far from the throne of raw power, of military power, of empire building and countinghouses, writers who construct meaning in the face of chaos must be nurtured, protected. And it is right that such protection be initiated by other writers. And it is imperative not only to save the besieged writers but to save ourselves. The thought that leads me to contemplate with dread the erasure of other voices, of unwritten novels, poems whispered or swallowed for fear of being overheard by the wrong people, outlawed languages flourishing underground, essayists' questions challenging authority never being posed, unstaged plays, canceled films—that thought is a nightmare. As though a whole universe is being described in invisible ink.

Certain kinds of trauma visited on peoples are so deep, so cruel, that unlike money, unlike vengeance, even unlike justice, or rights, or the goodwill of others, only writers can translate such trauma and turn sorrow into meaning, sharpening the moral imagination.

A writer's life and work are not a gift to mankind; they are its necessity.

PART I

The Foreigner's Home

The Dead of September 11

Some have God's words; others have songs of comfort for the bereaved. If I can pluck up courage here, I would like to speak directly to the dead—the September dead. Those children of ancestors born in every continent on the planet: Asia, Europe, Africa, the Americas; born of ancestors who wore kilts, obis, saris, geles, wide straw hats, yarmulkes, goatskin, wooden shoes, feathers, and cloths to cover their hair. But I would not say a word until I could set aside all I know or believe about nations, war, leaders, the governed and ungovernable; all I suspect about armor and entrails. First I would freshen my tongue, abandon sentences crafted to know evil—wanton or studied; explosive or quietly sinister; whether born of a sated appetite or hunger; of vengeance or the simple compulsion to stand up before falling down. I would purge my language of hyperbole, of its eagerness to analyze the levels of wickedness; ranking them, calculating their higher or lower status among others of its kind.

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.

To speak to you, the dead of September, I must not claim false intimacy or summon an overheated heart glazed just in time for a camera. I must be steady and I must be clear, knowing all the time that I have nothing to say—no words stronger than the steel that pressed you into itself; no scripture older or more elegant than the ancient atoms you have become.

And I have nothing to give either—except this gesture, this thread thrown between your humanity and mine: *I want to hold you in my arms* and as your soul got shot of its box of flesh to understand, as you have done, the wit of eternity: its gift of unhinged release tearing through the darkness of its knell.

The Foreigner's Home

EXCLUDING THE HEIGHT of the slave trade in the nineteenth century, the mass movement of peoples in the latter half of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first is greater now than it has ever been. It is a movement of workers, intellectuals, refugees, armies crossing oceans, continents, immigrants through custom offices and hidden routes, speaking multiple languages of trade, of political intervention, of persecution, exile, violence, and poverty. There is little doubt that the redistribution (voluntary or involuntary) of people all over the globe tops the agenda of the state, the boardrooms, the neighborhoods, the street.

Political maneuvers to control this movement are not limited to monitoring the dispossessed. While much of this exodus can be described as the journey of the colonized to the seat of the colonizers (slaves, as it were, abandoning the plantation for the planters' home), and while more of it is the flight of war refugees, the relocation and transplantation of the management and diplomatic class to globalization's outposts, as well as the deployment of fresh military units and bases, feature prominently in legislative attempts to control the constant flow of people.

The spectacle of mass movement draws attention inevitably to the borders, the porous places, the vulnerable points where one's concept of home is seen as being menaced by foreigners. Much of the alarm hovering at the borders, the gates, is stoked, it seems to me, by (1) both the threat and the promise of globalism and (2) an uneasy relationship with our own foreignness, our own rapidly disintegrating sense of belonging.

Let me begin with globalization. In our current understanding, globalization is not a version of the nineteenth-century "Britannia rules" format—although postcolonial upheavals reflect and are reminiscent of the domination one nation had over most others. The term does not have the "workers of the world unite" agenda of the old internationalism, although that was the very word—"internationalism"—that the president of the AFL-

CIO used at the executive council of union presidents. Nor is the globalism the postwar appetite for "one world," the rhetoric that stirred and bedeviled the fifties and launched the United Nations. Nor is it the "universalism" of the sixties and seventies—either as a plea for world peace or an insistence on cultural hegemony. "Empire," "internationalism," "one world," "universal"—all seem less like categories of historical trends than yearnings. Yearnings to corral the earth into some semblance of unity and some measure of control, to conceive of the planet's human destiny as flowing from one constellation of nations' ideology. Globalism has the same desires and yearnings as its predecessors. It too understands itself as historically progressive, enhancing, destined, unifying, utopian. Narrowly defined, it is meant to mean instant movement of capital and the rapid distribution of data and products operating within a politically neutral environment shaped by multinational corporate demands. Its larger connotations, however, are less innocent, encompassing as they do not only the demonization of embargoed states or the trivialization cum negotiation with warlords, but also the collapse of nation-states under the weight of transnational economies, capital, and labor; the preeminence of Western culture and economy; the Americanization of the developed and developing world through the penetration of U.S. culture into others as well as the

marketing of third-world cultures to the West as fashion, film settings, and cuisine.

Globalization, hailed with the same vigor as was manifest destiny, internationalism, etc., has reached a level of majesty in our imagination. For all its claims of fostering freedom, globalism's dispensations are royal, for it can bestow much. In matters of reach (across frontiers); in terms of mass (of populations affected and engaged); and in terms of riches (limitless fields to mine for resources and services to offer). Yet as much as globalism is adored as near messianic, it is also reviled as an evil courting a dangerous dystopia. Its disregard of borders, national infrastructures, local bureaucracies, internet censors, tariffs, laws, and languages; its disregard of margins and the marginal people who live there; its formidable, engulfing properties accelerating erasure, a flattening out of difference, of specificity for marketing purposes. An abhorrence of diversity. We imagine indistinguishability, the elimination of minority languages, minority cultures in its wake. We speculate with horror on what could be the irrevocable, enfeebling alteration of major languages, major cultures in its sweep. Even if those dreaded consequences are not made completely manifest, they nevertheless cancel out globalism's assurances of better life by issuing dire warnings of premature cultural death.

Other dangers globalism poses are the distortion of the public and the destruction of the private. We glean what is public primarily, but not exclusively, from media. We are asked to abandon much of what was once private to the data-collecting requirements of governmental, political, market, and now security needs. Part of the anxiety about the porous divide between public and private domains certainly stems from reckless applications of the terms. There is the privatization of prisons, which is the private corporate control of a public facility. There is the privatization of public schools. There is also private life—claims to which can be given up freely on talk shows, or negotiated in the courts by celebrities, "public" figures, and privacy rights cases. There is private space (atriums, gardens, etc.) open to the public. And public space (parks, playgrounds, and beaches in certain neighborhoods) limited to private use. There is the looking-glass phenomenon of the "play" of the public in our private, interior lives. Interiors of our houses look like store displays (along with shelf after shelf of "collections") and store displays are arranged as house interiors; young people's behavior is said to be an echo of what the screen offers; the screen is said to echo, represent, youthful interests and behavior—not create them. Since the space in which both civic and private life is lived has become so indistinguishable from inner and outer, from inside/outside, these two

realms have been compressed into a ubiquitous blur, a rattling of our concept of home.

It is this rattling I believe that affects the second point: our uneasiness with our own feelings of foreignness, our own rapidly fraying sense of belonging. To what do we pay greatest allegiance? Family, language group, culture, country, gender? Religion, race? And if none of these matter, are we urbane, cosmopolitan, or simply lonely? In other words, how do we decide where we belong? What convinces us that we do? Or put another way, what is the matter with foreignness?

I have chosen to comment on a novel written in the fifties by a Ghanaian author as a means of addressing this dilemma—the inside/outside blur that can enshrine frontiers, and borders real, metaphorical, and psychological, as we wrestle with definitions of nationalism, citizenship, race, ideology, and the so-called clash of cultures in our search to belong.

African and African American writers are not alone in coming to terms with these problems, but they do have a long and singular history of confronting them. Of not being at home in one's homeland; of being exiled in the place one belongs.

Before I discuss this novel, I want to describe what preceded my reading of African literature and compelled my excursion into what troubles

contemporary definitions of the foreign.

Velvet-lined offering plates were passed down the pews on Sunday. The last one was the smallest and the one most likely to be empty. Its position and size signaled the dutiful but limited expectations that characterized most everything in the thirties. The coins, never bills, sprinkled there were mostly from children encouraged to give up their pennies and nickels for the charitable work so necessary for the redemption of Africa. Although the sound of the name, “Africa,” was beautiful it was riven by the complicated emotions with which it was associated. Unlike starving China, Africa was both ours and theirs; intimately connected to us and profoundly foreign. A huge needy homeland to which we were said to belong but that none of us had seen or cared to see, inhabited by people with whom we maintained a delicate relationship of mutual ignorance and disdain, and with whom we shared a mythology of passive, traumatized otherness cultivated by textbooks, film, cartoons, and the hostile name-calling children learn to love.

Later, when I began to read fiction set in Africa, I found that, with no exceptions that I knew of, each narrative elaborated on and enhanced the very mythology that accompanied those velvet plates floating between the pews. For Joyce Cary, Elspeth Huxley, H. Rider Haggard, Africa was

precisely what the missionary collection implied: a dark continent in desperate need of light. The light of Christianity, of civilization, of development. The light of charity switched on by simple goodheartedness. It was an idea of Africa fraught with the assumptions of a complex intimacy coupled with an acknowledgment of unmediated estrangement. This conundrum of foreign ownership alienating the local population, of the dispossession of native speakers from their home, the exile of indigenous peoples within their home contributed a surreal glow to these narratives, enticing the writers to project a metaphysically void Africa ripe for invention. With one or two exceptions, literary Africa was an inexhaustible playground for tourists and foreigners. In the work of Joseph Conrad, Isak Dinesen, Saul Bellow, Ernest Hemingway, whether imbued with or struggling against conventional Western views of benighted Africa, their protagonists found the continent to be as empty as that collection plate—a vessel waiting for whatever copper and silver imagination was pleased to place there. As grist for Western mills, accommodatingly mute, conveniently blank, Africa could be made to support a wide variety of literary and/or ideological requirements. It could stand back as scenery for any exploit or leap forward and obsess itself with the woes of any foreigner; it could contort itself into frightening malignant shapes upon which

Westerners could contemplate evil; or it could kneel and accept elementary lessons from its betters. For those who made that literal or imaginative voyage, contact with Africa offered thrilling opportunities to experience life in its primitive, formative, inchoate state, the consequence of which experience was self-enlightenment—a wisdom that confirmed the benefits of European proprietorship free of the responsibility of gathering overly much actual intelligence about the African culture that stimulated the enlightenment. So bighearted was this literary Africa, only a little geography, lots of climate, a few customs and anecdotes sufficed as the canvas upon which a portrait of a wiser or sadder or fully reconciled self could be painted. In Western novels published up to and throughout the fifties, Africa was itself Camus's *l'étranger,* offering the occasion for knowledge but keeping its own unknowableness intact. Like Marlow's "white patch for a boy to dream gloriously over, mapped since his boyhood with "rivers and lakes and names, [it] had ceased to be a blank space of delightful mystery….It had become a place of darkness." What little could be known was enigmatic, repugnant, or hopelessly contradictory. Imaginary Africa was a cornucopia of imponderables that like the monstrous Grendel in *Beowulf* resisted explanation. Thus, a plethora of incompatible metaphors can be gleaned from the literature. As the original locus of the human race,

Africa is ancient, yet, being under colonial control, it is also infantile. A kind of old fetus always waiting to be born but confounding all midwives. In novel after novel, short story after short story, Africa is simultaneously innocent and corrupting, savage and pure, irrational and wise.

In that racially charged literary context, coming upon Camara Laye's *Le Regard du Roi,* known in English as *The Radiance of the King,* was shocking. Suddenly the clichéd journey into storybook African darkness either to bring light or find it is reimagined. The novel not only summons a sophisticated, wholly African imagistic vocabulary from which to launch a discursive negotiation with the West, it exploits the images of homelessness that the conqueror imposes on the native population: the disorder of Joyce Cary's *Mister Johnson;* the obsession with smells in Elspeth Huxley's *The Flame Trees of Thika;* the European fixation on the meaning of nakedness as in H. Rider Haggard, or Joseph Conrad, or virtually all travel writing.

Camara Laye's narrative is, briefly, this: Clarence, a European, has come to Africa for reasons he cannot articulate. There, he has gambled, lost, and heavily in debt to his white compatriots, is hiding among the indigenous population in a dirty inn. Already evicted from the colonists' hotel, about to be evicted by the African innkeeper, Clarence decides the solution to his pennilessness is to be taken into the service of the king. He is prevented by

a solid crowd of villagers from approaching the king, and his mission is greeted with scorn. He meets a pair of mischief-loving teenagers and a cunning beggar who agree to help him. Under their guidance he travels south, where the king is expected to appear next. By way of his journey, not wholly unlike a pilgrim's progress, the author is able to trace and parody the parallel sensibilities of Europe and Africa.

The literary tropes of Africa are exact replicas of perceptions of foreignness: (1) threatening, (2) depraved, (3) incomprehensible. And it is fascinating to observe Camara Laye's adroit handling of those perceptions.

1. Threatening. Clarence, his protagonist, is stupefied with fear. In spite of noting that the "forests [are] devoted to the wine industry"; that the landscape is "cultivated"; that the people living there give him a "cordial welcome," he sees only inaccessibility, "common hostility." The order and clarity of the landscape are at odds with the menacing jungle in his head.

2. Depraved. It is Clarence who descends into depravity, enacting the full horror of what Westerners imagine as "going native": the "unclean and cloying weakness" that imperils masculinity. Clarence's blatant enjoyment of and feminine submission to continuous cohabitation reflect his own appetites and his own willful ignorance. As mulatto children crowd the village, Clarence, the only white in the region, continues to wonder where

they came from. He refuses to believe the obvious—that he has been sold as stud for the harem.

3. Incomprehensible. Camara Laye's Africa is not dark; it is suffused with light: the watery green light of the forest; the ruby-red tints of the houses and soil; the sky's "unbearable…azure brilliance"; even the scales of the fish women "glimmered like robes of dying moonlight." Understanding the motives, the sensibilities of the Africans—both wicked and benign—require only a suspension of belief in an unbreachable difference between humans.

Unpacking the hobbled idioms of the foreigner usurping one's home, of delegitimizing the native, of reversing claims of belonging, the novel allows us to experience a white man emigrating to Africa, alone, without a job, without authority, without resources or even a family name. But he has one asset that always works, can only work, in third-world countries. He is white, he says, and therefore suited in some ineffable way to be advisor to the king whom he has never seen, in a country he does not know, among people he neither understands nor wishes to. What begins as a quest for a position of authority, for escape from the contempt of his own countrymen becomes a searing process of reeducation. What counts as intelligence among these Africans is not prejudice, but nuance and the ability and

willingness to see, to surmise. The European's refusal to meditate cogently on any event except the ones that concern his comfort or survival dooms him. When insight finally seeps through, he feels annihilated by it. This fictional investigation allows us to see the deracing of a Westerner experiencing Africa without European support, protection, or command. Allows us to rediscover or imagine anew what it feels like to be marginal, ignored, superfluous; to have one's name never uttered; to be stripped of history or representation; to be sold or exploited labor for the benefit of a presiding family, a shrewd entrepreneur, a local regime.

It is a disturbing encounter that may help us deal with the destabilizing pressures of the transglobal tread of peoples. Pressure that can make us cling or discredit other cultures, other languages; make us rank evil according to the fashion of the day; make us legislate, expel, conform, purge, and pledge allegiance to ghosts and fantasy. Most of all this pressure can make us deny the foreigner in ourselves and make us resist to the death the commonness of humanity.

After many trials, enlightenment slowly surfaces in Camara Laye's Westerner: Clarence gets his wish to meet the king. But by then he and his purpose have altered. Against the advice of the local people, Clarence crawls naked to the throne. When he finally sees the king, who is a mere

boy laden with gold, the “terrifying void that is within [him],” the void that he has been protecting from disclosure, opens to receive the royal gaze. It is this openness, this crumbling of cultural armor maintained out of fear, this act of unprecedented courage that is the beginning of Clarence’s salvation, his bliss and his freedom. Wrapped in the boy king’s embrace, feeling the beat of his young heart, Clarence hears him murmur these exquisite words of authentic belonging, words welcoming him to the human race: “Did you not know that I was waiting for you?”

Racism and Fascism

LET US BE REMINDED that before there is a final solution, there must be a first solution, a second one, even a third. The move toward a final solution is not a jump. It takes one step, then another, then another. Something, perhaps, like this:

1. Construct an internal enemy, as both focus and diversion.
2. Isolate and demonize that enemy by unleashing and protecting the utterance of overt and coded name-calling and verbal abuse. Employ ad hominem attacks as legitimate charges against that enemy.
3. Enlist and create sources and distributors of information who are willing to reinforce the demonizing process because it is profitable, because it grants power, and because it works.

4. Palisade all art forms; monitor, discredit, or expel those that challenge or destabilize processes of demonization and deification.

5. Subvert and malign all representatives of and sympathizers with this constructed enemy.

6. Solicit, from among the enemy, collaborators who agree with and can sanitize the dispossession process.

7. Pathologize the enemy in scholarly and popular mediums; recycle, for example, scientific racism and the myths of racial superiority in order to naturalize the pathology.

8. Criminalize the enemy. Then prepare, budget for, and rationalize the building of holding arenas for the enemy—especially its males and absolutely its children.

9. 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.

10. Maintain, at all costs, silence.

In 1995 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. 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. The forces interested in fascist solutions to national problems are not to be found in one political party or another, or in one or another wing of any single political party. Democrats have no unsullied history of egalitarianism. Nor are liberals free of domination agendas. Republicans have housed abolitionists and white supremacists. Conservative, moderate, liberal; right, left, hard left, far right; religious, secular, socialist—we must not be blindsided by these Pepsi-Cola, Coca-Cola labels because the genius of fascism is that any political structure can host the virus and virtually any developed country can become a suitable home. Fascism talks ideology, but it is really just marketing—marketing for power.

It is recognizable by its need to purge, by the strategies it uses to purge, and by its terror of truly democratic agendas. It is recognizable by its determination to convert all public services to private entrepreneurship, all nonprofit organizations to profit-making ones—so that the narrow but protective chasm between governance and business disappears. It changes citizens into taxpayers—so individuals become angry at even the notion of the public good. 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. It changes parenting into panicking—so that

we vote against the interests of our own children; against *their* health care, *their* education, *their* safety from weapons. 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).

When our fears have all been serialized, our creativity censured, 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.

Home

LAST YEAR a colleague of mine asked me where I had gone to school when a child. I told her, Lorain, Ohio. Then she questioned me: Were your schools desegregated then? I said, What? They were never segregated in the thirties and forties—so why would they be desegregated. Besides, we had one high school and four junior high schools. Then I recalled that she herself was around forty years old when that term "desegregated" was alive everywhere. Obviously I was in a time warp and

obviously the early diverse population of the town I grew up in was not the way of the country. Before I left Lorain for Washington, D.C., then Texas, then Ithaca, then New York City, I thought every place was more or less like it, except in size. Nothing could be further from the truth. In any case her questions made me think anew about this area of Ohio and my recollections of home. This region (Lorain, Elyria, Oberlin) is not like it was when I lived here, but in a way it doesn't matter because home is memory and companions and/or friends who share the memory. But equally important as the memory and place and people of one's personal home is the very idea of home. What do we mean when we say "home"?

It is a virtual question because the destiny of the twenty-first century will be shaped by the possibility or the collapse of a shareable world. The question of cultural apartheid and/or cultural integration is at the heart of all governments and informs our perception of the ways in which governance and culture compel the exoduses of peoples (voluntarily or driven) and raises complex questions of dispossession, recovery, and the reinforcement of siege mentalities. How do individuals resist or become complicit in the process of alienizing others' demonization—a process that can infect the foreigner's geographical sanctuary with the country's xenophobia? By welcoming immigrants, or importing slaves into their midst for economic

reasons and relegating their children to a modern version of the “undead.” Or by reducing an entire native population, some with a history hundreds, even thousands of years long, into despised foreigners in their own country. Or by the privileged indifference of a government watching an almost biblical flood destroy a city because its citizens were surplus black or poor people without transportation, water, food, help and left to their own devices to swim, slog, or die in fetid water, attics, hospitals, jails, boulevards, and holding pens. Such are the consequences of persistent demonization; such is the harvest of shame.

Clearly, the movement of peoples under duress at, beyond, and across borders is not new. Forced or eager exodus into strange territory (psychological or geographical) is indelible in the history of every quadrant of the known world, from the trek of Africans into China and Australia; to military interventions by Romans, Ottomans, Europeans; to merchant forays fulfilling the desires of a plethora of regimes, monarchies, and republics. From Venice to Virginia, from Liverpool to Hong Kong. All these and more have transferred the riches and art they found into other realms. And all these left that foreign soil stained with their blood and/or transplanted into the veins of the conquered. While in their wake the languages of conquered and conqueror swell with condemnation of the

other.

The reconfiguration of political and economic alliances and the almost instant reparsing of nation-states encourage and repel the relocation of large numbers of peoples. Excluding the height of the slave trade, this mass movement of peoples is greater now than it has ever been. It involves the distribution of workers, intellectuals, refugees, traders, immigrants, and armies all crossing oceans and continents, through custom offices and via hidden routes, with multiple narratives spoken in multiple languages of commerce, of military intervention, political persecution, exile, violence, poverty, death, and shame. There is little doubt that the voluntary or involuntary displacement of people all over the globe tops the agenda of the state, the boardrooms, the neighborhoods, the streets. Political maneuvers to control this movement are not limited to monitoring the dispossessed. The transplantation of management and diplomatic classes to globalization's outposts, as well as the deployment of military units and bases, feature prominently in legislative attempts to exert authority over the constant flow of people. This slide of people has freighted the concept of citizenship and altered our perceptions of space—public and private. The strain has been marked by a plethora of hyphenated designations of national identity. In press descriptions, place of origin has become more telling than citizenship,

and persons are identified as “a German citizen of such and such origin” or “a British citizen of such and such origin.” All this while a new cosmopolitanism, a kind of multilayered cultural citizenship, is simultaneously being hailed. The relocation of peoples has ignited and disrupted the idea of home and expanded the focus of identity beyond definitions of citizenship to clarifications of foreignness. Who is the foreigner? is a question that leads us to the perception of an implicit and heightened threat within “difference.” We see it in the defense of the local against the outsider; personal discomfort with one’s own sense of belonging (Am I the foreigner in my own home?); of unwanted intimacy instead of safe distance. It may be that the most defining characteristic of our times is that, again, walls and weapons feature as prominently now as they once did in medieval times. Porous borders are understood in some quarters to be areas of threat and certain chaos, and whether real or imagined, enforced separation is posited as the solution. Walls, ammunition—they do work. For a while. But they are major failures over time, as the occupants of casual, unmarked, and mass grave sites haunt the entire history of civilization. Consider another consequence of the blatant, violent uses to which foreignness is put—ethnic cleansing. We would be not merely remiss but irrelevant if we did not address the doom currently faced by millions of

people reduced to animal, insect, or polluted status by nations with unmitigated, unrepentant power to decide who is a stranger and whether they live or die at, or far from, home. I mentioned earlier that the expulsion and slaughter of "enemies" are as old as history. But there is something new and soul destroying about this last and current century. At no other period have we witnessed such a myriad of aggression against people designated as "not us." Now, as you have seen over the last two years, the central political question was, Who or what is an American?

From what I gather from those who have studied the history of genocide —its definition and application—there seems to be a pattern. Nation-states, governments seeking legitimacy and identity, seem able and determined to shape themselves by the destruction of a collective "other." When European nations were in thrall to royal consolidation, they were able to act out this slaughter in other countries—African, South American, Asian. Australia and the United States, self-declared republics, required the annihilation of all indigenous peoples if not the usurpation of their land to create their new, democratic state. The fall of communism created a bouquet of new or reinvented nations who measured their statehood by "cleansing" communities. Whether the targets were of different religions, races, cultures —whatever—reasons were found first to demonize then to expel or murder

them. For an assumed safety, hegemony, or pure land grabs, foreigners were constructed as the sum total of the putative nation's ills. If these scholars are right, we will see more and more illogical waves of war—designed for the grasp of control by the leaders of such states. Laws cannot stop them, nor can any god. Interventions merely provoke.

Wartalk

IN TRYING to come to terms with the benefits and challenges of globalism, it has become necessary to recognize that the term suffers from its own history. It is not imperialism, internationalism, or even universalism. Certainly a major distinction between globalism and its predecessors is how much it is marked by speed: the rapid reconfiguration of political and economic alliances, and the almost instant reparsing of nation-states. Both of these remappings encourage and repel the relocation of large numbers of peoples. Excluding the height of the slave trade, this mass movement of peoples is greater now than it has ever been. It involves the distribution of workers, intellectuals, refugees, traders, immigrants, and armies crossing oceans, continents, through custom offices and via hidden routes, speaking multiple languages of commerce, or political intervention, of persecution, exile, violence, and defiling poverty. There is little doubt that the voluntary or involuntary displacement of people all over the globe

tops the agenda of the state, the boardrooms, the neighborhoods, the streets. Political maneuvers to control this movement are not limited to monitoring the dispossessed. The transplantation of management and diplomatic classes to globalization's outposts, as well as the deployment of fresh military units and bases, feature prominently in legislative attempts to exert authority over the constant flow of people.

This slide of people across the globe has altered and freighted the concept of citizenship. The strain has been marked by a plethora of hyphenated designations of national identity in the United States, by press descriptions where origin is of more significance than citizenship. People are described as "German citizen of 'fill-in-the-blank' origin" or "British citizen of 'blank' origin," all this while a new cosmopolitanism, a kind of cultural citizenship, is simultaneously being hailed. The relocation of peoples that globalism ignites has disrupted and *sullied* the idea of home and has expanded the focus of identity beyond definitions of citizenship to clarifications of foreignness. Who is the foreigner? is a question that leads us to the perception of an implicit threat within "difference." The interests of global markets, however, can absorb all these questions, thrive in fact on a multiplicity of differences, the finer, the more exceptional the better, since each "difference" is a more specific, identifiable consumer cluster. This

market can reconstitute itself endlessly to any broadened definition of citizenship, to ever-narrowing, proliferating identities, as well as to the disruptions of planetary war. But unease creeps into the conversation about this beneficial morphing ability when the flip side of citizenship is addressed. The chameleon-like characteristic of global economy provokes the defense of the local and raises newer questions of foreignness—a foreignness that suggests intimacy rather than distance (Is he my neighbor?) and a deep personal discomfort with our own sense of belonging (Is he us? Am I the foreigner?). These questions complicate the concept of belonging, of home, and are telling in the alarm apparent in many quarters regarding official, prohibited, unpoliced, protected, and subversive languages.

There is some gasping at what North Africans may have done or are capable of doing to French; of what Turkish people have made of German; of the refusal of some Catalan speakers to read or even speak Spanish. The insistence on Celtic in schools; the academic study of Ojibwe; the poetic evolution of Newyorican. Even some feeble (and I think misguided) efforts to organize something called Ebonics.

The more globalism trumps language differences—by ignoring, soliciting, or engulfing them—the more passionate these protections and usurpations become. For one's language—the one we dream in—is home.

I believe it is in the humanities, and specifically the branch of literature, where such antagonisms become rich fields of creativity and thus ameliorate the climate between cultures and itinerant people. Writers are key to this process for any number of reasons, principal among which is the writer's gift for teasing language, eliciting from its vernacular, its porous lexicon, and the hieroglyphics of the electronic screen greater meaning, more intimacy, and, not incidentally, more beauty. This work is not new for writers but the challenges are, as all languages, major and dominant, minor and protected, are reeling from the impositions of globalism.

Yet globalism's impact on language is not always deleterious. It can also create odd and accidental circumstances in which profound creativity erupts out of necessity. Let me suggest one case in point, where severe changes in public discourse have already taken place as communication floods virtually every terrain. The language of war has historically been noble, summoning the elevating quality of warrior discourse: the eloquence of grief for the dead; courage and the honor of vengeance. That heroic language, rendered by Homer, Shakespeare, in sagas and by statesmen, is rivaled for beauty and force only by religious language, with which it frequently merges. In this parade of inspiring wartalk, from BC to the twentieth century, there have been disruptions. One moment of distrust and

disdain for such language occurred immediately after World War I when writers like Ernest Hemingway and Wilfred Owen, among others, questioned the paucity of terms such as “honor,” “glory,” “bravery,” “courage” to describe the reality of war, the obscenity of those terms being associated with the carnage of 1914–1918.

As Hemingway wrote: “I was always embarrassed by the words sacred, glorious, and sacrifice and the expression in vain. We had heard them, sometimes standing in the rain almost out of earshot….[A]nd I had seen nothing sacred, and the things that were glorious had no glory and the sacrifices were like the stockyards at Chicago if nothing was done with the meat except to bury it. There were many words that you could not stand to hear and finally only the names of places had dignity.”

But the events of 1938 quieted those interventions and once more the language of war rose to the occasion of World War II. The glamour-coated images we carry of Roosevelt, Churchill, and other statesmen are due in part to their rousing speeches and are testimony to the strength of militant oratory. Yet something interesting happened after World War II. In the late fifties and sixties, wars continued, of course—hot and cold, north and south, big and small—more and more cataclysmic, more and more heartbreaking because so unnecessary; so wildly punitive on innocent civilians one could

only drop to one's knees in sorrow. Yet the language that accompanied these recent wars became oddly diminished. The dwindling persuasiveness of combat discourse may have been due to the low requirements of commercial media: their abhorrence of complex sentences and less-known metaphors, the dominance of the visual over linguistic communication. Or perhaps it was due to the fact that all of these wars were the seething mute children of preceding ones. Whatever the cause, warrior discourse has become childlike. Puny. Vaguely prepubescent. Underneath the speeches, bulletins, punditry, essays lies the clear whine of the playground: "He hit me. I did not. Did too." "That's mine. Is not. Is too." "I hate you. I hate you."

This decline, it seems to me, this echo of passionate juvenilia affects the highest level of contemporary warrior discourse and sounds like that of the comic book or action film. "I strike for freedom!" "We must save the world!" "Houston, we have a problem." An inane, enfeebled screed has emerged to address brain-cracking political and economic problems. What is fascinating is that such language sank to its most plodding at precisely the time another language was evolving: the language of nonviolence, of peaceful resistance, of negotiation. The language of Gandhi, of Martin Luther King Jr., of Nelson Mandela, of Václav Havel. Compelling

language, robust, rousing, subtle, elevating, intelligent, complex. As war's consequences became more and more dire, wartalk has become less and less credible, more infantile in its panic. A change that became obvious just at the moment when the language of resolution, of diplomacy was developing its own idiom—a moral idiom worthy of human intelligence, shedding the cloud of weakness, of appeasement, that historically has hovered above it.

I do not believe the shift is coincidental. I believe it represents a fundamental change in the concept of war—a not-so-secret conviction among various and sundry populations, both oppressed and privileged, that war is, finally, out of date; that it is truly the most inefficient method of achieving one's (long-term) aims. No matter the paid parades, the forced applause, the instigated riots, the organized protests (pro or con), self- or state censoring, the propaganda; no matter the huge opportunities for profit and gain; no matter the history of the injustice—at bottom it is impossible to escape the suspicion that the more sophisticated the weapons of war, the more antiquated the idea of war. The more transparent the power grab, the holier the justification, the more arrogant the claims, the more barbaric, the more discredited the language of war has become. Leaders who find war the sole and inevitable solution to disagreement, displacement, aggression,

injustice, abasing poverty seem not only helplessly retrograde, but intellectually deficient, precisely like the empurpled comic-book language in which they express themselves.

I understand that my comments may appear disjunctive on this date in 2002 when legislatures, revolutionaries, and the inflamed do not “declare” war, but simply wage it. But I am convinced that the language that has the most force, requires the most acumen, talent, grace, genius, and, yes, beauty, can never be, will never again be found in paeans to the glory of war, or erotic rallying cries to battle. The power of this alternate language does not arise from the tiresome, wasteful art of war, but rather from the demanding, brilliant art of peace.

The War on Error

IACCEPTED this invitation to speak at Amnesty International with instant glee. I didn’t have a second thought about the opportunity to address an extraordinary community of active humanitarians whose work I so profoundly respect. The honor pleased and challenged me and I believed it would be relatively effortless to find something of consequence to say to you. Months later, however, I began to have grave reservations about my early and unthinking enthusiasm. Benumbed with news of ignited chaos, death tolls, manufactured starvation, wars of choice against disarmed

countries, I became virtually speechless; startled into mute disbelief; disabled by what I understood to be the equanimity of congresses and inert parliaments going about their business of business. The irrelevance cum sensationalism of mainstream media, its strange quietude on vital issues, its publicity posing as journalism did their job and mangled my own hapless, helpless unspeakable thoughts.

Although an obvious theme for this occasion occurred to me: a rehearsal of salutations and compliments to AI, I realized at last that the time for compliments has passed—although I am amazed by the breadth and depth of AI's resiliency. I came to believe that this is no time for self-congratulation—although there is room for it; room to recall and marvel at the record AI has garnered, its impact on the lives of the forgotten, and its success in tarnishing the glitz of the mighty.

Unaligned, nobly interventionist, unbrooked by nations and political parties, private interests or public exhaustion, Amnesty International declares states, walls, borders irrelevant to its humanitarian goals, detrimental to its tasks, by summoning responsibility and refusing to accept a myopic government's own narrative of its behavior.

I can share the seethe of millions, but it won't do. Rage has limited uses and serious flaws. It cuts off reason and displaces constructive action with

mindless theater. Besides, absorbing the lies, untruths, both transparent and nuanced, of governments, their hypocrisy so polished it does not even care if it is revealed, can lead to a wearied and raveled mind.

We live in a world where justice equals vengeance. Where private profit drives public policy. Where the body of civil liberties, won cell by cell, bone by bone, by the brave and the dead withers in the searing heat of "all war, all the time," and, where facing eternal war, respect for, even interest in, humanitarian solutions can dwindle. Even as the conviction that "the security of every other nation in the world be subordinate to the comfort of the United States" is, finally, being challenged, civil rights and humanitarian solutions are being steadily crushed by the imperatives of that conviction.

Let me describe a little of what is happening in my country.

Death-penalty advocates are more and more entrenched even as thousands of planned executions in Texas are forced into being reviewed because of blatant errors committed in DNA laboratories.

A so-called Clear Skies Act, designed to replace the Clean Air Act, has exactly the opposite effect. Corporations, mining companies, factories can now ignore or delay every environmental safeguard put in place by the previous administration and turn "death by breathing" into gold.

Constitutional rights are facing impoverishment and annihilation as the biggest, most undertold story in the United States is the looming disenfranchisement of the electorate. Under the “Help America Vote” Act of 2002, the new electronic voting machines are said to be unable to do what ATMs and grocery clerks do: provide a paper receipt documenting the voter’s choice; this while any astute hacker can gain access, the largest manufacturer of these new machines is able to calculate (perhaps control) the results in its home office.

Withdrawal from treaties, preemption, dismantlement, mass arrests minus charges or legal representation; judges instructed by the Justice Department to impose maximum terms; whistle-blowers fired; Draconian censorship—these actions are taking place in an atmosphere of aggression, panic, greed, and malice reminiscent of the oppressive political architecture we believed we had demolished. But all this you already know. The history of your activities is the documentation of and intervention into such travesties.

It seems to me that among the several wars being waged around the planet, one is paramount and surpasses in urgency all the others. That is the War Against Error.

“War Against Error” is a phrase originated to describe the fifteenth- and sixteenth-century efforts on the part of institutional religions to correct

those whose beliefs were different. In a time when and place where state religion is the norm, apostasy is literally treason. Our modern world has "inherited a fully fledged apparatus of persecution and an intellectual tradition that justified killing in the name of God." Saint Thomas Aquinas himself wrote that apostates were "to be severed from the world by death." The point, in that medieval war, was not the inherent evil of the dis- or unbelieving, but his or her refusal to acknowledge his or her mistake. The lesson to be learned was: acceptance or death. A hard education in a difficult school, the doors to which are still ajar. Freely, reverently it is pried open by unbelievers as well as the faithful, by politicians as well as Enron, Halliburton, and WorldCom.

Now that this medieval school has reopened, the old curricula are revised. Rushing to teach the lessons, administrations spin out of control, skipping between the cheating scholar's expedience and the dullard's violence; between courses on empire's fundamentalism and seminars on theocratic domination. And nations and pseudo-states assert powers that would make Caligula smile as they educate their pupils in purging, cleansing, slaughtering. Graduation parties are held where exploitation, assuming the seductive costume of globalism, dances with any willing partner. In its pursuit corporations plop themselves down in every corner of

the globe selling “democracy” as though it were a brand of toothpaste, the patent to which they alone control.

I think it is time for a modern War Against Error. A deliberately heightened battle against cultivated ignorance, enforced silence, and metastasizing lies. A wider war that is fought daily by human rights organizations in journals, reports, indexes, dangerous visits, and encounters with malign oppressive forces. A hugely funded and intensified battle of rescue from the violence that is swallowing the dispossessed.

If we have progressed psychologically, scientifically, intellectually, emotionally no further than 1492, when Spain cleansed itself of Jews, to 2004, when Sudan blocks food and remains content to watch the slow starvation of its people; no further than 1572, when France saw ten thousand slaughtered on Saint Bartholomew’s Day, to 2001, when thousands were blown into filament in New York City; no further than 1692, when Salem burned its own daughters and wives and mothers, to 2004, when whole cities are choked with sex tourists feeding off the bodies of young girls and boys. Then, in spite of our shiny new communication toys, our gorgeous photos of Saturn, our sophisticated organ transplants, we are studying the same old curricula that waste the lives they cannot destroy. We turn to sorcery: summoning up a brew of aliens, enemies, demons,

“causes” that deflect and soothe anxieties about gates through which barbarians stroll; anxieties about language falling into the mouths of others, about authority shifting into the hands of strangers. The desire, the mantra, the motto of this ancient educational system is, Civilization in neutral, then grinding to a halt. And anyone who thinks otherwise is naïve because there is real danger in the world. Of course there is. That is precisely why a correction is in order—new curricula, containing some powerful visionary thinking about how the life of the moral mind and a free and flourishing spirit can operate in a context increasingly dangerous to their health.

No more apologies for a bleeding heart when the opposite is no heart at all. Danger of losing our humanity must be met with more humanity. Otherwise we stand meekly behind Eris, hold Nemesis’s cloak, and genuflect at the feet of Thanatos.

Enjoining the work of AI is more critical today than ever before because the world is more desperate; because governing bodies more hampered, more indifferent, more distracted, more inept, more depleted of creative strategies and resources; because media are increasingly cheerful pawns on the exchange market, courtiers for corporations who have no national interests or loyalties and are committed to no public service.

What strings these social perversions together, for me, is profound error

—not only the errors in questionable but unquestioned data, in distorted "official" releases, in censorship and the manipulation of the press, but also and especially faults deeply embedded in the imagination. A prime example is the inability or unwillingness to imagine future's future. The inability or unwillingness to contemplate a future that is neither afterlife nor the tenure of grandchildren. Time itself seems not to have a future that equals the length or breadth or sweep or even the fascination of its past. Infinity is now, apparently, the domain of the past. And the future becomes discoverable space, outer space, which is in fact the discovery of past time. Billions of years of it. Random outbreaks of armageddonism and persistent apocalyptic yearnings suggest that the future is already over.

Oddly enough it is in the West—where advance, progress, and change have been signatory features—where confidence in an enduring future is at its slightest. Since 1945, "world without end" has been subject to serious debate. Even our definitions of the present have prefixes pointing backward: postmodern, poststructuralist, postcolonial, post–Cold War. Our contemporary prophets look back behind themselves after what has gone on before.

There are good reasons for this rush into the past for all our answers to contemporary problems. First there is the happiness that its exploration, its

revision, its deconstruction afford. One reason has to do with the secularization of culture, another to do with the theocratization of culture. In the former there will be no Messiah and afterlife is understood to be medically absurd. In the latter, the only existence that matters is the one following death. In both, sustaining human existence on this planet for another half a billion years is beyond our powers of imagination. We are cautioned against the luxury of such meditation, partly because it is the unknown, mostly because it may defer and displace contemporary issues—like missionaries who were accused of diverting their convert's attention from poverty during life to rewards following death.

I don't want to give the impression that all current discourse is unrelievedly oriented to the past and indifferent to the future. The social and natural sciences are full of promises and warnings that will affect us over very long stretches of time. Scientific applications are poised to erase hunger, annihilate pain, extend individual life spans by producing illness-resistant people and disease-resistant plants. Communication technology is making sure that virtually everyone on earth can "interact" with one another and be entertained, maybe even educated, while doing so. We are warned about global change in terrain and weather that radically alters human environment; we are warned of the consequences of maldistributed

resources on human survival and warned of the impact of overdistributed humans on natural resources. We invest in the promises and sometimes act intelligently on the warnings. But the promises trouble us with ethical dilemmas and a horror of playing God blindly, while the warnings have left us less and less sure of how and which and why. The prophecies that win our attention are those with bank accounts large enough or photo ops sensational enough to force debate and outline corrective action, so we can decide which war or political debacle or environmental crisis is intolerable enough; which disease, which natural disaster, which institution, which plant, which animal, bird, or fish needs our attention most. These are obviously serious concerns. What is noteworthy among the promises and warnings is that, other than products and a little bit more personal time owing to improved health, and more resources in the form of leisure and money to consume these products and services, the future has nothing to recommend itself. We are being seduced into accepting truncated, short-term, CEO versions of the world's wholly human race.

The loudest voices are urging those already living in day-to-day dread to think of the future in military terms—as a cause for and expression of war. We are being bullied into understanding the human project as a manliness contest where women and children are the most dispensable collateral.