



CFlisi

writer, PR professional, mother, dog-lover, traveler. See more at www.paroleanima.com

Aug 27 · 3 min read



Is Toni Morrison's acumen evergreen?

Eight years ago, back in the heady promise of Obama's first administration, Toni Morrison, the Nobel Prize-winning writer, came to my city to promote a book. The local auditorium was packed with well-read individuals attracted by her fame.

One of her comments, in particular, struck me. She recalled an incident when a well-known white American male writer was introducing her, and had thought to pay her a compliment by saying, "One of the best things about Toni Morrison is that you don't think of her as a 'black' writer or a 'feminist' writer. You think of her as a writer." In response, Morrison told us, when she got up to thank her colleague, she said, "What you really mean is that you think of me as a white, male writer just like you." Her implication was that his words weren't much of a compliment.

I liked her riposte. I thought that was just right. Too bad all the men in the audience hadn't a clue what she meant.

She went on to say that she didn't write for "black, female" readers; she wrote to please one reader only—herself. She sketched out the history of modern black literature in the US and how it had evolved from Ralph Ellison's seminal work, *The Invisible Man*, in 1952. That book, she noted, was written for a white audience and not a black one. She ap-

plauded the development of a fuller, richer range of literature by black writers since then.

When it came time for questions from the audience, I had one. Did Ms. Morrison think that the election of Obama represented a discontinuity with the past history of race relations in the US, or was his election the result of his exceptionalism? She smiled at the question and immediately agreed about Obama's exceptionalism. "There is no question that he is exceptional," she said. "That is apparent to anyone who meets him." Still, she believed that race relations WERE improving in the United States. Positions of extremism on the right and left were becoming narrower and more marginalized, she suggested. "Maybe intolerance is more likely to be found in Europe these days?" she proposed impishly.

As I joined in applause at the end of her presentation, I couldn't help remembering a political advertisement appearing at the time—remember this was eight years ago—in connection with then-upcoming elections for the European Parliament. The ad was for a right-wing, nationalistic political party espousing "Citizens first; keep the foreigners out" policies. The ad visual was of an American Indian with a full-feathered head bonnet. The headline read: "They couldn't control immigration. Now they live on reservations. Think about it."

I didn't *want* to think about it. The headline was so appallingly illogical, irrelevant and inapplicable to the situation in my area (where local industry NEEDS immigrant labor to function) that I couldn't conceive of anyone being swayed by it.

How the world has changed since then, and not for the better. Flash forward to present day: the results of a current Politico poll reveal that almost 40 percent of American voters APPROVE of Donald Trump's conduct in the wake of Charlottesville, 47 percent believe that he is moral, and 48 percent describe him as honest.

These results suggest another form of exceptionalism—a US president who is exceptionally impervious to the arc of progress. His rhetoric and policies fly in the face of once-held optimism about progress against racism and xenophobia. In Europe, immigration issues have brought right-wing politicians to the spotlight, but sanity has prevailed so far, at least in France, Italy, the Netherlands (less so Austria, Poland, and Hungary). In the US, the crazies ARE the government. Maybe Toni Morrison, Nobel prize winner and esteemed intellectual, needs to rethink her position.

###

