

The Perception of Systemic Racism: Davis and Morrison

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Difficulty Passage:

“The inability to recognize the contemporary persistence of racisms within institutions and other social structures results in the attribution of responsibility for the effects of racisms to the individuals who are its casualties, thus further exacerbating the problem of failing to identify the economic, social, and ideological work of racism. There is a similar logic undergirding the criminalization of those communities, which are vastly overrepresented in jails and prisons. By failing to recognize the material forces of racism that are responsible for offering up such large numbers of black and Latino youth to the carceral state, the process of criminalization imputes responsibility to the individuals who are its casualties, thus reproducing the very conditions that produce racist patterns in incarceration and its seemingly infinite capacity to expand.” The misreading of these racist patterns replicates and reinforces the privatization that is at the core of neoliberalism, whereby social activity is individualized and the enormous profits generated by the punishment industry are legitimized.” (Davis, 117)

Engagement Passage:

“Our past is bleak. Our future dim. But I am not reasonable. A reasonable man adjusts to his environment. And unreasonable man does not. All progress, therefore, depends on the unreasonable man... We cannot be optimistic, but we can be clear. We can identify the enemy. We can begin by asking ourselves what is right rather than what is expedient. Know the difference between fever and the disease. Between racism and greed.” (Morrison, 67)

To overlook the ways in which legal institutions masks racism can be easy, yet destructive to the forward progress of our human society. In this passage, Angela Davis opens up with a radical claim. She states that failure to acknowledge the systemic racism hidden in our society spins the unfair treatment to responsibility of the victims. This ignorance shifts the burden to the victims, which in turn creates a never-ending cycle of racial inequality in society today. Davis goes on to talk about the parallels between systemic racism and the significant overrepresentation of black and Latino youth in incarceration, and how it becomes the responsibility of those incarcerated to spark change. Upon initially reading this, I could not fully grasp her point. Not only was I unable to understand, but I also did not agree with her argument. How could the blame be put on the individuals who suffer from the consequences of racism, instead of the individuals who perpetuate the system? The perpetrators of the institutionalized

racism should be the ones to carry the responsibility of breaking the cycle and initiate change. They are, after all, the very ones who are allowing the toxic system to remain toxic. I knew this passage had a deeper level of understanding to it, I just had trouble uncovering it. Davis' idea created strong cognitive dissonance as I sought for a better understanding of this passage.

In *Moral Inhabitants*, written by Toni Morrison, Morrison talks about analyzing the root of the problem. She says on page 67, "Our past is bleak. Our future dim. But I am not reasonable. A reasonable man adjusts to his environment. And unreasonable man does not. All progress, therefore, depends on the unreasonable man."¹ In saying "But I am not reasonable. A reasonable man adjusts to his environment,"² Morrison points out that true progress completely depends on the unreasonable man. The unreasonable man must open the mind of the reasonable men to make them realize their ignorance to the true problem. It does not matter how fair the reasonable people think they are, especially since they are the ones to contribute to the unjust institution.

As I continued to dig for a deeper meaning, I put these two passages from two different authors into conversation with one another. Davis' driving message highlights the significance in recognizing the institutionalized racism in our world today. She notes how easily overlooked this problem is, and the corrupting effect this has on everyone, especially those of color. "The inability to recognize the contemporary persistence of racisms within institutions and other social structures results in the attribution of responsibility for the effects of racisms to the individuals who are its casualties..."³

¹ Toni Morrison. "Moral Inhabitants," in *The Source of Self-Regard: Selected Essays, Speeches, and Meditations* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2019), 67

² Toni Morrison. "Moral Inhabitants," 67

³ Angela Davis. "Recognizing Racism in an Era of Neoliberalism," Vice Chancellor's Oration on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (Murdoch University, Perth, Western Australia March 18, 2008), 117

Drawing from Morrison now, she talks about the conditions that must be satisfied in order for progress to be made. Morrison claims that positive change in human society cannot be expected without changing the mind of “the reasonable man.” When applying this Morrison excerpt to Davis’ passage, the “reasonable man” becomes the people who ignore the existence of systemic racism. They believe they are being reasonable by following the law. These people are completely unaware of major flaws within the institution. Employing Davis’ logic, forward progress will always be impossible if there exist people who refuse to recognize the harsh consequences of institutionalized racism.

Initially, I was under the impression that Davis was actually blaming the victims for their own suffering. Reading both of these passages shifted my perception of Davis’ passage. Underneath the surface text of her passages lies the following message: The fault does not lie on the victim, but rather the system as a whole that provides the *illusion* of responsibility. The unjust system we live in today treats black and Latino people unfairly, without being held accountable for any of it, and instead pushes the blame to the people who are suffering from the consequences of the system. The privileged people in power believe they have no responsibility for the mistreatment of minorities. They believe the mistreated bring the mistreatment upon themselves. This illusion of responsibility is exponentially detrimental, as it eternalizes an increasingly horrible cycle of racism. In order to break this cycle, we first have to understand this cycle. We must recognize how the institution is simultaneously acceptable by law and also creates an environment for racism to thrive. It is not actually the victim’s fault, but rather the system as a whole that provides the *illusion* of responsibility. It is absolutely essential that the

“reasonable man” recognizes this if we want improvement. Ignorance to this problem will allow society to continue with no forward progress.

Davis’ use of ambiguous words in her passage can be seen as a metaphor to symbolize how easy it is to be unaware of the roots that perpetuate this cycle. Society gets held back by the people who are blind in their so-called reasonableness. The people that are oblivious to the consequences of their actions allow an unchanging, stagnant society. The thing is, it can be very hard to completely question one’s reasonableness—people do not usually have a reason to. Davis proves this challenging idea in her puzzling passage. Instead of explicitly stating the illusion of racial equality, she gets her message through by using words and phrases that requires some outside-the-box thinking to uncover the true meaning.

This means that the passage is only effective if the reader is aware enough to analyze it with an open mind. The reader must be able to look at everything from an outside perspective and understand it from Davis’ true meaning, rather than just the surface meaning. Taking a step back would shine a new light to help the reader make sense of the issue in the context of society today. They have to look at the whole picture and discover *why* Davis says what she is. Once the reader realizes the absurd but true statement that Davis says, it not only emphasizes how easily one can look past the crucial systemic problems that keep minorities down, but more importantly, the necessity of recognizing the source of this corruption.

Bibliography

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