



USA: Post-November 8, There Is Nowhere To Hide

By Novuyo Rosa Tshuma



Houston, United States of America - There is sometimes a moment one can pinpoint as demarcating a tectonic shift in one's being, a cracking open of something deep within, sucking one's mental and emotional resources of their vitality. The Death of Living as animated expression.

Just the week before November 8, I had been living, specifically traipsing all over my new home, Houston - having just moved from Iowa City, where I had spent the past three years, and before that Johannesburg, and four years before that the home of my birth, Bulawayo - hopping from Metro bus to Metro bus like the two-month old resident that I am. Standing on the side of the road, glistening in the exuberant Houston sun, my bracelets jangling, my Africa necklace - speaking of home, the repose of lazy Bulawayo streets on a Sunday morning, the frenetic beat of Jo'burg on a Saturday evening - dangling around my neck. Allowing myself the freedom to explore, to be, to risk losing my way. Squinting at Google Maps. Rejoicing in precious discoveries - a taste of the South in Mama B's Shrimp N' Grits at BB's on Montrose and Weistheimer. Savouring the breathtaking beauty of the Julia Ideson Building in downtown Houston, with its magnificent Reading Room, striking hallways and generous windows (lots of light!).

Traipsing. Discovering. Living. Being.

Something shifted on the night of November 8, letting in a fear and anger that has made it difficult to 'see.' And I attempt to use THAT word as little as possible here, because words, when deployed recklessly as they have been over the past several months, can and do Trump our attempts to accord ourselves humanity, dignity. No, I don't want to use that word, it has been on my mind since November 8, it desires to make itself the single story, to swallow us and regurgitate us as inferior versions of ourselves, minions serving as apprentices to a Trumpian universe - the very worst of dystopia. Words carry meaning, connotations, context; words are never innocent, we know that. What does it mean, this 'T' word, what meanings and connotations has it accorded itself?

Trump/Trømp/

verb

1. Calling for a [ban on all Muslims](#) (remember Adolf Hitler's call to first ostracise and then exterminate all Jews?)
2. [Claiming - against data that suggests that there is no evidence that immigrants commit more crimes than native-born Americans - that Mexican immigrants are rapists and criminals](#)
3. 2016 word for Mysogyny: [Bragging that one as a \(famous white\) male can 'grab them by the pussy'](#)
4. [Debasing Black Lives Matter and reducing it to a terrorist movement](#) (rhetoric reminiscent of the [Reagan Era when Civil Rights and the affirmative action movement were seen in a similar light](#), and [support was given to apartheid South Africa, meanwhile demonising the anti-apartheid movement](#) as 'terrorists')

Synonyms

1. [Smearing 'Make America White Again' swastikas on buildings](#)
2. [Placing a black baby doll with rope around its neck in an elevator on a college campus](#)
3. [Declaring that Black Lives Don't Matter](#)
4. [Shouting slogans such as 'Cotton Picker, You're a Nigger, Heil Hitler'](#)
5. [Free and public expression of sentiments such as the following: 'I can't wait until Trump asks us to rape your people and send you back over the biggest damn wall we're going to build'](#)
6. [Free and public expression of sentiments such as the following: 'How scared are u, u black bitch? I should kill u right now!'](#)

I am overcome by a profound grief. I mourn for my personal illusion of America and what was possible in it, the death of the very best of my America that had so far cultivated in me a culture of free speech and thought as advancing humanity. A space that allows one the freedom to see, if one so wishes, in a world that does not want to be seen, only looked at. It takes a long time to see. Seeing is a difficult thing, always in flux because it's reciprocal, a dialectical activity always in conversation with the world. The view is never static. And everything matters with seeing - angle, distance, depth, breadth, obstruction, mood... The mood of fear instigates a shrinking away from the lens and a surface view of others.

To stare at an image of yourself and come face to face with a face that you cannot recognise as your own, a caricature as seen by others, is the most dehumanising experience. It is a form of erasure

Viet Thanh Nguyen expresses the ethics and responsibility of seeing in his book, *Nothing Ever Dies*,

where he talks eloquently about the value of Remembering One's Own, as well as the value of Remembering Others:

'If the ethics of remembering one's own operates in every society, the ethics of remembering others is the refinement of remembering one's own, at work only in those societies that see themselves as more open, inclusive, and tolerant...An ethics of recognition involves a change in how we see the other, and in how we see ourselves as well, especially in relation to the other...To avoid simplifying the other, the ethics of recognition demands that we remember our humanity and inhumanity, and the humanity and inhumanity of others as well. As for what this ethics of recognition asks us to forget - it is the idea that anyone or any nation or any people has a unique claim to humanity, to suffering, to pain, to being the exceptional victim.' (2016: 77-97)

TO BE DEHUMANISED AND TO DEHUMANISE IN RETURN

I feel trapped in the imagery of November 8, in the experience of having been dehumanised and having a strong impulse, out of the hurt to, in turn, dehumanise. To see the world around me in terms of a totalising whiteness, and reflected in this my blackness. The white young man with a ragged beard at my regular Starbucks who is cleaning my table as I type this; does he look at me now, post-November 8, reeking of my Africanness with my wooden bangles and Africa necklace, and see a Trumpian immigrant? Is this who he is, a 'white man'? Is this who I am, a 'black immigrant'?

The Black Skin and White Masks of Fanon -that dynamic, oft-misunderstood, abused, anguished, beautiful mind -are calling out to me. What, in the end, did he say?

'Before embarking on a positive voice, freedom needs to make an effort at disalienation...It is through self-consciousness and renunciation, through a permanent tension of his freedom, that man can create the ideal conditions of existence for a human world. Superiority? Inferiority? Why not simply try to touch the other, feel the other, discover each other?' (1967: 205- 206)

A Friday walk in the early evening, three days after November 8, along Shepherd Avenue, turns into a stumble. Everything is a blur; Trader Joe's to my right - housed, amusingly, in what used to be a cinema - and Little Pappas Seafood Kitchen to my left. Overhead, near the corner of Shepherd and Alabama, like some omen in a dystopian novel, the crows have gathered on the electricity wires, smudges of black against a cobalt-grey sky. There is whiteness all around me, everywhere whiteness, whiteness everywhere; I cannot breathe, blackness, whiteness, breathe, breathe, try to breathe...When I glimpse the two homeless men (white) who are always sitting by the bus-stop at the corner of Shepherd and Richmond and who sometimes greet me and whom I sometimes greet, I quickly cross the street.

Can we talk about the foundational ideas of Western civilisation and address its seeming inability to recognise other cultures except as a negation of itself? It becomes difficult, in an authoritarian atmosphere, to ask these kinds of questions freely

Are we now forever caught in a binary of blackness and whiteness? To stare at an image of yourself and come face to face with a face that you cannot recognise as your own, a caricature as seen by others, is the most dehumanising experience. It is a form of erasure. It is like an emptying of the insides, of the essential parts of you; it is a muting, a mutilation, a death of the real you and a rebirth of someone you do not recognise but may be shocked to find, through constant answering to this false image, yourself becoming.

This is what colonialism is. This is what imperialism is. This is what fear turns us into.

One of the attributes of the America I have experienced and that threatens to get lost - and there are many attributes of this place, some very beautiful, some very ugly, for the USA is both a country and an empire, doing the ugly things that countries and, on a more devastating scale, empires do - is the upholding of the thing I hold most dear: The freedom to think. To explore, free of limitations, in the sense of independent thinking and thoughtful expression, the potential of our world; the work of creative invention and intellectual innovation. It is different to grapple with the questions of how the recent surge in civic participation and ethical responsibility currently being propagated by Americans following Trump's election can be extended in the American imagination from just a protection of all persecuted Americans to all humans persecuted by American imperialism. It becomes difficult not to read articles that [speak so humanely about the plight of white rural America](#), highlighting this plight, which is a real thing, without noting, again, the kind of language that is deployed, that flattens and gives a one-dimensional view, with a kind of disingenuousness that fails to address how often racist and conservative in its view of non-white peoples much of white rural America is (I, as a black person, have been warned repeatedly not to try to venture to the rural parts of white America on my own, as it may be dangerous because of my skin colour), and how these two issues - the economic plight of white rural America and the concurrent ideas around race, especially given how racist, violent and inflammatory the pre-November election campaign language has been - ought not to be separated. They have a real tie to history. They both require grave attention. Which is to say, doesn't this one-dimensional view facilitate pathos and not empathy, in the same kind of manner, but for different purposes, that the political rhetoric deployed during the election campaign flattened Muslims, Mexicans, minorities, people of colour, women and LGBTQs? It is this sort of erasure of language and its possibilities that I mourn, whose divisive currency now leads to a clamouring of voices as we all seek to inhabit the 'group' designated to us by narrow political rhetoric and compete, 'free-market' style, to highlight our respective plights as most deserving of attention over the plights of others. I become tempted to add a very long list of grievances that this space, that functions both as country and empire, ought to address with the same level of moral fervour: What about the plight of the Native Americans in the reserves? What about the Iraqi civilians trapped in the nightmare instigated by the US invasion of Iraq? The Syrian civilians (I hesitate to call them refugees as this immediately attaches the kind of narrow imaginary that others, flattens and divides). What about the black and brown peoples of the world who are the casualties, in their countries, of the 'soft imperialism' enforced by the US and Western Europe often in cahoots with local governments and elites - IMF and trade policies that hurt local industries and protect multinational corporations from bearing environmental responsibility? Is it possible, in this atmosphere, to ask, with the aim of the kind of critique that expands rather than constricts, how American culture can be made less insular so as to learn more about the rest of the world it must share with everybody else? Can we talk about the foundational ideas of Western civilisation and address its seeming inability to recognise other cultures except as a negation of itself? It becomes difficult, in an authoritarian atmosphere, to ask these kinds of questions freely, even 'innocently', and to cultivate the kind of creative and intellectual exploration that leads to innovative imaginaries of how we may inhabit our world. This is the kind of slower, yet equally crucial work of the creative enterprise, the work of slow-cooking the soul until it's nice and tender, making sure not to turn up the heat too high lest that soul-stew burns.

An essay about a book due for a class turns into a post-Trump rant (directed at the book but so obviously not about the book). 'White people'. 'Whiteness'. 'Privilege'. 'White Supremacy'. I cannot breathe. I cannot 'see'. Something feels bruised within. I can feel the fatigue creeping in. The creative and intellectual work I think I have been doing and participating in all this time - it suddenly feels inconsequential. Powerlessness. Grief.

There is nowhere to hide.

THE SLIPPERINESS OF IDEAS

Friday evening, November 11. At the Menil Gallery for a talk by the celebrated poet Terrance Hayes on the relationships between the written line and the drawn line. There is a precision to the stark, white walls of the gallery, a delicious coolness to the air-conditioned room. This hushed, civilised bourgeois atmosphere feels, in the context of the rest of the week, surreal. Hayes's tawny skin, his graceful movements, his collected comportment, are in themselves an artistic installation thrown against the crisp white background of the Menil. Listening to him speak about the slipperiness of language, and the slipperiness of ideas as things that inhabit tangible, visible shapes, I can't help but think of the ideas stuffed to near-bursting in the suffocating shapes we are each being encouraged to inhabit by the polarising language of political rhetoric. Anger is a surface response, a superficial response because it covers something else. It is necessary for the artist to be a shape-shifter, so as to inhabit different consciousnesses. Vulnerability can be a sort of power. Openness can be a sort of power. Vulnerability leaves one open to surprise.

Listening to Hayes's talk, I can't help but think of the people on the continent, back in South Africa and especially Zimbabwe. Have we, I wonder, been so abused and so beat down politically by many of our own leaders, that we have lost the capacity for outrage or any sort of meaningful emotion, the kind of response that can stir up something other than apathetic cynicism?

Listening to Hayes's talk, I can't help but think of the people on the continent, back in South Africa and especially Zimbabwe, and the kinds of political environments we inhabit. Have we, I wonder, been so abused and so beat down politically by many of our own leaders, and also this tumultuous history of struggle, that we have lost the capacity for outrage or any sort of meaningful emotion, the kind of response that can stir up something other than apathetic cynicism? What is this loss of the impetus to dare to imagine a radically different tomorrow? The death of the hope that we can get there? How, in an age where we have been encouraged to live only for ourselves and validate only those things in the world that impact us and our 'group' directly, can we expand the nodes of connection across a horizontal axis - that is to say, across spaces and nations - and not just a vertical one - the nationalist rhetoric we are hearing now everywhere, centred around our respective flags? What is it that Arundhati Roy said about flags? ['Flags are bits of coloured cloth that governments use, first to shrink wrap people's brains, and then as ceremonial shrouds to bury the dead.'](#)

THE WORLD OUTSIDE, THE WORLD WITHIN

Seated at the Menil, listening to Hayes's magnificent talk, and the invitation to the cheese and wine after, I imagine the effects of a timely disturbance just outside, the kind of frenetic commotion I feel inside; white and black bodies, slamming against the front glass wall of the gallery, faces squished against the pane; a thud, a jolt, our inner bourgeois tranquility ruffled, if only momentarily, as the world outside struggles to collide with the world within.

Published by the good folks at [The Elephant](#).

The Elephant is a platform for engaging citizens to reflect, re-member and re-envision their society by interrogating the past, the present, to fashion a future.

Follow us on [Twitter](#).

