

## The Marginalization Into “The Other”

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In *Black Matters*, Toni Morrison illuminates the marginalization of specific groups, such as women in The Second Sex, emphasizing how underrepresented groups are outcasted as “the other.”<sup>1</sup> Both serve as revolutionary texts for the rights of women and African Americans. In The Second Sex, Simone De Beauvoir describes how men subjugate and define women as “the other.” This notion is ingrained into society: men are the “essential one”, while women are defined as “pure alterity.”<sup>2</sup> De Beauvoir’s complicated language makes it particularly difficult to dig into the text and uncover her true definition of “the other.” When initially reading it, the muddled diction and repetition of “the other” and “the one” confused me as to what was meant by these terms. The constant switching of both words exemplifies the difficulties that come along with De Beauvoir’s piece.

When looking for meaning in De Beauvoir’s difficult language, I looked to the analogy at the beginning of the paragraph to bring clarity to her words. Her explanation of how “a local is shocked to realize that in neighboring countries locals view him as a foreigner” and vice versa reveals the oddity of how women succumbed into becoming “the other.”<sup>3</sup> This analogy shows how different groups are defined to be “the other” in certain situations and are never seen in an accepted light. The way women yield into being “the other” unique to the relationship between women and men. The roles of women and men as “the other” and “the one” are never flipped, they are definite.

To further understand the discussion of “the other” by De Beauvoir, it is extremely valuable to look at the premise of Toni Morrison’s *Black Matters*. Here, Morrison discusses how

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<sup>1</sup> The phrase “the other” along with “the one” are commonly used in the De Beauvoir difficulty passage

<sup>2</sup> Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany Chevallier (New York: Vintage, 2011), 27.

<sup>3</sup> Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 27.

Africans and African Americans<sup>4</sup> tremendous impact on American literature has been belittled into the new idea that “canonical American literature is free of, uninformed by, and unshaped by, the four-hundred-year-old presence of first Africans and then African-Americans in the United States.”<sup>5</sup> The identity of American literature as we know it is as Morrison states: “the preserve of white male views, genius and power.”<sup>6</sup> Later in the text, she delves deeper into how literary whiteness cannot be understood without the understanding of literary blackness. Much of American literature has been built upon the nature of race and the portrayal of the “Africanistic presence” that Morrison describes. This presence is central to the identity of American literature. Without it, the canon of this “literary whiteness” cannot be understood.<sup>7</sup> African and African Americans impact is deeply rooted in all forms of the American identity and helped shape “the body politic, the Constitution” and much more.<sup>8</sup> African Americans’ presence throughout history is undeniable, but fails to be recognized on a broader scale.

This relationship between Whites and African Americans is very similar to what De Beauvoir describes in The Second Sex. Africans and African Americans are “the other” when it comes to their role in American literature, diminished to a lesser role without a choice. Although their impact upon canonical American literature is certain, it has been deemed unimportant by the white male perspective that rules American literature. This same perspective is what has belittled women to becoming “the other.” Privileged males have posited themselves as “essential”, while marginalizing other groups in the process. This can be seen in Morrison’s

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<sup>4</sup> In “Black Matters”, Morrison emphasizes the significant impact both Africans and African Americans have had upon American literature. To keep the essay from being too wordy, I will be using the term “African Americans” when referring to this groups impact.

<sup>5</sup> Toni Morrison, “Black Matter(s),” *Grand Street* 40 (1991): 205.

<sup>6</sup> Toni Morrison, “Black Matter(s),” 205.

<sup>7</sup> Toni Morrison, “Black Matter(s),” 205-208.

<sup>8</sup> Toni Morrison, “Black Matter(s),” 205.

description of how American literature has evolved from a kind of “Americanness.”<sup>9</sup> This idea completely leaves out African Americans, differentiating them from what can be considered “American.” De Beauvoir also reveals segregation of men and women, as men are put into the category of the “essential one”, and women “the other.”

This division causes the male group to be seen as valuable, and the marginalized to be seen as inhuman. The dehumanization of these groups was the same justification for slavery and has existed throughout the eras of the two texts to subdue groups in the minority. These claims help to explain why it is almost impossible for women and African Americans to break the shackles of “otherness”. When De Beauvoir asks the rhetorical question, “Why do women not contest male sovereignty?”<sup>10</sup>, the answer becomes evident. Women have been defined as “the other” for so long across time, they do not contest it anymore. This ideology has been built from an early time and persisted into modern day societies. Just as how Africans and African Americans have been seen as other by the white European male, women have been burnt into this category of “other.” This correlation is clear and shows that history has been dictated by those in power, specifically the perpetuation of dominance by the white male European.

Both passages by Morrison and De Beauvoir are critical in understanding that certain groups across time have been outcasted and deemed as the “other” by more powerful groups. By using Toni Morrison’s piece to explain the meaning of De Beauvoir’s language in The Second Sex, a comparison can be made between the categorization of women into “otherness” and the marginalization of African Americans in the realm of American literature. Both show a clear view of how European and American societies have been dictated by white male views and

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<sup>9</sup> Toni Morrison, “Black Matter(s),” 205.

<sup>10</sup> Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 27.

ideals, while other groups have become deemed as lesser. Due to the power males have perpetrated upon history; It has made it difficult for both women and African Americans to escape the tag of being known as “the other” and being dehumanized into a state of worthlessness. This issue requires a revolution of action to prevent the static situation that has persisted into our lives today.

## Bibliography

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