The Ethics of Swagger

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In the twenty-first century, Toni Morrison’s lofty stature seems almost preordained. Her writing epitomizes serious fiction, and she is that rarity, a black literary celebrity. Although her popularity remains high, her career inspires dissent. Some critics extol her as innovative while others dismiss her as imitative. If this disagreement, given the subjectivity of artistic judgments, is predictable, it also hints at how racial realities influence creativity. Morrison, more than any of the Black Archivists, noted the profits and the perils that attended black novels’ broader circulation in white mainstream channels. Because of her careful cost/benefit analysis, certain commentators deem her an opportunist. Such detractions are whispered today, but when her fifth novel, Beloved, was published in 1987, they were voiced raucously. Since criticism about Beloved often concentrates on post-publication events, Morrison’s mindset before she completed the novel rarely gets full scrutiny. Such neglect obscures her encounters with white literary expectations. When these encounters are examined, her plight along with that of other Reagan era black novelists crystallizes.

Beloved is usually viewed as the crowning text of Morrison’s literary rise,¹ and by the 1980s, when she planned and wrote this book, her career

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¹. A 2006 New York Times Book Review poll recognized Beloved as “the single best work of American fiction published in the last 25 years” (Anonymous, “What”). This accomplishment recalled Ralph Ellison’s distinction when in 1965, the New York Herald Tribune recognized Invisible
was ascending. Despite the ascendancy, she felt uncertain about black fiction. She believed that the novel was becoming an important genre for African Americans, yet she found too few writers who were recording the legacies that integration threatened to erase. She feared that this disregard for cultural preservation would rob the black novelist of her moorings. If Morrison sought to thwart such robberies and challenge mainstream America’s distorted portraits of black life, then her interest in literary prizes, an interest born in the 1970s, suggested her complex relationship with white aesthetic judgments. Notwithstanding the voluminous criticism that *Beloved* has inspired, not much attention has been paid to how the book’s themes dramatize its author’s grappling with the black novelist’s pursuit of artistic autonomy. This grappling emerges via a black couple’s search for love in the context of white supremacy. Reflecting both her interest in cultural history and her meditations on black fiction and prizewinning, Morrison’s linkage of heterosexual romance and literary work reveals how desire and satisfaction are contorted by America’s racial past. She uses love and labor to reveal the moral convictions that can affirm black life in this nation; these convictions inform the ethics of swagger.

While many of the more than six hundred articles, chapters, dissertations, essays, and monographs that *Beloved* has inspired analyze its title character, only a handful engage Sethe and Paul D’s love affair. This novel undeniably has a lot to do with Beloved the character; nevertheless, fully understanding the book requires a sustained look at the

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2. Morrison, in 1986, observed, “I was talking to a woman writer a couple of years ago and she said that all her hopes in her work were in the future. And I said that all mine were in the past, meaning that . . . there were things already there that had either been buried, discredited, or never looked at and I feel it particularly strongly with black literature.” Extending that thought, she suggested that the black novel, despite its nineteenth-century roots, remained a “new” enterprise: “The examination of it, the experimentation within it, the information that has to surface from it, the play in it—it’s still very, very young and new and that’s all right because I think it’s only been very recently that it was important to have black novels really, for black people at large” (McCluskey 40).

odd couple at its center. Aside from offering an example of hard-won intimacy, this pair also expresses a crucial metaphor. Sethe and Paul D occupy a nineteenth-century world of slavery, emancipation, and Reconstruction. Though they seem divorced from the 1980s, their relationship involves single motherhood, child killing, and imprisonment, three poignant themes from the Reagan era, during which Morrison wrote the book. This resonance could be understood as an instance of contemporary readers being forced “to reconsider the traumatic past” (Page, Dangerous 157). While Morrison admitted such intentions, she stated that it was only after Beloved’s publication that she sensed the book’s demand for a memorial that could “summon the presences of, or recollect the absences of slaves” (“A Bench” 44). Her earlier ambitions for the novel were less epic. She explains, “[Beloved] was not about the institution—Slavery with a capital S. It was about these anonymous people called slaves. What they do to keep on, how they make a life, what they’re willing to risk, however long it lasts, in order to relate to one another” (Angelo 257). Emphasizing pleasure amid distress, the novelist’s decision to make Sethe and Paul D’s relationship a metaphor of her quest for creative independence suggests the unevenness of black access to happiness. This unevenness spawns resentment, emulation, and new experiments in self-definition, a trio of responses that captures Morrison’s movement through confounding and then revising prejudice.

Focusing Sethe and Paul D’s chase after intimacy through the lens of Morrison’s encounters with New Criticism and American prize-granting committees, this chapter argues that Beloved betrays its author’s bouts with “whitefolks on the brain” (A. Walker, In Search 35). It links the text’s depictions of self-determined love with Morrison’s struggle to find the proper attitude toward mainstream approval. Contending that Sethe and Paul D’s alliance shows the inter- and intraracial entanglements that precede healing, this analysis concludes that in Beloved, Morrison revealed how deeply white calculations of literary value influenced her even as she finally discovered the folly of such investments. Her experiences and


5. In 1972, Alice Walker stated that critics inexplicable preference for Richard Wright’s Native Son (1940) rather than Zora Neale Hurston’s Their Eyes Were Watching God (1937) boiled down to each novel’s position on “worrying about white folks” (In Search 35). Her folksy phrase captured the importance of black thrall to white expectation, and her use of Hurston and Wright suggested why knowing the black literary tradition might simplify the post–civil rights writer’s creative tasks.
those of her characters illustrate the dangers of a facile subscription to received standards. Whether in a post-Emancipation or a post–civil rights world, black confrontations with white expectations demand sophisticated decisions about what should and should not be kept. Making those decisions starts with discovering an ethical compass.

Creative Risks and Intimacy’s Lessons

Sethe and Paul D represent two of the black community’s more controversial members—the single mother and the ex-convict. Although these types raised moral concerns throughout African American history, during the late 1970s and the 1980s, impassioned speeches about family values and black male criminality made putative “welfare queens” and “Willie Hortons” the objects of more intense scrutiny. For Morrison, such “pariah figures” had long been central to her art (Tate, “Toni” 168).

6. Sethe, even under slavery, does not experience an out of wedlock childbirth, the moral breach that often pushes discussions of black single motherhood toward sanctimony. Nonetheless, her female-headed household provokes a related acid discourse. See Stanley Elkin’s Slavery: A Problem in American Institutional and Intellectual Life (1959) and Daniel Patrick Moynihan’s The Negro Family: The Case for National Action (1965) for castigations of black matriarchy. For analyses of how Morrison’s portrayals of slavery engage these discourses, see James Berger’s “Ghosts of Liberalism: Morrison’s Beloved and the Moynihan Report” (1999) and Michelle Pagni-Stewart’s “Moynihan’s ‘Tangle of Pathology’: Toni Morrison’s Legacy of Motherhood” (1997).


8. Morrison had depicted female-headed households through the characters of Eva and Hannah Peace, Nel Wright, and Pilate and Reba Dead in Sula and Song of Solomon, respectively. Ex-convicts such as The Bluest Eye’s Cholly Breedlove and Sula’s Shadrack also received sustained portrayals. These characters reflected Morrison’s belief that “the black community is a pariah community” (Tate, “Toni” 168). John Edgar Wideman admired Morrison’s interest in outlaw characters; in fact, Bonnie TuSmith suggests that Wideman sees a “call-and-response between his works and those of Toni Morrison” (Conversations ix). The Black Archivists solve many problems of black representation because they use one another to grow on.
withstanding these precedents, her focus on outcasts in *Beloved* explored how slavery and its aftermath required dealing with white authority and black subordination. Her point was not that bondage caused single motherhood or incarceration; rather, she contended that these judgmental labels in themselves assaulted black cultural complexity. During a testy exchange, Morrison critiqued such assaults. Regarding teen pregnancy and single motherhood, she stated, “Neither of those things seems to me a debility. . . . I don’t think anybody cares about unwed mothers unless they’re black—or poor. The question is not morality, the question is money” (Angelo 260, 261). She also claimed that black male employment and criminality aroused “comic-book solutions” rather than a “vigorou

Although Morrison impugns the hypocrisy of family-values rhetoric and law-and-order ideals, her remarks illustrate the problems that arise when mainstream morality flattens black experiences to assert white superiority. She knew that such gestures were not confined to sociopolitical discussions, and her attitude toward New Criticism suggests how completely she grasps the stakes.

Morrison did not begin publishing until 1970, yet she acquired her idea of a writer’s function during the heyday of New Criticism. Talking about that moment, she observed, “In the fifties, when I was a student, the embarrassment of being called a politically minded writer was so acute, the fear of critical derision for channeling one’s creativity toward the state of social affairs so profound, it made me wonder . . . What could be so bad about being socially astute, politically aware in literature?” (*Sula* xi). She offered the previous comment in 2004, but she made a similar point in 1984 while she was working on *Beloved*:

I am not interested in indulging myself in some private, closed exercise of my imagination that fulfills only the obligation of my personal dreams—which is to say yes, the work must be political. It must have that as its thrust. That’s a pejorative term in critical circles now: if a work of art has any political influence in it, somehow it’s tainted. My feeling is just the opposite: if it has none, it is tainted. (Morrison, *What* 64)

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9. Nancy Peterson discusses the alarmed response to Morrison’s remarks on teenage pregnancy and black male criminality in her 1993 article “Canonizing Toni Morrison.”

10. Morrison’s statement not only evoked New Criticism but also the more pernicious specter of Joseph McCarthy, the Wisconsin senator whose allegations wreaked havoc in the 1950s. For more on McCarthy, see David Oshinsky’s *A Conspiracy So Immense: The World of Joe McCarthy* (1985) and Arthur Herman’s *Joseph McCarthy: Reexamining the Life and Legacy of America’s Most Hated Senator* (2000).
From the 1950s, when she was in college, through the 1980s, when she was already an award-winning writer, Morrison remained convinced that white aesthetic judgments generally and the formalist mandates of New Criticism specifically unduly influenced black literary expression. Her response was to try to be both “a careful . . . craftswoman” and a novelist who reflected a reality “beyond the story told at the center of the text” (Morrison, What xiv). Beloved’s accounts of Sethe and Paul D’s relationship suggest how skillfully she achieved this combination.

Sethe and Paul D as a couple signal Morrison’s willingness to politicize her depiction of romantic love. Although debates surrounding female-headed households, serving prison time, and shacking-up define post–civil rights America, her engagement with these loaded discourses is evident in the contrast between Sethe’s marriage to Halle and her affair with Paul D. When Sethe arrived at Sweet Home, the Kentucky plantation where she met Paul D in 1848, she was a young girl who was struggling with her mother’s death and the meaning of her own survival. After twelve months of patient observation, she chose Halle to be her husband. Morrison’s portrayal of this slave union emphasizes tenderness and naïve expectancy. Upon telling her mistress Mrs. Garner that Halle had proposed, Sethe innocently asked, “Is there a wedding” (27). Her sentiment partially reflects the inability to destroy human desire. Beyond that though, Sethe betrays an idealization of both Halle and their marriage. Her efforts to make slave life normal show a penchant for “fluidly turning her dream into the truth” (Mayberry 164). If this penchant prompts Mrs. Garner’s bemused condescension, then by the time she reunites with Paul D, more than two decades later, her dreams have met much crueler fates.

Sethe and Paul D’s reunion reflects slow-steeping lust. By all accounts, she has not been dating since she left Sweet Home in 1855, and he, though not celibate, was still driven by “the sex with her [he] had been imagining off and on for twenty-five years” (25). The two do not jump into bed as soon as they see each other; however, their lovemaking is not long delayed, and its implications are complicated. Paul D’s sexual desire for Sethe helped him endure a chain gang in Alfred, Georgia, where he was forced to perform fellatio on prison guards. While she carried no fantasies during the interim between 1855 and 1873, she does see

11. In The Negro Novel in America (1965), Robert Bone classically expressed the view that political content was a handicapping force for the black novel. Lawrence Jackson concisely documents the New Critical roots of Robert Bone’s study (Indignant 473). For more on Bone and New Criticism, see Clarence Major’s The Dark and Feeling (1974).
him as someone whose affection can blunt the murderous impulses that landed her in jail and in a haunted house. The realities that surround Sethe and Paul D’s lives invest their consummation and their decision to live together with felicity, but other factors taint their circumstances.

No one in Beloved protests the immorality of Sethe and Paul D’s situation, yet Morrison allows a collision of Reconstruction era behavior and late twentieth-century narratives of black deviance to inform her novel’s events. Noting among other things Sethe’s status as “a single mother working a low-paying job,” James Berger concludes that her “family is certainly dysfunctional, if not (to use a loaded term from the Moynihan report) pathological” (411). Berger’s gloss suggests Beloved’s engagement with demonizing narratives of black family life, and his broader argument explicitly links these narratives to white attempts to study the putative mysteries of black behaviors. This exploration of white totalizing narratives and the way that they condition black experience becomes crucial not only to Beloved’s presentation of family but also its depictions of love. By examining the interplay between Sweet Home’s two male slaveholders and Sethe and Paul D’s respective searches for identity, the full implications of white expectations and black desire can be seen.

The basis of Sethe and Paul D’s familiarity is their shared enslavement. On Sweet Home, the two experienced first the enlightened ownership of Mr. Garner and then the spirit-rending superintendence of Schoolteacher, two very different white men. Garner identified respect rather than coercion as the crux of mastery and deemed his slaves “men” because they complied with his wishes out of reason, not intimidation (220). When Garner died, leaving his plantation to his wife, her cousin, Schoolteacher, restructured Sweet Home instituting a dehumanizing regime steeped in “measurement, analysis, and classification” of black life (McGurl 346). Notwithstanding Garner and Schoolteacher’s differences, both men distorted Sethe and Paul D’s options for selfhood.

Before she ever met Mr. Garner or encountered his “special kind of slavery,” Sethe experienced life with a mother who died trying to escape from a plantation and who protested being raped by throwing her children away “without names” (140, 62). This lineage explains some of her later attitudes. At Sweet Home, Sethe initially attempted to beat back white authority with delicate ornamentation such as myrtle and mint sprig. These embellishments were meant as subtle buffers against the arbitrary power of whiteness, a power she associated with her mother’s hung corpse and her siblings who were murdered as a “resistance tactic” (Bou-
While its form was decorative, her act was essentially evasive. Paul D’s accounts of his time on the plantation hint at why. Unlike Sethe, he has no parents. His only family is his brothers, Paul A and Paul F, and his close friends, Sixo and Halle. While Paul D and his siblings happily take Garner’s word that they are men, Sixo and Halle raise questions about black freedom and white authority. Garner’s presence allows the Pauls to claim if not liberty then at least distinction. When Garner dies and Schoolteacher’s reign begins, everyone on Sweet Home gains perspective.

The lenience that defined Garner’s stewardship lulled Sethe and the Pauls into complacency. Knowing the costs of seeking true freedom, namely running away, they all equivocated. Their isolation in the “wonderful lie” that was the plantation ended when Schoolteacher taught them what Garner had only implied—the absoluteness of white authority (221). Although his methods were ostensibly objective and scientific, Schoolteacher’s dispassionate practices not only yielded profitability but also emotional harrowing. His techniques inspired the slaves to hatch an escape plot. Because it broke up Sethe’s marriage and sent Paul D to the chain gang, this escape attempt exemplifies the wreckage that accompanies the pursuit of black independence. Sethe and Paul D’s relationship begins with these fateful steps toward freedom, and this origin complete with the twenty-five year gestation, the unequal consequences, and the distinct personalities symbolizes Morrison as she attempted to make sense of how white aesthetic assumptions fit into her art.

In 1977, Morrison stated, “I was . . . aware that there was an enormous amount of apology going on, even in the best [black] writing. But more important than that, there was so much explanation . . . the Black writers always explained something to somebody else. And I didn’t want to explain anything to anybody else!” (Bakerman 38). Three years later, the novelist specified who she meant by “anybody”: “I’m always a little disturbed by the sociological evaluations white people make of Black literature . . . It’s demoralizing for me to be required to explain Black life once again for the benefit of white people” (Koenen 67). Morrison wanted to document the complexity of black existence, yet after studying the African American literary tradition, she felt that indulging an unin-
formed white audience caused lapses in creativity. She explained, “I was preoccupied with books by black people that approached [black experience], but I always missed some intimacy, some direction, some voice. Ralph Ellison and Richard Wright . . . were saying something . . . to white people, to men. 13 Just in terms of the style, I missed something in the fiction that I felt in a real sense in the music and poetry of black artists” (Ruas 96). 14 Throughout her career, Morrison attempted to free her art from the bonds of assuming a white readership, but at the same moment, she was increasingly invested in prizewinning, a designation of merit that is largely mediated by whites. Her attitude recalls Sethe and Paul D’s pre-Schoolteacher mindsets.

Just as Sethe idealizes her marriage and Paul D romanticizes his manhood, Morrison uses prizewinning to gauge the value of black autonomy in America. The room that Garner gives for self-expression seems immense, particularly when measured against past experiences (i.e., hung corpses) and other alternatives (i.e., the brutality of neighboring slaveholders). Despite providing this license, Sweet Home is still a plantation; thus, Sethe and Paul D are defining themselves within a space designed for slavery. Mark McGurl connects Beloved’s plantation imagery to Morrison’s teaching career as a university professor. 15 While that connection is insightful, the link between Sweet Home, the plantation, and the American prize-granting establishment illuminates the ethical issues that inform Morrison’s aesthetic practice. Specifically, it conveys her attempt to decide whether mainstream awards were orienting marks in a pluralistic society or shibboleths meant to distract and distort. Morrison’s history with prizes and awards prior to Beloved clarifies her pursuit of the ethics of swagger.

Morrison believed that the lack of prizewinning black novels implied lingering mainstream doubts about African American creativity. Although

13. Laura Doyle suggests that Morrison’s reactions to her black male predecessors deeply condition her fiction. See her chapter, “‘To Get to a Place’: Intercorporeality in Beloved,” in Bordering on the Body: The Racial Matrix of Modern Fiction and Culture (1994) for an expansive treatment of Morrison’s response to Ralph Ellison.

14. Regarding black writers and black musicians, Ntozake Shange affirms Morrison’s point: “We, as a people, or as a literary cult, or a literary culture have not demanded singularity from our writers . . . a black writer can get away with abscond and covet for him or herself the richness of his or her person long before a black musician or singer cd” (3). John Edgar Wideman makes a similar point about black musical virtuosity in “Stomping the Blues: Rituals in Black Music and Speech” (1978).

she considered such sentiments ignorant, she also felt that without a record of achievement, any objection to white literary judgments would be viewed as a case of sour grapes. As the jewelry that accessorized “qualities of [literary] greatness,” awards not only negotiated “transactions between . . . cultural and political capital” but also provided tremendous leverage in the black artist’s psyche (Black Creation 4; English 10). Morrison’s demands for prestige, however, are initially as barren as Sethe and Paul D’s slave-borne attempts to normalize black hope. Notwithstanding a temporary relief from bondage’s severity, they submit to white authority, and their efforts become trivial aberrations that prove the norm. With her runners-up for the 1974 (Sula) and the 1978 National Book Awards (Song of Solomon), and even her 1977 National Book Critics Circle Award triumph, Morrison felt the pressure exerted by that reality. Beloved reflects her discoveries about such pressure and her investment in esteem rather than prestige.

When Sula, her second novel, was shortlisted for the NBA, Morrison manifested concerns about black artistic authority and creative concession. She suggested that in the book’s opening, she had tried to close the “threshold between the [white] reader and the black-topic text” by constructing a “safe, welcoming lobby” (Sula xv). Although her sensitivity to white readers yielded a defensible adjustment, her decision revealed a willingness to subordinate black values to white expectations. When her next book Song of Solomon was nominated for both the NBCCA and the NBA, Morrison’s engagement with the ethical consequences of writing to meet white standards grew even more complicated. She won the NBCCA and lost the NBA, yet her reaction, tempered dissatisfaction, betrayed less a competitive personality and more the belief that prizewinning held crucial, if convoluted significance for her and for black novelists. The 1977 National Book Critics Circle Award represented a breakthrough, but Morrison’s reaction to the announcement of the 1978 National Book Award winner suggested her complex engagements with white literary expectations. When Collette Dowling traveled with Morrison shortly after the announcement, she speculated that the novelist’s disappointment at not winning might have caused a “bad mood” during the trip. Dowling writes, “Many people in the publishing industry had considered Toni Morrison a shoo-in [for the NBA] . . . Perhaps this bad news had accounted for her bad mood earlier” (55). Dowling’s opinions are a dubious basis for
experiences of failed and successful plans for liberty clarify Morrison’s reasonings.

Sethe and Paul D remember Sweet Home nostalgically because of marriage and brotherhood, yet the plantation acquires its most profound meaning as a catalyst for their freedom. While Schoolteacher’s brutality eloquently expressed his control over their bodies and minds, his viciousness also moved them toward bolder experiments in self-assertion. His roles in their escape efforts are illustrative. On the one hand, he installs the measures that convince Sweet Home’s slaves to risk running away. This negative consciousness-raising moves the slaves toward solidarity, yet his lessons become even more textured. When Sethe joins the escape plot, she dreams of reconstructing her family beyond Schoolteacher’s reach. Paul D’s ambitions lack that precision, yet they share the same spirit. Revealing thoughts about a future, these sentiments customize their rebellion against white authority. In the aftermath of this foiled attempt, Schoolteacher allows his nephews to suckle from Sethe and places a collar on Paul D, thus trying to destroy both their specific intentions and their general will. This perversity becomes the excess that hurtes Sethe and Paul D along different paths toward freedom, yet it also haunts their calculations of identity. This interrelationship of black autonomy and white surveillance sutures the couples’ post–Sweet Home reunion and romance to Morrison’s meditations on the black novelist, “social death,” and literary prizewinning (Patterson 39).

By 1873, when Sethe and Paul D see each other after a more than twenty-year absence, their lives are all about managing enslavement’s spillover into their post-Emancipation worlds. She strives to come to grips with murdering her daughter, and he tries to decipher the judgments Morrison’s mentality, but she does register the writer’s interest in prizewinning. Morrison brought up the NBA announcement; she wanted Dowling, who thought that the winners would not be chosen for another few days, to know the results.

19. In Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study (1982), Orlando Patterson argues that the authority of the slaveowner was buttressed by defining the slave as “a socially dead person.” This social death marked “a secular excommunication” that completed the subjugation of the slave (5). Convinced that this subjugation survived beyond enslavement, Morrison in part uses Beloved to explore how such survivals boomerang through history.

20. A good starting point for the vast criticism that analyzes Sethe’s murder of her daughter is Kathleen Marks’s Toni Morrison’s Beloved and the Apotropaic Imagination (2002). Marks examines Sethe’s deed through the lens of “apotropaic” actions, “those gestures” that lead one to do “what one finds horrible so as to mitigate its horror” and neutralize its “threat” (2). Other illuminating treatments include Christopher Peterson’s “Beloved’s Claim” (2006), Jennifer Fitzgerald’s “Selfhood and Community: Psychoanalysis and Discourse in Beloved” (1993), Mae G. Henderson’s “Toni Morrison’s Beloved: Re-membering the Body as Historical Text” (1991), and Elizabeth House’s “Toni Morrison’s Ghost: The Beloved Who is Not Beloved” (1990).
“tobacco tin” that has replaced his “red heart” (72–73). Signaling the reclaiming of black selfhood from dehumanizing white value systems, their attempts are the foundations of survival. Nonetheless, their beliefs in the singularity of their efforts produce a problematic exceptionalism. While former slaves know that bondage’s effects were disperse, their preoccupation with their own wounds blunts one of the best weapons that they possess against “social death,” community. The tension between distorting individuation and healing togetherness becomes the subtext of Sethe and Paul D’s romance, and this part of their interactions ties them to Morrison’s pre-Beloved outlook on black prizewinning.

By the early 1980s, Morrison had experience and laurels, yet like black novelists from time immemorial, she wondered whether white aesthetic judgments were gumming up her creativity. Her musings were particularly ironic since mainstream prizes, powerful apparatuses in maintaining white tastes, were her favorite metric of success. For more than a decade, she had taken responsibility for legitimizing African American fiction, and she remained convinced à la James Weldon Johnson that “the amount and standard of the literature” that blacks produced would do much to determine their greatness (Book vii). Despite this conviction, as she surveyed the literary landscape anew, she concluded that she had a lot of help. Alice Walker, Gloria Naylor, David Bradley, and John Edgar Wideman had all won major literary prizes by the time Morrison started Beloved. Their achievements clarified for her that one key to confronting white aesthetic judgment was recognizing that you were not alone. With her clear if belated understanding, Morrison began registering how black creative fellowship, both actual and metaphorical, could speed her attainment of the ethics of swagger. This realization emerged in Beloved through her exposing Sethe and Paul D’s paralyzed affections to the wisdom of Baby Suggs and Stamp Paid, two elders who failed in their attacks on slavery and still endured as vital tutors.

21. Riffing off of the Tin Man in Victor Fleming’s The Wizard of Oz (1939) and perhaps more likely in Sidney Lumet’s The Wiz (1978), Toni Morrison portrays Paul D as one who “plunge[s] into reticence and the solitary life, suppressing his memories . . . and masking the sexual repression . . . of his necessary asceticism” (Kang 847). Though critics fervently analyze the metal for flesh substitution that embroiders Paul D’s pursuit of survival, Beloved offers another symbol of his adjustment to bondage’s violations: “After Alfred he had shut down a generous portion of his head, operating on the part that helped him walk, eat, deep, sing. If he could do those things—with a little work and a little sex thrown in—he asked for no more” (41). The heart/mind binary that grounds Paul D’s management of his life reinforces Nancy Kang’s contention that he is a figure of “an isolated, incommunicable self in multiform combinations” (847).
Elders and the Black Novelist’s Psyche

Three years before she published *Beloved*, Morrison wrote a famous essay, “Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation” (1984). There she concluded that an elder or an ancestral figure often determined a character’s fate in African American writing. Although concerned with plot and narration, Morrison’s remarks really centered on the differences between how black and white writers defined their roles. She explained that white critics often viewed the artist as the “supreme individual”; thus, they believed that the writer was “always in confrontation with his society.” Though such conflict can exist for black authors, she felt that it was rarer because they were not “isolated” projections of an “ivory tower” but instead representative of “an implied ‘we’” (*What* 62). Many commentators have analyzed Morrison’s novels and black women’s writing more broadly with these observations in mind. Despite these attentions, the specific relationship between her statements about elders and her professional strivings has been underexamined. In particular, her sense of what ancestors might mean for a canon of black prizewinning has been neglected.

Given the resurgent interest that black women’s fiction inspired in the 1970s, the critical concentration on “Rootedness” and gender is understandable. Morrison repeatedly emphasized her desire to combat the erasure of black women’s experiences, and she stated forthrightly that her art originated in an attempt to explore “being a little black girl” in America (Naylor, “Conversation” 198). While gender is a powerful part of her creative identity, she also craves resplendent performance, an aim that for her involves artistic competition.22 Morrison is not naïve about the deficiencies of awards and prizes as markers of aesthetic accomplishment; nevertheless, she sees within them significant chances to force white judgment into contact with black talent. Because of this perception, her observations about elders have intriguing implications for black prizewinning.

In 1974 when she made the shortlist for the National Book Award, the only black novelists who had ever been nominated for any major prize were Ralph Ellison, James Baldwin, John Oliver Killens, Ernest Gaines, Barry Beckham, and Ishmael Reed. Of this group, Ellison

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22. Expanding Michael Awkward’s perspective, George E. Lewis argues that analysis of African American cultural production must privilege “the promulgation of new cooperative, rather than competitive, relationships between artists” (xi). While an uncritical focus on competition could be distorting, the Black Archivists address creative anxiety precisely by competing; thus, ignoring these realities would obscure key parts of their success. See Awkward (7–8) for his take on competition and the difference between black male and black female literature.
remained the sole winner. Morrison knew of his status as a literary luminary, and occasionally, in her capacity as a Random House editor, she would seek his aid. Regarding these requests, she explained, “[Ellison] was unhelpful when I tried to enlist him on behalf of new or younger [black] writers . . . Ralph had no interest in rallying” for them (Rampersad 487). His lack of support registered sharply in Morrison’s mind. As she considered elders and the black literary tradition in “Rootedness,” her suggestion that older, more experienced characters could control the fate of younger ones not only noted fictional creations but also the realities of American publishing. One cannot prove that Morrison blamed the dearth in black prizewinning on Ellison’s indifference; however, her opinions about how blacks could win prestigious prizes repudiated his posture. More evocatively, her convictions about ancestors, black identity, and white practices surfaced through Beloved’s portrayals of Baby and Stamp’s impact on Sethe and Paul D.

Positioned at the beginning of Beloved, Sethe and Paul D’s 1873 reunion features exorcism, lovemaking, and a trip to a carnival. These activities fuel a growing romantic attraction, and the couple’s intimacy hints at the richest options for Reconstruction era black life. If happiness threatens during their relationship’s early days, then soon moral dilemmas and infidelity challenge its hopeful start. More precisely, Sethe’s defiant uncertainty regarding her 1855 murder of her daughter joins with the sexual repression born during Paul D’s 1856 chain gang bid to rob their courtship of its momentum. Sethe’s infanticide and Paul D’s cheating are direct legacies of Sweet Home and an Alfred, Georgia chain gang, two spaces where black identity proceeds from the perverse whims of white authority. Although such perversion informs the deeds’ origins, their consequences are confined to black environments where fragile experiments in liberated living are running. White tyranny’s ability to live beyond its direct manifestation seemingly perpetuates oppression. In addition, such concealed power spawns explanations that stress black behavior rather than white causality. Sethe and Paul D’s scarred souls do not distinguish them from other blacks in postbellum Cincinnati, but their sensitivity to their burdens blinds them to the fullest legacies of the community. These legacies involve a woman whom both of them knew well and a man whose generosity opens doors.

Baby, Sethe’s mother-in-law, and Stamp, a longtime resident of black Cincinnati, are not romantically linked, but they are tandem emissaries in a community where former slaves struggle to make their “hearts . . . free to love” (Griesinger 691). While Baby preaches to help folks with “claim-
ing ownership of” their “freed sel[ves],” Stamp took as his “clear and holy purpose” provision for “the contraband humans that he ferried across the river” (Beloved 95, 169). These characters epitomize the elders that Morrison described in “Rootedness.” In addition to securing material wellbeing for recently escaped blacks, they also tutored them in full appreciation of liberty. Baby, from her birth in 1790 to her arrival at Sweet Home in 1838, experienced “the nastiness of life” (23). Mothering eight children by six different men, she watched as all of them save one were sold away. She was abused because of a busted hip and concluded that God burdened her with deprivation. Despite these realities, she transformed misfortune into witnessing. Her sermons rebuffed misery, counseling love as a reinvigorator of formerly enslaved black lives. While Stamp eschewed the pulpit, he joined her in this mission.

Like Baby, Stamp relies upon his past as he decides what former slaves need. Where she loses her children and endures brutality, he learns of bondage’s costs through dissolved betrothal. He once loved a woman named Vashti, and while he honored their relationship with abstinence, his slave-master bedded her. After this betrayal, he changed his name from “Joshua” to Stamp Paid, suggesting that this slight settled whatever he owed the white man (233). Stamp’s renaming stresses defiance; however, his actions among Cincinnati’s black folks are empathetic. Nurturing a fragile collective, he and Baby patiently encourage communion as an antidote to servitude’s depravity. Their efforts flourished for many years, but in 1855 their affection morphed from grace to offense.

Twenty days after Sethe escaped Sweet Home and arrived in Cincinnati, Stamp picked two buckets of blackberries. His gesture required a twelve-mile roundtrip to a secret riverbank, and within his “labor,” Baby detected “his love.” To honor that love, she baked pies, an act that somehow grew into roast turkeys, strawberry shrug, and “a feast for ninety people” (136). Such fellowship could have been edifying. As a celebration of one and all who fled enslavement, the party could have bolstered spirits. Baby felt that instead its “excess” aroused repulsion (138). Analyzing this sentiment, James Hans argues that in attempting to kindle life in a community still learning what freedom means, Baby and Stamp

23. Jean Daniels argues that Baby Suggs, through her preaching, inserts “an Africanist narrative” into Beloved (1). Lorie Fulton makes a similar point when she notes, “Baby’s chosen place of worship brings to mind the sacred groves of African religion” (192). While Daniels contends that Baby neutralizes “white supremacist patriarchy,” Fulton sees her as a part of Morrison’s desire to “alter the ecofeminist belief that the domination of women directly connects to the devastation of the natural environment” (1, 190). These interpretations diverge, yet they unite in concluding that combating the lingering effects of enslavement is Baby Suggs’s true calling.
“embarrass” their neighbors with their “extravagance” (Golden 237).\textsuperscript{24} The extra that Hans refers to is material (the food, the setting, and the time) and emotional (the happiness, the open expression, and the audacity). If most slaves had to love “small and in secret” because sanity made investing anything more “risky,” then here in their neighborhood were other black people “used-to-be-slave[s]” flamboyantly expressing their caring (221, 45). The harvest from this exuberance sprouted the next day when Schoolteacher’s visit to claim his property and Sethe’s murder of her daughter Beloved occurred in rapid succession. Morrison’s intertwining of these events shows the precariousness of Baby and Stamp’s efforts and the hazards of personality.

Schoolteacher’s appearance challenges the interventions of black Cincinnati’s elders, yet at the same moment, it dramatizes the different theories of selfhood within the community. If Baby Suggs’s “great heart” and Stamp’s nervy caring suggest an identity grounded in collective awakening, then Sethe, reflecting her mother’s lessons, chooses stylized violence as her route to individuality (87). This collision between communal and individual notions of personality seemingly affirms white authority. After all, Schoolteacher has the right to reclaim his property because of the Fugitive Slave Act—a white legislative remedy intent on controlling black bodies. While Morrison’s portrayal stresses both the formal and the numinous dimensions of white power, it also suggests that a key part of that power’s vitality is black discord. This lack of unity surfaces not as mere resistance to consensus rather as absence of generosity. Engaging the daily sacrifices that slavery demanded, Baby and Stamp survived by offering black folks the benefit of the doubt, a margin to operate between a moral ideal and their actual circumstances. The withdrawal of that margin meant a more profound succumbing to dehumanizing white assumptions. While Morrison’s interactions with prize-granting bodies lacked the same stakes, her convictions about black attitudes in the face of white literary judgments revealed important continuities.

Like all of the Black Archivists, Morrison’s prizewinning occurred against the backdrop of the culture wars.\textsuperscript{25} These pitched debates about

\textsuperscript{24} Hans connects Baby’s audacity to a “heresy” that she preaches, namely that blacks should not defer life on earth in favor of a heavenly reward (Golden 236). As black liberation theology suggests, this tension could be understood as a conflict between black and white styles of Christianity.

America’s defining values deeply affected her perspective, and in a way her editing career responded to this philosophical wrangling. Although she once described her job at Random House as merely one of the things she did to make a living, her editing activities actually reflected a lofty ambition. Betty Jean Parker suggested that by 1979, Morrison had “for some time been deliberately encouraging and cultivating a certain kind of Black work” (60). When one considers Morrison’s hand in publishing Gayl Jones, Toni Cade Bambara, James Alan McPherson, and Leon Forrest, the deepest implications of what Parker meant by “a certain kind of Black work” emerge. Morrison registered literature’s possibilities for giving black culture its swagger, and she used her career as well as those of her peers and forebears to redeem such options. By coercing a confrontation between fiercely talented black writers and the decision-makers at Random House, she insisted that white tastes and economic expediency condition but need not determine black literary ethics. Her convictions about promoting these sorts of charged evaluative situations attracted her to prizewinning, but like Baby and Stamp, she favored a united front over singular genius as the best hope for black success. Her elders taught her intricate lessons about this preference.

Gwendolyn Brooks’s 1950 Pulitzer Prize for poetry distinguished her as the first black writer to win a major American literary award. Clustered with Ellison’s 1953 National Book Award and Alice Childress’s 1956 Obie Award, her achievement signaled powerful possibilities for both racial and gender equality. Though recognition from America’s white prize-granting establishment allied Brooks, Ellison, and Childress, their attitudes about black creative fellowship and white aesthetic standards divided them. When he was approached about signing a letter in support of Morrison, Ellison declined, stating that public agitation about her lack of prizes might be “well-intentioned,” but it was “pretty annoy[ing],” since to him selecting awards is “a matter of luck . . . Look how long Hemingway and Faulkner had to wait to get their just awards.” He notes that individually Morrison can “compete with the best writers anywhere,” yet he sees no value in further endorsing her talent (Mitgang B5). In dramatic contrast, Brooks and Childress not only cultivated deep bonds with a wide range of younger black writers but also explicitly

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26. Ellison, if the clippings in his “Toni Morrison” folder are any indication, followed her career with great interest. That folder is among the Ralph Ellison Papers held by the Manuscript Division of the Library of Congress.

promoted them by pressing editors on their behalf, plugging them in interviews, and writing recommendation letters for fellowships and job applications. These different models of leveraging honor struck Morrison as a crucial impasse for the future of African American literature. With respect to the novel specifically, she felt that until the fullest legacies of collective black excellence were acknowledged, the trite objections of white literary tastemakers would continue to breed insecurity in black writers. The way forward for Sethe and Paul D’s romance reflects Morrison’s speculations on an effective response to such stigmas.

Sethe and Paul D crave a togetherness that can displace Garner and Schoolteacher’s nullification of their every attempt to define themselves. Although the couple’s longing affirms Baby and Stamp’s communal ethos, each of them embraces sequestering at a crucial moment. Sethe locks herself in a moral gambit, convinced that her salvation hinges on Beloved’s forgiveness. Embarking on a spiritual reckoning, Paul D takes refuge in a church cellar and ponders both Sethe’s ostensible animalism and his actual infidelity. Each suspends the benefit of the doubt and scrutinizes black behavior through the Manichean lens of white puritanical ethics. While their stocktaking is meant as ritual purification, it evades the discipline of fellowship and thus misses the profound instructions of human failings. Stamp’s reassessment of Baby’s legacy prefigures Sethe and Paul D’s second reunion.

Amid the misery from Schoolteacher’s arrival, Sethe’s murderous reaction, and black Cincinnati’s collective pouting, Baby renounces her ministry claiming that preaching the Word was just “one other thing” white folks “took away from” her (178). Stamp objects to her abdication, insisting that she allows mere shame to give the enemy a victory in the war over black humanity. Looking back at his 1856 perspective...


28. Beloved, when she first appeared, struck Paul D as like him—illiterate and “drifting from ruin” (52). This connection impels him toward generosity, yet his affair with her bespeaks exploitation and thwarted agency, two concepts that link his deeds to Sethe’s. Laura Doyle argues that when “Beloved precipitates Paul D’s” unfaithfulness, she “forces [the] anxiety over the distinction between human and animal to a crisis” (221). This anxiety colors Paul D’s meditations, reminding him of how life stifles intent and blasting the “flakes of rust . . . away from . . . the tobacco tin” that masqueraded as his heart (Beloved 117). In this development, Beloved sowed the seeds of his departure from and return to Sethe’s love.

29. John Duvall believes “that although Baby Suggs is gone, her religion of the maternal body
from 1874, he discovers that he misperceived fellowship. His demands that Baby ignore catastrophe are both callous and flattering. Honoring her ministry’s power, they at the same time withhold empathy—a withholding that poses great risks both to their friendship and to Cincinnati’s black community. Stamp views his and Baby’s rescue efforts as akin to functions of nature; she was “the mountain to his sky” (170). While that imagery bespeaks divine sanction and organic partnership, it ignores pain’s accumulated perforations of her spirit. Such stinted generosity bothers him. Living even during Reconstruction among a “people of broken necks, of fire-cooked blood and black girls who had lost their ribbons,” Stamp believed that former slaves should never mistake tidy piety for deliverance from “the deeper more tangled jungle” that whites sought to cultivate “inside” them (181, 198). He momentarily succumbs to self-righteousness, but the example of his determination to “get right” with Baby amplifies Sethe and Paul D’s fate (181).

Sethe says that before Paul D showed up at 124, “words whispered in the keeping room had kept her going.” Those words, admonitions from a long-dead Baby Suggs, were to put down “her heavy knives of defense against misery, regret, gall and hurt” and renounce the “war” of atoning for the past (86). If these instructions originated in Baby’s ministry, then her final edicts reflected an admission that “God puzzled her” and that “she was too ashamed of him to say so” (177). This confession led her to bed and away from the business of recasting legacies of black suffering. While both of Baby’s approaches involve letting go, the latter carries tints of defeat while the former bespeaks liveliness. Paul D, when he returns to 124 for the second time, finds Sethe in the keeping room tottering between these two convictions. By recalling her from solitary weariness, he completed the compassion that Stamp had originated and reminded her that receiving your self “in all the right order” after being smashed to “pieces” can be serene collaboration (272–73).

They Want Affects

Black life in late nineteenth-century America differs considerably from post–civil rights era existence. Despite these distinctions, Morrison aligns

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animates the community’s movement toward redemption.” This view of “the afterlife that Baby Suggs’s words achieve” reinforces Stamp’s misperception of her resignation (130).

30. Although she does not dwell on the tension between Stamp and Baby Suggs, Kristin Boudreau offers a thorough discussion of “physical and emotional suffering” (451).
her professional odyssey with Sethe and Paul D’s burgeoning romance. Her connection to this couple shows how white definitions enduringly shape black identity, and one example of this dynamic is the controversy surrounding *Beloved’s* place in awards deliberations. James English holds that during the 1987–88 literary prize season, the elaborate maneuvering on behalf of *Beloved* revealed “broad shifts within the whole system of cultural gift-exchange” (240). Explaining these shifts, he argues that Morrison and her supporters, in the days leading up to the selection committee’s decision, simultaneously critiqued the Pulitzer Prize “as a thoroughly social, economic, and (racist) political instrument” and invested it “with real, potentially decisive power in determining long-term literary valuation.” He concludes, “The scandalized rhetoric that has surrounded Morrison’s Pulitzer derives from the residual but still forceful imperative . . . that the artist, one way or another . . . help to maintain a discernible degree of separation between the scale of aesthetic value and that of public acclaim” (240–41). Because Morrison allowed the gap between art and prize to close, English believes that she “capitulated too fully to the awards mania” (237). His perspective while informative undervalues how Morrison’s involvement in arguments about aesthetics and acclaim centers on white attitudes regarding black cultural performance.\(^\text{31}\)

Julian Moynahan, a white man and the chair of the three-member fiction jury for the 1988 Pulitzer Prize, explained that after he and his peers read the more than one hundred books that had been nominated, “there was one towering book, a book that was so much better and important than any other . . . *Beloved.*” Despite Moynahan’s endorsement, a “protest letter” that appeared on January 24, 1988, affected not only public reaction to Morrison’s receipt of the Pulitzer but also assessments of her career (Anonymous, “Story” 36).\(^\text{32}\) This letter, apparently the

\(^{31}\) The black novelist Gloria Naylor was a judge on the 1987 National Book Award committee that chose Larry Heinemann’s *Paco’s Story* (1986) over *Beloved.* Even in light and perhaps because of her presence, the controlling frame for those awards deliberations were white standards versus black performance. I analyze the importance of Naylor’s judgeship at greater length in chapter 4.

\(^{32}\) Starting as early as January 9, 1988, Wesley Brown and other black writers solicited signatures for an ad that would run in the *New York Times.* This ad lamented the fact that Morrison had not received the “keystones to the canon of American literature: the National Book Award and the Pulitzer Prize” and hailed her advancement of “the moral and artistic standards by which we must measure the daring and the love of our national imagination and our collective intelligence as a people” (Anonymous “Black”). Her peers among the Black Archivists—Ernest Gaines, Alice Walker, and John Edgar Wideman—joined several critics and writers in signing the document. Bemoaning the awards system promotion of such lobbying, Walter Goodman concluded tellingly: “In the long run—and literature is supposed to be a long-run endeavor—[Morrison’s] books are
brainchild of poet June Jordan, bewailed the unwillingness of America’s prize-granting bodies to reward *Beloved*’s genius. While signatories such as John Edgar Wideman identified the letter as a “tribute” rather than an attempt at “tyrannizing the standards and notions of literary quality,” onlookers insisted that Morrison and her supporters violated the spirit if not the letter of the rules (McDowell, “48 Writers” C15). In part, this may have been because Morrison had shown up, only months earlier, at the National Book Awards banquet with an entourage and then implied that she had been slighted when she did not win (English 237). Episodes like these reflected her investment in “redemption” that stemmed from prizes (Anonymous, “Morrison” 14). While such commitments betrayed vanity, they also marked the complicated collision between black expression and white expectation.  

Morrison’s editor for all of her novels from *Sula* to *Beloved* was Robert Gottlieb, a white man who was legendary in New York publishing circles. Though his expertise inspired her belief that a white reader could “grasp a [black] cultural thought or experience,” his participation in her artistry also signaled the nuances of interracial encounters related to literature (J. Harris 7). Like Moynahan, Gottlieb revealed that white observers could impartially engage black literary swagger. Their aptitude, however, could not cancel conspicuous prejudices. With *Beloved*, Morrison exploited these tensions within mainstream perceptions and offered a novel that treated slavery, a charged metaphor of America’s self-

33. Toni Morrison in 1976 confessed that she takes writing “very very seriously”; thus, she adhered to basic principles: “I don’t lie. I don’t mislead. I don’t cater to the whole media thing.” Though she announced this retreat from “media madness,” by roughly a decade later, Morrison’s situation involved elaborate negotiations of art, audience, and celebrity (J. Harris 9). Loren Glass in *Authors Inc.: Literary Celebrity in the Modern United States, 1880–1980* (2004) explores the ways in which “celebrity . . . is crucial to [the] understanding of literary authorship in the twentieth century” (2–3). Though Glass’s study does not engage Morrison, it does hint at the milieu in which she and her prizewinning black peers carved out their artistic identities.

34. When Gottlieb left Random House in 1987 to take the helm at the *New Yorker*, Morrison rued her loss of a “dispassionate” “third eye” that had had a “superlative” effect on her work (Schappell 68). After his stint at the magazine, Gottlieb resumed his work as Morrison’s editor in the late 1990s, working on her novels *Love* (2003) and *A Mercy* (2008). Gottlieb, to whom Morrison dedicated *A Mercy*, represented the apex of her edifying encounters with the New York publishing culture.

35. Tying black prizewinning to affirmative action debates, Martha Bayles’s article “Special Effects, Special Pleading” (1988) impugns Morrison’s competition for the 1988 Pulitzer Prize. Her candor revealed an opposition that was sometimes obscured as Morrison’s reputation grew.
splitting. In doing this, her links to Sethe and Paul D are illustrative. This couples’ relationship suggests that liberty inheres in acknowledging white authority’s precise capacity to destroy their identities. Such acknowledgment edifies because it is the preamble to accepting the concern that allows them to form healthy black selves. Like Sethe and Paul D, Morrison confronted her connection with white power. By entering the opera that was American prize deliberation, she especially in the aftermath of *Beloved* was simultaneously feted and discredited, an artist split in two. Her renewed convictions that institutionalizing black literature might enhance post–civil rights liberty softened this schism, but Morrison remained convinced that *Beloved*’s prize misadventures dramatized mainstream America’s limited patience with black self-determination. If Morrison’s exposure to white expectations centered on prize-granting bodies, then Alice Walker and Charles Johnson encounter curbs on swagger in the genial spaces of relationships with mentors.

36. At the same moment that *Beloved* was published, several important critics of African American literature were advancing through the academy. I explore this development’s impact on colleges and universities in this study’s conclusion.

37. Where some would see sober case making (i.e., “literary lobbying”) as par for the course, something that “goes on all the time,” the incorporation of race launches the enterprise over the bounds of good taste (Goodman C26). Similarly, creative technique individuates artists marking them as fresh and resourceful, yet when material such as slavery laces the style, readers grow “numb” beneath the “cumulative and oft-repeated miseries, with new miseries and new dimensions of miseries added in each telling and retelling long after the point has been made” (Iannone, “Toni” 63).