



PROJECT MUSE®

Losing Manhood: Animality and Plasticity in the (Neo)Slave Narrative

Zakiyyah Iman Jackson

Qui Parle: Critical Humanities and Social Sciences, Volume 25, Numbers
1 & 2, Fall/Winter 2016, pp. 95-136 (Article)

Published by Duke University Press



➔ For additional information about this article

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/639967>

Losing Manhood

Animality and Plasticity in the (Neo)Slave Narrative

ZAKIYYAH IMAN JACKSON

You have seen how a man was made a slave; you shall see how a slave was made a man.

Frederick Douglass, Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass (1845)

The uncompromising nature of the Western self and its active negation of anything not itself had the counter-effect of reducing African discourse to a simple polemical reaffirmation of black humanity. *However, both the asserted denial and the reaffirmation of that humanity now look like two sterile sides of the same coin.*

Achille Mbembé, On the Postcolony (2001)

Slavery and colonialism not only catalyzed the conscription of black people into hegemonically imperialist and racialized conceptions of “modernity” and “universal humanity” but also inaugurated Western modernity’s condition of possibility, initiating a chain of events that have given rise to a transnational capitalist order. In light of this history, it stands to reason that we should critically remember New World slavery as epochal rupture.¹ Slavery’s archival footprint is a ledger system that placed black humans, horses, cattle, and household items all on the same bill of purchase. This ledger’s biopolitical arithmetic—its calculation of humanity—dislocated, depersonalized,

and collapsed difference, except in the area of market value. The ledger's life promised the social death of those enslaved.²

"Slave humanity" is an aporia with which we have yet to reckon and which, perhaps, marks the limit of the reckonable. Rather than view the paradoxical predicament of enslaved humanity through the lens of lack or absence, I contend that humanity itself is fractured and relational instead of a single trajectory or a unitary sign. In place of assuming the virtuousness of human recognition or humanization, I interrogate the methods upon which an imperialist and racialized conception of "universal humanity" attempted to "humanize" blackness. In the case of slavery, humanization and captivity go hand in hand. Too often, our conception of anti-blackness is defined by the specter of "denied humanity," "dehumanization," or "exclusion," yet, as Saidiya Hartman has identified in her pathbreaking study *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America*, the process of making the slave relied on the abjection and criminalization of the enslaved's humanity rather than the denial of it.³ Thus, humanization is not an antidote to slavery's violence; rather, slavery is a technology for producing a *kind* of human.

Following Hartman, my interest is in drawing attention not only to the manner in which black people have been excluded from the "life and liberty" of universal rights and entitlements but also to the conditions under which black people have been *selectively incorporated* into the liberal humanist project. Blackness has been central to, rather than excluded from, liberal humanism: the black body is an essential index for the calculation of degree of humanity and the measure of human progress. From the aporetic space of this inclusion that nevertheless masks itself as exclusion, I query, how might Toni Morrison's *Beloved* disarticulate Eurocentric humanism while negotiating blackness's status as interposition in the ever-shifting biopolitical terms and stakes of "the human versus the animal"? *Beloved's* questioning of liberal humanism's selective recognition of black humanity is suggestive of a desire for a different mode of being/knowing/feeling and not simply a desire for fuller recognition within liberal humanism's terms.⁴

In *Beloved*, Morrison departs from and transforms the slave narrative convention of juxtaposing the degradation of slaves with that of

animals in order to draw our attention not to the violence of dehumanization but rather to the violence of humanization. More specifically, *Beloved* suggests that animalization and humanization of the slave's personhood are not mutually exclusive but mutually constitutive. In other words, the slave's humanity (the heart, the mind, the soul, and the body) is not denied or excluded but manipulated and prefigured as animal, whereby black(ened) humanity is understood, paradigmatically, as a state of *human* animality, or "the animal within the human."

Morrison's text recalls rhetorical strategies employed by Frederick Douglass, arguably the nineteenth century's most iconic slave, that diagnose racialization and animalization as mutually constitutive violence under slavery. Douglass's iconicity is perhaps precisely owed to his dexterous navigation of competing liberal humanist rhetorical modes and affective registers, in particular, sentimentality and religio-scientific hierarchy. While Douglass undoubtedly radically calls into question the biopolitical logics and practices of slavery with respect to both humans and animals, he does so in a manner that reveals the seemingly near-inescapable paradoxes of liberal humanist recognition to the extent that one is conscripted by its terms—appeals to discourses of sentiment and Self. Yet, both sentiment and the sovereign "I" return us to racialized, gendered master narratives of identity and feeling, which the rooster's gaze in *Beloved* productively destabilizes.⁵ Mister's gaze, or the exchange of glances between Mister and Paul D, offers a much-needed critical alternative to sentimental ethics—sympathy, compassion, protection, stewardship, care, and the humane—which has historically been conceived within the terms of a racialized, heteropatriarchal economy of sensibility. In what follows I examine how we might read Morrison as productively problematizing sentimentality as well as gendered appeals to discourses of the Self rooted in religio-scientific hierarchy, as both discourses have historically recognized black humanity and included black people in their conceptualization of "the human" but in the dissimulating terms of an imperial racial hierarchy.

Re-constellating the slave narrative genre, Morrison opens up a new way to interpret the genre, not as one that exposes slavery's dehumanization but rather as one that details the violence of liberal

humanism's attempts at humanization. Unsettling reified interpretations of history and literary slave narratives, *Beloved* identifies the violation of slavery not in an unnatural ordering of man and beast but in its transmogrification of human form and personality, as an experiment in plasticity and its limits therein. To put it differently, New World slavery established a field of demand that tyrannically presumed, as if by will alone, that the enslaved, in their humanity, could function as infinitely malleable lexical and biological matter, at once sub/super/human. What appear as alternating, or serialized, discrete modes of (mis)recognition—sub/super/humanization, animalization/humanization, privation/superfluity—are in fact varying dimensions of a racializing demand that the slave be all dimensions at once, a simultaneous actualization of the seemingly discontinuous and incompatible.

**“How a Slave Was Made a Man”:
Racialized Animality and the
Paradoxes of Recognition**

Douglass's 1845 *Narrative* has been canonized in the literary study of blackness. For many critics and readers alike, Douglass's narration of his life was their introduction to the routine bestialization experienced by those enslaved in the southern United States. Douglass's text relies heavily on the explanatory power of bestializing images. Such images and juxtapositions of slave and animal degradation were designed as a rhetorical device, a strategy that provoked moral persuasion and/or Christian outrage over a system of “unnatural” ordering that was discordant with God's law.

For instance, Douglass describes how, upon the death of a master, the enslaved were divided and appraised:

We were all ranked together at the valuation. Men and women, old and young, married and single, were ranked with horses, sheep, and swine. There were horses and men, cattle and women, pigs and children, all holding the same rank in the scale of being. . . . After the valuation, then came the division. . . . We had no more voice in that decision than the brutes among whom we were ranked.⁶

As Jennifer Mason has observed, the “scale of being” to which Douglass refers is the *scala naturae*, or the Great Chain of Being, predicated on the commonplace view that all living beings could be placed on the rungs of a linear, hierarchical, and continuous ladder that extended from Earth to Heaven. Each step of the ladder corresponded to a different measure of perfection: God was at the top, humans were suspended between angels and animals, and inanimate things occupied the lowest rung. Douglass published the 1845 *Narrative* while acting as an orator for William Lloyd Garrison’s Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society. For abolitionists like Garrison, the philosophy of natural rights and its hierarchies of being—human superiority and uniqueness—were cornerstones of an abolitionist rhetorical arsenal.

Yet, the adoption of the Chain of Being framework neither provides the slave standing nor authorizes the slave’s testimony. While the Chain of Being may have suggested that placing humans and animals on the same rank was discordant with God’s law, it did not provide a stable place for black people to argue for symmetrical liberal humanist recognition, much less redress, since the enslaved were merely a rung away from animals, or possibly even conjoined with their animal neighbors as “animal humans” on what was a *continuous* scale. Once (human) being became coincident with animality, recognition of one’s humanity as such would not guarantee a respite from violence based on race, because humans were measured by their purported capacity to be more or less “animal.” As Winthrop Jordan has noted, the strategic use of the Great Chain was exceedingly tricky for abolitionists, because “[o]n the one hand the existence of the Chain of Being was difficult to deny categorically without implying that Nature was not so highly ordered as it might be. Contrarily, to admit the possibility that Nature was hierarchically ordered was to open the door to inherent inferiority, no matter how strenuously the unity of the human species was objected.”⁷ As in this case, if black people were human but represented the lowest human rung of the ladder and thus embodied the specter of “the animal” within the human, then the extension of human recognition dissimulated rather than simply abated race’s animalizing discourse.

As exemplified by the Chain of Being, modern racialized animalization stratified humanity, preemptively barring or excluding black

participation in the symbolic order while also establishing or including black humanity as an object in the discursive-material institution of proto-scientific Western humanism. Here, human recognition is extended, but only to serve further objectification. The recognition of the slave's humanity was cast in the terms of a globally expansive debate over what *kind* of human black(ened) people represented. To put it plainly, the discourse of race is a discourse of speciation and thus indissociable from the historical development of what Cary Wolfe has called the "discourse of species" and "the animal" as a fundamental site of onto-epistemo-ethical reflection.⁸

The Chain of Being and related frameworks provided a sense of order and stability at the dawn of an expanding imperial order, newly conceived in global terms. As noted by Jordan, the Great Chain and related systems developed in a manner that was responsive to global political and epistemological shifts that emerged in the wake of slavery including the French Revolution and the ascendancy of comparative anatomy in natural philosophy (*WH*, 485). The slave's disputed humanity would ground claims about what was proper to man by functioning as limit case. Therefore, I suggest that slave labor be principally understood not as forced unwaged labor exploitation in the master's enclave but as an essential enabling condition of the modern grammar of the Subject, a peculiar grammar of kind or logic of species, one that approaches and articulates the planetary scale.⁹ Yet as Jordan reminds us, while blackness might have functioned as a stabilizer, the logic of the Chain was always inherently tautological; the Great Chain lapsed into incoherence once specific cases came into view:

To obtain criteria for ranking all creatures on a single scale was virtually impossible. . . . When natural philosophers tried to decide whether the ape, the parrot, or the elephant was next below man, for instance, the grand Chain began to look like an unprepossessing pile of ill-assorted links. . . . Any sharp increase in detailed knowledge of the multitude of species was bound to make hierarchical construction impossible even for the most masterful craftsman. How was one going to rank thousands of species of plants in exact order? (*WH*, 222)

It was for these precise reasons, I would argue, that the compulsive repositioning of blackness as limit case, in its abstraction, as type, was not only necessary but also an essential stabilizer.

The Chain of Being framework was a compromise between the increasing authority of science and the powerful sway of Christianity. Christian abolitionists deployed the Chain of Being as a rhetorical strategy in the hope of provoking a largely white, northern, Christian readership, who, it was believed, would be aroused to ethical action by such rhetorical strategies. At the time, most white Christian denominations sanctioned slavery based on a reactionary interpretation of scripture. And abolitionists, in turn, countered by producing interpretations that repurposed biblical authority. Both pro- and anti-slavery factions, by appropriating an established discourse, necessarily obscured the singular nature of slavery's cataclysmic violence.¹⁰ Moreover, rather than manifestly clarifying the contradictory terms of *racial* humanity or registering the seismic stakes of the enslaved's claim to being, the twin strategies of moral suasion and Christian outrage joined the fray of contemporaneous debates concerning the potential consequences of slavery for the fate of the white soul and/or the future of the republic.¹¹

Many scholars have underscored the exceptional originality of Douglass's 1845 *Narrative*. Deborah McDowell has even suggested that it might be best understood as "sui generis."¹² However, how might the *Narrative's* subversion of genre or innovation of both slave and abolitionist literature as noted by scholars *necessarily* exist alongside and even be enabled by the fraught rhetorical inheritance that occasioned Douglass's textual performance? In particular, I want to consider the ways in which abolitionist discourse and its conventions are constitutive of Douglass's textual performance of the "truth" of slavery and the veracity of experience. Those formerly enslaved, like Douglass, were pressured from within white-led abolitionist circles to trope one's personally nuanced experience of slavery to produce recognizable characters, plot devices, and rhetorical strategies, because the slave narrative had become a genre, and, like all genres, it had narrative strictures.

In a study that investigates "the discursive terrain" awaiting slave testimony, Dwight McBride observes the following:

If the situation of the discursive terrain is that there is a language about slavery that preexists the slave's telling of his or her own experience of slavery, or an entire dialogue or series of debates that preexist the telling of the slave narrator's particular experience, how does one negotiate the terms of slavery in order to be able to tell one's own story? The importance of this idea is that the discursive terrain does not simply function to create a kind of overdetermined way of telling an experience; it creates the very codes through which those who would be readers of the slave narrative understand the experience of slavery. . . .

. . . Even more radically, the discourse of slavery is what allowed the slave to speak in the first place. But to speak what? It allowed for speech on one's very experience as a slave. That is, it produced the occasion for bearing witness, but to an experience that had already been theorized and prophesied. . . . Before the slave ever speaks, we know the slave; we know what his or her experience is, and we know how to read that experience. Although we do not ourselves have that experience, we nevertheless know it and recognize it by its language.¹³

"To be heard at all," McBride argues, the witness writes to, if not for, an imagined reader, who is, in turn, discursively constructed out of a cacophonous debate concerning the controversy surrounding the being of the witness (*W*, 2). This scenario arguably positions the witness as an object of discourse and/or noise—an actant, rather than an interlocutor.¹⁴ It is likely that the slave's actual perspective (rather than unmediated experience, which is ineligible for strict narration by the very nature of representation) was often only obliquely present in the texts' inconsistencies, ellipses, and constrained speech. The writing of subsequent versions of Douglass's narrative reveals *the text's and the self's* opacity and instability as "origin."

My question here, following McDowell, is an inquiry into rhetorical inheritance: In what ways does Douglass's corpus exist inside and outside of slave and abolitionist textuality, or more precisely, how does this polarity undermine our ability to identify and assess the enabling conditions of textuality? Moreover, as a number of scholars have observed, reading slave narratives as unmediated truth would not only

reinforce the problematic conflation between black authors and their texts but also potentially undermine our ability to critically examine both their content and the historical context of their production, considering that they arose within a literary cultural industry.¹⁵

The point here is not to criticize Douglass's strategic use of the Chain of Being framework or his adroit facility with sentimentality. Those untimely voices negated by the prevailing episteme of their age may never find the words to describe their experience, or their speech may be rendered illegible or inaudible by power. This is so even when their voices are, like Douglass's, bold and eloquent. That said, the insistence that slavery's violation be articulated as a mistake of categorization (rendering humans as beasts) or application undercuts our ability to subject racialization's justifications to fuller critique. This approach undermines our capacity for a more thorough assessment of the life-and-death stakes of slavery's equation of black humanity with a state of animality. A fuller critique would risk calling into question not only its application but also its epistemic foundations. What I am suggesting is that "freedom" is onto-epistemological. "The animal" as symbol, as trope, as locus of possibility, must be *rethought and transformed*; otherwise, it will continue to animate anti-black discourse and institute itself biopolitically.

It is here that I want to suggest that it may not be the case, as it is often taken to be, that Douglass's 1845 *Narrative* is representative of how the enslaved saw their place in relation to animals. Liberal humanist frameworks of "inclusion" and "recognition" have obscured and/or insufficiently examined other possible modes, authored by Douglass himself, of relating to animals—forms of relating that problematize biopolitical arrangements engendered by slavery. While, ultimately, I argue in what follows that Douglass problematizes rather than resolves the biopolitical arrangements he scrutinizes, shifts in his rhetorical strategy confound his earlier position in the 1845 *Narrative*—revealing that testimony, ontological position, and political diagnosis must be understood as an improvised rather than reified interrelation in the corpus of Douglass's thought.

In the years immediately following the formal end of slavery, Douglass produced speeches that have a noticeably more vexed and irrelative relation to the 1845 *Narrative*'s philosophies of natural rights

and the Chain of Being, philosophies that are premised on concepts of human superiority and uniqueness. For instance, on Friday, September 19, 1873, *The Tennessean* published a speech that Douglass had delivered the day before at Nashville's "Colored Fair Grounds." When discussing the topic of "Kindness to Animals," Douglass states the following:

There is no denying that slavery had a direct and positive tendency to produce coarseness and brutality in the treatment and management of domestic animals, especially those most useful to the agricultural industry. Not only the slave, but the horse, the ox, and the mule shared the general feeling of indifference to the right naturally engendered by a state of slavery. . . . It should be the study of every farmer to make his horse his companion and friend, and to do this, there is but one rule, and that is, uniform sympathy and kindness. . . . All loud and boisterous commands, a brutal flogging should be banished from the field, and only words of cheer and encouragement should be tolerated. A horse is in many respects like a man. He has the five senses, and has memory, affection, and reason *to a limited degree*.¹⁶

Here, Douglass suggests that *slavery introduces* brutality into the lives of humans and animals, such that brutality is understood as synonymous with the institution, and he advocates for human-animal cooperation in farming in place of rivalry or brutalization. More than that, while stopping short of foreclosing difference, his understanding of (human) being, presumably including his being, does not arise in binaristic opposition to, or in negation of, "the animal," as a "horse is in many respects like a man."¹⁷ More importantly, for this discussion, Douglass's "many respects like" and the use to which these words are put confound the terms of his earlier testimony.

Nevertheless, what if the rhetoric of sentimentality and empathetic identification itself reintroduces hierarchies of feeling and capacity engendered by slavery rather than remedies them, as his "to a limited degree" might suggest? *The Tennessean* reports that Douglass ends the section of his speech devoted to "Kindness to Animals" with the following:

When young, untrained and untamed, he (a horse) has unbounded faith in his strength and fleetness. He runs, jumps, and plays in the pride of his perfections. But convince him that he is a creature of law as well as of freedom, by a judicious and kindly application of your superior power, and he will conform his conduct to that law, far better than your most law-abiding citizen. (4)

While a horse is “perfect” rather than in a state of privation, as the Chain of Being might suggest, the horse, like citizens presumably, must still defer to the “kindly application” of “superior power” and “law.” Rather than read Douglass’s sentimental animal ethics as either an unqualified reversal of the 1845 *Narrative* or prescriptively, I read both statements as critically wrestling with, but still very much conscripted by, slavery’s hierarchies of being and feeling—even extending the institution’s palliative logic of “humane” reform.¹⁸ The “humane” is an ideal that suggests humanity is gained by performing acts of kindness and attuning oneself to the suffering of those of inferior status and lesser capacity; as such, it does not posit humanity simply as an inherent or a priori aspect of being human. As in John Locke’s highly influential *Thoughts on Education* (1693), rather than forestalling domination, “humane” discourse, in effect, made human identity contingent on hierarchical relationality—encounters between those with refined sensibilities and those presumably without, in particular, children, animals, and slaves—as “humane” education in the United States concerned itself with the proper cultivation of sympathy and behavior conducive to the successful *reproduction of the established order*.¹⁹ Saidiya Hartman has argued that “the humane in slave law was totally consonant with the domination of the enslaved” and, more specifically, that sentiment routinely regulated and preserved the institution rather than effected a reversal of its relations (*ss*, 93):

On one hand, there was an increased liability for white violence committed against slaves; and on the other, the law continued to decriminalize the violence thought necessary to the preservation of the institution and the submission and obedience of the slave. If anything, the dual invocation of law [property and person] generated the prohibitions and interdictions designed to regulate the violent excesses of slavery and at the same time extended this vio-

lence in the garb of sentiment. . . . To be subject in this manner was no less brutalizing than being an object of property.

In the arena of affect, the body was no less vulnerable to the demands and the excesses of power. The bestowal that granted the slave a circumscribed and fragmented identity as a person in turn shrouded the violence of such a beneficent and humane gesture. (*ss*, 94)

While scholars of the US nineteenth century have put forth varying accounts of how racial slavery shaped white racial anxiety and the increasing prominence of sentimentality as a mode of civic engagement and pedagogy, there is a shared scholarly conviction that extends far beyond Hartman that sentimentality, perhaps the century's most privileged rhetorical mode, acted to safeguard existing power relations, even in its abolitionist deployment, by masking the reorganization of domination and violence in the emerging secularizing terms of empathetic identification on the one hand and hierarchical bonds of kindness, domesticity, and laws of nature on the other.²⁰

Regarding Douglass, Robert Fanuzzi notes, "Above all, Douglass knew what it meant to produce the position of the outsider as a kind of performance, through a political rhetoric that was also an art. His infamous mimicry of venerable orators, his reiteration of civic pedagogy, and his inversion of political symbolism all betrayed a formal mastery" of genres of masculine, republican elocution.²¹ But what if this lesson in civic pedagogy addressed to the "colored citizens" of Tennessee in 1873—exemplary pedagogy of civic manhood—actually reinscribes even as it renounces the terms of their continued subjugation, even in slavery's putative absence? I invoke Douglass's equivocations here to suggest we read the inchoate and incomplete nature of his intervention, its fugitivity, as a provocation and an effort to refuse modes of relating that were established under slavery. However, Douglass's hierarchized conception of feeling and capacity, even in its deployment as empathetic identification with animals, actually rehearses the assumptive logics of racial subjection. After all, the racialization of capacity and feeling preconditions and prefigures the occasion of Douglass's speech on at least two counts: the city's spatiotemporal arrangement—the "Colored Fair Grounds"—and the honorifics bestowed on Douglass—"the most distinguished of their

race,” “The Colored American’s Chosen Moses,” “distinguished gentleman, statesman, and lover of his race.”²² In addition to hypostatizing racial difference, the presence of such plaudits throughout Douglass’s career implies that while Douglass represents black people, he is not representative of blackness, but exceptional not simply as an orator but as a black person. In fact, in Douglass’s case, his skill as an orator is inseparable from his racialization: it is precisely his reported exceptional capacity as an orator that simultaneously marks his racial difference and purportedly sets him apart from other black people.

Douglass’s acclaim as an orator began with his career as a lecturer in Garrison’s Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society and grew precipitously with the publication of his 1845 *Narrative*. At the time, some skeptics questioned whether a slave, a black, could have produced such an eloquent and moving piece of literature. The credibility of black authorship—in other words, the facticity of black capacity for reason and feeling—was so routinely questioned that slave narratives were commonly underwritten by white abolitionists. For instance, the 1845 *Narrative* was published under the imprimatur of Garrison, who presumably was axiomatically credible by virtue of his whiteness.

However, Jacques Derrida has productively called into question how securely “the human,” understood in its white Western imperial form, possesses the characteristics it claims for itself and denies to others (*AT*, 135). Moreover, what of the capacities that exceed human identification? What of those things and creatures with which it is not (yet) possible to confer identification or with which identification is denied? Sentimental ethics is an arbitrary order of perception and sense-making that disqualifies from ethical consideration all those incalculable opacities and yet-to-be-recuperated differences with which it does not and, by design, cannot identify. Moreover, sentimentality is a relation, not a sensibility; conceived as a sensibility, sentimental feeling has historically functioned as a pretext for racial hierarchy in the forms of pathology, pedagogy, and criminalization.²³ If, as I suggest, sentimental ethics typically proceeds without sufficiently interrogating the vexed terms of identification or even pausing to consider whether or not identification should organize ethics, is such an order of consideration ethical? And if so, by what measure?

Yet the vexed terms of identification are precisely what are under

investigation in *Beloved*, and in the process of investigation, a hasty, prescriptive, sentimental ethics is exchanged for an investigation of affectivity and its relational effects.²⁴ Eschewing both sentimentalism and naturalized hierarchy with *Beloved*, Morrison pulls apart and re-constellates the slave narrative form. In doing so, Morrison invites the reader to relinquish a reified understanding of “the truth of slavery” so that we might investigate New World slavery as an ever-present mode of violent ontologizing that includes but exceeds the animalization of the slave, as blackness was always subject to something more.

Ontological Plasticity in *Beloved*

The animalization of blackness has been central, even essential, to the salience and reanimations of anti-black discourse from the early days of the American republic until today, whereby the evocation of black animality is either unquestioningly reified or criticized for reinforcing anti-black racism and quickly dismissed. Morrison avoids both approaches; instead, she problematizes these strategies by critically engaging the assumptive logic of racialized animality and redirecting anti-black animal imagery. Morrison critically observes the fundamentals of animalized representation up close rather than negating it at a distance. Instead of performing a straightforward rejection of racially oppressive imagery, her text exposes the complexity and contradictions that produce blackness and animality as proxies, not through the refutation of bestial imagery but rather through its magnification and deconstruction. It is Morrison’s deconstructive approach that reveals the convolutedness of racialized animalization as an essential feature of the historical institution of liberal humanism, including its lexical possibilities.²⁵

Beloved does not so much resolve the ethical blindness of liberal humanism through empathy between the reader and the narrative’s characters or between Paul D and Mister or between human and animal as general categories, but instead reopens the field of ethics by reminding readers of alterity’s intractable insistence.²⁶ Instead of offering a dialectical solution or providing an answer or prescription on

ethical action, the text uncompromisingly insists on the problem of ethics that accompanies asymmetrical relations, in this case between Paul D and Mister.²⁷

Beloved identifies the site of a potential breach in the epistemological project of humanistic perspective: What is behind Mister's gaze? More accurately, *Beloved* intensifies "animal perspective," a disruption that is already there—latent and repressed—in liberal humanism's textuality. As a result, the novel facilitates reconsideration of perspective's consequence for ethics, given liberal humanism's stubborn refusal to authorize (or even avow) the perspective of the animalized (human and nonhuman) while also failing to attend to its own pernicious limitations. This refusal is the result of at least three contiguous presuppositions: first, "the animal" lacks perspective; second, "the African" is animal in the form of a human and, thus, is devoid of the achievement of Reason or the full realization of perspective; and third, because "the animal"—human and nonhuman—is lacking, animality disqualifies one from ethical consideration. Mister's gaze calls into question the ethical authority of this formulation by countering the epistemological certainty upon which principled judgment is made and questioning, rather than presuming, the ontological distinctions upon which ethical judgments rest. *Beloved* rearticulates, rather than resolves, the problem of ethics in light of differential embodiment by questioning and destabilizing slavery's economy of sense and perceptual logic, that is to say, its religio-scientific taxonomies and foreclosures that rely on a white patriarchal authority alternately supported by naturalistic, divine, or positivistic pretense. *Beloved* invites a critical reopening of the orders of ethical authority and ontological distinction, thus rendering them not as the context of investigation but rather as the object to be critically reexamined. As the foreclosing of animal perspective reinforces the logic of enslavement, the novel prompts us to reconsider how animal perspective potentially undermines one of race's most formative epistemic presumptions.

With *Beloved*, Morrison provides a rich exploration of the seemingly contradictory construction that is black(ened) humanity, namely, the entanglement of racialized, gendered, and sexual discourses with those concerning animality. Largely focusing on the animalization of

black male gender, sexuality, and subjectivity under conditions of enslavement, I investigate how the captive's gender and sexuality were constructed in relationship to humanity *and* animality in the text.²⁸

Critics of *Beloved* have largely ignored the presence of Mister the rooster, despite the text's insistent return to Mister's gaze in scenes that make and undo the significance of both humanity and manhood—where gendered, sexual, and ontological violence produce and mark the limits of manhood for Paul D. If one considers the rooster as both figurative actor *and material presence* in the novel, rather than mere *projection of Paul D's trauma*, the gaze of Mister—the exchange of glances between Mister and Paul D—takes on the quality of a caesura, a disruption of the prevailing grammar of gender, knowledge, and being.

Taking up the narrative's insistence on Mister's gaze, in particular, I investigate the distinctive quality of Paul D and Mister's relationality and explore its implications for contemporary theorization of biopolitics and the onto-epistemo-ethical stakes of non/in/humanity designations. Problematizing literary conventions of form and interpretive method, *Beloved* performs narrative at the register of a structural analysis of the modern grammar of the Subject. Reaching to meet the fullness of Morrison's intervention into theory, mine is a literary criticism that explores how narrative texture performs and excites philosophical engagement. I will read Paul D's encounter with Mister the rooster as one that brings into stark relief Paul D's gendered sexual alienation and existentially debilitating circumstances.

The practice of gender at Sweet Home, the fictional plantation that provides the setting for much of *Beloved*, would appear to depart from the generalized principles that characterized slavery as depicted in the text. At Sweet Home, male slaves are considered "men," breaking with the commonplace slaveholder logic, which typically withheld acknowledgment of manhood or even adulthood among those enslaved. It was believed that reciprocal recognition between white and black men would disrupt the natural order of plantation life. Normative modes of gender such as authority and filial recognition are the entitlements of manhood in the Oedipal symbolic economies of the US South, but manhood and enslavement were commonly viewed as incommensurate by proponents of slavery. As one

slaveholder put it, "Ain't no nigger men."²⁹ Yet, Mr. Garner would appear to break with this tradition by being "tough enough and smart enough to make and call his own niggers men" (*BE*, 13). However, with Garner, Morrison explores dimensions of sovereign power that often go undetected and unremarked. Garner is emblematic not of sovereignty's power to expropriate and withhold recognition but of that aspect of sovereignty (self-)authorized to give and bestow: create and legitimate.

So that he might "demonstrate . . . what a real Kentuckian was," Garner consolidated his manhood in the bestowal of abject manhood on the enslaved in the figure of the "Sweet Home man." The concept of "Sweet Home men" was initially introduced by Morrison's omniscient narrator in the following way: "There had been six of them who *belonged* to the farm" (*BE*, 11, emphasis added). The six men, all named Paul by Garner, fungible property, *belonged* to the farm, *belonged* to Garner. Before his encounter with a rooster named Mister, Paul D affirmatively identified as a "Sweet Home man" as defined within the terms of Garner's racially qualified and hierarchical definition of manhood.

Yet, with the arrival of Schoolteacher and the encounter with Mister that subsequently follows, Paul D begins to question the meaning of his manhood (*BE*, 11). Through the use of free indirect discourse, Paul D's telegraphed subterranean thoughts oscillate between assurance and worry: "He [Paul] grew up thinking that, of all the Blacks in Kentucky, only the five of them were men. . . . Was that it? Is that where manhood lay? In the naming done by a white man who was supposed to know?" (*BE*, 147). He tries to reassure himself that in fact he has nothing to worry about, his identity secure, yet the violence introduced under Schoolteacher's rule, culminating in his encounter with Mister, leaves him with creeping doubt. He recounts:

He [Mister] sat right there . . . looking at me. I swear he smiled. My head was so full of what I'd seen of Halle and before him Sixo, but when I saw Mister I knew it was me too. Not just them, me too. One crazy, one sold, one missing, one burnt and me licking iron with my hands crossed behind my back. The last of the Sweet Home men. (*BE*, 85–86)

As I will demonstrate, in this scene, the recurring phrase “*the last of the Sweet Home men*” (emphasis added), and Paul D’s self-identification with it, takes on an ironic quality because here it suggests incipient possibilities and the unsettling of identity rather than mere reification. Paul D might in fact be able to experience something the other Pauls had not—a life beyond the farm—that introduces discontinuity into the fetters of ownership and gendered identification. In its way, his growing envy of Mister in this scene is an acknowledgment of doubt, but Paul D initially refuses that knowledge due to his attachment to heteropatriarchy and its sovereign “I.”

It is not until Paul D has an encounter with a rooster that destabilizes his sense of his own manhood that he begins to recognize that tyrannical power not only denies but also permits, a realization that ultimately leads him to question Sweet Home’s fetters of obligation. It is when Paul D comes face-to-face, eye-to-eye, male-to-male with Mister the rooster that Paul D is compelled to confront what is in plain view: the state of his manhood is not one of coherence, unification, and integrity, but is rather riven, circumscribed, and indefinite. In the eyes of Garner, Paul D is not decisively and symmetrically “man,” but is instead an occasion for the theater of sovereign power, manipulated matter, a plastic. The encounter with Mister sets in motion the interrelated processes of relinquishing his identification as a “Sweet Home man” and redefining his gender and being in improvisational terms rather than in fidelity to those inherited from slavery. Crucially, Morrison desentimentalizes this loss of identity by framing loss as invitation to invention such that the loss of manhood and the relinquishment of what never properly belonged to him and compelled renegotiations of identity become the arc of Paul’s development as a character. The scene with Mister sets Paul D in a direction away from liberal humanism’s hierarchical ordering but in an improvisational manner and thus initiates movement without predetermined terminus, but nevertheless in an insistent direction.

Elliptically returning in the novel, Mister’s gaze pushes Paul D to confront that doubt, turn toward it rather than away from it, go deeper into it by stripping him of an identity that never belonged to him and revealing the depth of the violence that upholds it. Merging

Paul D's voice with the narrator, a tremble would register that he was not free of Mister, even when Mister appeared far from Paul D's consciousness: "OUT OF SIGHT of Mister's sight, away, praise His name, from the smiling boss of roosters, Paul D began to tremble" (*BE*, 125).

Morrison's insistence on Mister's gaze, via indirect discourse, invites a reconsideration of ontological and gendered meaning: If an essential feature of your existence is that the norm is not able to take hold, what mode of being becomes available, and what mode might you invent? How might an injunction against an avowed commonality in being, or humanity, by an ontologized conception of racialized gender paradoxically provide access to an alternative—a realm of invention, an ability that operates or becomes manifest in the realities from which this other realm or mode is excluded?³⁰ How might the singular burden and (im)possibilities of blackness be reconceived in a manner other than as a melancholic attachment to the norm? What modes of correspondence between humanity and animality open up? Again, Morrison desentimentalizes this loss of identity by framing loss as invitation to invention such that the loss of manhood—the relinquishment of what never properly belonged to him—compels renegotiations of identity, becomes a caesura, a space for something other than what he has previously known and desired to occur.

Paul D's narration of his encounter with Mister is prompted by Sethe's difficulty in fully appreciating the violence experienced by Sweet Home men. Due to her resentment of her husband Halle's unexplained disappearance, Paul D feels compelled to recount not only the events that led to Halle's disappearance but also the events that indelibly shaped his own history. In conversation with Sethe, Paul D, despite himself, attempts to recount unspeakable events. He recalls how he found himself with a bit between his jaws, the bit immobilizing his tongue, tearing the corners of his mouth, forcing it open, plasticizing by pulling and ripping. Paul D's retelling prompts Sethe, in turn, to remember witnessing similar episodes, "Men, boys, little girls, women. The wildness that shot up into the eye the moment the lips were yanked back. Days after it was taken out, goose fat was rubbed on the corners of the mouth but nothing to soothe the tongue or take the wildness out of the eye." She said, "People I saw as

a child . . . who'd had the bit always looked wild after that . . . it put a wildness where before there wasn't any" (*BE*, 84). *Beloved* suggests that the forcing of a bit into a human mouth, the plasticization of the body, puts wildness into the eyes rather than reveals the wildness that is presumed to already characterize black people.³¹

For Paul D, however, the bestializing bit is not the worst part. He recounts, "[I]t wasn't the bit—that wasn't it. . . . The roosters. . . . Walking past the roosters looking at them look at me. . . . Must have been five of them perched up there, and at least fifty hens" (*BE*, 85). It is seeing himself being seen in the gaze of a rooster named Mister. Reflected in Mister's eyes, he sees for the first time the extent to which his manhood has been distorted by slavery. He is ashamed that Mister is witness to all of it.

More specifically, rather than an inability to hide his shame, it is *unheimlich* identification that is "the worst part": what unmoors Paul D is that somehow Mister knows, that Mister has seen what Paul D cannot. Paul D watches Mister walk from the fence post before ultimately choosing his favorite spot: "I hadn't took twenty steps before I seen him. He come down off the fence post there and sat on the tub . . . [I]ike a throne" (*BE*, 85). Now perched on a tub, Mister is one of the five roosters and at least fifty hens Paul D believes are observing him. However, Paul D fixates on Mister, perhaps because Mister appears to possess aspects of masculinity that Paul D believes are his by entitlement or ought to be the rightful property of his manhood, but at the same time, as Freud might characterize it, Paul D is "dimly aware, in a remote corner of his own being," that they are not.³² Despite Mister's "bad feet," "he whup(ed) everything in the yard" (*BE*, 85). Whereas Mister can overcome his "bad feet" and triumph over every opponent in the yard to become a "Mister," Paul D cannot untie his hands. In contrast, Mister is described:

Comb as big as my hand and some kind of red. He sat right there on the tub looking at me. I swear he smiled. My head was full of what I'd seen of Halle a while back. I wasn't even thinking about the bit. Just Halle and before him Sixo, but *when I saw Mister I knew it was me too. Not just them, me too.* One crazy, one sold, one missing, one burnt and me licking iron with my hands crossed behind me. The last of the Sweet Home men. (*BE*, 85–86, emphasis added)

Staring at Paul D, evil-eyed, Mister, his uncanny double, his large red comb, Mister's phallus, smiles in the face of his torture, flaunting his sovereignty, or so Paul D believes.

Paul D, with his hands tied behind his back and hobbled, begins to envy Mister, who "looked so . . . free. Better than me. Stronger, tougher. Son of a bitch couldn't even get out of his shell by himself but he was still king and *I was* . . ." (*BE*, 86, emphasis added). "Better" because Mister symbolizes masculinist aspects of a normative conception of "freedom" felt increasingly contingent at Sweet Home: autonomy over the body, over movement, over one's sexuality. It would appear to Paul D that plantation slavery has somehow accorded Mister aspects of "life and liberty" as well as manhood withheld from him. Paul D can no longer be appeased by the relative freedoms afforded Sweet Home men, freedoms that are diminishing quickly by Schoolteacher's rule. Paul D laments, "Mister was allowed to be and stay what he was. But I wasn't allowed to be and stay what I was" (*BE*, 86). Here Paul D not only describes a scene of interspecies male rivalry characterized by a melancholic longing for the purported whole of the mythical phallus, but he also identifies an ontological aporia, one that is so foundational that it reverberates across the entire horizon of discourses governing the Subject. "I wasn't allowed to stay and *be* as I was," says Paul D (*BE*, 86, emphasis added).

So what is the *being* of blackness? Ultimately, (anti)blackness appears to be a matrix. A matrix has a range of meanings, including a situation or surrounding substance within which something else originates, develops, or is contained: a mold, a womb, a binding substance, a network of intersections, functioning as an encoder or decoder. All of these meanings establish that a matrix is an essential enabling condition for something of, but distinguishable from, its source—and therefore it performs a kind of natality. If described as a matrix, then (anti)blackness is symbolically a form of natality, a generative function rather than an identity.

If (anti)blackness is a matrix, then the normative conception of "the human" and the entire set of arrangements Sweet Home represents has its source in abject blackness. In the process of distinguishing itself from blackness, normative humanity nevertheless bears the shadowy traces of blackness's abject generativity. As "the defined"

rather than the “definers,” the enslaved’s abjection places blackness under the sign of the feminine, the object, matter, and the animal regardless of sex. Paul D hints at the slave’s abject generative function when he recounts the fact that it was he that enabled Mister’s birth:

Was me took him [Mister] out the shell, you know. He’d a died if it hadn’t been for me. The hen had walked on off with all the hatched peeps trailing behind her. There was this one egg left. Looked like a blank, but then I saw it move so I tapped it open and here come Mister, bad feet and all. (*BE*, 85)

In describing his presumably indispensable role in Mister’s birth, Paul D both identifies with and abjects the hen. Realizing that he had thus far been blind to crucial aspects of slavery’s gendered violence, his initial response was to displace those feelings onto Mister, as Mister has become representative of a loss of the illusion of a proper gendered role. And it is this natality, this irreducible femininity, that Paul D resents, as Mister reminds him of the plasticity of his manhood, or more precisely that such plasticity represents the impossibility for unqualified manhood to take hold. Mister momentarily appeared before Paul D as “a blank,” yet with respect to Garner and the gendered symbolic arrangements of slavery more generally, Paul D begins to fear it is actually *he* who signifies as “a blank” or even that he fails to signify at all (*BE*, 85). This unsettling encounter marks the beginning, not the completion, of Paul D’s meditation on the violent nature of Sweet Home’s ordered hierarchy in the renegotiated terms of an identity’s un/becoming.

So if blackness, here, is a natal function rather than an identity or experience, then what/who are black people? The slash conjoining who and what is not there to offend but to open up the question as widely as needed, which Morrison invites us to do, in order to identify whatever answer arises in the narrative. Paul D states, “Even if you cooked him [Mister] you’d be cooking a rooster named Mister. But wasn’t no way I’d ever be Paul D again, living or dead” (*BE*, 86). Paul D is irrevocably changed by the violent terms of his enslavement, but into what? The statement about the cooking of Mister recalls the cooking of Sixo—a Sweet Home man burned to death by Schoolteacher. However, Paul D is establishing something more

specific, a condition or quality that differentiates these two modes of roasting an other.

The enslaved are not only conscripted by hierarchical economies of commodification, property, and killing, which would position Paul D and Mister as proxies, but also Paul D's heart, mind, soul, and flesh are conscripted by and must contend with whatever the master effects. *The blackened embodied mind is, therefore, rendered plastic by a demand that includes and exceeds the authorized killing, consumption, and disposability of fleshly existence.* Paul D's body, hobbled with a bit in his mouth, is subject to be transmogrified according to purported registers of "animality" and "humanity." In this act of transmogrification—the changing of something into a different form or appearance (especially a fantastic or grotesque one)—the coordinates of the human body are changed into a different shape or form—bizarre and fantastic: human personality is made "wild" under the weight of blackness's production as seemingly pure potentiality. "But wasn't no way I'd ever be Paul D again, living or dead," he says (*BE*, 86). Here, Paul D is pointing to the way that the black body and mind are twisted and contorted in a manner indifferent to structures of form, their integrity and limits. So it is not only a body that is stolen but also the becoming of the slave: the slave's future perfect state of being. The black(ened) can only be defined as plastic: impressionable, stretchable, and misshapen to the point that the mind does not survive—it goes wild. We are well beyond alienation, exploitation, subjection, domestication, and even animalization; we can only describe such transmogrification as a form of engineering. *Slavery's technologies were not the denial of humanity but the plasticization of humanity.*

After all, as Paul D learns, slavery is not "like paid labor"; economic labor might actually be incidental to enslavement (*BE*, 165). "Beast of burden" is one of the many forms that Paul D is forced to take, but not the sole form; as *Beloved* depicts it, the slave's body is always subjected to something else, to forms of domination that are in excess of forced labor. "The slave" is paradigmatically that which shall be appropriated by emerging demands of the reigning order, as needed, with no regard for the potential irreparable effects of ontological slippage. Arguably, plasticization is the fundamental violation of en-

slavement: not any one particular form of violence—animalization or objectification, for instance—but rather coerced formlessness as a mode of domination and the *unheimlich* existence that is its result.³³

“Plasticity,” as concept and thematic, has been differentially articulated and inflected by thinkers as diverse as Hegel, Lévi-Strauss, and Darwin, and most recently by the French philosopher Catherine Malabou. While my use of the term *plasticity* arose independent of Malabou’s unique philosophical elaboration and development of “plasticity” as concept and reading practice in its distinction from and productive tension with Malabou’s materialist-realist hermeneutics, my approach is, nevertheless, arguably responsive to what has become Malabou’s signature concept.³⁴ Transformed by but also transformative of Hegelian, Derridean, Heideggerian, and contemporary neuroscientific thought, “plasticity,” as taken up by Malabou, refers to a fundamentally immanentist, mutable, transformable, and indeed plastic understanding of thought, matter, and being whereby the plastic is defined as that which is able to receive and give form and assumes the destruction of form in this giving and receiving. In the words of Malabou:

Existence reveals itself as plasticity, as the very material of presence, as marble is the material of sculpture. It is capable of receiving any kind of form, but it also has the power to give form to itself. Being the stuff of things, it has the power both to shape and to dissolve a particular facet of individuality. A lifetime always proceeds within the boundaries of a double excess: an excess of reification and an excess of fluidification. When identity tends toward reification, the congealing of form, one can become the victim of rigid frameworks whose temporal solidification produces the appearance of unmalleable substance. Plasticity situates itself in the middle of these two excesses. (*DW*, 81)

Malabou’s philosophy is an attempt to think the dialectical process anew as a plasticity that governs the continuous or even explosive process of (de)formation of the real.

While an engagement with the fullness of Malabou’s conceptualization of plasticity is beyond the scope of this essay, for the purposes of this discussion I contend that with respect to Malabou’s proposed

structuring dualism—dialectics of reification and fluidification—“the slave” is that discursive-material instance where the givenness of structural form is denied or fluidified. What is in flux, in the first instance here, is not immanent metamorphosis or matter’s self-regulation, but anti-black bonds of ontological effacement or irresolution that produce blackness as a plastic way of being—a relational field whereby what Malabou describes as the “the fragile and finite mutability” of being is effaced or fluidified (*DW*, 81). In other words, the slave is the discursive-material site that must contend with the demand for seemingly infinite malleability, a demand whose limits are set merely by the tyrannies of will and imagination. What is at stake is the definitive character of form, its determinacy or resistance, which is potentially fluidified by a willed excess of polymorphism and the violent wrenching of form from matter.

In contrast to Malabou’s approach, the plastic ontology described here is neither the thing-in-itself nor an immanentist ontology of the real, but representational or paradigmatic: an a posteriori virtual model of a dynamic, motile mode of anti-black arrangement. As ontological plasticization has been constituent to a mode of unfreedom and the history of anti-blackness, plasticity is therefore inflected differently than in Malabou’s work. My conceptualization of plasticity neither posits that human form can become “any kind of form” nor celebrates such a potential; rather, it concerns the way potential can be turned against itself by bonds of power. As Jayna Brown in “Being Cellular: Race, the Inhuman, and the Plasticity of Life” rightfully cautions:

Remembering how a plasticity of life was imagined and scientifically practiced through race and ability is key as scholars go forward in the project of decentering the human. A trust in scientific knowledge must be interrogated, and the “we” of new materialist thinking situated historically. Scholars must remember not to assume a universally shared positioning in relation to the material world.³⁵

Similarly, I suggest that the desirability and ruse of the “any kind” is embedded in and conditioned by an anti-black imaginary, in other words by the afterlife of slavery.³⁶

Moreover, I am resistant to Malabou's theory of plasticity because of its commitment to Hegelian dialecticism. I remain skeptical of attempts to read both the "interior" of bodies or the organismic field in Hegelian terms and to elevate such thought to the level of an originary anterior principle, or even "systemic law," underpinning the organization of life, sense, meaning (*DW*, 57). Even in its plastic presentation as the principle of fundamental mutability rather than totalizing movement toward identity, the constitutive operations of plasticity remain contradiction and synthesis, or negativity and reconciliation (*NF*, 87).

Beloved's refiguration of trans-species correspondence, rather than oppositional difference, disrupts Man's ability to cast "animal"—human or nonhuman—as the abjected referent in the production of the human Self. *Beloved* makes possible an intervention into an episteme, and not simply its application, by inviting an investigation of the potentially disruptive effects of trans-species correspondence—or more specifically, correspondence between actants—on the reigning order of being, knowing, naming, and its attribution of value. I use the term *correspondence*, denoting connection, interplay, and communication, in place of and against the normativity that legislates intersubjectivity in the Hegelian terms of the Self-Other relation. In the Hegelian tradition, Paul D and Mister are neither Self nor Other, but reciprocally and constitutively sub-Other. The animal as negative referent rests largely on the presumption that "the animal" lacks perspective or exists in a state of privation.³⁷ In this tradition, black people are situated as "animal man."³⁸ In other words, the African is animal in the form of a human and is thus devoid of the achievement of feeling and Reasoned perspective. Attributes of body and character are presumed to provide evidence of black people's bestial nature. Here, I aim to think the relationship between Paul D and Mister in vocabularies and terms other than those of post- or neo-Hegelian thought, which tends to inform the theorization of "Self/Other" as the plasticization of blackness forestalls definitive position as either Self or Other.

The ellipses in Paul D's retelling of his encounter with Mister—"I was . . ."—and the pregnant pauses in his speech emblemize the lexical gaps in language, the impossibility of a language predicated equally on violence and forgetting to give voice to the severing of

person from personality that Paul D describes. “Definitions belonged to the definers—not the defined,” and Paul D’s ontology was denoted by an em dash, an emphatic gap between definition and the act of defining (*BE*, 225). Whereas Paul D “was . . .” in his phantasy, Mister was definitively masculine, and he envied him for it.

Mister is in many respects a phantasm: an emblem of the desired but denied pleasures of racial patriarchy. His red comb makes him simultaneously a demonic apparition and a potent symbol of eroticism, as Mister has access to “at least fifty hens” that he can mate with as he chooses (*BE*, 85). Yet, Paul D’s envy combines his incipient existential awakening with a myopic, patriarchal, humanist entitlement (*BE*, 85).

However, because Paul D’s envy does not merely reflect misplaced resentments and patriarchal desires, we should resist moralizing and dismissing his envy outright. As Sianne Ngai points out, *envy* is not “a term describing a *subject* that lacks, but rather the subject’s affective *response* to perceived inequality.”³⁹ Moreover, Ngai observes, “envy lacks cultural recognition as a valid mode of publicly recognizing or responding to social disparities, even though it remains the *only* agnostic emotion defined as having a perceived inequality as its object” (*UF*, 128). Because it has been so thoroughly pathologized as an error of individualized passions, envy, whether pointing to phantasmatic or actual disparities, is undervalued as a political diagnosis.⁴⁰ Helmut Schoeck asks, “Why is a subject’s enviousness automatically assumed to be unwarranted or petty? Or dismissed as an overreaction, as delusional or even hysterical—a reflection of the ego’s inner workings rather than a polemical mode of engagement with the world?”⁴¹ Even the imaginary sources of envy can be a form of oppositional consciousness to what are indeed actual asymmetries. That one so often feels shame as a result of one’s envy points to how successfully envy has been pathologized and stripped of its critical value. Envy has been overdetermined as a passion that belongs to the individual psychological failures of the poor and especially the feminine; it is no coincidence that envy is so frequently rendered a symptom of hysteria. Once cast as feminine, representative of a disreputable economic class and the hysterical, envy is devalued for its critical implications (*UF*, 126–73).⁴²

Mister’s freedom to move across the expanse of the plantation, juxtaposed to Paul D’s tightly bound hands and forcibly mute tongue,

makes Mister an object of Paul D's envy. However, Paul D's envy is not simply a passive condition or psychological flaw; it is the means by which he recognizes and responds to an actual relation of power, where antagonism may be an appropriate response. However, instead of directing his antagonistic feelings toward enslavement, he turns them in on the self before misdirecting them at Mister based on a rivalry engendered by white patriarchal slavery. That slavery could inspire such debilitating envy and traumatic desire is astounding given Mister's position as animal in the order of things. Mister's low rank in the Chain of Being makes him a surprising symbol of phallogentric power, but at Sweet Home, Mister would appear to enjoy a measure of freedom withheld from Paul D.

Paul D has been acutely dispossessed of his sexuality by sexual trauma and Garner's control. Paul D's seemingly intractable investment in a heteromasculine recognition that never arrives suggests normative manhood's racial exclusion. Nevertheless, Paul D's investments in that manhood blind him to the manner with which said manhood establishes itself based on his vulnerability to gendered and sexual violence, whether in the context of Garner's control over his sexuality or the specter of rape on the chain gang. Tragically, he fails to see how such an investment places him in a paradoxical relation to his freedom and obscures the fullness of being. Not only is patriarchy itself inimical to freedom, but his investment in normative masculinity is also especially tragic, for at least two reasons. First, he does not understand that patriarchal desire is counterproductive to a politics of black freedom, in particular, as the pursuit of patriarchy binds black people to a model that can only reinforce black gender as failed or fraudulent. Not only are the material conditions absent for heteronormative genders and domestic arrangements, but attempting to embody such genders will be seen as reinforcing whiteness as their natural home and point of origin. Second, this purported fraudulence is predicated on the projection of animal lack—human and nonhuman—such that the slave will never experience ontologically level relationality with the master without displacing this epistemic premise.

In short, while Paul D's traumatized envy suggests the highly problematic and ultimately self-defeating consequences of his identification with Garner and the master's conception of manhood, it

also underscores a historical and existential truth: “the human” and “the animal” are not mutually exclusive ontological zones but rather positions in a highly unstable and indeterminate relational hierarchy, one that requires blackness as exception, as plasticity, in the establishment and reproduction of its code or representational grammar. Blackness’s ontological plasticity and the near formlessness of the violence that secures it do not and cannot strictly observe strictures of human exceptionalism where blackness is concerned, as blackness’s plasticity acts as a safeguard against emergent conditions that threaten to disestablish its code. Thus, arbitrary inversions of anthropocentric hierarchy as well as absurd and paradoxical modes of human recognition are essential to the renewal and adaptability of liberal humanism’s biopolitical logics.

Beloved facilitates a reconsideration of animal perspective’s significance, and from this questioning we can alter how we define our (human) being, black or otherwise. The scene underlines not only the questionable nature of Euro-patriarchal, anthropocentric constructions of the Self but also “the animal,” and by doing so it undermines “the human” ideal, one that claims that black people are representative of failed humanity, of being animals. In *Beloved*, Morrison narrates Mister and Paul D’s traumatized correspondence neither as a sentimental romanticization of nature nor as a fantasy of mastery over nature, which would characterize so much of the Western humanist (literary) tradition, but as a rupture of the governing terms of social life and grammar of representation. Eye-to-eye with Mister, Paul D is traumatized by his identification with the rooster, and this encounter fractures his sense of identity and radically destabilizes his sense of himself. Paul D, bit in mouth and in a traumatized state, cannot lay claim to a position of mastery that is supported by hegemonic orders of knowledge, culture, and being. Paul D has no epistemological, economic, or symbolic capital to do that. All he can do is try to hold on to his mind while carefully formed illusions of the self shatter. Embedded in that encounter is the incontrovertible specification of his existential predicament: he has not determined the meaning of (his) being; the manhood he claims is the property of an other, a Self-effecting phantasy.

The pain of the bit was certainly incalculably horrible, yet it was

Paul D's traumatizing introduction into trans-species correspondence and the non-self-identical revelation that emerged in its wake that threatened a total loss of self. If Mister has a perspective, authorized by something other than sovereign power, that supersedes sovereign recognition and disrupts its terms via an inexorable affectivity, how would Paul D define his manhood and (human) being? What *Beloved* establishes in this scene is that anti-black racialization exists within a biopolitical sphere that exceeds the master-slave relation and comprises also trans-species relations. However, human-animal binarism is, in turn, shaped by the historical development of slavery. The slave's plasticity neither conforms to a predetermined human exceptionalism nor maintains fidelity to the general principle of human privilege with respect to the animal. The arbitrary powers of the master (order) confound formulations that presume humans' symbolic and material power over animals. The slave's status is uncertain and provisional with respect to animals even when slaves such as Paul D desire anthropocentric privilege and prerogatives. The interval effectuated by animal perspective is an interruption of the slaveholder's conception of humanity and manhood, a conception Paul D has inherited. However, what if this painful and traumatizing interruption is more than a personal crisis for Paul D? What if this crisis is the precipice of a conception of being that would rechart the fate of black masculinity, one where humanity would be defined in a manner other than as teleology or hierarchy? What would it mean for black(ened) humanity if (human) being was no longer binaristically or teleologically positioned with respect to "the animal"? On what basis would we then define black humanity as liminal, lacking, or absent?

Mister's gaze arguably haunts Paul D. However, if we limit our analysis to the *figure* of Mister, whereby his gaze is merely a symptom of Paul D's trauma, then we potentially miss that Mister's presence in the novel is also an invitation, an opening, to question some of our most basic assumptions about who we are and what defines (human) being, revealing the fuller stakes of the ideal of "the human." Reading Mister as a character in the novel, deconstructively, calls into question the terms that have defined the antagonistic binarism subtending the human/animal distinction. Mister's gaze is a provocation, inviting us to reconsider how we define ourselves, especially with regard to the

racialized, gendered, and sexual dimensions of our fleshly being. In place of reading Mister's presence as only a symbol of slavery's animalization of black(ened) humanity or as an emblem of the travestied manhood afforded to black men under conditions of a racially hierarchized "universal humanity," we can read Mister's presence as the onto-epistemo-ethical disruption that it is. Paul D sees Mister as a castrating figure, one that mocks him, showing him how low and unmanly he is. But not even Paul D, who is so thoroughly invested in normative codes of manliness, can resist wondering what is behind Mister's eyes: What phenomenological experience and meaning-making exist for the rooster?

Paul D's tortured speculation about Mister's smile and his constant return to it raise important questions about epistemology and being. Paul D is shaken by his own conviction that Mister has an authorized perspective and is not simply there mechanically recording but rather "sees." Mister is a spectator of his humiliation neither as human nor as Descartes's automaton, but as one whose force and weight is registered as an affectivity that effects, and redirects, Paul D's experience of his gendered sexual being.

Moreover, Morrison's narration avoids the vexed problematics of anthropomorphism. Instead of purporting to transcribe or narrating Mister's mode of address and interiority, she alerts us to it, through Paul D's response to it, but does not represent it. Thus, it is able to exist as a disruption of the onto-epistemo-ethical while honoring its difference. Morrison, therefore, could help us revise conventional interpretations of slave narratives in which the genre simply reinforces a presumed hierarchy of humanity over an already-known and unitary "animal" (47, 402). Morrison's text questions the terms on which we define beasts, human or otherwise.

Paul D's near nullification in signification is what ails him. According to the ideology of slavery, the slave is essentially a human animal. And as "animal man," reason, sentiment, morality, will, desire, or any of the exalted characteristics that putatively define humanity as not only species membership but also a cultivated achievement are either absent, pathological, criminal, wholly deficient, or wholly excessive. How might Paul D's pained correspondence with Mister the rooster as fellow actants rather than Subjects problematize the very

episteme and language of evaluation that animalize both? In that moment, Mister is no longer simply an animal, and if he is not simply an animal, what does “animal” mean? Could slave-animal correspondence provide an entry point to another horizon of possibility, make way for another code or another mode of relating? Surely a different mode of relating and a different vocabulary of value is behind, and reflected in, Mister’s eyes.

Instead of offering an elaboration of an alternative epistemology that would return us to foundational forms of knowledge rooted in scientific positivism or biblical authority, *Beloved* queries without hastily concocting answers. In *Beloved*, because difference is not to be overcome or domesticated, alterity remains open; it must be allowed to remain that which is present but is not fully apprehended. The text does not seek to definitively answer ethical questions; instead, it raises their profile as questions, problematizing regimes of knowledge rather than competing with them.

The text opens up a space for us to ask questions that may not have solutions or provide solutions that may not be legitimated by hegemonic regimes of knowledge and liberal humanist ethics. The trauma of having a bit in his mouth may have been so great that it inhibited Paul D’s ability to accept an address from another on any terms other than his traumatized own. Trauma captures a person in its grip, arresting time; it tends to forestall mental capabilities. Seeing Mister seeing him, Paul D is suspended somewhere between what used to be “the animal,” what used to be “the human,” and an entirely different arrangement of possibility. Paul D’s traumatized identification with Mister is a caesura. No longer “the animal” or “the human,” Paul D’s plasticity potentially gives way to forms that would not turn “wild.” The remainder of Paul D’s story concerns his attempt to reconfigure his being, his gender and sexuality, not in pursuit of completion or wholeness but inside of conditions of irreparability and the necessity of deferral.

Morrison does not figure Mister as incapacity but instead endows him with the capacity to situate and decenter Paul D’s understanding of the Self, even if it is traumatizing for Paul D to do the same. Crucially, the effects of correspondence are not predicated on granting permission or prior authorization; rather, to be affected is to expose the prerogatives of the Self as a beguiling fiction. If we consider that

Paul D's perspective, his conception of himself, has already been intruded upon by Garner and Schoolteacher's Eurocentric and teleological understanding of the Self, where "animal" is the negative referent that defines Euro-humanity as an achievement and signifier of sovereign capacity, then Morrison's insistence on the situating power of animal perspective undermines one of slavery's most formative epistemic presumptions. But in order to problematize the sovereign "I," Morrison had to put the liberal humanist Self at risk.

Mister's capacity is occluded in the Chain of Being framework found in Douglass's 1845 *Narrative*. But what eludes anthropocentric humanism is not only that Mister has a perspective that does not await recognition but rather precedes and exceeds the limited terms of recognition; what also eludes it is that Mister's perspective requires that we rethink the limitations of our inherited views on "the animal" and examine how our presumptions undermine thought on human identity. To clarify, it is not that Morrison's text is suggesting that Mister, a male rooster, and Paul D, a male slave, are existentially the same; contesting the Chain of Being's (and related frameworks') ethico-epistemological grounding does not require a disavowal of phenomenological differences of embodiment or existence. Instead, it suggests the liberating potential, for Paul D and Mister as well as their avatars, both alive and dead, of a thoroughgoing questioning of the legacy of Enlightenment humanism.

In conclusion, Morrison's text suggests that slavery's violence is not the reduction of humans to the rank of animals but rather the transmogrification of the black(ened)'s being. More accurately, the black body, *in its humanity*, is turned into a form of infinitely malleable lexical and biological matter, a plastic upon which projects of humanization *and* animalization rest. This work is accomplished by the ontological position of blackness not as a sociological subjectivity or identity but as a matrix for forms of modern subjecthood and subjectivity.

I have argued that animal perspective, as an affectivity that effectively dislocated and redirected Paul D's conception of his gendered and sexual being by reminding him of what he knows but represses, may destabilize the prevailing grammar of "the human." Nevertheless, said disruption does not in and of itself topple hierarchical order: to do so would require a transformation of the terms and logics of cor-

respondence and the institution of another mode of being/knowing/feeling. A shift in the valuation of animals, if it is to be transformative and not merely a reallocation of attribution within a racially hierarchical system of value, must be accompanied by a different mode of political social life and grammar of representation. In other words, a revaluation of “animality,” or any other singular term, “objecthood” for instance, does not guarantee the revaluation of blackness; the elevation of the status of animals, especially their humanization, may reciprocally intensify the abjection or diminishment of black(ened) humans/animals due to some purported irrecuperable difference effected by rigged scales and retroactive justification. In short, *Beloved* not only questions the authority of the trope of “the animal” as applied to humans and animals but also offers an approach to the question “What is man?” that ultimately invites the dissolution of its terms.

.....

ZAKIYYAH IMAN JACKSON is assistant professor of black feminist theory, literature, and criticism in the English department at George Mason University and affiliate faculty in Women and Gender Studies. She has published articles in *Feminist Studies* and *GLQ*.

Notes

1. My use of the term *conscriptio* in this essay is inspired by David Scott’s thought-provoking *Conscripts of Modernity: The Tragedy of Colonial Enlightenment* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004).
2. See Orlando Patterson’s description of the “the constituent elements of slavery”: violent domination, dishonor, natal alienation, and chattel status. Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982).
3. Saidiya V. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997). Hereafter cited as *ss*. Furthermore, Hartman contends that the recognition of the enslaved’s humanity did not redress slavery’s abuses or the arbitrariness of the master’s power, since in most instances the acknowledgment of the humanity of the enslaved was a “complement” to the arrangement of chattel property rather than its remedy. Hartman further asks:

[S]uppose that the recognition of humanity held out the prom-

ise not of liberating the flesh or redeeming one's suffering but rather of intensifying it? Or what if this acknowledgment was little more than a pretext for punishment, dissimulation of the violence of chattel slavery and the sanction given it by the law and the state, and an instantiation of racial hierarchy? What if the endowments of man—conscience, sentiment, and reason—rather than assuring liberty or negating slavery acted to yoke slavery and freedom? Or what if the heart, the soul, and the mind were simply the inroads of discipline rather than that which confirmed the crime of slavery. (5–6)

In the course of her study, Hartman demonstrates the manner with which the purported peculiar properties of humanity became the pathways for the intensification of violence. This project extends Hartman's pathbreaking intervention. On the pitfalls of the concept of "dehumanization" in particular, see Samera Esmeir, "On Making Dehumanization Possible," *PMLA* 121 (October 2006): 1544–51.

4. I have adopted "being/knowing/feeling" from Sylvia Wynter, "On Disenchanted Discourse: 'Minority' Literary Criticism and Beyond," *Cultural Critique* 7 (1987): 207–44.
5. For instance, René Descartes (*Discourse on Method, Optics, Geometry, and Meteorology*, trans. Paul J. Olscamp [Indianapolis: Hackett, 2001]) and Thomas Jefferson (*Notes on the State of Virginia* [New York: Penguin Books, 1999]).
6. Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, in *The Classic Slave Narratives*, ed. Henry Louis Gates Jr. (New York: Mentor, 1987), 271, 282.
7. Winthrop Jordan, *White over Black: American Attitudes toward the Negro, 1550–1812* (Baltimore: Penguin Press, 1968). Hereafter cited as *WH*.
8. Cary Wolfe coined the phrase "discourse of species" in order to critically intervene in the semio-material twinned and oppositional constructions of "human" and "animal." Wolfe, *Animal Rites: American Culture, the Discourse of Species, and Posthumanist Theory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003).
9. For an excellent discussion of the global idea of race, see Denise Ferreira da Silva, *Toward a Global Idea of Race* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007). Hereafter cited as *GI*.
10. Betty J. Ring, "Painting by Numbers: Figuring Frederick Douglass," in *The Discourse of Slavery: From Aphra Behn to Toni Morrison*, ed. Carla Plasa Nfa, Carl Plasa, and Betty J. Ring (London: Routledge, 2013), 126–27. Ring provides an excellent exposition of how Douglass embraces

- “Christ-based values” while rejecting the hermeneutical warping of its pro-slavery adherents. She also underlines the problems of elevating Douglass’s narrative as authentic or original.
11. For differing but highly generative accounts of how white racial anxiety, in particular, structured transatlantic debates concerning the interrelation of political sovereignty, humane reform, race, and animality as they pertain to white heteropatriarchal reproductive futurity and salvation during the nineteenth century, see *ss*; Katherine C. Grier, *Pets in America: A History* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010), hereafter cited as *PA*; Jennifer Mason, *Civilized Creatures: Urban Animals, Sentimental Culture, and American Literature, 1850–1900* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005); and Susan J. Pearson, *The Rights of the Defenseless: Protecting Animals and Children in Gilded Age America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), hereafter cited as *RD*.
 12. Deborah McDowell, introduction to Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 101.
 13. Dwight A. McBride, *Impossible Witnesses: Truth, Abolitionism, and Slave Testimony* (New York: New York University Press, 2001), 3, 5. Hereafter cited as *rw*.
 14. An actant is that entity or activity which “modif[ies] other actors.” Bruno Latour, *Politics of Nature*, trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004), 75. On “Noise” see Michel Serres, *Hermes: Literature, Science, Philosophy*, ed. Josué V. Harari and David F. Bell (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1983), 123–24.
 15. Texts that historicize and analyze the conditions of early African American autobiography with respect to the conventions of abolitionist discourse and other literary modes and forms include Frances Smith Foster, *Witnessing Slavery: The Development of Ante-bellum Slave Narratives* (Westport CT: Greenwood Press, 1979); Gabrielle P. Foreman, “Manifest in Signs: The Politics of Sex and Representation in Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl,” in *Harriet Jacobs and Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl: New Critical Essays*, ed. Deborah M. Garfield and Zafar Rafia (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 76–99; Dwight A. McBride, *Impossible Witnesses: Truth, Abolitionism, and Slave Testimony* (New York: New York University Press, 2001); and William L. Andrews, *To Tell a Free Story: The First Century of Afro-American Autobiography, 1760–1865* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988).
 16. “Frederick Douglass: He Receives an Ovation at the Hands of the Col-

ored Tennesseans," *The Tennessean*, September 19, 1873, 4, emphasis added. Hereafter cited as "FD." Douglass is not proposing that all farming is brutalizing. Rather, he argues that slavery is brutalizing to both humans and animals, as it coarsens humans' treatment of life. However, Douglass's humanism does have him privileging particular aspects of humanity that are seen as uniquely human, such as reason and affection, even if he seeks to recognize these traits in animals. But his recognition of animal reason and affection still positions animals as lacking "to a limited degree." Animal studies scholars such as Derrida question how securely "the human" possesses these very characteristics; and others, such as Vicki Hearne, argue that the comparisons do not take difference seriously. As a dog's nose is its strongest sense, and the average dog's nose is exponentially stronger than the typical human's, critics such as Hearne ask: on what basis do we compare humans and animals? For thinkers like Hearne, the presumptive politics of comparison is the problem, as it tends to take presumed human attributes as the norm from which to compare animals. Arguably, by privileging the gaze, *Beloved* too participates in Western anthropocentric ocularcentricism even while contesting the terms of its logic. Jacques Derrida and David Wills, *The Animal That Therefore I Am (More to Follow)* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), hereafter cited as *AT*; Vicki Hearne, *Adam's Task: Calling Animals by Name* (New York: Skyhorse, 1986).

17. It is difficult to suggest that theoretical, ethical, and political questions should be coterminous with a species distinction with the human on one side and everything else on the other. Nevertheless, for a sampling of recent scientific research on animal intelligence and emotion, see Marian Stamp Dawkins, *Through Our Eyes Only? The Search for Animal Consciousness* (New York: W.H. Freeman/Spektrum, 1993); Donald R. Griffin, *Animal Minds: Beyond Cognition to Consciousness* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013); Marc Bekoff and Dale Jamieson, *Interpretation and Explanation in the Study of Animal Behavior*, vol. 1 (Boulder: Westview Press, 1990); Marc Bekoff and Jessica Pierce, *Wild Justice: The Moral Lives of Animals* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009); Marc Bekoff and Jane Goodall, *The Emotional Lives of Animals: A Leading Scientist Explores Animal Joy, Sorrow, and Empathy—and Why They Matter* (Novato CA: New World Library, 2008); Dale Peterson, *The Moral Lives of Animals* (New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2012). While these texts foreground a world of multiple intelligences and communicative beings, they do so at the risk of reinforcing scientism and anthropocentrism by preserving "the hu-

- man” as norm. In my work, indeed in this essay, I have tried to trace the limitations of both scientism and identification (with all its vicissitudes) as the grounds on which one bases an ethics.
18. Fragments of this speech are often circulated in animal rights literature. For an example of a prescriptive approach see Marjorie Spiegel, *The Dreaded Comparison: Human and Animal Slavery* (New York: Mirror Books, 1996).
 19. For an alternative reading of the “humane” and of Douglass in *My Bondage and My Freedom*, see Colleen Glenney Boggs, *Animalia Americana: Animal Representations and Biopolitical Subjectivity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), esp. 138–40 and 77–107.
 20. On the question of empathetic identification, see *ss*, 17–25.
 21. Robert Fanuzzi, *Abolition’s Public Sphere* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 206.
 22. Although the event was held at the “Colored Fair Grounds,” *The Tennessean* gives a detailed account of the whites in attendance: their anticipated and actual numbers, their societal standing, and their projected responses to Douglass’s “address, and the manner and style of delivery, and the sentiments which it contained” (“FD,” 4).
 23. For a discussion of these issues during the Progressive Era, see Michael Lundblad, *The Birth of a Jungle: Animality in Progressive-Era US Literature and Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013). Hereafter cited as *BJ*.
 24. The literature here is long. For a critique of sentimental identification as a mode of ethics, perhaps start with Lundblad (*BJ*), Hartman (*ss*), Pearson (*RD*), and Grier (*PA*). For variations on the subject of affect(ability) and affect(ivity), see, respectively, Da Silva (*GI*) and Mel Y. Chen, *Animacies: Biopolitics, Racial Mattering, and Queer Affect* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012).
 25. While not directly referencing or quoting the work of Giorgio Agamben, this essay is informed by his highly influential contributions to animal studies and posthumanism. The psychoanalytic theory and criticism of Jacques Lacan and Hortense Spillers also loom large as influences. Agamben, *The Open: Man and Animal* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004); Lacan, *Écrits: A Selection*, trans. Bruce Fink (New York: Norton, 2002). Spillers, *Black, White, and in Color: Essays on American Literature and Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003).
 26. Articles that underline the manner in which *Beloved* undermines or complicates empathy between reader and characters as the novel’s approach to ethics include Molly Abel Travis, “Beyond Empathy: Narrative Distancing and Ethics in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* and J. M. Coetzee’s

- Disgrace*,” *Journal of Narrative Theory* 40, no. 2 (2010): 231–50; Dorothy J. Hale, “Fiction as Restriction: Self-Binding in New Ethical Theories of the Novel,” *Narrative* 15, no. 2 (2007): 187–206; James Phelan, “Sethe’s Choice: *Beloved* and the Ethics of Reading,” *Style* 32, no. 2 (1998): 318–33; and Yung-Hsing Wu, “Doing Things with Ethics: *Beloved*, Sula, and the Reading of Judgment,” *Modern Fiction Studies* 49, no. 4 (2003): 780–805.
27. For an article on *Beloved* that stresses the narrative’s contradictions and aphorisms as central to its ethics, see Wendy Harding and Jacky Martin, “Reading at the Cultural Interface: The Corn Symbolism of *Beloved*,” *MELUS* 19, no. 2 (1994): 85–97.
 28. The text also creatively exposes the animalization of black female reproduction in early science and medicine. In one chapter of my forthcoming book titled *The Blackness of Space between Matter and Meaning*, I demonstrate that the animalization of black gender and sexuality forges identification between Paul D and Sethe in the novel, even while pushing them apart.
 29. Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (New York: Vintage International, 2004), 13. Hereafter cited as *BE*. Again, Morrison is fictionalizing and exploring the racialization of the Oedipal relation at the register of the paradigm rather than making a historical point or pursuing historical accuracy. However, on questions regarding the enslaved’s gendered, familial, and sexual relations as they existed under slave law, I would suggest Margaret Burnham’s important work. Margaret A. Burnham, “An Impossible Marriage: Slave Law and Family Law,” *Law and Inequality* 5 (1987): 187.
 30. My discussion of invention riffs off of Darriek Scott’s examination of the concept in *Extravagant Abjection: Blackness, Power, and Sexuality in the African American Literary Imagination* (New York: New York University Press, 2010).
 31. The following quotation is from Morrison’s *A Mercy*: “I am nothing to you. You say I am wilderness. I am. Is that a tremble on your mouth, in your eye? Are you afraid? You should be.” This text inflects wild(er)ness differently and opens up different possible linkages between blackness and wild(er)ness than what you find in *Beloved*. In the longer book chapter I will discuss these alternate inflections in relation to one another. *A Mercy* (New York: Random House, 2008).
 32. Sigmund Freud, *The Uncanny*, trans. David McLintock (London: Penguin Books, 2003), 14.
 33. We have to think critically about the enthusiastic fetishism of ontological slippage in much recent posthumanist, ecocritical, and speculative-

realist work. Not only does the erection of ontological dualism necessarily entail contradiction and aporia, but for these very same reasons they also require an exception, and black people have been burdened with those contradictions. Fred Moten's work is essential reading for serious thinking on the question of objecthood. Moten, *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003).

34. In *Plasticity at the Dusk of Writing*, Catherine Malabou variously describes plastic reading as "a new reading method," a "new transformed type of structural approach," or, more specifically, as "the metamorphosis of deconstructive reading": "*The plastic reading of a text is the reading that seeks to reveal the form left in the text through the withdrawing of presence, that is, through its own deconstruction.* It is a question of showing how a text *lives its deconstruction.*" Malabou, *Plasticity at the Dusk of Writing: Dialectic, Destruction, Deconstruction* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 51, 52. Hereafter cited as *DW*. Ian James argues that plastic reading attempts to "discern how the destruction or deconstruction of the metaphysics of presence leads to a mutation of form, and, indeed, arises necessarily from a fundamental mutability of form per se. In this sense, plastic reading is, like plasticity itself, defined as movement or passage between the formation and dissolution of form." James, *The New French Philosophy* (Cambridge UK: Polity, 2012), 85. Hereafter cited as *NF*.
35. Jayna Brown, "Being Cellular: Race, the Inhuman, and the Plasticity of Life," *GLQ* 21 nos. 2-3 (2015): 327. Brown's essay provides an important historical analysis of discourses of plasticity in the influential theories of eugenics and transhumanism while remaining optimistic about what the plasticity of life introduces into possibility—an optimism I share even if it is not the focus of the argument presented here.
36. More recently, Malabou's conception of plasticity has extended to an engagement with neuroscience. "Neuroplasticity," Malabou explains, means the brain is modulated by the unfolding of our experiences—and these modulations do "not just" document "that the brain has a history but that it is a history" (Malabou, *What Should We Do with Our Brain?* [New York: Fordham University Press, 2009], 4). The neurobiological concept of "neuroplasticity" commonly describes the brain's ability to reorganize itself by forming new adaptive neural connections across the life course, allowing neurons (nerve cells) in the brain to compensate for injury and disease and to adjust their activities in re-

sponse to new situations or to changes in their environment. Contrasting sharply with its predecessors, which characterized the brain in genetically deterministic terms, as a static control center, the discourse of neuroplasticity emphasizes, instead, the dynamic modulating function of experience and the continuous development of the brain over the life course. Neuroplasticity has been heralded in the popular press as a promise of salubrious futures, enunciated in an ableist key: cures for autism and ADHD, for instance. Since the 1990s a more expansive conception of neuroplasticity has also been put forward, neurogenesis, one that Tobias Rees contends Malabou largely ignores. Neurogenesis challenges the idea of adult cerebral fixity, suggesting that the dynamism of the adult brain is not limited to synaptic communication and that the development of new neurons extends into adulthood. By marginalizing neurogenesis, Rees argues, Malabou's "synapse-centered conception of the brain" is actually "a pre-plasticity conception. And her notion of cerebral plasticity is a relic of a time in which the brain's main feature was not plasticity—but its fixity" (Rees, "So Plastic a Brain: On Philosophy, Fieldwork in Philosophy and the Rise of Adult Cerebral Plasticity," *Biosocieties* 6, no. 2 [2011]: 266).

Moreover, in her recent turn to neuroscience, or the discourses of neuroplasticity, Malabou risks charges of material reductionism and scientism in constructing an ontology of the real based on the flux of experimental research and recent findings. In an attempt to map the interrelations and effects of social networks of power and neural networks, Malabou argues in *What Should We Do with Our Brain?* that capitalistic society is isomorphic to neuronal organization. I would argue it is a *racial* capitalism and the not yet past of slavery that conditions biotechnological and biocapital imaginaries, including those that shape the history of neuroscience. I thank Cameron Brinitzer, Gabriel Coren, and Mel Salm for bringing Rees's critique to my attention.

37. On the figuration of animality (human and otherwise) as a state of privatization, see Kalpana Seshadri, *HumAnimal: Race, Law, Language* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012).
38. Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History*, ed. Johannes Hoffmeister, trans. H. B. Nisbet (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), 177.
39. Sianne Ngai, *Ugly Feelings* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005), 126. Hereafter cited as *UF*.

40. Frederic Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981), 202, 268.
41. Helmut Schoeck, *Envy: A Theory of Social Behavior*, trans. Michael Glenny and Betty Ross (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1966), 172.
42. For more information, see *UF*, 126-73; and Peter Stearns, "Gender and Emotion," in *Social Perspectives on Emotion*, ed. David D. Franks and Viktor Gecas (Greenwich CT: JAI Press, 1992), 127-60, esp. 135.