

# “What You Call Yourself?": Nothingness, Naming, Abjection, and Queer Failure in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*

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As her former master drives her to a purchased freedom in the North, “Jenny,” the matriarch of a family fractured by slavery, pauses to ask him, “Mr. Garner,’ she said, ‘why you all call me Jenny?’ ‘Cause that what’s on your sales ticket, gal. Ain’t that your name? What you call yourself?’ ‘Nothing,’ she said, ‘I don’t call myself nothing’” (Morrison 167-68). Until this moment “Jenny” has had no cause to name herself, even to herself. The dehumanization of slavery erased her individual existence, which is just one of the acts of violence that Toni Morrison forces her audience to face in her novel *Beloved*. In this paper, I use the work of Kimberly Benston and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick to contextualize black and queer conceptions of naming (and the unnamed). I then employ queer of color scholar Darieck Scott’s work in *Extravagant Abjection: Blackness, Power, and Sexuality in the African American Literary Imagination* to examine specifically how two self-named characters, “Jenny” (who names herself Baby Suggs) and Stamp Paid, embrace nothingness and abjection and how that operates in *Beloved*. Finally, I perform a close reading of these characters’ names and lives, using Jack Halberstam’s “The Queer Art of Failure” to draw out the queerness, failure, and abjection circling in their stories. Their chosen names “fail” in many ways, leading me to questions about how Baby Suggs and Stamp Paid resist a dominant narrative and instead find power in, as Jack Halberstam would say, “the refusal of legibility, and an art of unbecoming” (Halberstam 88).

There is an obvious historical importance to African-American self-naming, as many slaves were given their slave-owner’s surname and arbitrarily assigned first names by those slave-owners. In “‘I Yam What I Am’: Naming and Unnaming in Afro-American Literature,” Kimberly Benston writes about the violence of naming the Other. “Language,” he writes, “that fundamental act of organizing the mind’s encounter with an experienced world—is propelled by a rhythm of naming: It is the means by which the

mind takes possession of the named, at once fixing the named as irreversibly Other and representing it in crystalized isolation from all conditions of externality” (Benston 3). Even in *Beloved*, there is a moment where the master beats the slave to remind him “that definitions belonged to the definers—not the defined” (Morrison 225). Benston argues that naming others, as the master enforces here, is a form of possession and colonization, but what happens when one names one’s self? The rest of Benston’s piece grapples with the ontological experience of being named, being nameless, searching for a name, and naming’s one’s self as represented in black American literature. He writes about how naming one’s self becomes symbolic of finding a free identity or a way to point towards that free identity; how kinship and temporality explicitly influence the post-slavery African-American experience of naming; and how a minority subject has the potential of being nameless for a time. All of these spaces exist in *Beloved* and resonate heartily with queer and queer-of-color theory about naming, identity, and the power of being abject.

I set Benston’s ideas about “being named” next to Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s argument about naming one’s self as “queer.” She writes, “there are important senses in which ‘queer’ can signify only when attached to the first person. One possible corollary: that what it takes—all it takes—to make the description ‘queer’ a true one is the impulsion to use it in the first person” (Sedgwick 9). Although Sedgwick’s instance of naming is about claiming an identity category, her statement offers an opportunity to engage with a queer experience of self-naming. She also famously defines queer as a very flexible term when she says, “‘Queer’ can refer to: the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone’s gender, of anyone’s sexuality aren’t made (or *can’t* be made) to signify monolithically” (8). The lack of definition in this

definition gives “queer” an inherent and unsteady power since anyone can use it to “name” themselves but are forced to engage with (and engage others in) what the term means for them. In other words, how can claiming yourself as “queer” both signify something to the world by supplying the world with a definition *and* refuse to be definable? What Sedgwick circles around with “queer” in “Queer and Now” parallels a felt experience in *Beloved* about both the power and the limitation of names.

There is a power in refusing to signify or “be named,” a power that connects well to Darieck Scott’s work in *Extravagant Abjection*. He establishes a framework for considering the abject black subject that he largely uses to examine sexuality in various texts, which I will use to perform a close reading of namelessness and naming in *Beloved*. He argues:

Is that within the black abject—within human abjection as represented and lived in the experience of being-black, of blackness—we may find that the zone of self or personhood extends into realms where we would not ordinarily perceive its presence; and that suffering seems, at some level or at some farflung contact point, to merge into something like ability, like power (and certainly, like pleasure) without denying what it is to suffer. (Scott 15)

Scott asks us to consider the state of abjection as not something to merely move on from, but rather a space of power and potential for the abject subject who has experienced defeat. He writes that “black people have had to be inside, as it were, abjection, have had to embody it and *be* it in the lack of command of their embodiment that becoming black decrees” (17). A novel like *Beloved* is entirely relevant to his claims (in fact he calls it “a novel which is in many ways the urtext and bible of my project,” although he works with different characters and issues than I do), as it acknowledges the psychological impact of the past alongside the day-to-day experiences of racism that black people face (1). Although the community in *Beloved* is predominantly African American, white people and their racism linger constantly on the margins of the story and remind the characters, especially Baby Suggs, of their abjection. She, in the middle of her life, is a survivor of degradation and defeat, but her method of survival is not necessarily “to overcome.” Within a lifetime marked by abjection,

Scott asks, “What then is that fashion of survival? What are the elements of that survival *in* abjection, or *as* abjection?” (17). He offers a useful structure to work through an abject life, a life Toni Morrison represents in her matriarch, Baby Suggs.

Baby Suggs is not Baby Suggs’ name from birth. When she is arriving into freedom for the first time, she finally has the courage to ask her former master Mr. Garner “something she had long wanted to know,” which is why everyone on his farm, Sweet Home, calls her Jenny (Morrison 167). As aforementioned, he explains that this is her “bill-of-sale name,” but for her it has no personal meaning (168). When asked what she calls herself, she says “Nothing... I don’t call myself nothing” (167). Baby Suggs gives us even more perspective on her nameless, identityless existence just before this section, when she compares how her son Halle sees her to how she sees herself. She says:

And no matter, for the sadness was at her center, the desolated center where the *self that was no self* made its home. Sad as it was that she did not know where her children were buried or what they looked like if alive, fact was she knew more about them than she knew about herself, having never had the map to discover what she was like. Could she sing? (Was it nice to hear when she did?) Was she pretty? Was she a good friend? Could she have been a loving mother? A faithful wife? Have I got a sister and does she favor me? If my mother knew me would she like me? (165, emphasis added)

This is not an expression of losing one’s identity momentarily or struggling to figure out who one really is. This is an expression of never having had an identity because one has been dehumanized to the point of total abjection. Abjection here is a term I am using by Scott’s definition as “a way of describing an experience, an inherited... historical legacy, and a social condition defined and underlined by a defeat” (Scott 17). Baby Suggs has certainly experienced many defeats at this point in her story: the hard, endless work of slavery, the loss of her children in body and in memory, the unresolved question of her husband’s attempted escape from slavery. Describing herself as “nothing” indicates how deeply abject defeat defines her existence.

At the end of his most substantial chapter, Scott makes the argument that to understand “one... of the *powers of blackness*, the powers of lingering in the gap of being... we will need sweeter or perhaps more fabulous fables of lived experience... we shall need a literary imagination” (93-94). I argue that Morrison’s *Beloved*, specifically the character of Baby Suggs, provides an imaginative characterization of an experience of abjection that has these subversive powers. By lingering for a moment in her namelessness and identitylessness, one can critically examine what Scott defines as a uniquely black experience of embodiment. In his chapter titled “Fanon’s Muscles: (Black) Power Revisited,” Scott examines the work of writer and cultural theorist Franz Fanon, especially Fanon’s claim that oppressed black people must immediately and assertively move on from their oppression and “overcome” it. Scott writes, “It is reasonable to say Fanon is about nothing so much as resistance to defeat, and about a refusal to give defeat any final acceptance, a refusal to acquiesce to it... Fanon will not *allow* defeat; he must be actively defeated, he will not collude in the process” (39). This moment of disavowal is what Scott takes up and challenges in his work, especially examining Fanon’s writing through the lens of existentialist philosophy. He argues that while Fanon is concerned with “the freedom towards which human beings can aspire” by overcoming their anguish, the work of Jean-Paul Sartre focuses on “the anguished state [which] *is the freedom* that human beings possess” (79, emphasis added). The Sartrean principle of freedom is based on the idea that “consciousness is the nihilation, the withdrawal, of itself from the world around it... and from itself; consciousness surges up to become for-itself, distinguished from the in-itself of unconscious or nonconscious being. Thus consciousness depends on ‘nothingness’; that is, it nihilates what it is in order to be—it transcends the world and itself in order to know them” (79). In that transcendence, one finds Sartre’s freedom. Scott invests in *that* nothingness (or abjection) and critiques Fanon’s work for moving quickly beyond nothingness because Fanon does not see total anguish as powerful. Scott makes an argument that a black abject experience can be a location for freedom and power, as it offers a distinct perspective on which to grapple with questions of nothingness, anguish, abjection, and transcendence.

Scott defines power loosely, saying he seeks “to trouble the notion of power... to theorize that which is *not*-power according to the ego-dependent, ego-centric (and masculine and white) ‘I’ definitions we have of power, but which is *some kind* of power if by power we mean only ability, the capacity for action and creation in one or several spheres, be they internal or external to the empowered” (23). This definition links power with abjection through a discourse of nothingness; in other words, the subject who defines herself as “nothing” is part of the not-power which is power, especially depending on how and why she defines herself as “nothing.” Consider how Baby Suggs’ open acknowledgment of her own “nothingness” is an act of resistance. When her master insists that she must call herself something or answer to something, she instead refuses to be legible in her master’s conception of the world and challenges her master’s idea (which he specifically prides himself on) that he treated his slaves well, that there was some sort of happy and acceptable identity for a slave in slavery that she would desire to affirm. Baby Suggs, or in this moment “nothing,” creates a moment of discomfort that makes her former master go “red with laughter” and later “pink again,” as she considers renaming herself Baby (Morrison 167). Her master attempts to shame her for this choice, saying that “Mrs. Baby Suggs ain’t no name for a freed negro,” but how can he when she is the one acknowledging and existing in her own dehumanization and presenting to him her nameless nothingness as one of the consequences of slavery and his specific slave-owing? (167). By lingering in this moment of abjection, Baby Suggs is claiming what Scott would call “a kind of black *power*, that power is the ability or opportunity to access this condition, state, or facticity that is anonymous existence” (Scott 90). She is, in this scene of unnamings that turns shortly to self-naming and self-invention, experiencing a process of coming to consciousness that Sartre would say annihilates her world and herself in order to make sense of both (79).

Morrison certainly seems to be playing with these ideas in her characterization of Baby Suggs. Baby Suggs challenges her own nothingness and identitylessness in the context of coming into a literal freedom: freedom from slavery. She, just

before challenging Mr. Garner about her name, first becomes physically conscious of herself. She says, “Suddenly she saw her hands and thought with a clarity as simple as it was dazzling, ‘These hands belong to me. These *my* hands.’ Next she felt a knocking in her chest and discovered something else new: her own heartbeat. Had it been there all along? This pounding thing? She felt like a fool and began to laugh out loud” (Morrison 166). Morrison narrates the coming into consciousness and freedom from slavery at the same time and, in the same scene, sets up Baby Suggs’ interrogation of her slave name. Baby Suggs clearly gets pleasure from experiencing herself as a conscious, free person, and this moment of coming into consciousness also literally *empowers* her to ask Mr. Garner about her name. These impactful and moving moments about pleasure and power that she receives directly because of her abject experience are what Scott identifies in his work.

Part of Scott’s definition of power is in its creative energy, which is part of Baby Suggs’ freedom-and-consciousness experience. She decides to create a name for herself, a name which is interesting because of its interplay with distorted temporality and its eventual relationship to abjection and failure. Jack Halberstam’s “The Queer Art of Failure” argues that part of the “anticapitalist, queer struggle” is also “about anticolonial struggle, the refusal of legibility, and an art of unbecoming” (Halberstam 88). In many ways, Baby Suggs practices all three at once in the aforementioned scene: her struggle against the colonizing effects of slavery in her mind, the refusal to be named legibly to her former master, and the claiming of an anti-identity that is her process of “unbecoming.” Moving on from that moment of lingering in abject namelessness, Baby Suggs does choose a name, and a close reading of that name and how her name circulates alongside her freed identity is fascinating because her narrative arc bends towards a kind of failure. She ends her life in bed, in her home called “124,” with her daughter-in-law Sethe and her grand-daughter Denver but none of her other family. She focuses on nothing but pure colors in her final years, unable to engage with her community, her faith, or her family. She is failing the normative expectation, she is lingering in the abject, but what power is she finding in this end to her life? Why does she go to this place and stay there?

*Beloved* has another self-named character, a man named Stamp Paid. His and Baby Suggs’ chosen names are inspired by their pasts, reminders for their presents, and offer hope for their futures. Stamp first appears in the novel during a flashback, when Denver is retelling her mother’s story of journeying out of slavery and into the North. Stamp helps Sethe cross the Ohio river, which is emblematic of his role throughout the novel. Stamp comes from slavery and names himself in reaction to one specific element of his enslavement. He explains:

Born Joshua, he renamed himself when he handed over his wife to his master’s son. Handed her over in the sense that he did not kill anybody, thereby himself, because his wife demanded he stay alive. Otherwise, she reasoned, where and to whom could she return when the boy was through? With that gift, he decided that he didn’t owe anybody anything. Whatever his obligations were, that act paid them off. He thought it would make him rambunctious, renegade—a drunkard even, the debtlessness, and in a way it did. (Morrison 218)

By this Stamp Paid means that he becomes reckless in his charity; he fully employs himself in assisting runaway slaves and people in the community who need it. He gives and gives and gives, relentlessly. In many ways Stamp is invoking abjection, the power of taking “a social condition defined and underlined by a defeat,” and using the total and abject failure of masculinity, marital happiness, and independence that he was forced to sacrifice in slavery to create both his name and his lived identity; his stamp is paid by that moment (Scott 17).

However, Stamp’s name is also a constant reminder to himself about that humiliating moment and about his relationship to degradation and debt. He is tireless in his work of continuing “this debtlessness to other people by helping them pay out and off whatever they owed in misery,” but that too is a weight (Morrison 218). He is a fixture in a community; he is very clearly tying many people together with love and generosity. But all this bigheartedness comes from the worst moment of his life. He sees himself as not owing anyone anything, but once he realizes how bad things have gotten with Baby Suggs and her family at 124, he wonders, “if, after all these years of clarity, he had



misnamed himself and there was yet another debt he owed” (218). He questions his own name, which in itself is a question about the slave’s life after slavery. Does he owe anyone anything? Is his stamp paid by the dehumanization, degradation, and defeat he experienced under slavery? What does he “owe” to himself or to his community? I think Stamp chooses his name to propel himself towards *more* giving, adding an element of futurity to his choice. Naming is something that happens to us at the insistence of the dominant world, so to choose one’s own name is abnormal and defies the system. Beyond that, Stamp’s choice of a name enters what Halberstam describes as a queer space where “self-shattering, loss of mastery and meaning, unregulated speech and desire are unloosened... to embrace a truly political negativity, one that promises, this time, to fail... to speak up and out, to disrupt” (Halberstam 110). Giving his wife over to his master’s son shattered something inside Stamp’s self, as he lost mastery of his identity and his family. He promises to speak up and out. Post-slavery he disrupts capitalism by circulating items, connections, housing, and messages without expectation of payment. While he may not wholly embrace negativity like Baby Suggs eventually does, he still experiences a self-shattering in his abject experience as a slave that points him towards his eventual name.

Contrasting Baby Suggs’ name with her narrative arc is even more fascinating and challenging to grapple with. Baby Suggs clearly articulates why she has chosen her name, saying, “Baby Suggs was all she had left of the ‘husband’ she claimed... The two of them made a pact: whichever one got a chance to run would take it; together if possible, alone if not, and no looking back. He got his chance, and since she never heard otherwise she believed he made it. Now how could he find or hear tell of her if she was calling herself some bill-of-sale name?” (Morrison 169). Baby Suggs chooses her name because it is a cobbled together version of his last name and the name he always called her, “Baby.” The name connects her to her family, allowing her to imagine the possibility of reuniting with her husband. She starts her life in 124 under this name and this hope, and in her first conversations as a free woman, the reader can hear her dreams articulated (“We scattered... but maybe not for long”), and she starts to plan how she may use

her new connections to find her children (169). She gets a house and a job, but what she really seeks, and what her name points to, is reconnection with her husband and children. A few pages before, enslaved, she has no concept of knowing her children; slavery has made that knowledge meaningless. She says, “All seven were gone or dead. What would be the point of looking too hard at the youngest one?” (164). Slavery violently oppresses Baby Suggs into this subject position of anti-motherhood because it has no interest in her being “successful” as a mother, only as a slave. But freedom gives her an opportunity to be someone tender and loving, a mother and grandmother and wife, and she claims that tenderness in her name, Baby Suggs, and with her actions.

Beyond the desire to connect with a husband and children in the free world, the name Baby Suggs also expresses who she is. She plays a crucial role in the black community as “an unchurched preacher” who gathers audiences in the woods and talks to them about loving and living. She is “Baby Suggs, holy” to everyone because “when warm weather came, Baby Suggs, holy, followed by every black man, woman and child who could make it through, took her great heart to the Clearing—a wide-open place cut deep in the woods nobody knew for what” (102). In this space, she preaches to her community, helping them live through the emotions of becoming free, independent, self-owned people. Her preaching is about self-love and resists a supremacist narrative of religion or of white respectability politics. “She did not tell them to clean up their lives or to go and sin no more,” writes Morrison, “She did not tell them they were the blessed of the earth, its inheriting meek or its glorybound pure. She told them that the only grace they could have was the grace they could imagine. That if they could not see it, they would not have it” (103). What Baby Suggs does in the Clearing is a kind of queer failure already. She resists dominant expectations and embraces what Halberstam says queerness offers in a “method for imagining, not some fantasy of an elsewhere, but existing alternatives to hegemonic systems” (Halberstam 89). What Baby Suggs offers in the Clearing is not the hard rule of a patriarchal and hierarchal church, but a literal open space where the black community, free people and ex-slaves, can learn to love themselves in a world that

actively does not want them to. She preaches, sings, and dances in the Clearing, letting go of hatred and grief, encouraging all to “Lay em down... Sword and shield. Don't study war no more” (Morrison 101). If Stamp Paid is working to connect people with literal resources, Baby Suggs is connecting them with spiritual ones. She is loved for it; “Baby,” after all, is a term of endearment.

“Baby” also invokes Baby Suggs’ gentleness, which she employs constantly to serve others. Sethe fondly remembers Baby Suggs massaging her neck and longs for her mother-in-law’s gentleness: “Just let me feel your fingers again on the back of my neck and I will lay it all down, make a way out of this no way. Sethe bowed her head and sure enough—they were there. Lighter now, no more than the strokes of bird feather, but unmistakably caressing fingers” (112). Baby Suggs’ gentleness helped black characters like Sethe give up some of their anger and emptiness in the face of so much pain, and turn that energy to making “a way out of this no way” (112). She makes space for people to feel comfortable; she is both gentle like a baby and also babies others. Sethe remembers Baby Suggs swaddling her stripped and beaten back after she arrives at 124: “[Baby Suggs] bathed her in sections, starting with her face... After each bathing, Baby Suggs covered her with a quilt and put another pan on in the kitchen” (109). She helps Sethe heal, gently, slowly, from physical wounds and mental ones, encouraging her to be strong as she faces her own free identity and the future life she will have to make for herself.

All of these links between Baby Suggs’ name and her character come undone after Sethe kills her daughter Beloved and attempts to kill her other children, hoping to spare them from the slave master who comes to reclaim his “property” after the passage of the Fugitive Slave Act. If Baby Suggs was gesturing towards some queer art of failure in the Clearing, she certainly calls upon it after this tragic event and as her life approaches its end. In “The Queer Art of Failure,” Halberstam talks about the film *Trainspotting* and one character’s “choice ‘not to choose life,’ where ‘life’ signifies” the mundane, “a numbing domestic passivity” (Halberstam 90-91). Although he calls this film out for its depiction of white, male, unqueer failure, this description suits Baby Suggs’ final days. She seems to stop choosing life because of what

life has come to signify for her. Nowhere is this more obvious than when she meets Stamp Paid on the street sometime after Sethe’s terrible deed. He says, “He had not seen her in weeks... When he stopped her with a greeting, she returned it with a face knocked clean of interest. She could have been a plate... If there had been sadness in her eyes he would have understood it; but indifference lodged where sadness should have been” (Morrison 210). Stamp Paid in this moment cannot fathom that this matriarch of a family and a community, a powerful woman who brings people together and makes them love themselves, has given up on life. She is not down and out for a spell, she is totally withdrawing from existence. She stops going to the Clearing, she stops preaching, and she disappoints her community. But, in the same way that there is power in imagining abjection productively, Halberstam asks, “What happens when failure is productively linked to racial awareness, anticolonial struggle... and different formulations of the temporality of success?” (Halberstam 92).

Eventually Stamp Paid and I come to the same conclusion. There is something powerful in Baby Suggs’ giving up. She may be embracing the queer art of failure, but also the world has deeply failed her. The name she gave herself, which held such hope for reunification with her family and possibilities of love, failed to deliver on what she hoped. Slavery and white dominance took her husband, her son, her grandchild, and her faith. Stamp realizes after Baby Suggs’ death that, “The heart that pumped out love, the mouth that spoke the Word, didn’t count. They came in her yard anyway, and she could not approve or condemn Sethe’s rough choice. One or the other might have saved her, but beaten up by the claims of both, she went to bed. The whitefolks had tired her out at last” (Morrison 212). Morrison centers this novel on Sethe’s murder of Beloved, but *constantly* and almost casually many characters remind us that this egregious act is just one of thousands and hundreds of thousands of egregious crimes committed in the name of slavery. It just happens to be a crime committed by a mother and a black woman, not a white slaveowner. So what do we make of a grandmother who attempts to counteract some of that pain with self-love but eventually has to give it up to think about colors, to just “fix on something

harmless in this world” (211)? I argue that Baby Suggs comes to “feel backward... to recognize something in these darker depictions of queer life without needing to redeem them” (Halberstam 99). She is again resisting the dominant expectation (as she did by calling herself “nothing”) for a productive or normative body, this time by caring for nothing but herself and her desires. To take up the famous words attributed to black feminist lesbian mother poet Audre Lorde, “Caring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare.” Caring for herself, inching her way through colors, and lingering in the total abjection and loss she faces is in many ways a deeply queer, deeply powerful capstone on a complicated life.

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