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REVIEW: Michael DeRell Hill's *The Ethics of Swagger: Prizewinning African American Novels, 1977-1993* (Columbus, The Ohio State University, 2013). HB \$51.95. pp.195.

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In her 1993 Nobel Prize in Literature acceptance speech, Morrison contextualizes her lecture by positing that for her “[f]iction has never been entertainment,” but has instead been her work<sup>1</sup>. In this speech, Morrison recalls a story common to many cultures, but in her version a blind, older black woman, who is the daughter of slaves, finds herself confronted by a group of young people about whom “she does not know their color, gender or homeland.” They ask the old woman if the bird that one of them holds is alive or dead, and what ensues is the coming together of two divergent perspectives as well as age groups within a community. The audience notes the old woman’s “outsider” status: she “lives outside of town” and is “both the law and its transgression.” In this lecture, Morrison presents the notion of language “partly as a system, partly as a living thing over which one has control” because, as she avers, the old woman “thinks of language as susceptible to death, erasure; certainly imperiled and salvageable only by an effort of the will.” Here, Morrison might be seen as representative of the old woman in her speech, and her literary artistry as that of the bird: “So I choose to read the bird as language and the woman as a practiced writer.”

When considering the symbolism of the old woman and the bird to Michael DeRell Hill’s discussion in *The Ethics of Swagger: Prizewinning African American Novels, 1977-1993*, arguably, Hill views Morrison’s appropriation of language, represented, for instance, in her Nobel lecture, as a path to recognition by predominantly white prize-granting bodies. To extend this analogy, to Hill, the bird might be likened to that of the literary artistry crafted by African American “prizewinning” novelists from 1977-1993 to impress the gatekeepers of the prize(s)—through which they, like Morrison as the sage old woman, must secure successful passage.

This select cadre of prizewinning African American novelists, referred to by Hill as the “Black Archivists,” include: David Bradley, Ernest Gaines, Charles Johnson, Toni Morrison, Gloria Naylor, Alice Walker, and John Edgar Wideman (5).

Hill begins his argument by citing Toni Morrison’s use of the word “strut” when describing her feelings about receiving the Nobel Prize for literature in a conversation with Claudia Driefus as being synonymous to his appropriation of the word “swagger,”<sup>2</sup> claiming that this word becomes an apt expression of the way that the prizewinning African American novelists listed above finesse their craft as writers. As Hill puts it, “[s]trutting is ‘to walk with an affected air or dignity’ or ‘to ... swagger.’”<sup>3</sup> Hill sees Morrison’s remarks on how it felt to receive the Nobel Prize as “reveal[ing] a blend of responsibility, achievement, and style that fueled late twentieth-century black artistic freedom” (1). Swagger, for Hill then, becomes “a boldly innovative self-presentation—a retort to racial prejudice.... involv[ing] more than just ego; it entails cultural recovery. Because slavery and segregation threatened parts of black life, especially aggression and flamboyance, swagger ... became [citing Dawoud Bey] ‘a way to both reclaim and celebrate viscerally ... aspect[s] of self that ha[d] historically been eroded’” (2). As an illustration, Hill cites Dr. J’s “dunk” because it “embraced black styles and revised the agendas of basketball’s white creator” (3). Literary swagger, then, eschews a “misreading of flair” which, according to Hill, was the tendency of 1970s humanism (2). Moreover, he suggests that it was the swagger of these and other post-Civil Rights writers “that claimed African American literature’s place in the academy” (3), finding the era from 1977-1993 as marking “the end of black writers’ journeys through insecurity toward autonomy” (5). According to Hill, to this end, “Black Archivists” Bradley, Gaines, Johnson, Morrison, Naylor, Walker, and Wideman “scoured academic collections and touted skillful writers such as Hurston, Hughes, Wheatley, Jean Toomer, Dorothy West, and Wallace Thurman” (12).

However, Hill presents these writers’ appropriation of swagger in their novels as being fraught with incongruities. When discussing Morrison’s comments after being short-listed for a National Book Award for *Sula*, for

instance, Hill claims that her “decision revealed a willingness to subordinate black values to white expectations” (34). He finds that this compromising became “even more complicated” with the double nomination of *Song of Solomon* for the National Book Circle Critics Award and the National Book Award (34). Yet, elsewhere he also avers that “black novelists’ modernist and postmodernist experiments began succeeding because these authors shed anxieties regarding Eurocentric literary ideas and recovered their own literary traditions” (5). Hence, Hill claims that contradictions can be seen in the way that these literary artists negotiated their relationships with established literary communities.

The book is divided into two parts: Part I: “White Expectations” and Part II: “Black Traditions.” Part I: “White Expectations” discusses *Beloved*, *The Color Purple*, *Middle Passage*, and *A Lesson Before Dying* by “focusing on prize granting, mentors, and narration” as a venue to “explore the pressures that white opinions exert on black novels” and to consider more fully how “white authority shaped black novelists’ investment in the ethics of swagger” (18). Part II: “Black Traditions” analyzes themes of “communion without consensus, ambivalent inheritance, and fruitful failure” in *The Women of Brewster Place*, *Jazz* and *Song of Solomon*, *The Chaneyville Incident*, *Sent For You Yesterday* and *Philadelphia Fire* (19).

Some of Hill’s more provocative points include the following. On Morrison, he argues that “[t]hroughout her career, Morrison attempted to free her art from the bonds of assuming a white readership, but at the same moment, she was increasingly invested in prizewinning, a designation of merit that is largely mediated by whites,” claiming that “[h]er attitude recalls Sethe and Paul D’s pre-Schoolteacher mindsets” (33). This conflict as seen in *Beloved*, according to Hill, “reflects [Morrison’s] discoveries about such pressure and her investment in esteem rather than prestige” (34). Moreover, the desire for recognition for her craft as a writer might be understood, Hill suggests, as “Morrison’s engagement with the ethical consequences of writing to meet white standards” (34).

Hill has similar concerns when he discusses Alice Walker’s and Charles Johnson’s relationships to their white mentors. However, he speculates that Walker’s and Johnson’s sense of a “renovated moral vision is the

key to managing white expectations” (49). He observes in Rutherford, in Johnson’s novel *Middle Passages*, “an unresolved collision between black reality and white values” (58), as reflected by Johnson’s own relationship between himself and his mentor John Gardner at SIU-Carbondale (58-60) Hill finds that because of the aid of their mentors in assisting with their first (major) publications, Walker and Johnson “dramatized” in “their lives and their fiction” “the difficulty of balancing independent artistry and white expectations” (68). He concludes the chapter by noting that “the power distribution between white teacher and black student was not equal” (69).

Relatedly, in Chapter Five: “Hunting Inheritance in *Song of Solomon* and *The Chaneysville Incident*, Hill pairs a novel by Toni Morrison and one by David Bradley. He claims that “the reality [for Morrison and Bradley] was a publishing landscape that sought to fit black topic texts into white avant-garde categories” (135). He reasons that their work suggests that “black freedom is most vulnerable to racial oppression when it overlooks empathy” (136). In these works, Hill surmises, Morrison and Bradley come to understand “that black artistic independence must necessarily be gradual and partial ... the road is not pure ascent; it harbors twists, turns, and a few cadavers” (143). “Behind these men’s [Milkman’s and John’s] epic amassing, Morrison and Bradley place a fundamental question: Can black freedom accommodate love?” (142). Hill contends that this explains “why communion becomes one of the black archivists most treasured resources” in their novels written and published in the late 1970s, 1980s, and early 1990s, especially in those by Morrison (143).

However, Hill argues that the theme of communion faces challenges starting in the 1980s as Black Archivists like John Edgar Wideman feel “burden[ed]” by social and criminal justice concerns, particularly how to “stem the tide of murders, incarcerations, and assaults?” (157). For instance, he avers that Wideman’s protagonists in *Sent for You Yesterday* and *Philadelphia Fire* present “a journey from the deceptive comforts of post-World War II blackness to the bankruptcy of post-civil rights self-delusion” (163) and of “the struggling artist [who is] confounded by faulty perception” (164).

Hill wraps up his discussion by re-stating his opening assertion that the period between 1977-1993 marks “a singular epoch for the black novel” (169). This, as he rightly points out, is rather quite remarkable since “the only major literary prizes to go to a black novelist since 1993 have been Edward P. Jones’s 2004 Pulitzer and National Book Critics Circle Award for *The Known World* and Jesmyn Ward’s 2011 National Book Award for *Salvage the Bones* (2011)” (169). Highlighting how each of these novelists in this study walked between both the white and the black worlds, he notes that “[all] of the Black Archivists spent their formative years in black environments; however, each of them also attended majority white institutions for their undergraduate or graduate education” (170). Nonetheless, he contends, it was these artists “discover[y of] the ethics of swagger” that enabled them to become the successful authors of prizewinning novels (171).

If Morrison can be likened to the wise old woman and the bird to her literary artistry, then her readers are all the more enriched by it. In *The Ethics of Swagger: Prizewinning African American Novels, 1977-1993*, Michael DeRel Hill presents the kind of speculations on authors’ motivations, etc. that are more commonly found in literary biographies. To be sure, Hill offers some incisive analyses of the literary works themselves, especially those of Grant’s relationship to Jefferson in *A Lesson Before Dying*, the complexity of Paul D. and Sethe’s “love” in *Beloved*, etc. Yet, the underlying premise that these African American literary artists had to compromise and to tread lightly in order to achieve recognition by the established white literary community lingers as troubled water to the spirit, especially when considering how many other academics of African descent also found themselves negotiating their way through similar paths. At the end of the day, then, *The Ethics of Swagger: Prizewinning African American Novels, 1977-1993* presents an intriguing, unique, and arguably plausible take on these prizewinning writers complexly fraught “strut” between the African American and the established white literary communities.

NOTES

1. Toni Morrison- Nobel Lecture". Nobelprize.org. Nobel Media AB 2014. Web. 4 Aug 2014. <[http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel\\_prizes/literature/lareates/1993/morrison-lecture.html](http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/lareates/1993/morrison-lecture.html)>
2. Claudia Dreifus, "Chloe Wofford Talks about Toni Morrison." In *Toni Morrison: Conversations*, ed. Carolyn Denard, 96-106. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2008. As cited in Hill, 1.
3. "'Strut,' def. 7a, 5a." As cited in Michael DeRell Hill, *The Ethics of Swagger: Prizewinning African American Novels, 1977-1993*. Columbus: Ohio State University, 2013, 1.

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REVIEW: *Conjugal Rights: Marriage, Sexuality, and Urban Life in Colonial Libreville, Gabon*. (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 2014) HB \$64. PB \$26.36. pp. 336.

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Rachel Jean-Baptiste's *Conjugal Rights* offers a detailed look into the personal relationships of Gabonese men and women in Libreville during French colonial reign. Through her examination of Libreville, Jean-Baptiste aims to illustrate the ways in which romantic practices drive social change, particularly in a setting where colonization, interracial mingling, and rapid economic change complicate social evolution. What emerges from Jean-Baptiste's detailed research is a text that highlights issues of gender and sexuality, the ways in which colonizing forces imposed on every facet of life for the colonized, and the hidden power of interpersonal relationships to challenge colonial authority and order. Jean-Baptiste is largely successful in exploring the relationship between these intricate issues, offering a text that contributes an important but often neglected angle of postcolonial studies.

Jean-Baptiste's clearly describes her research methods, giving the text a sense of authority and dependability. Her research included examination and evaluation of various archived colonial records, including political reports, legislation, and ethnographies. Jean-Baptiste approached colonial records with a critical eye, considering them as a Western construction of the colonial situation and therefore likely fraught with misunderstanding and confusion regarding the indigenous people and their customs. To balance the information offered by historical records, Jean-Baptiste conducted about one hundred personal interviews with various Gabonese men and women between 1999 and 2005. This collection of oral histories allowed for a more authentic and objective perspective, offering the subjects of her research a chance to speak from their own experience and gain subjectivity through testimony. By exploring the connections and overlap between