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Abstract: This study puts Toni Morrison’s novel *A Mercy* in conversation with John Locke’s *Two Treatises of Government* (1689), re-visiting the *Treatises* in light of recent Black Studies interventions in the topos of Western subjectivity. While situating both the *Treatises* and the scholarly engagement with them in their historical moment, it develops a post-slavery reading of the early modern conceptions of individual liberty and property by means of *A Mercy*’s characters.

Keywords: early Enlightenment, slavery, subjectivity, John Locke, proprietorship

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“Own Yourself, Woman:” Toni Morrison’s *A Mercy*, Early Modernity, and Property

Samira Spatzek

In 2008 Toni Morrison published her ninth novel *A Mercy*, which is set in seventeenth-century colonial Virginia—a period in which conceptions of individual liberty and property would develop against the backdrop of European colonization. In this essay I will explore Morrison’s use of various characters in the novel as a means both re-visit and re-assess early modern Enlightenment constructions of property and freedom.¹

In the context of European colonial expansion and increasingly with the development of the Atlantic slave trade, early European modernity and individualism can be said to have emerged first and foremost,

through metaphors of property. [...] Where an earlier, hierarchical view assumed that people’s identities (their properties, if you will) were defined by their place in society, the assumption was now that who one was was based on what one had, rather than the other way round. (Graeber 36)

The European settlers imagined what they called the New World as a space that could be shaped according to their values. As literary scholar Gesa Mackenthun has put it, the colonization of America was accompanied by a “process of ideological homogenization in Europe by providing new opportunities for cultural and national self-definition,” which went hand in hand with an understanding of the English colonial subject as predominantly male, white, and superior to the ‘uncivilized’ (15). At the same time, the early modern colonial project merged with and expanded on “the domestic ideologies that Christian Europe had developed in relation to its internal others” (15), so that from the middle of the seventeenth century onwards the principle of the individual came to be organized around notions of private property.

A Mercy investigates this environment of the New World and its newly conceptualized notions of individual liberty and property at a time when

these notions had not yet acquired the strong racial connotations that they would develop at a later stage in US history.² As literary scholar La Vinia Delois Jennings has put it, *A Mercy's* late seventeenth-century plot invites the twenty-first-century reader to "consider a sectarian America as its racial divide unfolded. Dichotomies of racial superiority and inferiority, humanness and subhumanness, had yet to claim en masse the popular and, later, national psyche" (645).

Set in the 1690s, the novel tells the story of Florens, a black servant girl who is the property of the Dutch farmer and trader Jacob Vaark (also called Sir). She lives on his farm with a group of women: Vaark's wife Rebekka (also called Mistress); a Native American servant called Lina; a shipwrecked black girl called Sorrow/Twin; as well as with the two white indentured servants Willard and Scully whose services Vaark regularly makes use of even though they belong to the household of a neighboring farm. What all of the novel's characters have in common is that they attempt to negotiate their individual freedom and servitude/enslavement, respectively, in potentially dangerous, uncharted waters.³ In this essay I argue that *A Mercy* scrutinizes the early modern paradigm of a free and propertied individual by way of a refusal to create characters that function according to this paradigm. As the story unfolds on various intersecting narrative levels, some of the characters are violently expelled from the narrative orbit: Vaark falls ill with the pox and dies. When his wife Rebekka gets infected with the pox, too, she sends Florens to fetch a blacksmith for help. As I will show, this disposal of some of the characters works as the lever with which Morrison critiques early modern constitutions of the human subject as they were conceived by John Locke and others during the period in which the novel is set.

Within Black Studies the connections of modernity, blackness, and slavery and their discursive as well as structural manifestations have been intensely debated. Recently, critics have provided a radical critique of (early) modern Enlightenment conceptions of the human subject ('man') as inherently white (e.g. Broeck, Weheliye, Wilderson, Wynter), arguing that the production of this subject has been premised on the structural "desubjectification of humans" (Broeck 245), that is, on the "banishment [of the Black] from the Human fold" (Wilderson 9).

These debates inform my analysis of *A Mercy*.⁴ While critics like Valerie Babb and Maxine L. Montgomery have characterized the novel as a type of alternative American origins narrative and have looked at the novel's characters' multiple ethnic and national backgrounds, as yet, scholars have not read *A Mercy* in terms of the ongoing debate about the early modern conceptions of 'man' in Black Studies. This essay adds to the current criticism of *A Mercy* the suggestion to read the novel as a radical critique of early modern subject discourses. I contend that such a reading

allows for a reassessment of the early modern entanglements of property and freedom that were always already modeled *against* the figure of the 'Black,' whose position was one of "a paradigmatic impossibility in the Western Hemisphere" (Wilderson 9).

I thus enter the novel into conversation with John Locke's 1689 *Two Treatises*⁵, a text that has been paradigmatic in shaping the discourses of early modernity and that is generally considered as "the conventional way to conceptualize the relationship between the Enlightenment and America" (Greenson 6). In this respect, I will, first of all, briefly discuss two recent interventions in the body of Locke criticism that open up the discussion of Locke's ideas of individual liberty and property by introducing the notion of New World slavery. Secondly, I will examine how Locke's ideas are rendered problematic in *A Mercy* by performing a close reading of three of the novel's characters - Jacob Vaark, the blacksmith, and Florens - and argue that Locke's conceptions of individual liberty and property are re-configured on the aesthetic level of representation.

Being the 'Proprietor of One's Person and Capacities:' John Locke's *Treatises*, Slavery, and the Concept of Property

John Locke published his *Treatises* in 1689, at a time when,

[c]olonial space and its mercantile and productive possibilities provided English gentlemen as a group with an experience of entitlement to being properly themselves and knowing/owning the world for themselves, hitherto unknown to but a very small number of Europeans—it opened a window on becoming possessors instead of being possessed. (Broeck 239)

In the *Treatises* Locke would break new ground with his arguments for "*freedom as self-possession* [that] strategically reject any absolutist voluntarism and boldly advance the rights and obligations of the emerging enlightened subject—as an individual and as a group—and their appropriate political representation" (Broeck 236, emphasis in original), which he would conceptualize in his famous dictum of private property as man's "life, liberty and estate" (Locke 323-24, 350, 383). The majority of modern as well as postmodern readings of the *Treatises* generally have celebrated Locke's conceptualizations of individual liberty as universal ethics ever since. C. B. Macpherson's study *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism* (1962) offered one of the first critiques of the political philosophy of Locke and Hobbes from the Left, and has remained a point of reference for later critical engagements.

In his study, Macpherson argues that in seventeenth-century England “a new belief in the value and the rights of the individual” (1) developed, which fundamentally had a “possessive quality” to it (3). As he states,

The relation of ownership, having become for more and more men the critically important relation determining their actual freedom and actual prospect of realizing their full potentialities, was read back into the nature of the individual. The individual, it was thought, is free inasmuch as he is proprietor of his person and capacities. The human essence is freedom from dependence on the wills of others, and freedom is a function of possession. Society becomes a lot of free equal individuals related to each as proprietors of their own capacities and of what they have acquired by their exercise. Society consists of relations of exchange between proprietors. (3)

Macpherson referred to this principle of the propertied individual as *possessive individualism*. He argued that it would become a doctrine foundational to all modern theories of the rights of man, which remains a widely accepted insight until today (Graeber 36). As one of the key texts from the period, Locke’s *Treatises* is firmly based on the notion of possessive individualism.

One of the scholars who has expanded on well-established interpretations of the *Treatises* by shifting attention to the transatlantic slave trade and the ownership of slaves as essential to the text’s production is Jennifer Welchman. In her essay “Locke on Slavery and Inalienable Rights” (1995), Welchman presents the reader with a problem that many of Locke’s greatest admirers have faced. In his famous statement from the first pages of the *Treatises* that “[s]lavery is so vile and miserable an Estate of Man, and so directly opposite to the generous Temper and Courage of our Nation; that ‘tis hardly to be conceived, that an *Englishman*, much less a *Gentleman*, should plead for’t” (141, emphasis in original), Locke argues against slavery. At the same time, this statement stands in stark contrast to Locke’s attempt to “legitimize slavery by portraying it as a form of punishment for crimes committed where no central political authority or justice system exists” (Welchman 67). Welchman contends that the notion that slavery might in some cases be “permissible as a form of servitude” (and may thus be defended) becomes problematic as soon as we think about New World slavery (67). She rightly points out that this has confronted generations of Locke critics with the challenging task of thinking up various “ingenious reconstructions” of Locke’s defense of slavery (69).

Contrary to the well-established strategy of attempting to ‘explain away’ this allegedly inconsistent line of thought, Welchman argues that the so-called paradox of Locke’s political philosophy of individual liberty, on the one hand, and his defense of slavery, on the other, does not exist, as a detailed examination of his professional life would prove (71). For

example, Locke served on the Board of the Lords Proprietors who promoted the colonization of the territory of Carolina and he was one of the original subscribers to the Royal Africa Company, which was established in 1671 to supply British colonial projects with slave labor (71–74). This rightly leads Welchman to conclude that,

[w]e cannot know whether Locke intended his defense of slavery [...] to justify his own involvement with the institution. But we should recognize that there is no reason why he could not. Given the premises from which it starts, Locke's defense of slavery works. It legitimizes the enslavement of Africans as effectively as it condemns the subjugation of the English people by William the Conqueror. (81)

In her essay "Never Shall We *Be* Slaves" (2004), literary scholar Sabine Broeck draws on the notion that Locke criticism has repeatedly tried to pass over the apparent contradiction of Locke's simultaneous attack on as well as defense of slavery in that it has largely failed to consider "the factor of New World slavery" (239). Expanding on Welchman's arguments, Broeck asserts that, "the rebuttal of 'slavery' in the Lockean conception had nothing to do with a universal rejection of slavery, but, on the contrary, became a motor of the Atlantic slave trade *and* of early modern bourgeois emancipation in tandem" (237; emphasis in original). In this context, Locke's use of the term "slavery" refers to "the oppression [of the rights] of free [English] gentlemen" and not to chattel slavery in the New World (Broeck 244). The free Lockean gentleman has the right to property in the sense that he has the right to own his person as opposed to being subjected to somebody else's rule. Property in Locke's logic essentially enables the free gentleman "to be precisely *distinct and distinguished* from slaves who are subjected to some other party's whims and powers" (239, emphasis in original). In other words, Locke's emphasis on defining property as freedom as self-possession is rested upon both the objectification and the commodification of Africans in the transatlantic slave trade—precisely because Locke conceptualizes ownership as both the free gentlemen's right to own himself and to own slaves. As Broeck argues, "African bodies and their labor capacity [...] function as the crucial absent presence [in the *Treatises*]. [T]he purposeful ownership of chattel labor is an *a priori element of property* deliberately built into the Lockean system, which only wants to combat an ownership of and control over persons *as* Englishmen" (242–43, emphasis in original).

Whereas Welchman has argued that a closer look at Locke's career, e.g. his subscription to and investments in the Royal Africa Company as the main provider of slaves for the English colonial enterprise, would in fact reveal a nexus of Locke's thoughts on slavery and his business invest-

ments in the New World, Broeck has expanded on this notion on a more epistemic level. Treating Locke's text as a "paradigmatic [as well as] iconographic moment" in the constitution of early European modernity, she has claimed that the *Treatises* do not universally reject slavery but instead make a case for the liberty of English gentlemen from feudal rule, which at the same time includes these gentlemen's rights to own actual African slaves as their property in the New World (238). Informed by these interventions in the body of Locke criticism, I will read the character of Jacob Vaark back into the early modern Enlightenment paradigm of freedom as self-possessed existence as embodied in Locke's text to then trace the features of the free and reasonable Lockean 'man' in the character of the blacksmith.

Lockean Characters in *A Mercy*

Jacob Vaark enters *A Mercy* as a settler with high moral commitments. The way in which his arrival at the coast of colonial Virginia is narrated is reminiscent of the numerous accounts published by seventeenth-century European explorers of the 'New World.' Vaark steps

carefully over pebbles and sand to shore. Fog, Atlantic and reeking of plant life, blanketed the bay and slowed him. [...] Unlike the English fogs he had known since he could walk, or those way north where he lived now, this one was sun fired, turning the world into thick, hot gold. Penetrating it was like struggling through a dream. As mud became swamp grass, he turned left, stepping gingerly until he stumbled against wooden planks leading up beach toward the village. Other than his own breath and tread, the world was soundless. It was only after he reached the live oak trees that the fog wavered and split. He moved faster then, more in control but missing, too, the blinding gold he had come through. (Morrison 7-8)

The trope of the fog signifies Vaark's crossing from the Old World to the New as it obscures his way and reduces his whole being to mere physical existence in potentially hostile surroundings. Only after he has passed through the fog is he able to familiarize himself with this newfound environment, as he emerges – dreamlike, nascent – from "hot gold" (7).

With each step that he takes in this newly accessed world, we learn that Vaark enjoys his life as a landowning, independent farmer and trader, a life in which the color of his skin provides "relative safety" in the "ad-hoc territory" of the New World (9, 11). In this environment, "[h]e did what was necessary: secured a wife, someone to help her, planted, built, fathered" (32). Hardworking and determined, his character can be said to embody a Lockean work ethic, which credits a man's cultivation of his

land as a means of self-making by property. Locke describes in his *Treatises* that, "[t]he labor of [a man's] body and the work of his hands [...] are properly his. Whatsoever then he removes out of the state that nature has provided and left it in, he has mixed his labor with, and joined it to something that is his own, and thereby makes it his property" (Locke 287-88). In other words, by way of characterizing Vaark as a successful settler who works on his land and cultivates it, he is qualified in *A Mercy* as a "proprietor of his own person and capacities" (Macpherson 3). We could say that he meets a specific ideal of what Locke understood to be a proper settler and a flourishing businessman at the time.

Early on in the narrative, Jacob Vaark's character remains relatively uncorrupted. He captivates the reader with his high moral commitments and good judgment. When offered a slave as part of a debt settlement in a business transaction with the Portuguese slave trader D'Ortega, he agonizes over the proposal and initially refuses a human being as debt settlement. However, when he realizes that a slave will be the only compensation to be received, he accepts Florens as partial payment. His decision to accept is also influenced by the fact that he is envious of D'Ortega's large estate: "He had never seen [one] like it" (Morrison 13). On the way back to his farm, he decides to build a new house himself by investing in rum, which would mean an indirect reliance on slave labor. However, he believes that his house will not be as "compromised" as D'Ortega's estate (25), for there is, as he explains, "a profound difference between the intimacy of slave bodies at Jublio [D'Ortega's plantation] and a remote labor force in Barbados" (33). The supposed decency of Jacob-the-early-settler is thus lost when property becomes so important to him that he compromises his former principles by relying on a labor force made of slaves to make profitable investments. The novel hereby exposes the underside of the Lockean paradigm by showing the way in which men like Vaark relied on slavery as well as slave labor for an increase of their property. It demonstrates that in the New World, slave ownership may have lurked in the background, behind every self-made subject.

Quickly after becoming morally corrupted by his involvement with New World slavery, Morrison eliminates Vaark's character from the narrative by infecting him with the pox and letting him die in his half-built mansion. In my reading this literary maneuver of elimination is meant to suggest that Locke's vision of the European settler-as-cultivator cannot be sustained in the novel. With Vaark's expulsion from the text, Morrison denies him any more space in the narrative—space that would be accorded to him in the type of early Enlightenment text on which his character is based. By way of this refusal to characterize Vaark any further, Morrison writes against the continuous reiteration of the early modern discourse of proprietorial conceptions of the self that Vaark's character represents.

The novel similarly evokes Locke's early modern philosophy of the propertied subject with the character of the blacksmith. He is the subject of the 'you' that Florens addresses in her narrative,⁶ and he first appears in the novel when he is hired to forge the gates to Vaark's new house. A free black craftsman, his trade enables him to make a self-possessed living. As one of the indentured servants on Vaark's farm observes, "He had rights [...] and privileges like Sir. He could marry, own things, travel, sell his own labor" (43). In addition to his trade, his knowledge and medical expertise represent similarly important aspects that pertain to the construction of his character within a Lockean paradigm. His knowledge, too, qualifies the blacksmith as a free person in the narrative because it equips him with the authority to make life-and-death-decisions, for instance when he nurses Sorrow through a life-threatening illness (125). The blacksmith's character is thus constructed as a truly Lockean figure in that he is free by definition because he has a profession. In other words, his factual freedom, self-possession, and his strength of mind make the blacksmith into an emblematic figure of Enlightenment philosophy, who is in no way inferior to Vaark.

However, the fusion of liberty and blackness is troubling to some of the novel's characters, as it almost certainly would have been to Locke himself. For example, the equality with which Vaark treats the blacksmith startles Willard, who is appalled by the fact that Vaark pays the blacksmith for his work (148). It also worries Lina, Vaark's Native-American servant, who sees disruption in the blacksmith's appearance (59). The blacksmith's emblematic status—that is, Morrison's equation of a free black man with a free white man in the context of New World colonization—is indeed a provocative narrative maneuver in itself. It is provoking because, historically speaking, the number of such free black people was very small and they often were not treated as equals, as the novel suggests. Indeed, as historian Edmund Morgan has explained with regard to colonial Virginia in the 1640s and 1650s, black people represented a small and "conspicuous set of non-English immigrants" and from the beginning they occupied an "anomalous position" in the molding of early Virginian society (154). In this sense, Morrison's invocation of the utopian figure of a free as well as propertied black man serves as another instance of interrogating Locke's notion of private property in that it conjures up the image of the truly Lockean private entrepreneur (who is free by definition of his trade) while, at the same time, it complicates this image by creating a black *and* propertied figure. That this image is not meant to last is demonstrated by the blacksmith's expulsion from the narrative when he is attacked—and possibly killed—by Florens.⁷

While Jacob Vaark's character can be shown to be composed as essentially embodying the traits of the early modern subject of a hardworking

proprietor, the blacksmith, too, turns out to be both a propertied and self-possessed subject. This is ultimately reflected in the way that Vaark and the blacksmith interact with each other in the novel, namely in a mutual exchange of free subjects. However, both men are violently expelled from the text and, I would argue, deliberately so, to suggest that the early modern subject needs re-configuration. I claim that this refusal of more extensive characterization figures as the lever with which Morrison is able to formulate a critique of the early modern conceptions of the subject—particularly its Lockean incarnation as freedom by property—on the aesthetic level of representation. At the same time, I contend that it allows Morrison to explore different possibilities of selfhood and freedom that are not compromised by notions of property. The narrative orbit of *A Mercy* becomes a testing ground on which the novel poses important questions to its readers, such as: what are alternative plots—historical, aesthetical—that we can think of which do not reproduce the early modern entanglements of property, freedom, and the subjection of a whole group of human beings? Let me pursue this question by turning to another pertinent passage of the novel, in which Morrison explores one such possibility. This is the argument between Florens and the blacksmith, which is positioned towards the end of the narrative.

Of Independence and Belonging: Florens as a Failed Proprietor of the Self

In contrast to both Vaark and the blacksmith, Florens does not embody any of the Lockean features discussed earlier. Instead, she is constructed as craving for human kindness, probably because of the forced separation from her mother as a result of Vaark's business transaction with D'Ortega. Morrison's trope of the shoes illustrates Florens's wish to *belong* in an intimidating New World. As Florens herself states, "The beginning begins with the shoes. When a child I am never able to abide being barefoot and always beg for shoes, *anybody's shoes*" (Morrison 2, emphasis mine).⁸ Thus, on Vaark's farm and as his property, she wears her master's boots when ordered to fetch the blacksmith to help her sickened mistress. When she first meets the blacksmith, she is struck by his charm, and she immediately professes her unconditional love for him. Florens finds sexual attraction in the blacksmith but most of all she craves to be approached by him as a fellow human being in the hostile environment of the New World. As she states, "You are my shaper and my world as well" (69). When having arrived at the blacksmith's, Florens takes off her master's shoes because she feels that she can finally belong as a human being.

Florens's strong emotions build up to a scene in which she is confronted with Malaik, a foundling whom the blacksmith has taken in his care. Florens is extremely jealous of this boy because she wants the blacksmith's affection to be solely directed at her. The argument unfolding between the two positions the blacksmith as a realization of self-control and reason, as embodying the quintessential features of the early modern subject as understood by Locke. The blacksmith positions Florens as existing purely in an orbit of what a Lockean subject would conceive of as slavishness; namely, a dependency on one's own emotional desire and a strong need to rely on others. The scene begins with Florens asking,

Why are you killing me [...] I want you to go. Let me explain. No. Now. Why? Why? Because you are a slave. What? You heard me. Sir makes me that. [...] I am a slave because Sir trades for me. No. You have become one. [...] Your head is empty and your body is wild. [...] You alone own me. Own yourself, woman. [...] You are nothing but wilderness. No constraint. No mind. You shout the word – mind, mind, mind – over and over. (139, emphasis mine)

Beside herself with anger and jealousy of the boy, Florens then attacks and probably murders the blacksmith. The dialogue illustrates that the blacksmith reduces Florens to what he thinks is her 'wilderness,' her alleged inability to control herself and her sexual desire. He approaches Florens as if she were a slavish body-thing, which due to its lack of reason remains outside of the early modern paradigm of individual liberty. His commandment to 'own herself' thus unmasks his own hovering existence in a microcosm of reason, self-control, and self-possession. Black human mastery remains an ambiguously narrow narrative window of possibility in that it tantalizingly mediates black male liberty; however, in being constructed vis-à-vis a discourse of belonging, as figured by Florens, the blacksmith's freedom, attractive as his refusal to be mastered may appear, is only thinkable as a (self)possession, a state of personhood for which love or desire for another person becomes a threat. In his quasi-Lockean mindset, the blacksmith cannot conjoin independence and belonging.

For Florens the confrontation with the blacksmith signifies 'emotional unbelonging.' Her attempt to explain that it is indeed someone else who determines her existence as a slave – 'Sir makes me that' – cannot hold against the blacksmith's meditation on the mind. The scene foregrounds the notion that emotionality in the form of desire, longing, and affection is not deemed valuable for the early modern subject. When finally Florens realizes that she has no future in the blacksmith's world of reason, her equally emotional response of 'murdering' the blacksmith figures as a strong statement against *his* disavowal of *her* emotions. In contrast to both Vaark and the blacksmith as the embodiment of Locke's work ethics and

early modernity's reason, it is Florens in her vexed emotional state who ultimately survives. The narrative continues to tell her story whereas those of Vaark and the blacksmith are disposed of through death. Emotionality and desire function as a *possibility* of human capacity, which is *not* shaped by a liberal imagination. At the same time, it is important to note that this possibility does not enable overly positive readings of her character⁹; it may in fact anticipate and expose problematic white conceptions of the enslaved as overly emotional and driven by desires (and void of reason) – conceptions used to justify the enslavement of black people at the time. Despite the fact that Florens returns to Vaark's farm and begins to carve her story into the walls of the half-built mansion (155-59), she remains abandoned, and it becomes clear that she has been severely damaged by being treated as somebody else's property (to say the least).

Both her emotionality and her so-called 'slavishness' render her a 'failed' proprietor of the self in Locke's terms. It is in this narrative ploy of the collapse of the Lockean paradigm that Morrison finds a way to write against early European modernity. Florens states that "I am become wilderness but I am also Florens. In full. [...] Slave. Free. I last" (159). Despite the fact that we do not know what will happen to Florens beyond her immediate survival at the end of the novel, the narrative shows that Florens possesses a durability that she claims outside of Lockean terms of selfhood.

In conclusion, *A Mercy's* literary return to the 'ad-hoc territory' of colonial Virginia results in a radical critique of the early modern Enlightenment discourse of individual property and liberty. The early modern subject of this discourse figures in the novel as the propertied as well as self-possessed man, who is embodied by both Jacob Vaark and the blacksmith. As is illustrated by the elimination of both the Lockean characters from the text, *A Mercy* ultimately refuses to participate in the repeated reiteration of this aspect of early modern Enlightenment discourse. As a result, the narrative rupture created by the deaths of the two Lockean figures serves to destabilize canonical readings of the subject of the New World. This critique is continued through Florens's character, who frees herself from the blacksmith's world of the mind because she refuses to live in keeping with the principle of the Lockean individual. In this sense, in accordance with recent Black Studies insights on the topic, Florens is situated outside of the early modern paradigm of property and freedom and becomes a 'failed' proprietor of the self, as it were. As Saidiya Hartman reminds us of the complicity of slavery and freedom, it was "[t]he longstanding [...] affiliation of liberty and bondage [which] made it impossible to envision freedom independent of constraint, or personhood [...] separate from the sanctity of [...] proprietorial notions of the self" (Hartman 115). It is precisely in the *ambiguity* of Florens's character that

Morrison's literary intervention can offer an alternative reading to this dichotomy.

Notes

- 1 Earlier versions of this article have been presented as conference papers at the international symposium "Writing Slavery after *Beloved*: Literature, Historiography, Criticism" in Nantes, France, in March 2012, and at the tenth international conference of the Collegium for African American Research (CAAR) in Decatur/Atlanta, USA, in March 2013.
- 2 Morrison herself states that she "wanted to see what it might have been like, to be a slave but without being raced; where your status was being enslaved but there was no application of racial inferiority" (qtd. in Jennings 645). For an excellent historical study on the relationship of freedom and slavery in seventeenth-century colonial Virginia see Morgan.
- 3 I use the terms 'negotiate' and 'negotiation' in the sense of Mary Louise Pratt's *contact zones*. Pratt describes these as referring to "social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power, such as colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths" (34).
- 4 *A Mercy* generally has not yet received as much critical attention as many of Morrison's other novels have. As far as I am aware, Stave and Tally have issued the only book-length publication on *A Mercy*. Other publications on the novel include a plethora of reviews (e.g. Updike, Donahue); a few scholarly articles that varyingly analyze the novel in terms of e.g. female resistance and empowerment (Putnam) or with regard to the election of the first African American U.S. president in the discussion of a post-racial US society (Cantiello). Strehle reads *A Mercy* as interrogating the myth of American exceptionalism by showing that this myth of a 'chosen people' "rests on pernicious binary separations between an elect and its Others" (109). Cillerai ("Introduction," "One Question"), Bross, Curtis, and Logan discuss the pedagogical strategies of using Morrison's historical fiction in the context of teaching early American studies. Also see Anolik and Schreiber
- 5 I will use the following abbreviation from now on for the sake of convenience: *Treatises* for *Two Treatises*.
- 6 Florens's narrative opens the novel in the form of a first-person confession. The rest of the novel is narrated by Florens as well as by two other narrators.
- 7 The narrative does not explicitly reveal that the blacksmith is killed. However, Florens describes how she and the blacksmith fight each other to a point when Florens sees him "stagger and bleed" (158). I read this passage as an indication that the blacksmith dies as a result of this violent struggle.
- 8 In the course of the narrative, Florens wears different kinds of shoes, which mostly do not fit her. For example, she wears the "throwaway shoes from Senhora's [who is her mistress before she arrives at Vaark's farm] house,

pointy-toe, one raised heel broke, the other worn and a buckle on top" at the beginning of the novel (Morrison 2). Waegner discusses Florens' 'making do' with all kinds of shoes not in terms of her wanting to belong, but argues that this "*appropriation of the inappropriate*" shows how Florens "navigates her way cleverly through the dangerous 'ad hoc territory' of the New World" (106, emphasis in original).

- ⁹ For example, Vega-González has argued that Florens's act of carving her own story in her own voice elevates her being from the orphaned status of loss (of her mother and her loved-ones) to one of female agency (131).

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