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**Abstract:** In Toni Morrison's *A Mercy*, the protagonist represents both the historical and the contemporary African American author. As Mueller argues, her act of carving words into walls can be read as an act of resistance against the historical silencing of the black voice as well as politically against symbolic violence exercised through language.

**Keywords:** *A Mercy*, neo-slave narrative, symbolic violence, Bourdieu, Pierre

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# Standing Up To Words: Writing and Resistance in Toni Morrison's *A Mercy*<sup>1</sup>

*Stefanie Mueller*

In 1993 Toni Morrison received the Nobel Prize for Literature. In her acceptance speech she chose to talk about the responsibility of the writer and her position in society, a topic she had been writing about repeatedly in her non-fiction work until that date. In essays and articles, such as "Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation" (1983) or "Memory, Creation, and Writing" (1984), Morrison had firmly rooted her self-understanding as an author in the black oral tradition. In an essay on autobiography written in 1995, she focuses on "the print origins of black literature" and explains that, "a very large part of my own literary heritage is the autobiography" ("Site" 185) by which she refers to slave narratives. The authors of these narratives, she adds, followed two principles: representation and persuasion.<sup>2</sup> In her Nobel Prize lecture Morrison talks more broadly about the role of the author in society, by way of a parable about an old woman and a bird. In this story, the aim of a writer's work is no longer the representation of "the race" ("Site" 186), but "word-work" which "makes meaning that secures our difference, our human difference—the way in which we are like no other life" ("Nobel Lecture"). In her 2008 novel *A Mercy*, Morrison uses the conventions of the slave narrative to portray the "word-work" of the modern black writer, yet this time by way of the metaphor of the house.

The term "neo-slave narrative" was first introduced by Bernard W. Bell in *The Afro-American Novel and Its Tradition* (1987) and has gained wide currency since then. In *Neo-Slave Narratives: Studies in the Social Logic of a Literary Form*, Ashraf Rushdy redefines the genre on the basis of his studies on the field of cultural production in the 1960s whose transformation made the emergence of such a literary form possible. For Rushdy, neo-slave narratives can be defined as "contemporary novels that assume the form, adopt the conventions, and take on the first-person voice of the ante-bellum slave narrative" (3). As a literary form that stands for "a newly emergent black political subject" (7), it is concerned with questions of

subjectivity and identity. In her analysis of Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, Madhu Dubey argues further that neo-slave narratives question "the political promise of literacy" that inspired the slave narrative tradition and "reconsider the dawning of the modern legacy from the perspective of a present moment when its political promise is widely felt to have been exhausted and betrayed" (187). As we will see, this ambivalence towards literacy is a major issue in *A Mercy*, whose protagonist is literate but whose literacy alone does not hold the key to freedom and self. Moreover, as Elizabeth Ann Beaulieu points out, neo-slave narratives by female authors are characterized by a special concern with motherhood and freedom and thus shift the genre's "focus from literacy and public identity to family" as well as "from slavery to freedom" (13). She argues that, "their [Morrison, Williams, Cooper's] neo-slave narratives celebrate triumph not over escaping an institution and its cruel representatives but over finding, recognizing and claiming one's own 'best thing' [...]" (14)." Beaulieu claims that, while most slave narratives follow the structure of "literacy-identity-freedom" (9), in the case of female authors, this pattern varied and is more adequately expressed as "family-identity-freedom" (9). Both "triangulation[s]" (9) raise the question of their treatment in *A Mercy*: is it literacy, family, or something else that presents the first milestone on Florens's road to freedom, and what does freedom mean for Florens, who, after all, is on the verge of being sold at the end of the novel? This paper therefore explores *A Mercy's* contribution to the genre of neo-slave narratives and Morrison's portrayal of the role of the artist/writer in our society. I argue that Florens's quest for selfhood and agency is conveyed in terms of a quest for a particular kind of literacy, and I show that the voice that Florens gains in the course of this quest is a new voice, one that can change and transform the master's house. Finally, I suggest that, by dealing with the conditions of possibility for resistance, *A Mercy* is also a comment on the role of the African American author in the public sphere.

## I.

From the beginning, Florens's literacy is rendered problematic by the peculiar position in which she finds herself. She is "telling" (Morrison, *A Mercy* 1) her story but she is also "writ[ing]" it down (4)<sup>3</sup>, unto the walls of a room; and she is addressing a narratee, who seems at first to be identical with her contemporary readership, but who eventually turns out to be the blacksmith. At the same time her disregard for grammatical past tense leaves us reeling in the face of an ever-present *now*, heightened by the fact that Florens is standing among her words and, as I want to argue, stands up to them. By way of such a complex narrative situation the novel persistently draws attention to the use of language, by Florens and by the

world she lives in, and to Florens's struggle to acquire the kind of literacy that survival in this world requires.

It is therefore not just telling and writing that are rendered problematic. "One question is who is responsible? Another is can you *read*?" (1; my emphasis). While we, as her contemporary readers, are indeed capable of reading, it quickly becomes obvious that "reading" for the literate Florens does not only mean reading the written word but also reading the world. It means understanding the 'signs' and 'omens' in the world, which, if correctly understood, she believes will help her to anticipate danger. Yet, at first Florens seems unable to interpret such 'omens.' While she tries to pay attention to "hares" (39), goats (112), and steam rising from a kettle (108, 109), in the course of her journey, her confusion about the signs of the world and her insecurity about their meaning only increase, reaching their climax during her fight with Malaik: "Which? Which is the true reading?" (137). By contrast reading the world constitutes a skill in which the blacksmith is particularly versed and in which Florens tries to imitate him. It is also a skill that is implicitly linked to his African heritage, such as when he teaches Florens about "ancestors:" "And you know the ancestors approve when two owls appear at the very instant you say their names so you understand they are showing themselves to bless you" (66). His competence in the reading of the world also becomes apparent in the blacksmith's encounter with Willard. After Willard and Scully have learned that the blacksmith is paid for his work, they treat him with contempt and refuse to obey his orders—until the day Willard arrives at work in a new shirt:

Arriving at the site, he caught the blacksmith's eye, then his nod, then his thumb pointing straight up as if to signal approval. Willard never knew whether he was being made fun of or complimented. But when the smithy said, "Mr. Bond. Good morning," it tickled him. Virginia bailiffs, constables, small children, preachers—none had ever considered calling him mister, nor did he expect them to. He knew his rank, but did not know the lift that small courtesy allowed him. (148-149)

In this scene the blacksmith regains Willard's compliance by appealing to the latter's vanity. By 'reading' their respective social positions—the blacksmith is socially more powerful than Willard, because he is neither slave nor indentured servant<sup>4</sup>—and momentarily suspending them, the blacksmith reasserts his power over Willard without the latter noticing. He is able to do so because of his superior verbal competence, a special ability for creative wordplay that is on the same par with his ability to "shap[e] metal" (66), which, as Florens recalls, is an ancestral skill: "Your father doing it and his father before him back and back for a thousand

years" (66). The blacksmith's verbal play can thus be read as an instance of signifying. By emphasizing Willard's family name (*bond*) in such manner the blacksmith is signifying upon its etymological relation to *bondsman* and *bondage*. Like the lion of the Signifying Monkey tales, Willard assumes that the blacksmith "has spoken literally, when all along he has spoken figuratively" (Gates 57). But the scene remains ambivalent because it is the very same linguistic competence that enables him—like the traveler of Lina's tale—to almost destroy Florens.

The ability to read the world is a skill that Florens desperately needs to acquire in order to find her place in the world. The origin of her *inability* to read the world lies in her first and most dramatic failure at reading the world: her misreading of her mother.

Lina says Sir has a clever way of getting without giving. I know it is true because I see it forever and ever. Me watching, my mother listening, her baby boy on her hip. Senhor is not paying the whole amount he owes to Sir. Sir saying he will instead take the woman and the girl, not the baby boy and the debt is gone. A minha mãe begs no. Her baby boy is still at her breast. Take the girl, she says, my daughter, she says. Me. Me. (Morrison, *A Mercy* 5)

For Florens, her mother's request to Jacob to take her daughter is an act of *dis-owning* her. Not only does she believe that her mother "chooses [her instead of her brother] to live without" (113), thus implying that her mother had had a choice in the matter. But it becomes apparent in her recurrent references to her mother as "*a minha mãe*," literally 'a my mother.' By referring to her mother as *a my mother*, Florens emphasizes the possessive pronoun—and thus the claim to her mother—while at the same time signaling that this claim is beyond her reach. It is a claim that (through the indefinite article that precedes it) is reified as such and not consummated, because her mother has not claimed her. For Florens, having a mother is not an experience she can call her own. Rather, it is a concept of whose existence she is aware (as when she meets Widow Ealing) but which is beyond her reach.

The origin of Florens's misreading of her mother's action lies in the very nature of the categories Florens applies to the world. Because she lives in a world that overrules kinship with property claims, that is, transforms kinship into property ties, she fails to see her mother's predicament. She thinks of belonging in terms of ownership, because unlike the blacksmith she has no alternative ancestral framework available to guide her. But since she misreads her mother's act of love and cannot return to her mother to be taught by her, Florens is literally unaware of her self and her position in the world. For a sense of who she is, as well as for protection, she relies heavily on her environment. Whether it is the long string of pet

names she is given by Lina and Rebekka, which place her forever in the position of the obedient child; or whether it is her “vice for shoes” (160), she always depends on others to provide for her. This dependence on others for a sense of who she is has a crucial impact not only on her sense of self but also on her autonomy, as becomes apparent in the following scene. Taking a walk in the forest after the blacksmith’s disappearance, Florens comes upon a patch of flowers:

Climbing over it all, up up, are scarlet flowers I never see before. Everywhere choking their own leaves. The scent is sweet. I put my hand in to gather a few blossoms. I hear something behind me and turn to see a stag moving up the rock side. He is great. And grand. Standing there between the beckoning wall of perfume and the stag I wonder what else the world may show me. It is as though I am loose to do what I choose, the stag, the wall of flowers. I am a little scare of this looseness. Is that how free feels? I don’t like it. I don’t want to be free of you because I am live only with you. When I choose and say good morning, the stag bounds away. (67-68)

Not only is her interpretation of freedom negative (“looseness”), but most importantly she rejects the opportunity for choice. With, as I suggest, the flowers representing herself and the stag representing the blacksmith, Florens chooses the latter – which, as she very well knows, is no choice at all: “You are my shaper and my world as well. [...] No need to choose” (69). But to give up responsibility for oneself – even under conditions that *per se* deprive one of this responsibility – and to reject choice is to ultimately refuse agency. The danger inherent in such a refusal is the lesson that Florens’s mother longs to give her child; it is the realization that the refusal to face choice (the affirmation of agency) is slavery: “[...] what I know and long to tell you: to be given dominion over another is a hard thing; to wrest dominion over another is a wrong thing; to give dominion of yourself to another is a wicked thing” (165). In this way Florens’s relationship to her mother, her reading of her mother, is the key to her autonomy. Learning to read the world therefore becomes the central skill that she needs to acquire during her journey. It is the episode at Widow Ealing’s house that becomes central for her in this respect.

By setting her story in 1690, Morrison’s depiction of a Puritan village and the conflicts that Florens stumbles into are brought into conversation with a specific episode in American history: the Salem witch trials that would take place two years later. In the novel Florens is given shelter for the night by Widow Ealing. As it turns out the widow and her daughter are bracing themselves for an examination on the next day, during which the villagers want to determine whether the widow’s daughter is what they call a “demon” (107). While Florens is at first unaware of this situa-

tion, she attentively observes the mother-daughter relationship, such as when she overhears the two women's whispered conversation: "[Widow Ealing:] how many times do you have to hear it demons do not bleed. [Addressing the blacksmith, Florens comments:] You never tell me that and it is a good thing to know. If my mother is not dead she can be teaching me these things" (107). Her special recognition of the relationship between the two also becomes apparent in her reference to the girl as "Daughter Jane" – never simply Jane,<sup>5</sup> taking her cue from the widow's introduction: "This is my daughter Jane, the Widow says. Those lashes may save her life" (106). The lashes that keep Jane's legs bleeding and which are meant as proof of her humanity to the villagers in a sense replicate the dilemma that Florens's mother was facing: Widow Ealing has to inflict pain on her daughter in order to save her. But unlike Florens, Jane can stay with her mother, an advantage that is also underscored by reference to her as "Daughter Jane."

Upon arrival of the village's delegation, a scene ensues that reveals the center of Morrison's exploration of the power of language and the historical moment of naming in the so-called 'New World.' The delegation arrives to judge and possibly condemn Jane on account of her physical disability – a "wayward eye" (112) – which they interpret as a sign of the devil. The leading figure is a man, whose literacy suggests his service in ministry. Yet Florens's presence complicates matters: "It is true then [...]. The Black Man is among us. This is his minion" (109). Florens cannot attack the religious authority on which the man's power to name rests, yet she can counter it, albeit momentarily, with the authority of property claims. Rebekka's letter declares Florens to be Rebekka's "minion" and thus challenges the male religious authority embodied by the villager. For Florens this is an ambiguous advantage, since Rebekka's claim deprives her not only of her freedom – she is a servant, whether Rebekka's or the Black Man's – but also of her person. By using the "burne mark" (110) as a representation of her proprietorial claim on Florens, Rebekka's letter foreshadows the somatization of power relations to come.<sup>6</sup> When the minister orders Florens to be examined inside the closet, she tells us: "Naked under their examination I watch for what is in their eyes. No hate is there or scare or disgust but they are looking at me my body across distances without recognition" (111). The loss that Florens feels as she leaves the village is described as a physical sensation and one in which Florens experiences herself as an object: "I am a thing apart" (113). Thinking of the blacksmith she ever more fervently affirms her quest to find him, since now she realizes, "[y]ou have the outside dark as well" (113).

Bringing together in this scene the discourses of religion and of property, Morrison presents the symbolic order at a moment in which it is taking possession of bodies and minds and thereby establishes specific social di-

visions. As French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu points out, the ‘power of words’ results from the relationship of power between two speakers:

The real source of the magic of performative utterances lies in the mystery of ministry, i.e. the delegation by virtue of which an individual—king, priest or spokesperson—is mandated to speak and act on behalf of a group, thus constituted in him and by him.” (*Language* 75).

In this regard it is not only the effect this scene has on Florens that is significant but also the complicity of the women in the examination, because it is their investment in the symbolic order that gives power to the minister’s words. Morrison makes clear that alternative ways of acting are available. Thus Widow Ealing overcomes her initial suspicion when she learns that Florens is an orphan—a condition that overrides and overrules those of color and race. Yet the power of categories can only be truly recognized by a character who has been outside of the symbolic order, who has been made “a thing apart” as well. This character is Daughter Jane, who (on account of her eye) is also a victim of the “somatization of the relation of domination” (Bourdieu, *Masculine Domination* 56). But unlike Florens, Jane knows that her eye is a pretense with which the minister and the congregation seek to conceal their true purpose. Jane tells us, “It is the pasture they crave, Mother” (Morrison, *A Mercy* 107). In this respect her warped sight becomes a symbol for Jane’s ability to read the world, to escape the dominant vision by escaping acknowledgment—recognition through cognition, as Bourdieu puts it—of the religious authority. “The knowing is theirs, the truth is mine [...]” (107), she poignantly concludes. This companionship of religious legitimation of social divisions—whether between men and women, black and white, rich and poor—and material interests (the pasture, or capital in all its varieties) is a recurrent issue in the novel. The devastating effects of this experience on Florens are mitigated by Jane’s solidarity and her lesson on the re-appropriation of language and autonomy. When her mother does not return from a visit to the sheriff, Jane takes Florens out of the village and shows her where to continue her journey:

I say thank you and lift her hand to kiss it. She says no, I thank you. They look at you and forget about me. She kisses my forehead then watches as I step down into the stream’s dry bed. I turn and look up at her. Are you a demon I ask her. Her wayward eye is steady. She smiles. Yes, she says. Oh, yes. Go now. (112)

Because she has understood the power imbalance that is the basis for the accusation—the fact that her mother as widow has almost no legal stand-

ing and is entirely dependent on the community—Jane can appropriate the ascription and make it her own. But unlike the blacksmith, Jane does not remain inside the logic of the dominant; instead she is able to recognize Florens's position in social space as one that is homologous to her own and to show solidarity with her.<sup>7</sup> As we will see below this alternative example of the ability to read the world is crucial for Florens's reassessment of the blacksmith and herself.

## II.

Upon leaving the village Florens's hope for a sense of self lies entirely in the blacksmith: "You will tell me. You have the outside dark as well" (113). In the latter part of the novel Florens learns to emancipate herself from the blacksmith, most importantly from his teachings, and to fashion a voice of her own which is inspired by female storytelling and a tradition that is both African and Native American. Consider the following dream, which Florens has during her stay at the blacksmith's farm:

I dream a dream that dreams back at me. [...] I notice I am at the edge of a lake. The blue of it is more than the sky, more than any blue I know. [...] I am loving it so, I can't stop. I want to put my face deep there. I want to. What is making me hesitate, making me not get the beautiful blue of what I want? [...] Where my face should be there is nothing. I put a finger in and watch the water circle. I put my mouth close enough to drink or kiss but I am not even a shadow there. Where is it hiding? Why is it? Soon Daughter Jane is kneeling next to me. She too looks in the water. Oh, Precious, don't fret, she is saying, you will find it. (Morrison, *A Mercy* 135-136)

For one thing, it is the deep impact that Daughter Jane has left upon Florens that becomes visible here. Her tender, almost maternal address, her reassurance, all point towards Daughter Jane's importance for Florens's blossoming autonomy. But the dream is also significant in that it conveys Florens's deepest concern: that she might not find her 'face' in the blacksmith after all. The setting of her dream, however, the choice of imagery, is crucial, because the extraordinarily blue lake of her dream that symbolizes what she wants most in life is also the setting of the eagle-story that Lina tells her repeatedly during her childhood.

The story about the eagle mother is introduced by Lina retrospectively as one of the "stories of mothers fighting to save their children from wolves and natural disasters" (59), and indeed the story portrays the eagle mother's fight with a stranger as an attempt to protect her unborn young. On another level the story is also one about the arrival of the white colonists (the traveler) and the Native Americans' attempts to protect

their world. Significantly Florens's mother later in the story also refers to "[a] song about the green bird fighting then dying when the monkey steals her eggs" (164), thus adding another mother-bird story to Florens's childhood-education, though one which Florens herself never mentions. The story's central conflict is portrayed thusly:

One day a traveler climbs a mountain nearby. He stands at its summit admiring all he sees below him. The turquoise lake, the eternal hemlocks [...]. The traveler laughs at the beauty saying, "This is perfect. This is mine." And the word swells, booming like thunder into valleys, over acres of primrose and mallow. Creatures come out of caves wondering what it means. Mine. Mine. Mine. The shells of the eagle's eggs quiver and one even cracks. (60)

When the eagle mother attacks to defend her eggs, the traveler hits her and she "falls and falls. Over the turquoise lake, beyond the eternal hemlocks, down through the clouds cut by rainbow. Screaming, screaming she is carried away by wind instead of wing" (60). The "conversation [between Lina and Florens] that always followed it" (59) concerns the eggs and whether they will live, to which Lina responds by drawing a comparison between herself, Florens, and the hatchlings: "'We have'" (61). This parallel is significant with regard to Florens's potential for autonomy. When Florens finally finds words for the humiliation she has suffered in Widow Ealing's closet and her emotional reactions to it, she draws on this parallel between herself and the hatching eagles: "the inside dark is small, feathered and toothy" (113). But it is in her retrospective description of her fight with the blacksmith that the significance of this choice emerges most clearly. Finding her mistreating the orphan he has taken care of, the blacksmith tells Florens:

You are nothing but wilderness. No constraint. No mind.  
You shout the word—mind, mind, mind—over and over and then you  
laugh, saying as I live and breathe, a slave by choice. (139)<sup>8</sup>

The phonetic closeness between *mine* and *mind*, the triple repetition, and the laugh warrant a comparison between the traveler and the blacksmith (even the fact that both carry no names). Thus threatening to destroy her with his words as the traveler threatened to destroy the eggs, Florens' comes to her own rescue: "My face absent in blue water you find only to crush it? Now I am living the dying inside. No. Not again. Not ever. Feathers lifting, I unfold. The claws scratch and scratch until the hammer is in my hand" (140). Thus, while she had originally identified with the

hatchlings, by the end of her journey Florens has transformed into an eagle-mother.

This change in her self-perception is mirrored in her changed perception of motherhood. In the first chapter Florens tells us about Sorrow's pregnancy that, "mothers nursing greedy babies scare me. I know how their eyes go when they choose" (6). Yet at the end of her narrative she says: "Sorrow is a mother. Nothing more nothing less. I like her devotion to her baby girl" (157). Even more importantly, she calls *herself* a mother when she addresses the blacksmith a final time: "See? You are correct. A minha mãe too" (159). By calling herself a mother, Florens acknowledges her new understanding of motherhood as a state in which a woman protects, as Sethe in *Beloved* calls it, her "best thing" (Morrison, *Beloved* 274). And while Sethe needs Paul D's help to realize that she is her own 'best thing,' the blacksmith has unwittingly contributed to Florens' realization, too.

By the end of the story, Florens has mastered the art of reading the world, and she gains literacy to an even fuller degree, in that she comes to realize that being a slave, treated as a piece of property, perceived as a mere body, means being silenced—as is her mother in her recurrent dreams: "[...] saying something I cannot hear" (Morrison, *A Mercy* 6). In this sense it means not being the master of one's own narrative and having no voice, having no power over a language that is both liberating and enslaving. Therefore it seems crucial that by the end of the narrative, Florens has not only learned to read the world but also to write it.<sup>9</sup>

By carving her tale into the walls and the floor of the upper storey room in the house her master has built—literally, her master's property—Florens has arrived on par with the blacksmith in a way the latter might not have anticipated. While he was generous with lessons about reading the world, his ability to shape the world—"shaping fire with bellows" (35), "[t]he glory of shaping metal" (66)—had not been within reach of Florens. Her act of carving, however, using a nail and thus by virtue of the material also a symbol of the blacksmith's skills, transforms the room and presents an act of agency comparable to the blacksmith's art. In this sense Florens moves from being shaped to being a shaper. But the way in which Florens gains a voice becomes most apparent in the fashioning of her narrative. What starts out as a "confession" (1), her act of writing her story down for the blacksmith, has changed by the time Florens is nearing the door. Florens has emancipated herself from her reader, as her indifference shows when she recalls that in the conventional sense the blacksmith is illiterate: "You [the blacksmith] read the world but not the letters of talk. You don't know how to. Maybe one day you will learn" (158). But most importantly, she is critical of the blacksmith's teachings, which she had so ardently tried to follow before, especially his way of reading the world,

and she gives voice to her own experiences. Thinking of her adventure at Widow Ealing's House and of the solidarity that Daughter Jane had shown her, she repeats and revises his simile of the free slave:

I am remembering what you tell me from long ago when Sir is not dead. You say you see slaves freer than free men. One is a lion in the skin of an ass. The other is an ass in the skin of a lion. [...] Still, there is another thing. A lion who thinks his mane is all. A she-lion who does not. I learn this from Daughter Jane. Her bloody legs do not stop her. She risks. Risks all to save the slave that you throw out. (158)

The blacksmith's metaphor for the slave as a "lion in the skin of an ass" can be read as an image for the role of masks for African American slaves in a hostile white society. At the same time, it harks back to his treatment of Willard. For the blacksmith, freedom is not an external condition—the skin of a lion—but an interior state, which one can protect through disguise. Florens's retort is evidence of the education she has undergone at the end of the novel: "A lion who thinks his mane is all. A she-lion who does not." Signifying upon the pride that the blacksmith takes in his linguistic competence, Florens exposes the lion's vanity in the blacksmith<sup>10</sup>—a vanity that keeps him from recognizing the fellow human being in Florens. Instead, his words and his laugh, occasioned by Florens's inability to follow him unto the plane of figurative language, almost destroy her. By contrast, Daughter Jane, the "she-lion," risks her own safety to help Florens.

Along the same lines, we must interpret her use of the eagle-story imagery that we have already discussed above. Instead of following the blacksmith's teachings and his stories, such as that of the lion, Florens remembers Lina's story and uses the story's imagery to describe her internal life; drawing, in other words, on a tradition that is not African but Native American and transforming it. Thus, when she describes her words as remaining enclosed in the house, she imagines them in terms of Lina's story: "Over a turquoise lake, beyond the eternal hemlocks, through clouds cut by rainbow [...]" (159). Thus it is from women that Florens receives her education in signifying and storytelling.

While all of these changes are signs of her success at appropriating her own story, it is in the final two paragraphs of her last chapter that her reappropriation of language, history, and thus identity is realized. Closing her narrative she addresses the blacksmith a final time:

See? You are correct. A minha mãe too. I am become wilderness but I am also Florens. In full. Unforgiven. Unforgiving. No ruth, my love. None. Hear me? Slave. Free. I last. (159).

Her assertion that she will last, and remain both “wilderness” and “Florens,” tells of her recognition of this dichotomy as the fundamental contradiction of her self. In a gesture strikingly similar to Daughter Jane’s, she affirms that she is what the world has made her, has forced her to become—*wilderness*—but that she is also *Florens*. What is more, at this point in her narrative the traditional structure of slave narratives would posit the event and celebration of her freedom: Harriet Jacobs poignantly gives her final chapter the title “Free at Last”. And when Florens finally tells her lover, “Slave. Free. I last” (159), the phrasing (*Free at Last./Free. I last.*) is no coincidence.

It seems therefore that Florens has indeed achieved a state of internal freedom at the end of the novel. Florens’s achievement of literacy is at the same time a re-appropriation of her mother and therefore her history. Thus, in her last paragraph she can finally address her mother directly: “Mãe, you can have pleasure now because the soles of my feet are hard as cypress” (159). No longer referring to her as “minha mãe” (*my mother*), but directly as *mother*, Florens has finally come to read and write the wor(l)d.

### III.

Florens’s journey into the wilderness thus turns out to be a journey of discovery into her internal wilderness. Yet Morrison’s choice of words to describe Florens’s quest for selfhood is conspicuous in itself. Her recurrent references to Florens’s “errand” (*A Mercy* 2) to fetch the blacksmith as well as to the “wilderness” (40) that she has to cross in order to get to him evoke Perry Miller’s study of New England Puritanism in the seventeenth century: *Errand into the Wilderness* (1956). In this study, Miller analyzes the second and third generation Puritan society and their sermons, the so-called ‘jeremiads.’ It is from one of these—Samuel Danforth’s “A Brief Recognition of New-Englands Errand into the Wilderness” (1671)—that Miller’s study takes its name. Yet far from being merely an evocative title, the ‘errand into the wilderness’ has also come to denote American exceptionalism. In this sense the errand has come to present a ‘master narrative’ of America’s beginnings. Miller describes the transformation of the errand from its meaning of “a short journey [...] on which an inferior is sent [...] to perform a service for his superior” (3) to a journey on which one pursues one’s own agenda. Morrison seems to tap into this story of transformation. While Florens sets out to find the blacksmith for Rebekka, assuring her reader and her self that “[b]eing on an errand is not running away” (Morrison, *A Mercy* 103), by the time she has to give up Rebekka’s letter, she is on her own errand. But given the fact that the master paradigm of the white, Anglo-Saxon, and Protestant roots of the American na-

tion entirely excludes Africans (as well as Native Americans and women) from the founding of the nation, Morrison also seems to want to reintegrate these voices into the narrative. In order to do this, however, she does not only re-write the errand into the wilderness from a black woman's perspective. She also counters it with an allegory of her own: the house of Jacob.

The house that Jacob builds is a central symbol of his desire to "rise up in the world" (95) as well as of his failure to father a house in a genealogical sense. As I argued above, the "master's house" (qtd. in Cutter 209) can also be read as a symbol for the hegemonic discursive system, which cannot be defeated with its own weapons or if one remains within its walls. In an analysis of Harriet Jacobs' *Incidents*, Martha J. Cutter therefore argues that Jacobs strove for a voice of her own, since only then could she succeed in transforming the master's house: "to rescue her history, experience, and vision from the dominant social and discursive patterns of her society" (213). Yet the biblical references in Florens's 'writing on the wall' of 'the house of Jacob' also warrant an allegorical reading of the narrative. In the bible, the 'house of Jacob' is a synonym for the Israelites, but in the context of American history, it is not far fetched to draw a parallel between the description of the Israelites as God's chosen people and the Puritan belief in themselves as being God's 'own people.' In this sense Jacob's house becomes a symbol for the American nation and its history: carved out of the wilderness with the intention to build something "pure [and] noble" (Morrison, *A Mercy* 25), it is unfinished—just as the nation at the time of the novel's setting is only beginning to take shape. But Jacob has given in to temptation. While he initially scorns Jublio because in his eyes it is "compromised" (25) by slave labor, at the end of his chapter we see him wield to the lure of easy money. The night he decides to invest in sugar plantations in Barbados, "his dreams were of a grand house of many rooms rising on a hill above the fog" (33). And even though he consoles himself with the "profound difference between the intimacy of slave bodies at Jublio and a remote labor force in Barbados" (25), his house is built with money from the slave trade and the plantation labor in the Caribbean. The house that is America is built on the backs of African slaves, and even if this particular house, Jacob's house, is destroyed, their story will not be lost. On the contrary, it will be forever *present*: just as Florens has carved her words painfully into her master's house, so is the story of "Sixty Million and more" – the Africans who died as a result of the Atlantic slave trade and to whom Morrison dedicated her novel *Beloved* – forever written into America's history. The symbol of the bird further corroborates this reading. While the eagle and the green bird are symbols of motherhood and agency, towards the end of her story Florens seems to allude to another bird:

If you never read this, no one will. These careful words, closed up and wide open, will talk to themselves. Round and round, side to side, bottom to top, top to bottom all across the room. Or. Or perhaps no. Perhaps these words need the air that is out in the world. Need to *fly up* then fall, fall like *ash* over acres of primrose and mallow. Over a turquoise lake, beyond the eternal hemlocks, through clouds cut by rainbow and flavour the soil of the earth. Lina will help. As much as she needs to be Mistress' need I know she loves *fire* more. (Morrison, *A Mercy* 159; my emphasis)

Her reference to the eagle, her image of ash that flavors and fertilizes the soil, and her mentioning of fire evoke a bird that is neither eagle nor green bird (the symbols for Native Americans and Africans), but a phoenix. When Florens finally tells us, "I last" (159), she is implying that her words, her story, will rise like a phoenix from the ashes.

In the image of Florens writing on the walls of her master's house, telling her story with a voice that is her own at the same time that it represents the African American voice in history, Morrison therefore presents us with an image of an African American author. In her Nobel Prize lecture she describes language as "partly as a system, partly as a living thing over which one has control, but mostly as agency - as an act with consequences" ("Nobel Lecture"). Using the image of a bird that can either be dead or alive in the hand of the child that is holding it, she likens "dead language" to "[o]fficial language smitheryed to sanction ignorance and preserve privilege." The author, by contrast, is engaged in "word work" which "is generative; it makes meaning that secures [...] our human difference." When the children in Morrison's lecture challenge the woman to help them with keeping language alive, Morrison has them describe the "word work" of the author: "Make up a story. Narrative is radical, creating us at the very moment it is being created. We will not blame you if [...] love so ignites your words they go down in flames and nothing is left but their scald. [...] Language alone protects us from the scariness of things with no names." In *A Mercy*, Morrison seems to take her cue from Audre Lorde's famous statement that the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house. She presents Florens's voice as emerging from a specifically female experience of the world, one in which a "she-lion" (Morrison, *A Mercy* 158) and an eagle act out of solidarity with others, and she presents Florens as not so much dismantling the master's house as transforming it. Her act of carving, clearly associated with artistry, transforms the house beyond its physical existence. In this sense Florens has mastered what Pierre Bourdieu in a beautiful liaison of the corporeal and the cognitive has called "The Art of Standing Up to Words." Asked about the possibility of political resistance and social change, he answers with a reference to Francis Ponge:

Standing up to words, resisting them, only saying what one wants to say; speaking instead of *being spoken* by borrowed words that are charged with social meaning [...]. Resisting neutralized, euphemized, routinized words, in short, all the pompous platitudes of the new technocratic rhetoric, but also the threadbare words—worn down into silence—of motions, resolutions, platforms and programmes. All language that results from the compromise with internal and external censorship exercises an effect of imposition, an imposition of the unthought that discourages thought. (6)

The art of standing up to words is therefore an eminently political art through which Florens can also be read as Morrison's comment on the role of the African American (woman) author.

### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> This article is based on the publication *The Presence of the Past in the Novels of Toni Morrison*, as well as an earlier talk presented at the Symposium "Writing Slavery after *Beloved*: Literature, Historiography, Criticism," Université de Nantes, in March 2012.
- <sup>2</sup> "One: 'This is my historical life—my singular, special example that is personal, but that also represents the race.' Two: 'I write this text to persuade other people – you, the reader, who is probably not black – that we are human beings worthy of God's grace and the immediate abandonment of slavery'" ("Site" 186).
- <sup>3</sup> All subsequent quotes are taken from this edition.
- <sup>4</sup> Compare the recurrent examples of his relationship to Jacob and Rebekka, such as his first encounter with Rebekka, during which he "looked directly" (43) at her; or Jacob's sharing of an apple with the blacksmith (Morrison, *A Mercy* 58).
- <sup>5</sup> In her article "Hagar's Mirror: Self and Identity in Morrison's Fiction", Barbara Rigney comes to a similar conclusion in her analysis of *Tar Baby's* Son Green: "The primary significance of the name Son is, again, not to denote an individual self [...], but to place that self in a context of relationship [...]" (59).
- <sup>6</sup> Cf. Bourdieu, *Masculine Domination* 56.
- <sup>7</sup> "The social world is, to a great extent, something which agents make at every moment; but they have no chance of unmaking and remaking it except on the basis of a realistic knowledge of what it is and what they can do to it by virtue of the position they occupy in it" (Bourdieu, *Language* 242).
- <sup>8</sup> Florens intuitively literal grasp of the word 'slave' in this scene is another example of her inability to comprehend a figurative use of language. Gates repeatedly refers to the role of the family in the linguistic education of the child: "Learning how to Signify is often part of our adolescent education" (53).
- <sup>9</sup> Compare Martha J. Cutter's analysis of Harriet Jacob's *Incidents*, in which she

writes: “[F]or slave narrators like Harriet Jacobs, the real struggle is not learning to read and write the word, but learning to read and write the world. Critical literacy involves an understanding of how language practices have functioned to keep slaves disempowered, imprisoned in a ‘culture of silence.’ But critical literacy also involves an attempt to transform the structure of oppression: not simply to replicate the master’s house, but to dismantle it” (210).

- <sup>10</sup> The association of the lion with vain word games is further corroborated by the story on which the simile seems loosely based. It is a story from Aesop’s fables in which an ass dresses in the skin of a lion and is exposed when he uses his voice: “An ass having put on a Lion’s skin, roamed about, frightening all the silly animals he met with, and seeing a Fox, he tried to alarm him also. But Reynard, having heard his voice, said, ‘Well, to be sure! and [sic] I should have been frightened too, if I had not heard you bray.’ They who assume a character that does not belong to them generally betray themselves by overacting it” (*Fables* 70).

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