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Abstract: For the first time since *Beloved*, Toni Morrison returns to slavery in *A Mercy* (2008): the slave trade is allegorized as a 'pox' upon the initially utopian Vaark farm. Though in the face of systematic discourses of *othering*, each oppressed character puts up strategies of resistance, the dialectic of love, loss, and alienation in Florens's story permeates the entire novel. But Florens's voice offers resistance and empowerment as well: the house that Jacob built and that Florens 'haunts' is, in a *mise en abyme* of the house of fiction reclaimed by Toni Morrison, a black *repossession* of the house that slavery built.

Keywords: Morrison, *A Mercy*, trauma, voice, resistance

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Writing/Reading Slavery as Trauma: *Othering*, Resistance, and the Haunting Use of Voice in Toni Morrison's *A Mercy*

Monica Michlin

For the first time since the publication of *Beloved*, Toni Morrison returns to slavery as a central theme in *A Mercy* (2008), allowing the novel to be read both as a prequel¹ depicting the earliest days of the slave trade in the Americas, and as a literary variation on the 1987 novel. I will examine how the strategy of multiple focalization allows for the interweaving of various perspectives on bondage—black, white or Native American—while the slave trade is allegorized as a ‘pox’ upon America, which turns the apparent utopia of orphans on the Vaark farm into a cruel dystopia reminiscent of the (No) *Sweet Home* plantation in *Beloved*. Though in the face of systematic discourses of *othering* and domination, in the Salem-like ‘New World,’ each oppressed character puts up strategies of cultural and individual resistance, the dialectic of love, loss, and alienation in Florens’s story permeates the entire novel. Between the initial, desperate, *speakerly* opening address to the free blacksmith, and the final, tragically ‘unheard’ voice of the lost mother, the novel’s voices mirror the dispossession and trauma of slavery itself, placing, in a refusal of closure, the burden of grief upon each reader. But while the last note may seem desperate, it offers resistance and empowerment, too: the house that Jacob built and that Florens ‘haunts’ to carve her story into its wooden walls and floors, is, in a *mise en abyme* of the house of fiction reclaimed by Toni Morrison, a reinscription of History and *herstories*—a palimpsest of black *repossession*, haunting, and setting on fire, of the house that slavery built.

Writing *A Mercy* Twenty Years After *Beloved*

Beloved undoubtedly marked a turning point in the literary writing of slavery, through its post-modern as well as gothic, confessional as well as elliptical, dis-membered as well as *re-membering* immersion in trauma. Its refusal to narrate slavery from the outside, or even to use the word 'slave' at all; its use of broken chronology and traumatic flashback called *re-memory*; its magic realist poetics of haunting by the past returned in the flesh; its tragic use of polyphony as miscommunication; its circling around the unspeakable and its casting of the infra-verbal "mumbling of the black and angry dead" (198); its torn voices rising from the slave hold in a deliberately fragmented telling of the Middle Passage—all of its engaged aesthetics combined to make it one of the most shattering narratives of slavery from 'within.' If it could be read in its intertextual reprising of other African-American works—Robert Hayden's "Middle Passage;" Sherley Anne William's *Dessa Rose* (1986) for the work on the scar as indelible trace of horror *and* sublime image of resilience (a "chokecherry tree" and the "work of an ironsmith too passionate for display" [Morrison, *Beloved* 17]); and if it could be related to David Bradley's *The Chaneyville Incident* (1982) for its questioning of the Historian's discourse on slavery and its counteracting use of a palimpsest and polyphony of voices—it immediately, in turn, became the inescapable intertext of all subsequent novels on slavery. Its metatextual motifs of violated bodies and psyches, of mutilation, loss, and haunting, but also of resilience and healing, and its magnificent literary qualities, from the *écriture féminine* of blood and milk, to its use of halting parataxis and unreadable inventories of horror, its foregrounding of holes in the narrative for the unspeakable, and its hallmark use of the paradoxical negative in the haunting epilogue—"this is not a story to pass on" (275)—and finally, its aesthetic and political impact, made it seem the 'ultimate' work of fiction on slavery.

Literary authors tackling the same theme since 1987 have been forced to break new ground—for instance, Edward P. Jones's Pulitzer-prize winning *The Known World* (2003) explored the marginal perspective of the black slaveholder, within a multiple focalization; white author Valerie Martin grimly expanded the insight into the white woman's slaveholder's perspective in *Property* (2003); Phyllis Perry's *Stigmata* (1998) took up the magic inscription of the traumatic past on present-day bodies, resuming time-travel narratives where Octavia Butler's *Kindred* (1979) had left off. Or they chose to explore other periods. Toni Morrison herself deliberately cast *Jazz* (1992), *Paradise* (1997), and *Love* (2003) in the twentieth century, with flashbacks to Reconstruction in *Paradise. A Mercy* (2008) thus marks her return to slavery as a theme, suggesting it can be read as *Beloved's* chronological counterpoint, set in the very earliest days of slavery in the

Americas. It can also be seen as a variation on the 1987 novel, since it too features a tragic mother-daughter relationship; a young black woman on a dangerous journey aided by a white one; a haunted house of sorts, and a layering of voices and perspectives of characters best characterized by the fact that they are all orphans, abandoned and rescued, connected and separated by the many forms of *othering* the novel exposes.

Although Florens's confessional monologue to the man known to us only as *the blacksmith*² opens the narrative, and regularly returns, it is crosscut, interlaid, or complexified by each of the other characters' third-person perspectives: Jacob, Lina, Sorrow, Florens, Rebekka, Willard and Scully are thus heard contrapuntally in turn, before the only other first-person narrative, that of Florens's lost mother, takes over the last pages. All of them provide depictions of slavery that quickly saturate the text; more to the point, it is freedom—enacted in Florens's initiatory journey to find the blacksmith and healer—that seems elusive for anyone but propertied whites, be they landed gentry like d'Ortega or 'commoners' like Jacob Vaark. The second chapter, which takes place eight years earlier than the first, on the day Vaark's and Florens's lives collide, is focalized through Vaark, mainly to give us his perspective on the slave trade; only in the background do we see the traumatic scene that haunts Florens.

Jacob's contradictions are apparent: conscious that the law has already "separated and protected all whites from all others forever" following a "people's war" (Morrison, *A Mercy* 10), he deplores the new racial laws as "authorizing chaos in the defense of order" (11). The insistence on his empathetic feelings for animals and oppressed humans alike,³ born of his own miserable past as "ratty orphan"⁴ (12) and the puns on his name,⁵ which contains both the acronym for Virginia and the biblical Ark, all seem reassuring. That he feels nausea under the gaze of the enslaved blacks at Jublio, recognizing that they are "judging the men that judged them" (22) confirms that he truly considers "trading in flesh" a "degraded business" (31), his body language testifying to moral discomfort echoing the earlier line: "Jacob winced. Flesh was not his commodity" (22). The silent voices of the black enslaved are first filtered through his sickened conscience: "Whatever it was, he couldn't stay there surrounded by a passel of slaves whose silence made him imagine an avalanche seen from a great distance. No sound, just the knowledge of a roar he could not hear" (22). The intertextual echo of Morrison's *Beloved*, when the clamor of the voices of the dead surrounding the haunted house on Bluestone Road is heard through Stamp Paid—"What a roaring" (181)—is deliberate, and points to the "unspeakable [things], unspoken" (199) that the scars and the black gazes simultaneously suggest and veil to the white man's gaze and the reader's. But the chapter ends on Jacob being tempted into investing in 'rum'—the word that masks his commodification of other human

beings: "And the plan was as sweet as the sugar on which it was based. And there was a profound difference between the intimacy of slave bodies at Jublio and a remote labor force in Barbados. Right? Right, he thought, looking at a sky vulgar with stars" (Morrison, *A Mercy* 35).

The bad faith Jacob displays, the vocabulary of corrupt sweetness, confirms what the start of the chapter heralded, as he stepped into "air so new, [as to be] almost alarming in rawness and temptation." (12). Despite his humanist desire to make "a place out of no place, a temperate living from raw life" (12)—in short, a *utopia* of his farm, a human enclave in an inhuman world—his admiration for d'Ortega's grandiose house, discovered in that first chapter, is stronger. Jublio—a significant misspelling of Jubilo, and a cruel *signifying* on the meaning of *Jubilee* (on the day of emancipation) in the African-American tradition—seduces him into "trading his conscience for coin" (28). Jacob judges the house "prideful" (15) but is caught in its spell, as the final line of the chapter brings home: "his dreams were of a grand house of many rooms rising on a hill" (35). The entire chapter echoes and rewrites the 'primal scene' of color and class in Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936), where slavery is the curse upon the Thomas Sutpen's house: the exploitation that allows his wealth, and his intimate undoing all in one (Gustafson and Hutner make the same parallel). Despite Jacob's never using the hyper-racialized vocabulary of the agent from Barbados—"the place is a stew of mulattoes, creoles, zambos, mestizos, lobos, chinos, coyotes" (30), a phrasing which seems cannibalistic in its very inventory of animal-inspired names in a reflexive 'stew'—and despite his taking in Florens and Sorrow in gestures he thinks of as "rescue" (34), he is the invisible enabler of the slave trade, as stockholder and lender (heralding similar contradictions within Enlightenment philosophers such as Voltaire, a century later).

Significantly, the next time we see Jacob, one blank page and eight years later, he lies dying of the pox fallen upon his dream house before he has even set foot in it, making it impossible not to read in his demise an allegory of slavery as a curse upon America. Morrison complicates this reading through polyphony: contradictory interpretations are offered of the pox, as well as of the house and the serpents that adorn its gates. The free blacksmith who made them is the 'serpent in the garden' to Lina because he brings desire to Florens and because he embodies black freedom; but readers may think of him as a Christ-like figure who brings the pox-afflicted women back to life—in an infinite reflexive construction, the blacksmith is what each reader chooses to see, a figure of desire and of black agency itself. To Florens, the serpents thus reflect his art and their passion: "Your ironwork is wondrous to see. The glittering cobras still kiss at the gate's entrance" (36). To Lina they are an evil omen: "the sinister gate that the smithy took two months to make" opens, in her view,

onto “the world of the damned” (51); to Rebekka, they are part of “iron-work aglitter like a gate to heaven” (89). These interpretations shimmer kaleidoscopically, but always point to the Vaark farm as a paradise *lost*—the nearby town is called Milton, to drive the point home.⁶

The allegory of slavery as pox seems clear when we see that emerging from the disease, Rebekka turns into a nightmarish embodiment of the white mistress, even though she has been saved by her black and Native American allies on the farm. While years before, she had “discovered something much more interesting than status” (53) in Lina’s company—the text even claims that “they became friends” (53)—after the pox, as if in a literalization of Lina’s fear that her looking into the mirror would steal her soul, she renames the other inhabitants of the farm “servants” (97), the hypocritical euphemism for *slaves*. Although we are spared the particularly heinous racist focalization that Valerie Martin’s *Property* forces upon us, Rebekka’s cruel actions are described within Scully’s perspective, in an ‘undoing of community’ encapsulated in a single sentence: “When she beat Sorrow, had Lina’s hammock taken down, advertised for the sale of Florens, he cringed inside and said nothing” (155).

After Vaark’s death and Rebekka’s radical conversion to white supremacy—Scully, Sorrow (134) and Lina alike reflect that they were never a “family.” Scully expresses this bitter disillusionment:

They once thought they were a kind of family because together they had carved companionship out of isolation. But the family they imagined they had become was false. Whatever each one loved, sought or escaped, their futures were separate and anyone’s guess. (156)

Lina puts it even more bluntly: “As long as Sir was alive it was easy to veil the truth: that they were not a family—not even a like-minded group. They were orphans, each and all” (59). Even more brutal is her assessment of the status of minority women (doubly considered “unmastered”):

[t]hree unmastered women and an infant out here, alone, belonging to no one, became wild game for anyone. None of them could inherit; none was attached to a church or recorded in its books. Female and illegal, they would be interlopers, squatters, if they stayed on after Mistress died, subject to purchase, hire, assault, abduction, exile. (58)

The cruel puns on “un-mastered” and “wild game” draw our attention to gendered and class-based as much as racialized forms of servitude.

Dissociating Slavery From Blackness?

Morrison has stressed in all interviews that in *A Mercy*, she wanted to explore a time when slavery and blackness were not yet absolutely identified. (Neary; Rose). Not only does she show the status of women as men's property, when Rebekka remembers that as a working-class girl, "her prospects were servant, prostitute, wife, and although horrible stories were told about each of those careers, the last one seemed safest" (78), but she describes forms of white slavery euphemistically called by other names, which Amy, the runaway servant, also embodied in *Beloved*. The extreme exploitation and abuse endured by poor white indentured servants whose years of bondage were constantly being extended is represented in Joan Brady's novel *Theory of War* (1993), although in interviews, Morrison quotes Don Jordan and Michael Walsh's more recent historical study *White Cargo* (2008) as her inspiration. The indentured whites Florens sees running away in chapter 3, and the characters of Scully and Willard allow parallels between white and black forms of bondage. White enslavement is described repeatedly (40, 57), and best captured in the term "re-leased" (148) used as the exact opposite of *released*, or freed, since in context it means: 'leased over and over again.' But even the inset list of ads displayed on page 52, which interweaves demand for black and white and Native labor, emphasizes that poor whites are *for rent* and not, by law at least, *for sale*. Even the chapter devoted to Willard and Scully, which ends on the latter's feelings of compassion for the black and Native American women of the farm about to be sold off by a now bigoted Rebekka, emphasizes his white boy's consciousness that he has a future—"he was determined to be quit of servitude forever and for that, money was a guarantee" (155). While this does not prevent compassion—"Yet when possible and in secret, he tried to soften or erase the hurt Mistress inflicted" (155)—he imagines this future as a world still creating itself from inchoate "dark matter" (156). Though a reference to Genesis-inspired sermons, this image echoes Morrison's analysis of white identity shaping itself against the African (American) presence in *Playing in the Dark* (1992).

The narrative's polyphony of orphaned, marginalized, *Other* voices, from the Native girl (Lina) to the mute castaway (Sorrow), to the indentured white laborers who share the same bed (Scully and Willard) thus, if it initially intertwines black and white identities, constantly also reminds us of all that separates them. In addition, each character's strategies of resistance to sustain her or his own humanity are always ambivalent, swinging between self-preservation and violence: from Lina's patching together of the fragments of rituals and legends she remembers and her consoling Rebekka with thoughts that the Vaarks' dead children have become birds or stars to her probably drowning Sorrow's baby, from Sor-

row's conversations with her imaginary "Twin" – an echo of Pecola's psychotic dissociation in *The Bluest Eye* – to her renaming herself "Complete" when she becomes a mother and in a way 'killing' her other self – each tries to find "a way to be in the world" (48) that often implies the inflicting of hurt. Just as Rebekka is unsure whether Lina has sustained her in her grief after her children's deaths, or whether she has taken her down the road to perdition with her heathen beliefs, so, in Lina's perspective, whites – called "Europes" (44), just as blacks are "African" (47), precisely because geographical origin is still stronger a signifier than race – bring death (as colonizers), and "rescu[e] her" (43) at the same time. That the Other is essentially opaque is reiterated time and again, in Lina's thoughts: "Now they simply puzzled her" (44). In turn, she, who has perversely been named Messalina (47) by the fanatics who bar both Natives like her and those they call the "children of Ham" (92) from Heaven, places a similar curse upon the "mongrelized" (120) Sorrow (the animal image being not pastoral but dehumanizing), believing her to embody bad luck.

True, each scene of racial trauma, at least in the main body of the narrative, is also, simultaneously, a scene of human solidarity across lines of racial *othering* or religious bigotry. *A Mercy's* title draws our attention – the way the title *Paradise* did – to religious fanaticism and its perverse meshing with racial and gender politics. From the flashbacks to Rebekka's parents' sadistic pleasure in seeing heretics executed, to the cruelty of denying a grieving mother the religious burial of her unbaptized children, to labeling a cross-eyed girl demonic, all the subplots illustrate how the desire for dominion over others, which will, in the last page of the book, be called "hard," "wrong," and "wicked," is already woven into the social fabric of this Early America which thus cannot be a 'New Jerusalem.'⁷ In the subplot of Florens's journey, this form of *othering* reemerges as blackness, both dissociated from, and identified with, skin color.

Blackness and Trauma in Florens's Story

When Florens discovers her 'blackness' under the racist religious white gaze, it almost undoes the erotic empowerment she continues to associate with the blacksmith's embrace: "blackness is me. Is we" (Morrison, *A Mercy* 115). Forced to strip naked to show she is not "the Black Man's minion" (113), in a horrible pun that brings together the satanic and the color of her skin, she discovers that to be seen as "Afric and much more" (111) means her blackness is perceived as evil, and not as 'more' but 'less' than human. The trauma of this scene echoes the moment in *Beloved* when Sethe understands that the schoolteacher is listing her "animal characteristics" (*Beloved*, 193). The feeling of disintegration – "inside I am shrink-

ing," "something precious is leaving me" (115) – belatedly gives new significance to the *pastoral* moments that have staged the exchange of gazes between humans and deer (69, 70) or bears (5) sometimes in 'misreading' but never in the *absence* of connection which saturates the text now: "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. Swine look at me with more connection when they raise their heads from the trough" (113). The scene is however compensated by the sisterly white gaze of alliance between the stigmatized and oppressed: just as Florens did not denounce the white servants who ran away from the carriage; just as the young Native American horsemen who came across her gave her food and water, saving her life (in an echo of Native Americans helping Paul D. in *Beloved*), so does the cross-eyed white girl, Daughter Jane, help Florens escape, in a variation on the Amy/Sethe motif.⁸ While Florens's parting question "are you a demon?" (114) – points to her naïve "misreading" of the interplay between power, abuse and dehumanization through language, Daughter Jane chooses to reinvest the word. By answering "Yes. Oh yes" (115), the cross-eyed girl bonds with Florens against a white gaze that labels her "the Black Man's minion" – in an implicit pun on undoing do/minion between them. Revealingly, her "wayward eye is steady" (114) as she asserts herself and seeks to empower Florens.

But *othering* by the inhuman gaze has reawakened the black girl's earlier trauma of abandonment⁹; it translates into a "wildness" she now feels inside, in an introjection of animal imagery but also, of the Eagle legend told over and over to her by Lina (62–63), who figuratively took her 'under her wing.' Images of the eagle re-emerge here, in an 'inner hatching':

Without [the letter] I am a weak calf abandon by the herd, a turtle without shell, a minion with no telltale signs but a darkness I am born with, outside, yes, but inside as well and the inside dark is small, feathered and toothy. Is that what my mother knows? Why she chooses me to live without? Not the outside dark we share, a minha mãe and me, but the inside one we don't. Is this dying mine alone? Is the clawing feathery thing the only life in me? (115)

The "clawing feathery thing," while an image of resistance, is also a conflicted self-representation, in terms of animality and violence, of oxymorons ("feathered and toothy"), of an internalized darkness construed as deprivation ("without" is to be read in both its meanings) and equated with rage and shame, rather than pride. It heralds the violence Florens will inflict upon Malaik; which in turn will cause the blacksmith to reject her. The image of her flying with the hammer in her hand, to kill him rather than lose him, is an enactment of her previous expression of passion "I can never not have you have me" (137) as she relives the trauma of be-

ing “expel” (136)—the mutilated word expressing the trauma of separation and subsequent incompleteness. It is also an enactment of the possessive “mine” used by the colonizer in the Eagle Legend, which can also apply to the desire for dominion in love—the possessive echoes the dangerous, absolute possessives of the ‘women’s voices’ section in *Beloved* (“I am Beloved and she is mine,” 214–217). Possessives signify possessiveness; possession is demonic; and propertization similar to enslavement itself, as the blacksmith will finally say of Florens’s love for him.¹⁰ But the violence inflicted upon the blacksmith also tragically marks Florens’s failure to ‘read’ her own dreams—hence the tragic irony of her initial question “Can you read?” (3).

Misreading, Unbridgeable Silence and Traumatic Haunting:

The fundamental tragedy in *A Mercy* is Florens’s misreading of signs, and in particular, of the recurring dream in which she relives the trauma of separation from her mother, whom she always calls *mother* in the lost tongue (Portuguese), but with an oxymoronic use of the English article “a” in front of the possessive “minha” in “minha mãe” (my mother)—“a my mother” is a forever lost mother.¹¹ This frozen scene of trauma—“a minha mãe standing hand in hand with her little boy” (3)—is repeated numerous times (7, 8, 101, 138)—as Florens puts it: “I see it forever and ever” (7). While the belief she has been abandoned is constantly reinforced by others—through Rebekka, we learn that “Jacob said the mother had no use for her” (96)—increasingly, Florens tries to ‘read’ the dream. She literally tries to hear what her mother is saying to her—the words that she blocked out in shock as a child, and has blocked out since as an unforgiving dreamer: “This is a better dream than a minha mãe standing near with her little boy. In those dreams she is always wanting to tell me something. Is stretching her eyes. Is working her mouth. I look away from her” (101). The irony is that Florens has foregrounded the impossibility of univocal interpretation in describing those signs she *knows* how to read: “Other signs need more time to understand. Often there are too many signs, or a bright omen clouds up too fast. I sort them and try to recall, yet I know that I am missing much” (4).

When the blacksmith rejects her and she flees after assaulting him, she is stripped of even those signs—“What I read or cipher is useless now. Heads of dogs, garden snakes, all that is pointless” (157)—and shoeless for the first time—“I have no shoes. I have no kicking heart no home no tomorrow” (158), in an exact reversal of the African-American spiritual “I Got Shoes (All God’s Children Got Shoes).” Expelled from the paradise the blacksmith personified, Florens now addresses her lover and her lost

mother in the last page of her confession, finally admitting the wound of abandonment she has literally been circling around¹² since the first words of her confessional monologue: "There is no more room in this room. These words cover the floor. My arms ache but I have need to tell you this. I cannot tell it to anyone but you. I am near the door and at the closing now" (160). Only then does she remember that the blacksmith *cannot* read; as she thinks the words will talk to themselves, in the solipsistic circle of the room, we are reminded of the chain of voices of this novel and of the circle as metatextual image for Morrison's writing of individual and collective trauma, in all her works. The poignant reflexive image of the closing of the chapter, however, hides a twist that opens onto the very last 'door' of the lost mother's voice, much as the epilogue to *Beloved* reopens a narrative about to close, in a mirroring of haunting itself.

Within *A Mercy's* diegesis, the ghost that haunts the house is not Vaark's, contrary to what Willard and Scully believe when they see Florens's light flickering behind the windows at night – it is that of broken black hearts but also that of the indomitable spirit of black resistance. Although I confess that as a reader I did hope against hope for an intradiegetic textual healing between the blacksmith and Florens in an enactment of the line "If you are live or ever you heal you will have to bend down to read my telling" (158), the suspended ending is magnificent, as Florens looks anew upon the house of words she has created, thinking herself alone, not knowing *we* have entered her house, as ghosts of the future and witnesses to her story: "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" (161).

As she projects to burn the house down, releasing Lina from her own alienation ("much as she needs to be Mistress' need I know she loves fire more," 161) and lifting her own words onto the world, in a rain of "ashes," this picture reads as one of emancipatory destruction, beyond impossible mourning. The fertile rain of ash seems the metatextual image for the black pastoral Florens has embodied allegorically all along – for what does "Florens" mean, if not 'flowering'? In a deliberate echoing of James Baldwin's celebrated epigraph – *God gave Noah the rainbow sign/ No more water, the fire next time* – as well as in intertextuality to Audre Lorde, Morrison burns down what once seemed the 'Ark' of orphans and has turned into the White Mistress's house, a true house of horror.¹³ As she ends her lyrical monologue, Florens comes into her self, redefined by herself alone, in a series of only *apparent* oxymorons that express her resilience, beyond loss, and shame: "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" (161). This assertion

erases, in a textual counterpoint, the ominous dream in which she ‘saw’ her lost identity literalized as facelessness in the beautiful blue lake of Lina’s legend: “I see my face is not there. Where my face should be is nothing” (138). This dread of being ‘disremembered’ by one’s loved ones, erased as Beloved is in the epilogue of the eponymous novel, or as Twin is, once Sorrow gives birth—“Twin was gone, traceless and unmissed by the only person who knew her” (134)—has left her.¹⁴

Now, and only now, as Florens finally expresses grief—“one sadness that remains. That all this time, I cannot know what my mother is telling me. Nor can she know what I am wanting to tell her” (161)—can the house of fiction open up, impossibly, magically, tragically, onto the mother’s lost voice. While it is possible that this is a magic realist answer to Florens’s desire to finally hear her mother’s voice in her dream, which would indeed allow a form of closure,¹⁵ it seems more likely that the blank page between Florens’s bitter, “Mãe, you can have pleasure now because the soles of my feet are as hard as cypress” (161), and the first lines of the mother’s voice tragically signifies unbridgeable silence. By making each reader the sole recipient of the poignant, devastating words the mother tries to say, night after night in her daughter’s dreams, Morrison makes our *response-ability*—to quote the term she coins in *Playing in the Dark*¹⁶—total.

The Mother’s Voice: Bearing Witness / Making Closure Impossible

As the invisible, extradiegetic addressees of the mother’s speech, we are called upon to bear witness to the unwritten, unbearable History that has been erased or denied by the other voices so far: that of the Middle Passage, and of the Transatlantic Trade in its already globalized Portuguese/Dutch/Caribbean/American form. The lost mother’s *herstory* collapses the parallels between white and black slavery; it rips the veil on the Middle Passage, the auction block, and the unremitting inhumanity of a condition in which “to be female [...] is to be an open wound that cannot heal. Even if scars form, the festering is ever below” (163). All of the images here are both literal and figurative, the “open wound” and the “festering”¹⁷ signifying actual, physical, infected scars, constantly repeated rape (the exploited sex itself as open wound), and allegorically, repeated trauma without hope of healing.

The mother’s voice rises up as the counterpoint to the slaveholder’s inhuman voice, heard in chapter 2, when D’Ortega, in chilling indifference, complains about the loss of human cargo when a ship of his was delayed in port, and about the added cost of having been sentenced to retrieve the black bodies thrown overboard. In a symbolic re-inscription of the refusal

to consider these lives human and worthy of burial, he boasts that he had them thrown into shallow backwaters to be eaten by alligators (16). In its depiction of the slave trade through the cold white perspective, these pages recall David Bradley's black narrator in *The Chaneysville Incident* (1981) pointing out that the horrors of the transatlantic trade were disclosed not by *redacted* History books, but by the blunter narrative of legal archives: ship captains judged not for homicide but for defrauding insurance companies when they threw overboard, in chains, their human cargo become too sick or too rebellious to be sold. It also reminds us of what Morrison herself gave as the reason for writing *Beloved*:

In an interview with Gloria Naylor, Toni Morrison noted that her desire to write a narrative about slavery was truly a desire to invoke all those people who were "unburied, or at least unceremoniously buried," and to go about "properly, artistically, burying them." The purpose of burying them, though, is to bring them back into "living life." Narrative, according to Morrison, is both burial and revival. (Rushdy 86)

Indeed, there is no memorial, no burying place one can go to to mourn all the *disremembered and unaccounted for*, as Saidiya Haartman reminds us, and as Morrison has said again in more recent interviews. By closing *A Mercy* on the lost mother's voice, the text re-inscribes the voice of the black subject as woman, even as, in Hortense Spillers's terms ("Mama's"), she is being legally reduced to "flesh." By ending on this voice of resistance to reification and humiliation, this voice of love beyond trauma and violation, Morrison creates a magnificent anonymous collective black mother, not lost, so much as heard across time and space. The fact that we hear the voice after all the others is an enactment, though not in as reflexive an aesthetic form, of the 'rupture' slavery represents, as collective trauma—but in less devastating a representation than the voice from the hold in *Beloved*, which fractured the 'unspeakable' into the postmodern 'unreadable.' Instead of the "historical recollection and narrative rememory of the collective experience of the Middle Passage [t]hrough [the] iconic sensory word-pictures" (Bouson 153) of *Beloved*'s monologue, we have only a brief paragraph on the "awfulness." Instead of a narrative "locked in traumatic, dissociated memory, frozen in time" (153), the extreme trauma of the Middle Passage is condensed in a paragraph of text. Even if there are obvious parallels between the two texts—"whitened men [...] believed to be ill or dead" (164) echoes *Beloved*'s "men without skin" (211)—Morrison shifts the emphasis from the Middle Passage that blocked all subsequent telling by the voice from the hold—"I am always crouching" (*Beloved* 210)—to what happened *after*: the stripping away of all identity but racial on the auction block in Barbados:

It was there I learned how I was not a person from my country, nor from my families. I was negrita. Everything. Language, dress, gods, dance, habits, decoration, song—all of it cooked together in the color of my skin. So it was as a black that I was purchased by Senhor, taken out of the cane and shipped north to his tobacco plants. (165)

Here, the identification of blackness and enslavement is total; the mother's entire identity—inventoried in terms of cultural heritage (such as the plural on "families" or "gods")—being "cooked together in the color of [her] skin," in an image not of remaking and creation like the blacksmith's smelting, but rather in an echo of the "stew" image used by the slave trader (30), and a reminder of the unbearable images of black bodies set on fire in lynching: Sixo's death in *Beloved*, the voices of the dead of "the fire-cooked blood" that arise from 124 Bluestone Road; the white hate riot that sees Dorcas's mother "burned crispy" in *Jazz*. The parataxis and broken punctuation, that separate "Everything," as a nominal sentence, from the inventory of language, gods, or song, marks the trauma of complete dispossession.

Although the pidgin or creole used by Morrison is somewhat awkward, because the English text seeks to mimic forms of creolized or hybrid Portuguese (the mother's voice should be in dialectal Portuguese, with a translation into Americanized black dialect in italics, for instance), it makes the voice more immediately accessible to English-language readers. That the only words left in Portuguese are "Florens," "minha mae," "tua mae," "Negrita,"¹⁸ and "Senhor" highlights the core of slavery itself and of resistance through the mother-daughter bond and the possessive as marker of love and identity. The exoticism of the word "negrita" emphasizes how slavery in the USA is the child—allegorically embodied by Florens—born of the Transatlantic Trade, the 18th-century version of globalization that ushers in Modernity.¹⁹ It also drives home how 'white' languages redefined blackness as inferior: the "-ita" suffix is not affectionate but racist, sexist and exploitative. As opposed to this 'minority' status inscribed in the word, by using "we" systematically, instead of the pronoun "us," the mother can be construed as resisting objectification, and asserting the black oppressed's subjectivity and agency.

She too cobbles together beliefs that can fortify her, for instance, the words of the Catholic priest who later teaches Florens to read: "that no matter what others may say, I was not a soulless animal, a curse; that Protestants were in error, in sin" (163). Reversing the animal imagery is central to her resistance to the Ortegas—she kneels before Jacob, because she feels he differs from them, in that "[t]here [is] no animal in his heart" (163).²⁰ That her moment of agency, to save her daughter, is to kneel before a white man, seems the ultimate paradox; but it is the moment that

gives its title to the book: implying a moment of *human* exchange. If not love, if not empathy, at least mercy:

Because I saw the tall man see you as a human child, not as pieces of eight. I knelt before him. Hoping for a miracle. He said yes.

It was not a miracle. Bestowed by God. It was a mercy. Offered by a human. (163)

The other pun implicit in Florens's name—gold Florins, Florens as "coin" (28)—seems erased because Jacob *sees* Florens as a child; in the exchange between two human beings, there is the fleeting hope that both their futures might be *redeemed* from the violence of History.

The cruelty of the last page is that it reveals the mother's parting words to Florens on dominion—whether received, imposed, or given over another—to have been prophetic of her daughter's tragic future. In this final paragraph, Morrison 'passes on' the wound, by placing the burden of unbearable knowledge upon the reader and denying closure to the readers, as she does in almost all her novels—leaving us mourning for Florens, the beloved daughter—"Oh Florens. My love. Hear a tua mae" (167), stabbing us with the truth that Florens had been loved all along, a truth understood "much, much, much too late" in the tragic final words of Morrison's first novel *The Bluest Eye* (1970).²¹ The tragic construction of the narrative is perfect; Florens's first words—"Don't be afraid. My telling can't hurt you" (3)—return to us, in all their terrible irony. As our throats catch upon reading these final words, what opens in this space of readerly empathy²² is the consciousness of one of the most intimate wounds inflicted by slavery: not knowing what one's mother or one's child had said/would have said/ might be saying now, so utter was the separation. Thinking back to how Barbara Chase-Riboud has defined the loss of one's ancestry and familial past, in the Middle Passage and in contemporary (white) America's amnesia of this loss that is not officially memorialized: "We are orphans, standing on the blank page of America, waiting to be acknowledged,"²³ I would suggest that this last voice is an 'un-orphaning' by the ancestral black mother, even as these final words are meant to haunt once the book is closed.²⁴

That we may be the sole recipients of all the inset narratives, and that the house that slavery built be turned into a mausoleum to loss, the haunted support of a carved narrative to go up in fertile flames, makes the book a reflexive image of the stories *that were not passed on* and yet, must be passed on today, for the chain of disremembering and of national amnesia to be broken. As Ashraf Rushdy has put it: "Not to acknowledge the 'wounds' of slavery would be to leave them festering; not to address the ways subjections of the past get rearticulated in the present is too let them

retain their force" (61). If indeed, as Michael Eric Dyson said in 1997 and as seems painfully obvious with the surge of the most reactionary elements in white America today, slavery is "bursting at the seam of our historical memory" (qtd. in Alter), fiction like Morrison's reopens wounds, out of necessity. In Florens's tragic story, we see how slavery, class violence, religious fanaticism, racism, simple ignorance and common greed turn a pastoral into hell, and into a seemingly endless repetition of trauma. But there is also a celebration of resilience, of emancipation through telling and writing, through reflection and confession, through mourning and the desire to love and be loved, beyond all forms of subjection and domination. *A Mercy* is a tragic fictional *herstory* of irreparable harm inflicted by slavery, but it is not a "slave narrative," for, as Toni Cade Bambara rightly insists: "we've been trained to call [them] slave narratives for reasons too obscene to mention, as if the 'slave' were an identity and not a status interrupted by the very act of fleeing, speaking, writing [...]" (4). *A Mercy* is the work of a consummate blacksmith, shaper of a world of rich and beautiful blackness—*Afric and much more*—, a work that reminds us that if the world shapes us, we all, to some extent, shape *it*, if only through the narratives we choose to read, hear, and pass on.

Notes

- 1 The author acquiesces to this term in the Charlie Rose interview; it is also used by Adams. Lenora Todaro uses the term "prelude" to *Beloved* instead.
- 2 The symbolic importance of this name cannot be stressed enough; reflexively, the blacksmith is the 'smithy' of blackness as well as an inset metatextual image for the author. Let us note that one of the heroes of James McBride's *Song Yet Sung* (2008) is a blacksmith, too.
- 3 Just as he has freed the raccoon from its trap (11), so he will rescue Florens; just as he cannot stand to see the scars left by beatings on one of d'Ortega's slaves, so he cannot see a man flog a horse. He consciously hates "dominion" over animals, abhorring the beating of a horse "not only because of the pain it inflicted [...], but because of the mute, unprotesting surrender glazing its eyes" (28). The question that lies in the subtext is whether he thinks of the enslaved as domesticated animals, or as human beings.
- 4 "Yet he continued to feel a disturbing pulse of pity for orphans and strays, remembering well their and his own teeming in the markets, lanes, alleyways and ports of every region he traveled" (33).
- 5 Jacob's is an "easily punned" (33) name. See Adams.
- 6 As David Gates put it in his *New York Times* Review: "In Morrison's latest version of pastoral, it's only mercy or the lack of it that makes the American landscape heaven or hell, and the gates of Eden open both ways at once" (n.

- pag).
- 7 Except if one considers, more realistically, 'Jerusalem' to have always already been the land of religious wars and racial or ethnic strife, even before the Crusades and up to this day.
 - 8 Daughter Jane and her mother, as well as Scully and Willard, are variations of Amy, the white runaway in *Beloved*, who, by treating Sethe's wounds, and by naming the hideously infected wound she dresses on Sethe's back a chokecherry tree, saves her in body and provides a performative spiritual healing by transforming the mutilation into a form of organic beauty that Sethe can proudly claim as her own. The chokecherry tree also carries echoes, obviously, of both the Crucifixion—a tree Sethe carries on her back—and of lynching, with the verb "choke," in a transcendent, while graphically embodied, image of black martyrdom.
 - 9 The hysterical little white girl and her mother seem a perverse real-life white reenactment of the scene that haunts her dreams, in which her mother clutches Florens's half-brother and gives Florens away.
 - 10 The bird imagery also recalls the scene of trauma in *Beloved* and Sethe's cry "nononono" as she "flies" to protect her children by taking them to the *other side*, while hummingbird wings seem to beat all around her (163). The blacksmith's cruel words that redefine Florens as "slave" both in her violence and her submission in all-consuming love echo Paul D.'s insensitive projection of racist animal imagery in *Beloved* when Sethe explains that she sacrificed her children out of love: "Your love is too thick [...] You got two feet, Sethe, not four" (164–165).
 - 11 Peterson similarly reads the English indeterminate article ("a") before the Portuguese possessive (12).
 - 12 As J. Brooks Bouson remarked of *Beloved*: "Thus readers of Morrison's fiction may come away with the sense of narrative withholding or hesitancy as they follow and piece together a novelistic narrative that circles redundantly around the illicit, traumatic, incomprehensible secret or secrets it represents. If through her use of aesthetic design and fragmented narrative structure Morrison partly defends against the shameful secrets and physical horrors she depicts in her fiction, her description of her imagined reader as a co-conspirator and confidant also reveals that she is intent on involving her readers emotionally in her work" (19).
 - 13 Florens will use this expression, speaking of Lina: "She finds horror in this house" (161).
 - 14 The true meaning of Daughter Jane's words in the dream—"Oh, Precious, don't fret, she is saying, you will find it" (138)—is hidden by the repetition of trauma: the dream ends on the combination of Florens's two worst fears as she sees her mother holding Malaik's hand. Florens thus cannot *see* what Daughter Jane embodies as her double and as *key* to her own story—a daughter loved by her mother who must nevertheless hurt her to save her from greater harm.
 - 15 This optimistic reading is Laura Sarnelli's. Morrison confesses having wanted

- a final reconciling of mother and daughter but rejected it as too “easy” (Rose).
- ¹⁶ “Writing and reading mean being aware of the writer’s notions of risk and safety, the serene achievement of, or sweaty fight for, meaning and responsibility.” (Morrison, *Playing* xi)
- ¹⁷ “Festering” is a charged term in African American literature, since it refers back to Robert Hayden’s rewriting of Ariel’s song in Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*: “Deep in the festering hold thy father lies / The corpse of mercy rots with him [...] (447). Morrison’s novel paradoxically resurrects mercy and festering both. The other famous occurring of “festering” is in Langston Hughes’s poem “Harlem”: “What happens to a dream deferred? / Does it dry up / like a raisin in the sun? / Or fester like a sore— / And then run?” (Hughes 268).
- ¹⁸ The term is still used today by a major brand of brown rum, here in France, in an unthinking reminder of what the rum trade was based on. See Jan Pieterse’s work on the semiology of blackness in white advertising in *White on Black* (1992).
- ¹⁹ For in an in-depth analysis of these issues of slavery and Modernity, “flesh” and “thingification” in slavery, informed by black feminist epistemology and readings of Hartman and Spillers, see Broeck.
- ²⁰ The radical pessimism of the novel lies in its rejecting the possibility of escaping the very language and imagery of enslavement. Animal imagery relevantly turns from pastoral to malevolent or dehumanizing. Lina’s metaphor for Sorrow as harbinger of bad luck is that she “dragged misery behind her like a tail” (55); her description of the blacksmith’s eyes as “slanted and yellow as a ram’s” (45) similarly makes animal comparisons ominous. Within Morrison’s own work, this detail of the “yellow eyes” echoes the description of Cholly, the incestuous father in *The Bluest Eye* (this was part of Cholly’s charm as a young man). The ‘fallen’ animal imagery announces the main tropes of white *othering* of blacks as not *people* but chattel in 19th- and 20th-century racist discourse; tropes that Morrison turns back on themselves in *Beloved*, when Stamp Paid speaks of the “jungle whitefolks had made [...] The screaming baboon lived under their own white skin; the red gums were their own” (199).
- ²¹ The irony being that *The Bluest Eye* ends on the lament for the indeed unloved and sacrificed black daughter, Pecola.
- ²² On issues of identification or recognition, and empathy in reading, see Michlin.
- ²³ “Barbara Chase-Riboud also provides an interesting metaphor for Africans Americans looking at their slave past: ‘We are orphans, standing on the blank page of America, waiting to be acknowledged’” (Rushdy 116–117).
- ²⁴ A *Mercy*’s work on the absence of closure, and on the haunting of the readers by this belated declaration of love that the true addressee will never hear, is a variation on the similarly tragic laments for Pecola, Sula, and *Beloved* respectively, that ‘leave gaping’ rather than they ‘close’ the narratives of *The Bluest Eye*, *Sula*, and *Beloved*.

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