2 From Human Bondage to Racial Slavery: Toni Morrison's *A Mercy* (2008)

Introduction

No author is more closely associated with the genre of neo-slave narratives than the African American writer, scholar, intellectual and Nobel Laureate Toni Morrison. Her 1987 *Beloved* is one of the most famous, critically praised and commercially successful novels about the transatlantic slave trade, the dehumanizing nature of chattel slavery and the devastating impact of this history on later generations of African Americans. Written from a black feminist perspective, it offers a thoughtful meditation on the complexity and pain of black womanhood and motherhood under slavery. Since its initial publication in the late 1980s, *Beloved* has provoked public and academic debates about the nature and legacy of black enslavement, countering the erasure of slavery from collective (white) American memory. Moreover, it has inspired numerous black novelists, poets and non-fiction authors to write about the past of slavery both in the United States and in other parts of the world.[1]

Published in 2008, *A Mercy* is Morrison's first novel after *Beloved* that deals explicitly with the experience of the Middle Passage and the history of slavery in the "New World." Whereas *Beloved* explores the haunting and persistent presence of racial slavery by focusing on the life of an (ex-)slave in the period before and after the Civil War, *A Mercy* is set in late seventeenth-century North America (1682-1690)—a time in which different types of human bondage, such as slavery and white indentureship, co-existed. Thus, Morrison's 2008 novel expands the genre of neo-slave narratives that, in their original form, primarily deal with the African American experience of slavery in the nineteenth century. At the heart of *A Mercy* is an exploration of the paradigm shift from human bondage

1 | For a discussion of the significance of Morrison's *Beloved* in American literature and culture, see also my introduction to *Transnational Black Dialogues*; see also Broeck, "Trauma, Agency, Kitsch and the Excesses of the Real" 239-57; Broeck, "Enslavement as Regime of Western Modernity" 34-36.

to racial slavery that took place in the early North American colonies. Crucially, Morrison's novel particularly examines the socio-psychological conditions under which anti-black racism developed and flourished in the "New World."

In her 2006 essay "Trauma, Agency, Kitsch and the Excesses of the Real," Sabine Broeck calls attention to a prevalent and disturbing trend in the critical reception of Morrison's first neo-slave narrative *Beloved*:[2] Over the last decades, many scholars and cultural critics have presented what Broeck describes as a "kitsch"[3] interpretation of Morrison's best-seller. Primarily concentrating on the novel's plot and, more specifically, its seemingly "optimistic" ending (i.e., Beloved's disappearance, Paul D's reunion with Sethe and Denver's successful struggle for self-determination), they have analyzed *Beloved* solely as a narrative of liberation and redemption; as a text that ultimately articulates the possibility of working through and healing the trauma of slavery.

According to Broeck, these critics have failed to take into account *Beloved*'s inner ambiguities and complex ethical agenda: Employing innovative narrative strategies (e.g. fragmentation and textual blanks), Morrison not only brings to light forgotten or suppressed memories of slavery and the Middle Passage but also critically reflects on the ultimate impossibility of bearing witness to this traumatic experience and of closing the wounds of this past.[4] In fact, as Yvette Christiansë contends, one of Morrison's most significant achievements is that she "complicates and resists our desire to read her fiction as a simple kind of memory work defined by the positive recovery of that which has been left out of the historical record."[5] And yet, despite Morrison's effort to challenge the idea of the reconciliatory power of neo-slave narratives, most readers and critics continue to "treat the fiction as being precisely that: a consoling filling in of blank spaces, a giving voice to the long-muted subjects of history."[6]

Like her *magnum opus Beloved*, Morrison's ninth novel *A Mercy* is a multi-perspective, highly fragmented, self-reflexive, non-linear and poetic text full of unresolved tensions and inner ambiguities. This complex narrative form, I argue, reflects the black slave characters' experiences of uprootedness, sexual abuse and fragmentation in late seventeenth-century North America. Without denying the possibility of black agency and resistance, *A Mercy* highlights the crushing power of chattel slavery and the traumatizing and debilitating effects of racial discrimination and oppression, particularly drawing attention to the hardships of slave motherhood and the suffering caused by the separation of slave families.

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2 | See also the introduction to this study.

3 | Broeck, "Trauma, Agency, Kitsch and the Excesses of the Real" 247.

4 | Ibid. 239-57; see also Broeck, *White Amnesia – Black Memory?* 36-40.

5 | Christiansë, *Toni Morrison* 46.

6 | Ibid. 35.

I read Morrison's *A Mercy* as a powerful black feminist reflection on—and intertextual intervention against—reductive reconciliatory interpretations of *Beloved* in academic and public discourses.[7] In a way similar to Saidiya Hartman's *Lose Your* Mother, Yvette Christiansë's *Unconfessed* and Marlon James's *The Book of Night* Women, *A Mercy* provides a conceptualization of slavery as a dehumanizing and destructive system of exploitation and "thingification." Instead of foregrounding the healing power of black solidarity, love, interracial cooperation, literacy and creative work in the life of the slave protagonist Florens, Morrison addresses the complex theme of intra-black violence, sheds light on the ultimate breakdown of a multiracial group of uprooted women and directs the reader's attention to the limits of black self-invention in the early colonial period. Focusing on loss and grief as defining elements of black (slave) life, *A Mercy* participates in a constructive discussion with Afro-pessimism about the meaning of (anti-)blackness.[8] Significantly, like Hartman's *Lose Your Mother* and Christiansë's *Unconfessed*, Morrison's novel self-reflexively engages with questions of representability and ethics as it comments on and highlights the impossibility of giving a coherent account of Florens's life and of working through and closing the wounds of slavery.

In terms of structure, this chapter opens with a critical discussion of Morrison's representation of a seventeenth-century transatlantic journey from England to America by a group of (forced) lower-class white female migrants. Examining the concept of human bondage in all its variety, *A Mercy* draws attention to the plight of lower-class women and, more specifically, the misogynistic nature of the "mail-order bride system" in the patriarchal Atlantic world of the seventeenth century. And yet, Morrison, I argue, foregrounds race as a central dimension of modern transatlantic history and never allows the reader to lose sight of the differences in the experiences of African captives during the Middle Passage and (forced) European migrants.

After giving a short historical overview of slavery and black life in seventeenth-century mainland North America, I will focus on Morrison's exploration of the meaning of "thingification" and the novel's rendering of Florens's experiences of anti-black racism. I will show that *A Mercy* especially foregrounds the debilitating psychological effects of racial discrimination and oppression on the black enslaved protagonist. Moreover, this chapter analyzes the novel's depiction of Florens's complex (violent) relationship with a free black man, before examining the relevance Morrison attributes to the breakdown of the female

7 | For a similar interpretation of Morrison's *A Mercy*, see also Maria I. Diedrich, "'The Burden of Our Theories' Genealogies:' Lessons in Decolonization of Gender," *Sabine Broeck: Plotting Against Modernity; Critical Interventions in Race and Gender*, eds. Karin Esders, Insa Härtel and Carsten Junker (Sulzbach: Helmer, 2014) 269.

8 | See also Wilderson 58.

community on the Vaark farm in Milton, in upstate New York.[9] In the last part, I will demonstrate that Morrison strategically employs specific narrative and aesthetic strategies, including self-reflexivity and non-linearity, to capture Florens's traumatic experiences of loss, dissolution and fragmentation.

On Board the *Angelus*: Rebekka's Transatlantic Journey to America

"How long will it take will she get lost will he be there will he come will some vagrant rape her?"[10] In the middle of *A Mercy*, Morrison introduces the reader to the thoughts of sixteen-year-old Rebekka, a lower-class white woman born in seventeenth-century London. Rebekka is sold by her parents to get married to Jacob Vaark, an Anglo-Dutch trader, who has recently inherited a tract of land in one of the American colonies but needs a wife in order to receive the property. As a "mail-order bride" expected to raise a family with a stranger in a foreign land, Rebekka faces an uncertain future. Morrison strategically uses a stream-of-consciousness technique to highlight the precariousness of Rebekka's situation and to give deep insight into the white woman's anxious state of mind. While *A Mercy* explores the misogynistic nature of the seventeenth-century "mail-order bride system," the novel also suggests that America holds the promise of a better future for Rebekka: Her departure from Europe means leaving behind a town full of crime and poverty (that is, London during the Restoration) and getting rid of family members who treat her with indifference and contempt.

The stream-of-consciousness passage quoted above marks the beginning of a chapter written from Rebekka's perspective, several years after her arrival in the "New World." Focusing on race as a defining characteristic of American life, Morrison explores Rebekka's transformation from a lower-class woman to a mistress over slaves and servants, from the daughter of a poor waterman to the wife of an ambitious farmer. And yet, challenging mythical conceptions of the "New World" as a paradise for (poor) white Europeans, *A Mercy* does not offer a triumphant account of Rebekka's American experience but instead draws

9 | In *Toni Morrison: An Ethical Poetics*, Christiansë tries to identify the location of the Vaark farm: "Vaark's journey passes 'Fort Orange: Cape Henry: Nieuw Amsterdam; Wiltwyck,' and he passes through Algonquin, Susquehanna, Chesapeake, and Lenape territories. [...] Since Fort Orange is present-day Albany, Vaark's directions suggest that he has come from upstate New York." Christiansë, *Toni Morrison* 263.

10 | Toni Morrison, *A Mercy: A Novel* (New York: Random House Large Print, 2008) 117. All further references to this novel (M) will be cited in the text and will refer to this edition.

attention to the omnipresence of death and illness in the lives of white immigrants: Rebekka not only has to cope with the loss of Jacob and her children but also suffers from smallpox, one of the most dreaded diseases in colonial America.[11] Confined to bed, in a state of fever, she starts to look back on her past.

Rebekka's story is one of migration that involves a six-week transatlantic passage on board the *Angelus*, in the steerage of the vessel, "a dark space below next to the animal stalls" (M 133). Highlighting the degrading and dehumanizing treatment of lower-class European women in the seventeenth century, Morrison shows that Rebekka is still traumatized by the memory of the water, the constricted space, the darkness and unhygienic conditions on her voyage to America: "Light and weather streamed from a hatch; a tub for waste sat beside a keg of cider; a basket and a rope where food could be let down and the basket retrieved" (M 133). As a lower-class passenger, there are only a few moments when Rebekka is allowed to leave the darkness and spend an hour on deck. Throughout the journey, she is forced to defecate in front of strangers.

Of course, Rebekka is not an African captive and the *Angelus* is not a slave ship transporting human cargo from Africa to the Americas. Still, given the terrible conditions in the steerage, a space that resembles a prison, Morrison evokes the imagery of the Middle Passage in this scene. At the same time, however, *A Mercy* never allows the reader to forget the essential differences in the experiences of poor white female migrants and enslaved people of African descent: Unlike black slaves torn from family and kin, exposed to extreme forms of violence and transformed into movable commodities, Rebekka has not been brutally kidnapped and put in chains. As a free white woman, she has a number of choices: She is the one who makes the decision to run away, to hide somewhere in London or to board the ship to America.

Unlike enslaved individuals violently taken to an unknown location,[12] Rebekka knows, however vaguely, the destination of her journey. Her future is not that of a slave denied subjecthood and reduced to an object but that of a slave mistress. Therefore, although Morrison conjures up certain images of the Middle Passage in this chapter, it would be highly reductive and misleading to describe Rebekka's sea voyage across the Atlantic as a "white Middle Passage:"[13] This is a term used by the African American social historian Lerone Bennett,

11 | For an overview of the history of smallpox in the early colonial period, see Gerald N. Grob, *The Deadly Truth: A History of Disease in America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2002) 72-74.

12 | See Maria I. Diedrich and Werner Sollors, "Introduction," *The Black Columbiad: Defining Moments in African American Literature and Culture*, eds. Diedrich and Sollors (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1994) 4-5.

13 | Lerone Bennett, Jr., *The Shaping of Black America: The Struggles and Triumphs of African-Americans, 1619 to the 1990s* (New York: Penguin Books, 1975) 45.

Jr. in his 1975 study *The Shaping of Black America: The Struggles and Triumphs of African-Americans,* when he refers to the transatlantic passage by white indentured servants. For Rebekka, the journey is an extremely traumatizing experience but it differs fundamentally from the situation of African captives who, as Maria I. Diedrich and Werner Sollors put it, "were herded together on slave vessels by beings whom they could only perceive as evil spirits, skinless and savage creatures, as early slave narratives relate."[14]

In *A Mercy*, Rebekka's experience on board the *Angelus* is as much about degradation based on class as it is about white female solidarity. Below deck, she stays with a group of "exiled, thrown-away" (M 135) female migrants, who face a future of unpaid labor in America: thieves like Dorothea and ten-year-old Patty or prostitutes like Judith and Lydia, "ordered to choose between prison or exile" (M 133). However different their stories are, the women share a sense of displacement but show no signs of resignation, creating a space of resistance against patriarchal forms of oppression: "Women of and for men, in those few moments they were neither" (M 139). Without downplaying the hardships on board the *Angelus*, this scene accentuates the power of female cooperation in the face of misogyny and oppression.

Morrison's representation of a transatlantic journey from Europe to America by a group of (forced) female migrants directs our attention to one of the novel's central concerns: Marked by a polyphony of voices, a variety of narrative perspectives, *A Mercy* explores the concept of human bondage in all its diversity, particularly drawing attention to the plight of lower-class women in the patriarchal Atlantic world of the seventeenth century. While Morrison never loses sight of the possibility of female resistance, her novel depicts a culture in which lower-class white women are exploited, sold and bought as property. By focusing on this inhuman trade in women, *A Mercy* contributes to an enormous broadening of the genre of neo-slave narratives usually primarily dedicated to the reconstruction of black history. It addresses the horrors of the Middle Passage, the crushing power of chattel slavery and the plight of poor European migrants in the late seventeenth century, without conflating the experiences of African slaves, on the one hand, and lower-class white women and indentured servants, on the other. This is a crucial difference to Bennett's approach in *The Shaping of Black America*: His usage of the term "white Middle Passage"[15] implies that white indentured servants were exposed to the same forms of violence, humiliation and "thingification" as African captives during the Middle Passage.

Significantly, *A Mercy* is not only concerned with the history of European migration to America in the seventeenth century. It also explores the complex web of power relations between enslaved and free individuals of African de-

14 | Diedrich and Sollors 4.

15 | Bennett, Jr. 45.

scent, Native Americans and whites in mainland North America. Before examining a key scene of the novel that offers a striking example of anti-black racism, I will give a short historical overview of the period the novel is set in: It is a time of significant transformations associated with the rise of the plantation system and what the historian Ira Berlin describes as the change "from a society with slaves to a slave society."[16]

Historical Context: Race in Seventeenth-Century North America

Over the last decades, Berlin's work has played a crucial role in reshaping our understanding of chattel slavery and (early) black life in the "New World." One of Berlin's central arguments is that slavery differed from region to region in mainland North America and took on different forms over the years, decades and centuries. In his influential study *Generations of Captivity: A History of African-American Slaves* (2003), he pays scrupulous attention to the particularities of places like New Netherland and Virginia and distinguishes between different generations of slaves, such as the charter generations and the plantation generations.[17] Within the historiography of American slavery, in general, and early black life, in particular, Berlin's "segmented approach pushed aside older studies that tended to homogenize African American experiences over time and to focus largely on the antebellum South,"[18] to use Graham R. Hodges's words.

As Berlin has shown, so-called "Atlantic creoles were among the first Africans transported to the mainland"[19] in the sixteenth century. These women and men of mixed European-African ancestry were fluent in several African and European languages and well-informed about the commercial system of the Atlantic world. Some of them were shipped to the "New World" as slaves, whereas others arrived in the Americas as interpreters or members of ships' crews.[20] Together, these Atlantic creoles "became black America's charter generations."[21]

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16 | Ira Berlin, *Generations of Captivity: A History of African-American Slaves* (2003; Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2004) 55.

17 | Ibid. 2-31.

18 | Graham Russell Hodges, "Historiography of Early Black Life," *Encyclopedia of African American History, 1619-1895: From the Colonial Period to the Age of Frederick Douglass*, ed. Paul Finkelman, vol. 2 (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2006) 169.

19 | Berlin, *Generations of Captivity* 30.

20 | Ibid. 2-31. See also Ira Berlin, *The Making of African America: The Four Great Migrations* (New York: Penguin, 2010) 67-68.

21 | Berlin, *Generations of Captivity* 30.

According to Berlin, Atlantic creoles successfully used their skills and knowledge to build a new home in mainland North America. In seventeenth-century New Netherland, where some of them were enslaved by the Dutch, Atlantic creoles created their own families, took part in religious activities of the colony and managed to live semi-independent lives. They worked together with European servants and, occasionally, they owned slaves, demonstrating that, as Berlin puts it, "race—like lineage and religion—was just one of many markers in the social order."[22] In many cases, in the Dutch colony of New Netherland but also in English colonies like Virginia and Maryland, enslaved Atlantic creoles achieved their freedom.[23] In contrast to slave societies, these early American colonies can be described as societies with slaves, in which different systems of labor (slavery, indenture and free wage labor) co-existed and slavery was "marginal to the central productive processes."[24]

A large number of white European migrants to the New World arrived as indentured servants. Unable to pay their transatlantic passage, they had to rely on the financial support of others. In order to repay their debts, they were forced to work for a master for a fixed number of years.[25] Like slaves, they were subjects of abuse, such as overwork, violent beatings and sexual assault.[26] In contrast to African captives, they had a number of rights: "They could sue and testify in court, though they could not vote. They could not engage in trade, but they could own property,"[27] Paul Spickard explains in *Almost All Aliens: Immigration, Race, and Colonialism in American History and Identity* (2007). Of utmost importance, their status as servants was not passed on to their daughters and sons, though additional years could be added to their terms.[28] Brought together as people in bondage, enslaved women and men of African descent and white indentured servants built relationships and cooperated in acts of (violent) resistance.[29]

The most famous interracial insurgency in the seventeenth century was Bacon's Rebellion (1676), an uprising led by the white planter Nathaniel Bacon against the leaders of the colony of Virginia: "Bacon developed plans in 1675

22 | Ibid. 33.

23 | Ibid. 31-39. See also Berlin, *The Making of African America* 68.

24 | Berlin, *Generations of Captivity* 9.

25 | Winthrop D. Jordan, *The White Man's Burden: Historical Origins of Racism in the United States* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1974) 28.

26 | Paul Spickard, *Almost All Aliens: Immigration, Race, and Colonialism in American History and Identity* (New York: Routledge, 2007) 61.

27 | Ibid.

28 | Ibid.

29 | Edmund S. Morgan, *American Slavery, American* Freedom: *The Ordeal of Colonial Virginia* (New York: Norton, 1975) 327.

to seize Native American lands in order to acquire more property for himself and others and nullify the threat of Indian raids," Michelle Alexander explains. "When the planter elite in Virginia refused to provide militia support for his scheme, Bacon retaliated, leading an attack on the elite, their homes, and their property."[30] In the course of the uprising, Bacon's troops set fire to Jamestown and killed hundreds of Native Americans. Significantly, large numbers of white servants and black slaves participated in the rebellion, hoping to obtain the freedom promised by Bacon and his followers. However, the uprising was suppressed shortly after Bacon's death in October 1676.[31]

In the late seventeenth century, the plantation system began to emerge in the Chesapeake region, creating an enormous demand for laborers. In the aftermath of Bacon's Rebellion, white planters were afraid of further acts of collaboration between poor whites and blacks. They started to replace white servants with black slaves, which were kidnapped from Africa and directly taken to the Chesapeake region in large numbers.[32] As a result, a colony like Virginia changed from a society with slaves to a slave society, in which black slaves were the main source of labor. Treated as chattel, the newly arrived Africans and their descendants were exposed to extreme violence and brutality. In contrast to members of the charter generations, they had few chances to establish families, to live independently and to escape slavery.[33] Of utmost importance, in the second half of the seventeenth century, racist laws were introduced to "recognize permanent, inherited slave status for African immigrant workers."[34]

In *A Mercy,* Morrison explores this period of dramatic changes for blacks by focusing on the fate of Florens, a sixteen-year-old slave woman. The following sub-chapter analyzes Morrison's representation of Florens's encounter with a group of white women and men in a small village presumably inhabited by Puritans. Examining the complex meaning of "thingification," it is a key scene in the novel which directs our attention to the socio-psychological conditions under which anti-black racism developed and flourished in seventeenth-century North America.

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30 | Alexander 24.

31 | Kathleen M. Brown, "Bacon's Rebellion," *The Oxford Encyclopedia of American Social History*, ed. Lynn Dumenil, vol. 1 (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2012) 99-100.

32 | Berlin, *Generations of Captivity* 53-55; Berlin, *The Making of African America* 68-69; Spickard 4, 69-67; Morgan 328.

33 | Berlin, *Generations of Captivity* 6-9, 53-67; Berlin, *The Making of African America* 68.

34 | Spickard 71.

"A Thing Apart:" Florens's Encounter with the Puritans

Born as a slave in Maryland, Florens grows up on a tobacco farm owned by the Portuguese slaveholder D'Ortega, who is compelled to offer some of his slaves to his creditor Jacob Vaark. Subjected to exploitation and sexual abuse by her master and mistress, Florens's mother desperately begs Jacob to choose her daughter, wishing to protect her from rape and violence on D'Ortega's plantation. Florens, who is taken to Jacob's farm in upstate New York, does not know—and will never learn—the motives behind her mother's action. As a result, for the rest of the novel, she is overwhelmed by a profound sense of loss, rejection and loneliness.

When her new mistress Rebekka suffers from smallpox, the young black woman embarks on a dangerous journey to find her lover, a free black man simply called the Blacksmith, who knows how to cure Rebekka's illness. At nightfall, Florens comes into a small Puritan village, a place where religious extremism and xenophobia go hand in hand: The scene is set in 1690, more than a decade after Bacon's Rebellion, when anti-black laws had already been passed. It is also the period of witchcraft accusations in New England, just a few years before the notorious incidents in places like Salem in colonial Massachusetts, "a time of tensions epitomized by contests between religious practices and calls for unity against ungodliness."[35] The Puritan villagers in *A Mercy* are described as being full of fear, hate, distrust and prejudices: They believe in the existence of Satan and accuse Jane, a white girl suffering from a squint, of being a demon, primarily because of Jane's physical handicap. When the Puritans discover Florens, however, they no longer focus on Jane but turn on the black woman. Based on their social status as free white individuals, the villagers judge from a position of supposed moral and racial superiority and identify Florens as a dangerous being. In the Puritans' view, it is Florens's skin color, her blackness, which makes her the devil's servant. Although a letter written by Rebekka provides information on Florens and her journey, they reduce the black woman to an embodiment of evil.

What follows is a scene that Aimé Césaire would describe as a process of "thingification," a passage that reminds us of the inhuman and degrading treatment of slaves at slave auctions: Afraid to touch her, the Puritans order Florens to take off all her clothes and start to examine her feet, teeth and private parts. Between Florens and the white men and women, there is, to use Césaire's words, "[n]o human contact, but relations of domination and submission."[36] Based on racial prejudice and ignorance, the Puritans regard Florens as an ob-

35 | Christiansë, *Toni Morrison* 59.

36 | Césaire 42.

ject, a thing, examining her "across distances without recognition" (M 186). Focusing on the devaluation and objectification of blackness in a white-dominated community, the scene in the Puritan village evokes the slave market, i.e., the fate of future generations of African Americans treated as chattel in a racist nation. It anticipates a society in which the concepts of slavery and race are closely intertwined and blackness is equated with inferiority.

Crucially, *A Mercy* not only directs the reader's attention to the process of exclusion and dehumanization itself but, in a passage that echoes Frantz Fanon's reflections on anti-blackness in his influential work *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952), it sheds light on the devastating psychological effects of this act of othering on Florens.[37] Morrison's slave protagonist, Christiansë argues, "is as exploded at the surface of the skin as is Fanon, who finds himself the object of a look that does not seek reciprocity but only fixity and subjugation."[38] While Florens manages to escape from the Puritans with Jane's help, she will never forget the racialized gaze of her white interrogators, the eyes of the villagers which "stare and decide if [her] navel is in the right place if [her] knees bend backward like the forelegs of a dog" (M 189). Reduced to a thing, she begins to believe in her supposed inferiority, to feel like "a thing apart" (M 189):

> Inside I am shrinking. I climb the streambed under watching trees and know I am not the same. I am losing something with every step I take. I can feel the drain. Something precious is leaving me. I am a thing apart. With the letter I belong and am lawful. Without it 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? (M 189-90)

Like Hartman's *Lose Your Mother*, Christiansë's *Unconfessed* and James's *The Book of Night Women*, *A Mercy* engages in a discussion with Afro-pessimist discourse about the destructive nature of anti-blackness, focusing on grief, loss and mourning as definers of black life: In the passage quoted above, Morrison strategically uses specific metaphors from the semantic field of animals to express Florens's feelings of despair and insecurity, drawing attention to the slave woman's transformation into a weaker and more vulnerable person. *A Mercy* explores how Florens's experience of "thingification" in the Puritan

37 | Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Richard Philcox (1952; New York: Grove Press, 2008). For a similar interpretation of Morrison's representation of Florens's traumatizing experience in the Puritan village, see Christiansë, *Toni Morrison* 58.
38 | Christiansë, *Toni Morrison* 58.

village destroys the black woman's self-esteem—and how the incident brings back excruciatingly painful memories of Florens's separation from her mother.

Focusing on the traumatizing effects of the destruction of slave families on slave children, Morrison has her black protagonist suffer from self-hatred and self-alienation: Florens interprets her mother's behavior on D'Ortega's plantation as an act of abandonment, blames herself for being rejected, thinks that her mother has given her away because she behaves like a beast, a monster with feathers and claws. This scene shows that Florens has internalized the Puritans' racist image, a conception of the black subject as a non-human being. It is this internalization of black inferiority that Fanon identifies as one of the most destructive effects of colonialism on the colonized.[39]

Intra-Black Violence: Florens's Nightmarish Reunion with the Blacksmith

Morrison offers an interpretation of diaspora that "is embedded within a multi-axial understanding of power,"[40] to use Avtar Brah's words: Highlighting the intersections between race, class, gender and sexuality, *A Mercy* not only explores the complexity of black-white relations in early North America but also addresses intra-black tensions, conflicts and violence through Florens. The novel demonstrates that the African diaspora is a social formation marked by internal hierarchical structures—or what Tina Campt and Deborah Thomas describe as "asymmetrical relations of power."[41]

Instead of foregrounding the healing power of love between a black woman and a black man, Morrison constructs Florens's reunion with the Blacksmith as a nightmare scenario: Destabilized by the Puritans' treatment and filled with jealousy, Florens attacks Malaik, an orphan adopted by her lover. Without listening to her story, the Blacksmith pushes Florens away, hits her and accuses her of being "a slave by choice" (M 233). His feelings of resentment and hostility towards Florens are a direct response to the woman's violent outburst; he is also repelled by Florens's strong and unquestioning attachment to him.

However, given the Blacksmith's status, there is another explanation for his reaction: As a free man who is allowed to "marry, own things, travel, sell his own labor" (M 73), the Blacksmith belongs to a higher social sphere, although he is not a white person. A talented healer and professional craftsman

39 | See Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* 2.

40 | Brah 189.

41 | Campt and Thomas, "Gendering Diaspora: Transnational Feminism, Diaspora and Its Hegemonies" 3.

from New Amsterdam, he can be described as an "Atlantic creole."[42] As Berlin explains, "whatever tragedy befell them, Atlantic creoles did not arrive in the New World as deracinated chattels stripped of their past and without resources to meet the future."[43] In most cases, they were familiar with various cultural contexts, spoke several African and European languages, took part in important commercial activities and worked as craftsmen, traders or hunters together with Europeans. In other words, their experiences differed fundamentally from those of later generations of Africans reduced to chattel in North America.[44]

A Mercy shows that the Blacksmith's status is threatened by the social and political changes that take place in the early colonial period: the conflation of race and slavery. In order to demonstrate his liberty and strengthen his position of power, the Blacksmith, Valerie Babb argues, "must maintain a clear demarcation between his free blackness and Florens's enslaved blackness."[45] In this sense, the Blacksmith's rejection of, and hostility towards, Florens is more than a way to assert his authority and manhood; it is a means to keep his distance from slavery.[46] Depicting the intricate relationship between a female captive and a free black man, *A Mercy* reflects on the complexity of black life and the specific vulnerability of enslaved women in seventeenth-century North America: Instead of offering a triumphant account of a love affair, Morrison directs the reader's attention to violent conflicts, negotiations of power and hierarchies based on race and gender within the black diasporic community.

Examining the complex theme of intra-black violence, Morrison's *A Mercy* contributes to a radical re-writing of American history from a black feminist perspective and enters into a powerful intertextual dialogue with slave narratives: As Maria I. Diedrich has shown, black antebellum writers like Frederick Douglass had to address "a predominantly white audience who were to be won as allies against slavery and racism."[47] Seeking to draw attention to the slaves' moral superiority over their white oppressors, they focused on "black protagonists whom no form of violence and injustice could dehumanize; suffering, instead of brutalizing their victims, ennobled them."[48] One of Morrison's central concerns in texts like *Beloved* and *A Mercy* is to challenge this strict dichotomy between black victimhood and white guilt culture: Her novels stress the brutalizing impact of

42 | Berlin, *Generations of Captivity* 23-39. See also my short overview of the historical period Morrison's *A Mercy* is set in.

43 | Berlin, *Generations of Captivity* 32.

44 | See ibid. 23-39.

45 | Valerie Babb, "E Pluribus Unum? The American Origins Narrative in Toni Morrison's *A Mercy*," *MELUS* 36.2 (2011): 154.

46 | See ibid.

47 | Diedrich, "'Things Fall Apart?'" 181.

48 | Ibid.

chattel slavery on both blacks and whites, deconstructing static interpretations of black communities as homogenous groups of passive victims. Giving voice to the specific plight of slave women, Morrison shows that black female captives not only suffered from the same forms of white violence as their fellow male slaves; they were also subjected to (sexual) abuse by black men.[49]

In the late 1980s, shortly after the publication of *Beloved*, Morrison was sharply criticized by black male intellectuals and writers like Ishmael Reed and Stanley Crouch for focusing explicitly on forms of disloyalty, violence and corruption within the black community and, particularly, for representing black male protagonists as both victims of white racism and oppressors of black women. These black male critics, Diedrich explains, were dismayed by the author's radical feminist project and envious of the critical and popular success of Morrison's novels.[50] Significantly, while Morrison's literary work has "aroused the ire of many male competitors,"[51] it has inspired and encouraged numerous black female writers, including second-generation neo-slave narrative authors like Yvette Christiansë, to adopt a radical black feminist perspective, to shed light on the specific experiences of black women, to address the theme of intra-black violence under slavery. As I will argue in chapter 4 of this study, in *Unconfessed*, Christiansë examines the ways in which enslaved men like Jeptha try to restore some sense of self-worth and self-control by humiliating and oppressing female slaves like Sila, the novel's protagonist.

In *A Mercy*, Morrison ends the scene in the Blacksmith's cabin by exploring the detrimental effects of humiliation on Florens: she attacks, and probably kills, her lover. In her description of the struggle with the Blacksmith, Morrison's first-person narrator reuses the image of a beast with feathers and claws to characterize her behavior: "Feathers lifting, I unfold. The claws scratch and scratch until the hammer is in my hand" (M 233). This quotation is another indication that Florens has developed a self-image that is consistent with the Puritans' racist conception. Focusing on the transformation of despair and fear into violence, *A Mercy* illustrates that Florens sees no other option but to attack the Blacksmith in order to express her feelings of utter hopelessness.

Exploring the complex nature of white-black and black-black relations in the early colonies, Morrison makes sure that the reader recognizes the differences between Florens's reactions in the Puritan village and in the Blacksmith's cabin. Born as a slave, exposed to the cruelty of white men and women, Florens has internalized notions of white supremacy and privilege. This is the main reason

49 | Ibid. 175-86; see also Maria I. Diedrich, *Ausbruch aus der Knechtschaft: Das Amerikanische Slave Narrative zwischen Unabhängigkeitserklärung und Bürgerkrieg* (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner, 1986) 78-83.

50 | Diedrich, "'Things Fall Apart?'" 175-86.

51 | Ibid. 177.

why she does not attack the Puritans when they treat her like a thing and reduce her to "flesh,"[52] to use Hortense J. Spillers's term. At the same time, Morrison represents the Puritans' examination as an utterly traumatizing experience that continues to haunt the slave woman for the rest of her life. Florens's violent act against the Blacksmith is primarily a result of the dehumanization she has experienced in the Puritan village. While she is powerless to destroy the white-controlled power structure, she strikes back when the Blacksmith humiliates and hurts her. Instead of celebrating Florens's reunion with her lover, the scene in the Blacksmith's cabin highlights the destructive and enduring impact of anti-black violence on relationships within the black community.

Borders and Border Crossings on the Vaark Farm

As an enslaved woman, Florens's fate depends on the decisions of her white mistress. The black protagonist's destiny is entwined with that of the little community on the Vaark farm, a heterogeneous group of displaced women. Brought together in a specific place at a particular moment in time, these individuals are part of a "diaspora space,"[53] to use Brah's term, in which meanings of home and relations of power are negotiated. Based on "a multi-axial understanding of power,"[54] Brah's theory helps to explore the complex hierarchical structures in late seventeenth-century North America as depicted in *A Mercy*. In the following, I will show that Morrison constructs Rebekka's farm in Milton as a highly ambivalent space. While her novel focuses on individual transformations and border crossings, it also draws attention to acts of othering and discrimination against Native Americans and African Americans on the Vaark farm.

In *A Mercy*, Morrison depicts all of her female characters as uprooted individuals who suffer from their separation from home and family. Having witnessed the destruction of her native village, Lina, a Native American servant, is plagued by survivor guilt. She is traumatized by images of dead infants, of peo-

52 | In her influential essay "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," Spillers differentiates between "body" and "flesh:" "But I would make a distinction between 'body' and 'flesh' and impose that distinction as the central one between captive and liberated subject-positions. In that sense, before the 'body' there is the 'flesh,' that zero degree of social conceptualization that does not escape concealment under the brush of discourse, or the reflexes of iconography. [...] If we think of the 'flesh' as a primary narrative, then we mean its seared, divided, ripped-apartness, riveted to the ship's hole, fallen, or 'escaped' overboard." Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book" 67.

53 | Brah 178-210.

54 | Ibid. 189.

ple dying next to her, of family members suffering from pain. In the course of the novel, however, she finds her own way of coping with loss and rootlessness. In a state of loneliness and anger, she makes the important decision "to fortify herself" (M 78). Not only does she begin to talk to animals and plants, which reveals her deep love for nature. She also starts to embrace her traumatic past as a source of power and inspiration and to combine her Native American cultural heritage with European influences: "Relying on memory and her own resources, she cobbled together neglected rites, merged Europe medicine with native, scripture with lore, and recalled or invented the hidden meaning of things" (M 78). In this passage, Morrison presents a dynamic and anti-essentialist view of cultural identity based on the interplay between tradition and innovation, continuity and discontinuity. For Lina, at least at this point in the novel, Rebekka's farm represents a place of potential possibilities, a place in which hybridity is practiced and celebrated as a means to survive. Nevertheless, Lina still feels "*a homing desire*,"[55] to use Brah's phrase, and suffers from not being able to live with her family in a Native American village.[56]

Her loneliness is alleviated by the arrival of Rebekka, who, as a European "mail-order bride" transformed into an American mistress, becomes a member of the dominant group. Despite initial mutual dislike and despite differences in status, Lina and Rebekka realize that they need each other to meet the challenges they face: "Together, by trial and error they learned; what kept the foxes away; how and when to handle and spread manure; the difference between lethal and edible and the sweet taste of timothy grass [...]" (M 86-7). In other words, each day, as a Native American servant and a free white mistress, they participate in interactions that challenge hierarchical structures based on ethnicity and class; following Brah, they deconstruct the static distinction between "minority" and "majority."[57]

However, Morrison does not offer an uncritical celebration of interracial female solidarity. Whereas Lina readily accepts Florens as a new member of their community and cares for her like a mother, Morrison has Sorrow suffer a different fate. Sorrow is introduced as a survivor of a shipwreck, a "mongrelized" (M 198) girl with red hair and black teeth struggling with a past of abuse. According to Anissa Wardi, she can be regarded as an embodiment of the Middle Passage. A homeless child used to a life on water, she "marks the 'sorrow' of the Africans'

55 | Ibid. 193; italics in the original.

56 | Mar Gallego-Durán, "'Nobody Teaches you to Be a Woman': Female Identity, Community and Motherhood in Toni Morrison's *A* Mercy," *Toni Morrison's* A Mercy*: Critical Approaches*, eds. Shirley A. Stave and Justine Tally (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2011) 108.

57 | Brah 189.

displacement and forced habitation of the slave ships."[58] Morrison represents Rebekka's farm as a place where borders are erected that exclude and dehumanize Sorrow. Given her status as a "mongrelized" (M 198) woman, the white and Native American community members treat Sorrow with distrust or contempt since she does not fit into the racial order of their society. The white characters see her as a threat to the supposed "racial purity" and "superiority" of their race; Lina thinks that Sorrow suffers from a curse. "In the community's eyes, Sorrow is less than human and will always be other in this society of foreign codes,"[59] as Evelyn Jaffe Schreiber argues. Nevertheless, *A Mercy* shows how Sorrow goes through a process of change after giving birth to a daughter, finding a way to resist the hostility she endures.[60]

Given Lina's negative attitude toward Sorrow, there are first hints that the household on the Vaark farm is rather a patchwork of orphans than a family. Therefore, it does not really come as a surprise that the community breaks down after Jacob's death: It leaves the women without a provider and causes Rebekka's emotional disorder. Focusing on Rebekka's transformation from a poor migrant into a resentful and brutal mistress who destroys the network of female solidarity on the Vaark farm, *A Mercy* draws attention to the demoralizing effect of chattel slavery on white female slaveholders; a theme that also plays a crucial role in antebellum slave narratives and in neo-slave narratives like James's *The Book of Night Women*.[61] In *A Mercy*, Morrison shows how Rebekka begins to beat one of her female servants, takes down Lina's hammock and offers Florens for sale, although the black young woman has saved her life (M 254). It is her status that allows Rebekka to erect what Brah would call boundaries of exclusion. As a free white woman, she is authorized by law to reduce Florens to chattel, i.e., movable property. In this "diaspora space" in late seventeenth-century North America, race becomes a defining feature. Whereas the white indentured servant Scully is happy about some of the first wages he receives from Rebekka and looks forward to the end of his servitude, Florens faces a future in which slavery and blackness will be closely intertwined, in which blacks will be systematically treated as non-human beings. Exploring

58 | Anissa Wardi, "The Politics of 'Home' in *A Mercy*," *Toni Morrison's* A Mercy*: Critical Approaches*, eds. Shirley A. Stave and Justine Tally (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2011) 27.

59 | Evelyn Jaffe Schreiber, "Personal and Cultural Memory in *A Mercy*," *Toni Morrison: Memory and Meaning*, eds. Adrienne Lanier Seward and Justine Tally (Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 2014) 89.

60 | See also Michel Martin, "Toni Morrison on Human Bondage and a Post-Racial Age," *NPR* 26 Dec. 2008, 1 Sept. 2015 http://m.npr.org/story/98679703.

61 | See chapter 6, "A Vicious Circle of Violence: Revisiting Jamaican Slavery in Marlon James's *The Book of Night Women* (2009)," in this study.

the paradigm shift from human bondage to racial slavery through characters like Scully, Rebekka and Florens, *A Mercy* reveals the centrality of violence and loss in the lives of black American slaves in the late seventeenth century.

Dissolution and Reinvention?—Postmodern Negotiations of Slavery

> [...] modern life begins with slavery ... From a woman's point of view, in terms of confronting the problems of where the world is now, black women had to deal with "post-modern" problems in the nineteenth century and earlier. These things had to be addressed by black people a long time ago. Certain kinds of dissolution, the loss of and the need to reconstruct certain kinds of stability.[62]

This famous quotation by Toni Morrison is taken from a 1993 interview with Paul Gilroy, a conversation focusing on *Beloved* and the complex relationship between racial slavery and Western modernity. Foregrounding the instability and fragmentation of black (female) identity under chattel slavery, Morrison's work shows that enslaved people of African descent must be considered "the first truly modern people,"[63] as Gilroy puts it. While Morrison highlights black women's experiences of discontinuity and disruption (generally associated with postmodernism),[64] she also refers to the possibility of diasporic resistance, the necessity for enslaved subjects to develop specific strategies in order to survive.[65] This is one of the central themes that Morrison explores in her neo-slave narratives.

Although they are set in different historical contexts, both *Beloved* and *A Mercy* unfold the stories of black women who are exposed to the horrors of slavery and racism but try to find a way to live with fragmentation and pain. In order to capture Florens's quest for recognition and self-control in *A Mercy*, Morrison strategically employs a variety of postmodern narrative strategies, such as metafiction, self-reflexivity and non-linearity. Whereas several chapters are third-per-

62 | Paul Gilroy, "Living Memory: A Meeting with Toni Morrison," *Small Acts: Thoughts on the Politics of Black Cultures* (London: Serpent's Tail, 1993) 178; second ellipsis in the original.

63 | Ibid.

64 | See, for instance, Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism*: *History, Theory and Fiction* (New York: Routledge, 1988) 3.

65 | Gilroy, "Living Memory: A Meeting with Toni Morrison" 178.

son narratives focalized through characters like Lina and Rebekka, every other chapter is told from Florens's first-person point of view. Written in a poetic language, Florens's account is full of ambiguities and uncertainties, flashbacks and fragmented memories. This narrative form, I argue, reflects Florens's experiences of loss and dissolution caused by the painful separation from her mother, the encounter with the Puritans and the Blacksmith's rejection.

This is already evident at the beginning of *A Mercy:* Morrison opens the novel without any introduction, leaving us in a state of disorientation, which, in turn, reflects her black protagonist's emotional condition: "Don't be afraid. My telling can't hurt you in spite of what I have done and I promise to lie quietly in the dark [...]" (M 3). For the reader, at this point in the text, it is neither possible to identify the narrator and narratee of the "confession" (M 3) nor to understand the facts and circumstances of the deed the narrator refers to. Moreover, it is not possible to decipher the meaning of images and signs, such as the "dog's profile" or the "corn-husk doll" (M 3). The beginning of Florens's account is not only highly mysterious but also self-reflexive. While the narrator reveals her intention to explain her act of violence, she refers to the limits of her ability to comprehend her environment and accentuates the impossibility to reconstruct her past accurately: "Often there are too many signs, or a bright omen clouds up too fast. I sort them and try to recall, yet I know I am missing much [...]" (M 4). In the following, Florens combines memories of her childhood on D'Ortega's plantation with recollections of her life on Rebekka's farm and descriptions of her journey to the Blacksmith. It is the reader's task to put together these fragments and to combine them with information provided by other characters.

Later in the novel, in *A Mercy*'s penultimate chapter, Florens once again explicitly refers to the act of telling her story. The scene is set on the Vaark farm in Milton, a couple of months after Florens's violent struggle with the Blacksmith. Rebekka, now turned into a slave mistress, has ordered her slaves and servants not to go into her dead husband's splendid house. In the darkness of the night, however, Florens feels save enough to act against her mistress and to enter the building. She cannot forget her encounter with the Puritans and her humiliation by the Blacksmith; she knows that her mistress plans to sell her. And yet, never losing sight of the possibility of black agency, Morrison shows how Florens emerges as an active woman and begins to carve her story (the story we have been reading) into the walls and the floor of one of the rooms: "I am holding light in one hand and carving letters with the others. My arms ache but I have need to tell you this" (M 263).

In a literal and metaphorical sense, the act of writing is extremely difficult and painful for Florens but she feels the necessity of bearing witness to slavery. Her story is a confession addressed to the Blacksmith, an attempt to explain her violent behavior by informing her lover about her experience of "thingification" in the Puritan village: "I know my withering is born in the Widow's closet" (M

262). While Florens reflects on the cruelty of her deed and the hopelessness of her situation, she also finds a new sense of self-worth, through the very act of remembering and writing: "I am become wilderness but I am also Florens. In full" (M 264). By developing a more complex self-image, she tries to move beyond the negative image the Blacksmith has created of her. Therefore, her first-person account is not only a declaration of guilt but also a means to embrace her blackness and her history.[66]

Within the African American literary tradition, in general, and in the context of slave narratives, in particular, the concepts of literacy, writing, self-determination and freedom are closely connected. In their autobiographical texts, many slave narrative authors focused on the importance of reading and writing in their struggle for freedom and recognition.[67] In *A Mercy*, Morrison explores the role of literacy in the period of slavery by telling, as Christiansë puts it, "the story of a slave who can write even before the emergence of slave narrative"[68] as a genre. In Maryland, Florens's "teacher is a Catholic priest who defies the codes against such instruction for slaves, which determine that the acquisition of literacy will be, as for so many slaves to come, shrouded in secrecy."[69]

While Morrison conceptualizes Florens's creative act in her master's house as an expression of black agency, she refuses to offer a triumphant reconstruction of Florens's life as a slave and identity as a writer. At the end of Florens's first-person account, Morrison puts a strong emphasis on loss rather than on renewal, highlighting the impossibility of closing the wounds caused by Florens's separation from her family: "I will keep one sadness. That all this time I cannot know what my mother is telling me" (M 264). While Florens's writing serves as a means to address the cruelty she has experienced, it cannot be interpreted as an act of self-liberation and overcoming. Since she cannot enter into a dialogue with her mother, Florens will never get an answer to the central question of her life: Why did her mother give her away on D'Ortega's farm? Via this scene, Morrison challenges the idea of slavery fiction as a form of therapy and healing, focusing instead on the destructive and enduring effects of chattel slavery on her black female protagonist. This is what makes *A Mercy* a powerful intertextual response to reductive reconciliatory, "kitsch" interpretations of *Beloved* in public and academic discourse.

Crucially, Florens's text in her dead master's house will never be read. It is not written for a broad audience but a single reader, i.e., the Blacksmith, who is illiterate (and probably dead): "You won't read my telling," Florens remarks.

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66 | See also Gallego-Durán, "Nobody Teaches you to Be a Woman" 112-13.

67 | See Henry Louis Gates, Jr., "Introduction," *The Classic Slave Narratives* (New York: Signet Classics, 2002) 1.

68 | Christiansë, *Toni Morrison* 53.

69 | Ibid.

"You read the world but not the letters of talk. [...] If you never read this, no one will" (M 263). In *A Mercy*, it is the reader who is encouraged to take on the Blacksmith's role, the task of a listener and witness. Unlike the characters in the story, the reader is in a privileged position to encounter and combine different narrative perspectives. While Florens is left with a deep sense of grief because she does not know her mother's story, the reader has the chance to delve into her mother's past, to explore her thoughts and feelings in the novel's last chapter.

"An Open Wound That Cannot Heal:" The Hardships of Black Womanhood

The mother's "letter" to Florens, a powerful meditation on the hardships of black womanhood and motherhood under slavery, is an attempt to explain her behavior on D'Ortega's farm. Born as a free person in Africa, Florens's mother is enslaved in the course of a war caused by a dispute between African tribal leaders. Taken to the coast, she is sold to white slave traders and shipped to the "New World," where she becomes a victim of rape. Whereas *Beloved* directs our attention to the ethical risks and ultimate impossibility of writing the Middle Passage,[70] *A Mercy* offers a short narrative description of the terrible journey across the Atlantic Ocean, focusing in particular on the tragic stories of slaves who, driven to utmost despair, see no other option but to commit suicide. Depicting the barbarity of the transatlantic slave trade, Morrison represents the Middle Passage as a defining event in the life of Florens's mother, a trauma which continues to haunt the enslaved woman for the rest of her life.

After having recounted the horrors on board the slave ship and the female captive's painful experiences of sexual abuse in Barbados and Maryland, Morrison has Florens's mother refer to the day when Jacob arrives on D'Ortega's plantation. Her account of the precariousness of black women's lives under slavery serves as the basis for understanding the scene on the farm in Maryland. Florens's mother knows that there is no way to protect her daughter from the violence of slavery. Giving Florens away is the only possibility to rescue her from the hands of the slave owner D'Ortega, the only chance to save her from rape on this particular plantation. Since she sees Jacob as a man of relative kindness and integrity, she desperately urges him to buy Florens. Like *Beloved* and Christiansë's *Unconfessed*, *A Mercy* explores the complexity and pain of what it means to be a slave mother in a society in which enslaved children are always in danger of being beaten, raped, sold or killed. The following passage captures Florens's mother's moral dilemma:

70 | See Broeck, "Enslavement as Regime of Western Modernity" 35.

> One chance, I thought. There is no protection but there is difference. You stood there in those shoes and the tall man laughed and said he would take me to close the debt. I knew Senhor would not allow it. I said you. Take you, my daughter. Because I saw the tall man see you as a human child, not 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. (M 272-73)

Florens's mother reads Jacob's decision to take her daughter as an act of humanity (a form of "mercy" to which the novel's title refers) because the Anglo-Dutch trader saves Florens from being raped by D'Ortega. However, Morrison makes sure that the reader is familiar with Jacob's perspective: his materialistic attitude and self-centered behavior; his desire to increase his property; his efforts to assert his authority as a white man; his determination to exert power over women, his servants and slaves; last but not least, his decision to invest in the slave trade to construct a new, impressive house on his farm in Milton.[71] According to his own statement, Jacob is only interested in the trade in goods, not in the buying and selling of human beings (M 39). Behind his initial refusal to take slaves from D'Ortega, however, there is no moral rejection of the institution of slavery: It is only the insight that the trade in slaves causes "too much trouble" (M 36) that initially deters him from accepting D'Ortega's offer. At the same time, he is neither willing to cancel the debts of the slave owner nor intent upon filing a lawsuit against the man.

In this vexed situation, Morrison has Jacob discover Florens, a potential companion and servant for his wife Rebekka, who has lost all her children: "This one here, swimming in horrible shoes, appeared to be about the same age as Patrician, and if she got kicked in the head by a mare, the loss would not rock Rebekka so" (M 42). This quotation reveals that Jacob sees Florens only as a slave, an unfree person who, if necessary, can be easily replaced by any other worker. His decision to choose Florens is not at all an act of human solidarity; it is a pragmatic solution to his dispute with D'Ortega, the only way to close his deal with the slave owner without financial losses. While Morrison depicts the Anglo-Dutch trader as a man who shows pity for injured and ill-treated animals, she emphasizes that Jacob is unable to empathize with Florens and her mother.[72] "Animals," Christiansë contends, "remain the safe, easy recipients of his form of mercy; humans trapped in slavery are not animal enough for this."[73]

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71 | See also Mar Gallego-Durán, "'Newness Trembles Me'? Representations of White Masculinity in Toni Morrison's *A Mercy*," *Toni Morrison: Memory and Meaning*, eds. Adrienne Lanier Seward and Justine Tally (Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 2014) 244-49.

72 | Christiansë, *Toni Morrison* 214-15.

73 | Ibid. 215.

Juxtaposing the perspectives of Jacob and Florens's mother, *A Mercy* draws attention to the hypocrisy of white slaveholders like Jacob and accentuates the impossibility for black women to escape racial violence and rape in seventeenth-century North America: "There is no protection," Florens's mother remarks. "To be female in this place is to be an open wound that cannot heal. Even if scars form, the festering is ever below" (M 267). Exploring the utterly dehumanizing nature of chattel slavery as "thingification" through a black feminist and Afro-pessimistic perspective, *A Mercy* draws attention to the enduring impact of physical and sexual abuse and the separation of slave families upon female captives. For Florens and her mother, it is impossible to overcome their traumatic experiences of humiliation and exploitation, to (re-)gain some sense of wholeness. Their only hope is to find a way to live with loss and despair, and this is also the future chattel slavery designs for them and their offspring.

Conclusion

Published more than two decades after her groundbreaking and best-selling novel *Beloved*, Morrison's *A Mercy* makes a crucial contribution to examining the complex history and nature of the African diaspora in the early colonial period. Tracing the paradigm shift from human bondage to racial slavery through characters like Florens, Rebekka and Scully, Morrison highlights the social and political construction of blackness and whiteness and, equally important, places a strong emphasis on loss, fragmentation, uprootedness and anti-black violence as defining characteristics in the lives of black slaves in late seventeenth-century North America. Written from a radical black feminist perspective, Morrison's novel accentuates the crushing power of chattel slavery as "thingification" by exploring the traumatic impact of the destruction of slave families on mother and child.

In terms of aesthetics, ethics and theorizing slavery, *A Mercy*, I argue, is a powerful intertextual response to the "kitsch reception" of *Beloved*: *A Mercy* never loses sight of the possibility of black agency under slavery, exploring how Florens emerges as a writer after being treated as a demon in the Puritan village, after being rejected and humiliated by the Blacksmith. However, and this is a crucial point, Morrison resists the temptation to offer an ultimately triumphant and consoling account of chattel slavery and Florens's life, to provide narrative closure and to construct a "happy ending." Not only does she draw attention to the destructive and enduring effects of anti-blackness on relationships within the black community (i.e., the Blacksmith's attack on Florens; Florens's violent response) and the brutalizing impact of slavery on white (female) slaveholders (i.e., the breakdown of the Vaark community after Rebekka's transformation into a resentful mistress). Morrison also foregrounds the

impossibility for female captives to escape sexual abuse and violence and to sustain or restore familial bonds: "[O]ne of the monstrous things that slavery in this country caused was the breakup of families," Morrison explains in a 2008 interview with Michel Martin. In *A Mercy*, she goes on to explain, "there was an urgent request or an encouragement for me to make it possible for Florens to hear and know and understand why her mother gave her away. And I resisted it completely because the truth is, she would never know."[74]

In *A Mercy*, Christiansë argues, "Morrison is never simply recuperative and never triumphalist, thus avoiding the conservatism of such gestures."[75] Instead of celebrating Florens's act of writing as a powerful and lasting triumph over the dehumanizing influence of slavery, the novel insinuates that the black protagonist "might even burn down the house and, with it, the story that she has been writing."[76] Ultimately, *A Mercy* is not about healing but about the impossibility of successfully working through, and thus leaving behind, the trauma of slavery.[77] Engaging in a dialogue with Afro-pessimism, *A Mercy* enters into the early period of chattel slavery in mainland North America to trace the origins of the history of anti-blackness, to reflect on the meaning of blackness[78] in the past and in the present.

74 | Martin, "Toni Morrison on Human Bondage and a Post-Racial Age."

75 | Christiansë, *Toni Morrison* 60.

76 | Ibid.

77 | For similar reflections on Morrison's *Beloved*, see Broeck, "Trauma, Agency, Kitsch and the Excesses of the Real" 243.

78 | See also Wilderson 58.