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HDS 2052

May 10, 2020

A Creation Myth in the Wilderness of Toni Morrison's *A Mercy*

If I arrange Toni Morrison's novels into a historical continuum that chronicles the centuries-old tale of America, her ninth novel *A Mercy* (2008) sits at the beginning, as the first pages of the creation story of the American nation, steeped in the dynamism of conflicting spiritual imaginaries, in the violent scramble for resources, in the errand into wilderness that would possess both land and bodies. Set in the late 17th century, *A Mercy* is more than what literary critic Giles Gunn calls a "complicated cartographic redrawing or refiguration" of the map of America — one that shows how race, in its colonial, capitalist formations, has always been sedimented within the history of America itself — but also an interrogation of roots, of origins (160). Yet, this fictional interrogation, or historical reconstruction, is not what Julia Kristeva describes to be the time of history as "project, teleology, linear and unfolding; […] as departure, progression, and arrival" (17) but instead an excavation of the places where we tend to assume is without history, becoming a genealogy of desire, loss, and wilderness that is "a confession" carved onto the architectural metaphor for colonialism (4). In an empty, garish mansion, haunted by the ghost of its owner Jacob Vaark, sixteen-year-old slave Florens writes her story on the walls and floorboards. So begins the story centered around Florens' first-person recollection, with alternating chapters of third-person vignettes of the characters around her: her master, Jacob Vaark; his wife, Rebekka; their Native American servant, Lina; and ambiguous

Sorrow/Complete, orphaned from a shipwreck. The novel, then, is a creation myth in the making that the reader witnesses, an artifact of border-crossing temporalities, a constellation of sacred places in inner and outer landscape of wilderness. The novel's creation myth, pieced together from fragments and told in a non-linear, iterative fashion, is Florens' story that penetrates the fog of white America.

A Mercy begins with Florens asking two questions as she begins her self-declared confession: "One question is who is responsible? Another is can you read?" (3) The 'you,' who the reader quickly comes to understand as the blacksmith, is also the invisible audience demanded by Florens' narrative, the listener to an unheard history, a reader of the "careful words" she releases into the world (188). Interestingly, what Florens means when she asks "Can you read?" is two-fold — first and foremost, it's the ability to read "signs": a dog's profile in the steam of a kettle, a corn-husk doll, a pea hen refusing to brood, a garden snake crawling up to the door saddle to die (3-4). Only secondly does reading mean to be educated in letters (illegally by a Reverend Father), such as when Florens reveals that she can write from memory the Nicene Creed. The first line of the creed goes: "I believe in one God, the Father almighty, maker of heaven and earth, of all things visible and invisible" (Britannica). Reading, in the latter meaning, becomes a totalizing affair, one that insists on a certain worldview of purity, unity, totality, and oneness — in short, that there is only "one" God. By foregrounding her own notion of reading, one of signs, ambiguity, and liminality, Florens asserts from the outset her sovereignty in writing and suggests too for the reader a way of "reading" that is open to negotiation and imagination, as much driven by interpretation as so-called facts. In this way, we begin by approaching the "America" that emerges in the subsequent pages as an invention, an assemblage of signs, instead of a discovery — or as Gunn puts it, a world defined as much by the "ambiguities of desire as by

the structures of the empirical," a world where "fantasy, fabulation, and fiction" would determine much of its contours (26-7). As much as the novel is about Florens' physical journey, or her "errand" in the "wilderness" to find in the blacksmith a cure for Rebekka and her lovesickness, it is also about the European (often Puritan) errand into wilderness in colonizing the New World (5). Yet, by making Florens' journey the narrative arc, *A Mercy* reclaims the topography of wilderness by remapping it for a female, black body.

What immediately follows is a second chapter told in third-person, from Jacob Vaark's perspective. Temporally, the narrative crosses from 1690 to 1982, diving into how Florens and Vaark's lives become entangled. The reader is immediately immersed in the landscape of "a world so new, almost alarming in rawness and temptation" with "forests untouched since Noah, shorelines beautiful enough to bring tears, wild food for the taking" (13). Setting aside our skepticism of how new this New World is, ostensibly, the discourse of an uninhabited landscape for the taking justifies the colonial instinct towards taming, possessing, and restructuring. To Vaark, the fog on the coast is like "thick, hot gold" — a foreshadowing of the lure of capitalism and material wealth that would ensnare him as the novel progresses as well as the exploitative glint of the putative errand in the wilderness that prioritizes self-enriching at the cost of the Other (10). What is also notable about the description of the landscape is its "ad hoc" nature, shifting according to the competing claims by churches, companies, countries, and individuals (15). He accepts Florens as debt payment from D'Ortega, at her mother's wish. This act — construed by young Florens as abandonment, as her minha mãe choosing her brother over her, as the ultimate signifier behind all signs — constitutes the mercy of the book's title.

Morrison makes clear that her motivation is to draw to the reader's attention the construction of the creation myth of America, embedded within it its logic of racialized slavery that was neither pre-ordained nor universal — instead, it was constructed. She shares:

> I wanted to separate race from slavery, to see what it was like, what it might have been like to be a slave but without being raced […] It had to be constructed, planted, institutionalized, and legalized. So I moved as far back as I was able when what we now call 'America' was fluid, ad hoc, a place where countries from all over the world were grabbing their land, resources, and all sorts of people were coming here. (NPR)

By exploring the spiritual imaginary of America in an era earlier than her other works, before even the United States of America was created, Morrison zooms into the critical period during which slavery became racialized in America. In his journey through the ad hoc territory of Virginia in 1682, Vaark recalls one watershed moment half-a-dozen years before when "an army of blacks, natives, whites, mulattoes—freedmen, slaves and indentured—had waged war against the local gentry" (11). This failed "people's war," likely the Bacon's Rebellion of 1676, spawned a thicket of new laws that "separated and protected whites from all others for ever" by granting licence to any white to kill any black for any reason (11-12). The Vaark household becomes a miniaturized society reflecting this insidious change, so central to America's creation myth, as it evolves from dynamic pluralism and seeming unity to disintegration and bifurcation into white exceptionalism and Other (black, biracial, Native American), and in Lina's words, into Europe and not-Europe.

In particular, as the American creation myth takes shape, an ironic 'sacred place' begins to emerge in the Vaark community: the superfluous big house. When the reader hears about Vaark's final years, it is in another jump through time to the viewpoint of Lina, who is

juxtaposed with Vaark in their divergent attitudes towards nature. He has set up an offshore commodity business (remote in Barbados where the slave bodies are far from sight and his conscience unweighted) and though considerably wealthier, he is dying of smallpox. Although he has no children and a house that already suffices, he sets out to build a third house that is "bigger, double-storied, fenced and gated" like D'Ortega's grand house (50). Viewed through Lina's eyes, "that third and presumably final house that Sir insisted on building distorted sunlight and required the death of fifty trees" (50). His killing of trees "without asking their permission" stands in stark contrast to Lina, who sees herself as "one more thing that moved in the natural world" (50, 57). Drawn into the whirlpool of acquisition and the settler hubris to "bring nature under his control," Vaark has lost his former affinity with nature and the marginal, descending into the binary of civilization/savage, human/nonhuman, Europe/not-Europe. His prior mindfulness of the distinction between earth and property is drowned out by his desire to amass property and profit. He becomes emblematic of the Europes that Lina describes: "Cut loose from the earth's soul, they insisted on purchase of its soil, and like all orphans they were insatiable. It was their destiny to chew up the world and spit out a horribleness that would destroy all primary peoples" (64). While Lina calls Vaark "[an exception]," the reader sees his uncanny resemblance to the Europes as Vaark spirals into the same insatiable greed that is only tempered by pangs of his conscience. His third house, in its vainglory, becomes the totem of his urge to leave behind "a profane monument to himself" (51). The house, initially, appears to be a parodic 'sacred place' of Vaark's colonial ambitions, a whitened landscape that asserts his virile masculinity over the elements, and a space that is haunted by his ghost when he dies within its enclosure.

The discomfiting image of the Europes "[chewing]" earth and expunging "primary peoples" is further extended by the evocative, poignant fable that Lina tells Florens, about an

eagle who defends her young against other predators but cannot defend against the evil thoughts of man:

> One day a traveler climbs a mountain nearby. He stands at its summit admiring all he sees below him. The turquoise lake, the eternal hemlocks, the starlings sailing into clouds cut by rainbow. The traveler laughs at the beauty saying, "This is perfect. This is mine." And the word swells, booming like thunder into valleys, over acres of primrose and mallow […] Mine. Mine. Mine. (72-73)

The fable continues. Searching for the source of this "unnatural," "incomprehensible," "strange, meaningless" sound, the eagle swoops down to attack the traveler only for him to strike her in return (73). She falls and falls and when Florens asks where the eagle is now, Lina answers, "Still falling […] she is falling forever" (73). The eagle's orphaned children, the eggs, hatch alone. When Florens asks if the eggs live, Lina answers with a switch in pronouns: "We have" (73). The parallels are plain as day. Native American presence is ignored, expelled, and erased from the land. So too for African Americans, as historian Tiya Miles writes in *Goodness and the Literary Imagination* about *Beloved*: "black people come from nowhere and can claim nothing beyond the gates of their bondage" (65). Whiteness can only enter, dominate, and articulate itself in geography in the absence of other presences, by negating and erasing Native Americans and blackness. The connective tissue between black and Native American experiences pulses in the realm of the natural world where their shared traumas are enunciated not only by Lina's "we" but also the perpetual fall of the eagle — the burdens of history roll over from generation to generation without reprieve.

The traveler's encounter with wilderness is first a source of admiration and inspiration (reminiscent of the romantic naturism and transcendentalist traditions to come) before turning

into one of possession, violence, and destruction. The Puritan task of "an errand into the wilderness" — attributed by Gunn to Samuel Danforth's 1670 sermon and Perry Miller's popular publication — belies the question: What is 'wilderness' in the first place? The term naturalizes exclusionary visions that render the native peoples of these lands as wild or nonhuman, as per the Enlightenment's definition of 'human' as the white man. This particular formulation of wilderness and even nature — as a province demarcated from man — is suggested by Morrison as a colonial construction, a rhetorical erasure to justify white settlement, and an attempt at legibility and *reading* — to impose one's reading onto the landscape, instead of recalling as Lina does "the hidden meaning of things" (56). Mythologizing a purported blank slate, an unmastered space, for the white man to tame and civilize, the journey to the New World was laden with a variety of archetypal mythic paradigms, including "the Arcadian myth of a lost world of primal innocence" and "the biblical myth of a fallen world alienated from the sources of its being and in need of redemption" (Gunn 67). The conception of wilderness, then, was inflected by the Christian faith: many saw the "savage" as Satanic and the wilderness as the "domain of the demonic" (Gunn 59). In addition, the Enlightenment ideal of human freedom creates a split between human and nonhuman, in the dualisms of its categories: subject/object, self/other, conscious/unconscious, active/passive, agent/resource, civilized/primitive. By placing the white man on one side of the binary, ecocritic Lawrence Buell argues that "nature has historically been not only directly exploited but also the sign under which women and nonwhites have been grouped in the process of themselves being exploited even while being relished as exotic, spontaneous, and so forth" (21). Morrison agrees. In her book of essays, *Playing in the Dark,* she comments on blackness as a fabrication used to outwork "Americans' fear of being outcast . . . of

Nature unbridled and crouched for attack; their fear of the absence of so-called civilization" (37-38).

In Morrison's fiction, she often taps on this fear by creating powerful female characters — Sethe, Sula, Pilate, the women of the Convent, even a character named Wild — who challenge and embrace this inner wilderness that white civilization both creates and rejects, pushes them into yet polices when it flares up, fetishizes yet exploits. Separated from man, the concept of wilderness too is a feminized realm, as is nature (think: Mother Earth); yet, paradoxically, it is also a quality that is feared in women who, like nature, need to be penetrated and domesticated, be innocent and possessed. In *A Mercy*, Florens is set on a novelistic journey through a wild terrain that allows her to claim her inner wilderness in the face of external rejection. The blacksmith disapprovingly tells Florens that she is "nothing but wilderness. No constraint. No mind" (166); Willard and Scully recoil upon seeing Florens "[turn] feral" (171); at the novel's beginning, Florens recalls a moment of policing by her mother who equates "wild" with "danger" (4). The key moment, however, is her first moment of racialization at the Quaker village, which sets up her later confrontation with the blacksmith where she is labeled wild. When Widow Ealing and Daughter Jane give Florens shelter, the villagers who are on the hunt for the Black Man (a demon) identifies Florens as his minion because of the blackness of her skin. One villager says outright, "I have never seen any human this black" (131). A little girl who reminds Florens of her younger self deals her a blow of acute rejection when she screams at the sight of Florens' blackness. The most traumatic part of this ordeal is when they examine her body, asking her to take off her clothes, looking at her nakedness "across distances without recognition" (133). The inspection, looking under the arms, between the legs, at the tongue and the teeth, treats Florens akin to livestock, to exotic animals, to an object; their eyes looks for "a

tail, an extra teat, a man's whip between my legs […] if my navel is in the right place if my knees bend backward like the forelegs of a dog. They want to see if my tongue is split like a snake's or if my teeth are filing to points to chew them up" (135). This phenomenological moment of othering recalls the baptismal, Fanonian moment that fixes him in a moment of racial recognition, similarly by a child, who cries, "Look! A Negro!" Florens, like Frantz Fanon, finds her body schema collapsing (a peeling, stripping, and hemorrhage that, for Fanon, leaves congealed black blood all over) to give way to an *epidermal racial schema*. The white gaze apprehends and traps her within the facticity of her black skin, her very subjectivity reduced to this blackness, fixed to her epidermal skin. Yet, as she continues on her journey (an escaped aided by Daughter Jane), haunted by the scrutinizing, dehumanizing gaze of the villagers ("the eyes that join me on my journey"), Florens grows aware of "a darkness I am born with, outside, yes, but *inside* as well and the inside dark is small, feathered and toothy" (135; emphasis added). Something awakes, "the clawing feathery thing" inside her, reminiscent of the eagle's eggs (136). With this inside dark, she reappropriates and reassembles the racism, using it to tentatively reconstitute her agency.

This hatching is only complete when Florens hears the blacksmith's condemnation in response to her hurting the child he left in her care. He tells her that she has "become" a slave because her "head is empty" and her "body is wild" (166). Then comes the damning crux of his verdict: "You are nothing but wilderness. No constraint. No mind" (166). Florens hears him shout the word "mind, mind, mind" over and over as he laughs, in an echo of the traveler in Lina's fable who unleashes "Mine. Mine. Mine" onto the natural landscape (167, 76). The shock and sheer power of his denial of her subjectivity and rationality mimics the same voice of abusive racism, only this time seeking to justify the burden of racism and slavery. By the

blacksmith's logic, Florens ought to bear the burden of guilt and shame for slavery because she is to be blamed; her lack of rationality (fundamental to the Enlightenment conception of human freedom) juxtaposed with her wilderness necessitate the control and restraint represented by man. In the face of the blacksmith's crushing words, Florens is labeled as "a slave by choice" — as the cause and the receptacle of the violence she has received (167). As she processes his words, she thinks, "No. Not again. Not ever. Feathers lifting, I unfold. The claws scratch and scratch until the hammer is in my hand" (167). She hatches and takes flight. Reversing the fable, she is reborn into the eagle in the face of the traveler's extinguishing, unfolding into her animality, rising even as she is diminished, and clawing by returning the violence that has been wrecked on her being. The eagle motif is transformed from victim to empowered freedom through flight, like Milkman's ancestor who "sailed on off like a black eagle" in *The Song of Solomon* (328). The eagle, born from the inside darkness, signifies a spiritual rebirth for Florens after she lives the "shrinking" (137) and then "the dying inside" (167). Perhaps, as Davíd Carrasco writes in his analysis of *The Song of Solomon*, characters find in spiritual allies, often manifesting as birds, the ability to "transcend the terror of one's historical condition" and "overcome the realities of racial suffering and death" (148, 151). In Florens' case, she and the eagle become one. In transcending her dehumanization, the denial of her subjectivity, and the smashing of her ontology, Florens turns to nature to seek magical flight, refusing to keep falling forever. She rejects the earthly chains and claims to rule over her personhood.

While Florens begins by telling the reader that her "beginning begins with the shoes," and that her "soles" will always be "too tender for life" with her childhood love for heels and needing Vaark's boots to go off into the wilderness, she makes the journey back to the Vaark estate barefoot (4). Casting away Sir's boots, she no longer needs the protection of man. The

soles of her feet are now "hard as cypress" (189). Her soul, like her soles, is hardened. Florens, with "no shoes," walks through the day and the night in a wilderness that no longer disturbs her. While in her previous journey she needed Lina "to say how to shelter in the wilderness" as she cowers from the fear of wet fur and "boneless bears in the valley," Florens is now part of the wilderness (49, 5). By internalizing her wilderness, she has turned feral and become one with the wilderness outside. She has, in the eyes of men, become "untouchable" (179).

In Mandarin Chinese, interestingly, the word for wild ("野") has the additional connotation of illegitimacy, orphanhood, or ambiguous origins. For Florens, Lina, Sorrow, and even Rebekka, they are all adrift, untethered, and unmothered in some sense — "orphans, each and all" (69). In each of their resounding solitude, as they sought selfish privacy away from the external world, they lost "the refuge and the consolation of a clan" when "some encircling outside thing was needed" (68). The Vaark household is described by Morrison, in an interview, as "a little society that they've created in the wilderness," which she intended as "the earliest version of American individuality, American self-sufficiency" (NPR). Yet, as Morrison points out, this little society falls apart because it has no "outside thing" that props it up or holds it together — tribal, racial, religious, institutional, or the masculine peg that was Vaark. Lina reflects that they liked to think that they could shape life like "Adam and Eve," needing only themselves and "beholden to nothing except their own creations" (69). Yet, when Jacob Vaark dies, the little society is revealed to be "false" family: Rebekka offers to give away Sorrow, plans to sell Florens, and begins to treat Lina as slave instead of companion (183). Scully, an indentured European laborer on the estate, reflects that "minus bloodlines, he saw nothing yet on the horizon to unite them" (183). He can only see "dark matter out there, thick, unknowable, aching to be made into a world" (183). For the Vaark household, then, their experiment in

community-building, in creating bonds where there appeared to be no commonality, has only ephemeral success. Rebekka turns to the Anabaptist community in the absence of a masculine gravitational force once holding their house together. Yet, for Florens, Lina, and Sorrow, the loss of this "selfish privacy" and self-sufficiency has more lasting, harrowing repercussions. The dark matter aching to be made into a world is America, in its landscape of various religious forces (Puritans, Baptists, Anabaptists, Separatists, etc.) and institutional and ideological configurations, which would experiment with freedom, with "America as itself a kind of last chance for humankind; of the American adventure as a voyage into the unknown and the untried; of the American people as a community knit together by suffering […] grappling with adversity and dissension" (Gunn 53). And yet, this freedom and such communities are denied to the non-white. Without the encircling "outside thing" to hold them together, Florens, Sorrow, and Lina fall through the cracks. Morrison powerfully articulates this tension in *Playing in the Dark*:

> What was distinctive in the New [World] was, first of all, its claim to freedom and, second, the presence of the unfree within the heart of the democratic experiment—the critical absence of democracy, its echo, shadow, and silent force in the political and intellectual activity of some not-Americans. (48)

The vestiges of their brief community can be found in Vaark's grand mansion, a twist on the sacred place because of its excessiveness, emptiness, and obsoletion when what it is meant to memorialize is no longer relevant and has dispersed. It is living proof of the death knell to the Vaark household of orphans, of ambition and pride that causes "malfortune" (51). Yet, its sacred nature to the myth of *A Mercy* is made apparent when the story we are reading from Florens' first-person perspective is revealed to have been carved out onto the floors and walls of this "big, awing house" (188). Her physical writing elevates the house into a palimpsest of time: the house,

a relic of a time past, is animated into a vessel for the future, a conduit for not a dead history but a history alive and in-the-making. Instead of order and finality, the house is now part of Florens' (and Morrison's) continual assemblage and reconstruction of a sense of being and a renewed sense of history through fragments.

Another more subtle transformation also occurs. From the opening lines, Florens has centered her narrative on the "you" — the blacksmith. He is the focus of her affections, the destination of her journey, and seemingly the sole drive behind her confession. Even in the final moments of her frantic writing, Florens pens: "I cannot tell it to anyone but you […] If you never read this no one will. These careful words, closed up and wide open, will talk to themselves" (188). But, then, the transformation happens. In a moment of epiphany, Florens realizes the power of her writing. She changes her mind, stating outright: "Or. Or perhaps no. Perhaps these words need the air that is out in the world. Need to fly up then fall, fall like ash over acres of primrose and mallow. Over a turquoise lake, beyond the eternal hemlocks, through clouds cut by rainbow and flavor the soil of the earth" (188). Echoing the fable of the eagle and the traveler, Florens' inner eagle is imbued in her letters, which will soar beyond the confines of her master's house and go beyond the "eternal hemlocks" of death (188). Her careful words too can take magical flight and fly out into the vastness of temporality and cross into the future. Her writing will fly up then fall, not into loss, destruction, and exile, but to "flavor the soil of the earth" and plant the seed of her voice, her story, her history in eternal flourishing beyond her death (188). This transmutation of the eagle — the metaphorical, invisible spiritual ally — into words, physical on the floor and visible in the book the reader holds, do fly and fall into the present, into the ever-unfolding now, into my lap as I read *A Mercy* in 2020. Florens' writing not only transcends the erasure and oppression by colonial history, but she finally also casts off the weight

of love and the pull of the masculine to send her words into the air of the open and the river of history.

How will these words fly like "ash" (188)? Florens also means it in the literal sense, that is, for Lina to help burn the house which Florens knows she will do because she "loves fire" (189). Though left off the page, and suspended between the past and the future perfect, Lina and Florens physically setting the house afire and returning it to the wilderness conjures James Baldwin's characterization of America as a burning house and the image of Sutpen's Hundred that is defiantly set ablaze by the ex-slave Clytie in William Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!*. The rainbow that Florens pictures from the fable is, perhaps, suggestive of the prophecy recreated from the Bible in song by a black slave and with which Baldwin titles his own book: "God gave Noah the rainbow sign, No more water, the fire next time" (Baldwin 106)!

At the tail-end of her narrative, Florens has finally uncovered her orientation, what Charles Long defines to be religion: "orientation in the ultimate sense, that is how one comes to terms with the ultimate significance of one's place in the world" (7). The fire to incinerate the colonial, masculine monument is, perhaps, the ceremony or ritual for Florens' story as it breathes the air out in the world. Her ultimate significance is finally realized: "I am become wilderness but I am also Florens. In full. Unforgiven. Unforgiving. No ruth, my love. None. Hear me? Slave. Free. I last" (189). Her ultimate significance is found in the enduring vision of her writings, scattered into the world for posterity — "I last" resounds because it is true. I would like to suggest that we see the house, carrying Florens' inscriptions and with the fate of being burned, as the center of *A Mercy*, of the novel's mythological sacred space. The novel itself becomes the house that carries Florens' writing.

Florens, at the end of her recounting, struggles with her final, singular sadness: “That all this time I cannot know what my mother is telling me. Nor can she know what I am wanting to tell her” (189). Almost like an anomaly, the final chapter of the novel is recounted from her mother’s first-person perspective, in a voice from across time, from an unknown origin, adding another layer of temporality to the palimpsest of the house of the novel. Florens’ mother tells us that the sacrifice that saved her daughter is not a miracle bestowed by God but a mercy offered by a human. As I close the covers of *A Mercy,* I am left with the recognition of maternal love, deep, deep love, as the true mercy. We do not know if Florens and her mother hear each other, but we hear them both. The answer to Florens’ opening question, “can you read?”, is yes. We are reading. The novel is the ultimate sign.

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