

# Contested Boundaries



Contested Boundaries:  
New Critical Essays on the Fiction  
of Toni Morrison

Edited by

Maxine L. Montgomery

**CAMBRIDGE  
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P U B L I S H I N G

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New Critical Essays on the Fiction of Toni Morrison,  
Edited by Maxine L. Montgomery

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## INTRODUCTION

### MAXINE LAVON MONTGOMERY

Although Toni Morrison was comfortably situated among an elite group of writers at the vanguard of belles lettres decades before the publication of *A Mercy*, the fall 2008 release of her ninth novel has occasioned a reappraisal of not only her canon but also her position on the global literary scene. One might attribute this reevaluation to reviews which placed the highly anticipated novel in conversation with her earlier fiction. A recent international conference in Paris was devoted to a reexamination of her writing. The summer 2011 publication of a MELUS special issue dedicated to an investigation of new directions in the criticism surrounding her work prompted further reassessment of the author's evolving oeuvre. Aside from the interest scholars and critics have generated, it is Morrison who provides the initial impetus for a re-reading of her canon in lieu of the publication of her 2008 novel when she describes mercy as the "heartbeat" of her third novel, *Song of Solomon*:

"Mercy," the other significant term, is the grace note; the earnest though, with one exception, unspoken wish of the narrative's population. Some grant it; some never find it; one, at least, makes it the text and cry of her extemporaneous sermon upon the death of her granddaughter. It touches, turns and returns to Guitar at the end of the book – he who is least deserving of it – and moves him to make it his own final gift. It is what one wishes for Hagar; what is unavailable to and unsought by Macon Dead, senior; what his wife learns to demand from him, and what can never come from the white world as is signified by the inversion of the name of the hospital from Mercy to "no-Mercy." It is only available from within. The center of the narrative is flight; the springboard is mercy.<sup>1</sup>

If mercy is the unspoken wish within or the discursive springboard for *Song of Solomon*, then it resonates broadly as the silent, albeit impassioned collective plea on part of all the fictional characters who people her novelistic universe. Morrison's characters operate within an imaginary geography where grace is ever-present, yet, as Baby Suggs points out in her improvisational sermon, tantalizingly beyond reach. For obvious

reasons, critics refer to *A Mercy* as a prequel to Morrison's Pulitzer Prize-winning and decisively most acclaimed novel *Beloved*.<sup>2</sup> Such an assertion is illuminating on one level, but at the same time it encourages a dangerous oversimplification of the author's ambitious, increasingly global narrative project involving an excavation of America's raced past. *A Mercy*, with its spotlight on a worldwide network of fictional characters, represents her efforts at upsetting race in ways that complicate fundamental concerns throughout her canon.<sup>3</sup> This should come as no surprise to Morrison's readers who realize that objective reality is under constant inspection in her fiction. Indeed, much of the enduring appeal of her writing stems from her ability to challenge old ways of knowing, predictable ways of thinking, and established ways of seeing. Scholars therefore must be wary of any approach to Morrison's work that relies upon a reductive analysis of cultural markers, lest we, like the naïve, love-struck Florens, misread the signs marking the path along the author's expanding artistic and political journey.

This volume aims to map the space between *A Mercy*, Morrison's ninth and arguably most enigmatic novel, and the fiction comprising the author's multiple-text canon. *Contested Boundaries* accomplishes this through the inclusion of eight original essays representing a range of critical approaches that trouble narrative boundaries demarcating the novels included in Morrison's evolving opus, with *A Mercy* serving as a locus for discussion of her re-figuration of concerns central to her narrative project. Issues relevant to the conflicted mother-child relationship, the haunting legacy of slavery, the black female body as site of trauma, the thorny quest for an idealized home, the perilous transatlantic journey, and, yes, the desire for mercy recur, but they do so with a difference, a "Morrisonian" twist that demands close intellectual inquiry. Essays included in this volume are invested in a persistent scholarly investigation of this narrative and rhetorical play.

Literary critics have noted the formal pattern of repetition-with-a-difference that obtains in the African-American narrative.<sup>4</sup> An examination of key moments in Morrison's fiction reveals the presence of a discursive lineage traceable to precursor events and texts within and outside the black canonical tradition. In discussing the inspiration for *A Mercy*, Morrison mentions her efforts at fictionalizing events surrounding Bacon's Rebellion.<sup>5</sup> But her re-inscription of the 1679 revolt, much like her reworking of the story of Margaret Garner, reveals a reliance upon numerous, often competing narrative perspectives in ways that represent an effort to not only worry the borderlines between history and fiction, but also expand the lens through which America views the past.

Liminality, in a spatial, metaphysical, and discursive sense, is central to an understanding of Morrison's canon, and more than any other space, the Middle Passage functions a locus for theorizing about the quirky connection linking the novels that comprise her fictional canon. For Morrison as well as countless other black writers, "re-memory," a psychic journey back to the past, offers a stay against the psychological ravages associated with the transatlantic journey; it is in its broadest sense a mnemonic resistance against the rupture owing to the forced migration of blacks from Africa to the New World. Along these lines, the mother figure is a source of unmediated memory – a vital link with a lost past existing outside the perimeter of a patriarchal, capitalist, and Western construct. Hortense Spillers traces the development of black literary and cultural production in underscoring not only the dislocation associated with the Middle Passage but also the primacy of the feminine as the solution to self-identity.<sup>6</sup> Drawing upon psychoanalysis and feminism, Bracha Ettinger uses the term "matrixial borderspace" in describing the presence of an undifferentiated gender space allowing for the creation of a self not tied to fixed notions of masculine or feminine.<sup>7</sup> No longer is the law of the father the primary means of selfhood. Instead, there is a co-existent link between male and female – a radically reconfigured connection that is a site for the development of an altogether new, hybrid persona.

Narrative action in a great deal of Morrison's fiction occurs within a familial context involving the broken mother-daughter bond as she directs attention to the attempt on the part of the female subject to (re)define the self in the absence of a monolithic past or mother tongue. Much of what happens in her fiction takes place in the interstitial place connecting the guilty mother and abandoned child. Language is at the center of this dyad. Through discourse Morrison endeavors to bridge the gulf – in psychological, geographic, and linguistic terms – between estranged female Diaspora personae. The inventive use of dialogue among a community of slaves and ex-slaves reveals the existence of a complex lineage that mediates against simplistic genealogical notions embedded in the American origins narrative, however. In Morrison's fiction, there is no such thing as a singularly constituted past or a heritage that one can easily recover. *Beloved*, the titular character of the author's Pulitzer Prize-winning novel, speaks in a lyrical voice that is traceable only in part to Sethe's African-born mother Nan. The ghost-child's accent also finds its pre colonial beginnings in Florens' poetic voice – one that is not only 'speakerly,' but 'writerly' as well, suggesting the influence of an African mother and kindly Anglo Saxon priests. Even so, with her trek in search of the nameless blacksmith, Florens is indebted more to the naturalist insights

gleaned from an American Indian cultural tradition and “re-memory” than to oral or written discourse, despite her confessional gesture of writing her life’s story onto the walls of Jacob Vaark’s abandoned home.

## II.

Events transpiring on the national and international scene during the decades following the publication of *Beloved* reflect a change in dominant attitudes surrounding the politics of race and nationhood. Not only is this shift mirrored in the public rhetoric of political debate, it is evident in the realm of cultural studies and the literature produced at the turn of the last century. Chief among the events engaging the political and artistic imagination of writers and scholars alike is the emergence of globalism, with issues of cross cultural influence and their relevance to a so-called nationalist identity. Scholars such as Paul Gilroy, Homi Bhabha, Edward Said, Gayatri Spivak, Carol Boyce Davies, and others are positioned at the forefront of intellectual conversation about the implications of migration and transnational exchange for a displaced, progressively more international population. Discussions about the viability of a monolithic Caribbean literary lineage or the need for a remapping of an American ‘writerly’ tradition along global lines underscore the need to rethink established conceptions of history and canon along with the ideologies surrounding such formulations. Time, space, and identity undergo relentless renegotiation in an era characterized by border crossing of epic proportions. In this regard, ideas of genealogical influence, in both a literary and biological sense, are under intense interrogation as scholars carry out a more nuanced articulation and investigation of geopolitical sites of beginning.

In “Home,” Morrison situates the mass migration of a raced population during the modern and contemporary eras within a socio-cultural and historic context involving chattel slavery. “The contemporary world’s work,” she points out, “has become policing, halting, forming policy regarding, and trying to administer the movement of people. Nationhood – the very definition of citizenship – is constantly being demarcated and re-demarcated in response to exiles, refugees, *Gastarbeiter*, immigrants, migrations, the displaced, the fleeing, and the besieged” (10). She offers a compelling reading of world history in terms of slavery and the transatlantic journey as catalysts for cultural and socio-political production. What begins as a discussion of race and home – the two major priorities in her narrative project – develops into a meditation on the paradigmatic quest for a utopian home free of racial restraint. For

Morrison as well as countless other writers, race, language, and home are mutually dependent constructs; they coexist in ways suggestive of the struggle on the part of the raced author for literary authority and autonomy.

Morrison is not only a prolific creative artist whose decades-long career, literary output, and worldwide acclaim have proven her staying power on an international scene, she is also a public figure often at the center of intellectual debates. It is difficult to disassociate her writing from the socio-political milieu out of which her work evolves. In 1987, a group of forty-eight prominent writers and critics protested when *Beloved* failed to win the National Book Award or National Book Critics Circle Award. They signed a tribute to her career and published it in the 24 January 1988 edition of the *New York Times* Book Review. Morrison was awarded a Pulitzer Prize for *Beloved* in 1988, and in 1993 she became the first African-American woman to win the Nobel Prize. Early in 2011, a group of scholars and creative writers selected *Beloved* as the most significant work of fiction in the last twenty-five years, a fitting, if not ironic recognition in light of the previous rebuff.

Conceptions of the borderlands as disputed terrain surface and resurface in the decades following the publication of *Beloved*. These ideas are manifest in escalating policy debates on immigration in the aftermath of September 11, 2001. They find expression in troubling references to those displaced as a result of Hurricane Katrina as “refugees.” Such ideas also enter into twenty-first century scholarly conversations about the recuperation of African-American Literary history. What is prevalent is the idea of geography as contested ground subject to ongoing upheaval, change, and flux. Throughout this time, race continues as a persistent fact at the center of public and private life. The modest gains achieved as a result of the modern Civil Rights Movement along with the elimination of race-based preferences in university admissions and employment decisions prompt discussion of a society where color no longer matters. If there is a singular event that signals this thinking it is the 2008 election of Barack Obama as the country’s first black president. Morrison’s ninth novel and early critical response to the text raise important questions about race – specifically, the viability of a post racial America. Publishers scheduled the release of *A Mercy* to coincide with Mr. Obama’s election. Morrison endorsed him for president and openly supported him during his campaign, lauding him for being a candidate whose wisdom and moral center transcend issues of race, class, or gender (“Letter to Barack Obama,” *New York Observer*, January 28, 2008). Although one may argue that Morrison’s words lend currency to the discourse surrounding

post racial thinking, she is far from sanctioning utopian notions of a society where race no longer matters.

*Beloved*, the author's most controversial novel, appeared as the first in a loosely constructed trilogy including *Jazz* and *Paradise*. In the years following the release of the Pulitzer Prize-winning work of fiction Morrison expands her reputation as a creative writer, essayist, cultural critic, playwright, song writer, and editor. On May 29, 2012, President Obama awarded her with the Medal of Freedom, the nation's highest civilian honor. Now in her eighties, she publishes a play, *Desdemona*, and her tenth novel, *Home*, a fictional account of the events surrounding the Korean War. But it is the release of *A Mercy* that constitutes a watershed moment in her lengthy and auspicious career. With her ninth novel, she re-inscribes key moments in the nation's pre-colonial history using a uniquely twenty-first century subject position. Morrison engages past events in ways that are old, yet paradoxically new. For her, the era designated as 'post' is itself a borderspace, a disjunctive moment rife with meaning in terms of her narrative and rhetorical choices. Homi Bhabha describes the essence of this positioning: "The borderline work of culture demands an encounter with 'newness' which is not part of the continuum of past and present. It creates a sense of the new as an insurgent act of cultural translation. Such art does not merely recall the past as social cause or aesthetic precedent; it renews the past, refiguring it as a contingent 'in-between' space, that innovates and interrupts the performance of the present" (*The Locations of Culture* 7). Morrison's re-inscription of the ad hoc Early American setting of *A Mercy* allows her to carry out what Bhabha aptly refers to as an "act of cultural translation." Her ninth novel revises the dynamics involved in chattel slavery and the lingering effects on successive generations, even as the institution and its associated social relations are reframed, linked with race neutral, twenty-first century concerns of consumer capitalism, imperialism, and the perils associated with heterosexual love. Not only that, but the Middle Passage, site of rupture and "re-memory," is re-envisioned in ways that point to an erasure of national bounds. Publication of *A Mercy* represents a climactic moment in Morrison's evolving political consciousness, her fictional geography, and, consequently, a shift in the margins marking her multiple-text universe. The complicated markers of difference figuring in "Recitatif" and continuing with *Paradise* and *Love* culminate in the author's ninth work of fiction. This volume ventures to chart that change, not for the sake of encoding it, but in an attempt to open up new ways of interrogating her writing.

### III.

*Contested Boundaries* therefore pursues several lines of scholarly inquiry: first, the volume seeks to examine the ways in which *A Mercy* signals a new direction in the author's developing canon; second, the essays included ask how a sustained reading of the novel might shed fresh light on recurring themes, issues, or subjects familiar to Morrison's readers; finally, this project endeavors to situate Morrison's ninth work of fiction within the larger discursive framework of the author's novelistic universe.

This volume includes essays by established as well as emerging scholars. All essays are original and written specifically for this collection. Three of the eight essays evolve out of papers presented at academic conferences. The scholars whose work appears here have drawn upon a range of critical and theoretical approaches, including feminism, eco feminism, trauma theory, critical race theory, and post colonialism. With each essay, there is an attempt to avoid the use of esoteric language so as to make the volume accessible to a broad scholarly audience.

*Contested Boundaries* relies upon a five-part organizational scheme that foregrounds concerns recognizable to Morrison's works of fiction. Section titles take their cue from signal moments in *A Mercy* – rupturing moments serving as sites of scholarly meditation on the disjuncture between Morrison's novels. Each essay not only takes up the issue of boundaries – in a narrative, metaphysical, or geographic sense –, it also seizes upon *A Mercy* as fertile textual grounds for a revisionist reading of Morrison's fiction, from *The Bluest Eye* to her most recent novel *Home*.

Part One, 'Are You Afraid?': Merciful Haunting in a New World Setting, includes Maria Rice Bellamy's essay, "These Careful Words . . . Will Talk To Themselves": Textual Remains and Reader Responsibility in Toni Morrison's *A Mercy*, which focuses on how child abandonment creates a "haunting presence" in both *Beloved* and *A Mercy*. Attending to ideas current in recent scholarship on contemporary forms of haunting and counterpointing that understanding with an investigation of *A Mercy*'s experiential rhetorical structure involving the use of written and verbal texts, she focuses on the figure of the abandoned child and the haunting presences that remain at the end of the novel. Demonstrating that Morrison's ninth novel engages multiple forms of child abandonment during a period of rapid social change, that the novel's orphaned characters are complexly fashioned, she contends that *A Mercy* "draws Morrison's readers into a different discursive space than many recent literary representations of haunting, including *Beloved*." Through an

investigation of the contemporary readers' responsibility and the role of "re-memory," to borrow Morrison's term, Bellamy makes a compelling case for an understanding of the ways in which Morrison's ninth novel "leaves the characters and readers of *A Mercy* in the haunted middle space of survival and witness." Reliance upon memory as a recuperative act enables Morrison to create a dynamic interaction among her novels, and the insight that we gain from this text encourages the reader to revisit the author's other works and view them from an original, more liberatory point of view.

The three essays included in Part Two, 'A Slave By Choice': Re-reading the (Neo) Slave Narrative, situate Morrison's fifth and ninth novels against a literary backdrop of the slave narrative genre. In "The (Neo) Slave Narrative in Black and White: Toni Morrison's Re-Envisioning of Masculinity in *A Mercy*," Gene Melton, II is concerned with the search for manhood on the part of the novel's assortment of male figures – black and white, slave and free, heterosexual and homosexual. Drawing upon the work of James Olney and others, Melton offers a reading of the Blacksmith, Willard, Scully, Jacob Vaark, and D'Ortega in terms of Morrison's experimentation with the boundaries of the slave narratives' portrait of racialized masculinity. Melton rightly concludes that Morrison's ninth novel enlarges the established limits of the neo slave narrative as "an inclusive genre that comprehends the experiences of slaves and former slaves, black and white, 'slave' and 'free.'"

Alice Eaton examines the trajectory of Morrison's fiction in terms of a progression to "a more radical vision of female sexuality." In "Becoming a She-Lion: Sexual Agency in Toni Morrison's *Beloved* and *A Mercy*," Eaton argues that sexual expression for both *Beloved* and *Florens* is rooted in slavery and attempts to proscribe female sexuality in ways that privilege a capitalist, patriarchal system. Eaton analyzes sexual expression as an important, positive impulse, although she also acknowledges that the "she-lion" as a figure both signifies empowerment for women and the terrifying specter of a deeply wounded woman.

For Kathryn Mudgett in "The Natural and Legal Geographies of the Body: Law's Corpus Written on the Lives of *Sethe* and *Florens*," it is the written and unwritten codes of pre-colonial America that reinforce the social order delimiting the identity and aspirations of the slave and ex-slave communities. Mudgett takes a law and literature approach to Morrison's fifth and ninth novels by showing how the law inscribes the status of the slave as person and property. Mudgett thus examines the idea of home – one of Morrison's most frequent themes – as an aspect of life denied to African-Americans.

Much of the action in Morrison's novels takes place in the interstitial space between the guilty, estranged mother and abandoned child. Essays included in Part Three, "To Be Female in This Place is to Be an Open Wound That Cannot Heal: Memory, Trauma, and Maternal Loss," direct attention to the emotional trauma associated with "motherloss" and the attempt on the part of Morrison's female characters to recreate a sense of wholeness in the face of maternal that loss. Whereas in "'To Be One or Have One': Mother Love in the Fiction of Toni Morrison," Terry Otten examines the ironic, if not destructive potential of love and the ways a perverse, capitalistic slave system "transfigures 'motherlove' into a potential weapon," Sandra Cox discusses maternity as a site of trauma and identification. Relying heavily upon the work of contemporary trauma theorists, Cox's "'Mother-Hunger': Trauma, Intra-feminine Identification, and Women's Communities in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, *Paradise*, and *A Mercy*" offers a reading of a trio of Morrison's novels as "a complicating reply to the preceding one." Ultimately, Cox astutely points out, *A Mercy* does not prove to be a space where intra-feminine community figures as a therapeutic response to the collective and personal trauma inflicted upon the female community.

Part Four, 'It Was Not a Miracle'; 'It Was a Mercy': Spirituality in the Americas, includes Shirley Stave's "'More Sinned Against Than Sinning': Re-defining Sin and Redemption in *Beloved* and *A Mercy*," which takes an uncompromising approach to Morrison's allusions to Christianity, arguing that Morrison adamantly critiques Christianity through her fifth and ninth novels. Focusing on Morrison's feminist rewriting of Christian theology, Stave observes that even though redemption is possible in *Beloved*, in *A Mercy*, "community is worthless, based upon a biblical patriarchal model."

Part Five, 'This Land is Our Home . . . But . . . I am Exile Here': Alternative Geographies," includes Charles Tedder's "Post Racialism and its Discontents: The Pre National Scene in Toni Morrison's *A Mercy*," which examines Morrison's ninth novel as a recuperation of history through acts of remembrance, revision, and recursion. Tedder grapples with what he refers to as the "national primal scene" that prompts readers to undergo the work of "re-memory" vis-à-vis the colonial period. Drawing on the work of Werner Sollors, Stuart Hall, Karl Popper, and others, he explores the ways that *A Mercy* creates an alternative myth-utopian past for the national narrative of America, specifically by imagining a multi-ethnic colonial landscape that contradicts the centrality of American Literature's concern with the "new white man" Morrison describes in *Playing in the Dark*. He argues that the symbolic action of Morrison's novels plays upon notions of a post-ethnic identity, and the

shared past she remembers insists on an anti-racist American identity that is, in some sense, the truest one – or at least the most complete.

The eight essays collected here point to *A Mercy*, a slim novel that has received mostly positive critical attention, as a meditational pause along the course of Morrison's decades-long literary career. Rather than marking the end of her journey, the publication of her ninth novel occasions an opportunity for author, scholar, and critic alike to glance back and forward simultaneously.<sup>12</sup> This volume underscores the need to construct a literary historiography that accommodates disjuncture and dissonance rather than one clamoring for artificially imposed cohesion. Scholars contributing to this collection reveal a willingness to engage in the kind of intellectual heavy lifting that such an enterprise demands, even as their essays insist upon the need to uncouple Morrison's fiction from often arbitrarily enforced theoretical limits.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> "Unspeakable Things, Unspoken: The Afro-American Presence in American Literature." *Michigan Quarterly Review* 28.1 (1989): 29.

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Hilary Mantel, "How Sorrow Became Complete." *The Guardian*. November 8, 2008. Mantel asserts that "Morrison is evoking the spirit of *Beloved* rather than creating something new." Maggie Galehouse offers a similar reading of the two novels in her review in *The Houston Chronicle*, November 9, 2008. Finally, Michiko Kakutani reads *A Mercy* as "a kind of prelude to *Beloved*." *The New York Times*, November 3, 2008. Jessica Wells Cantiello presents a thorough assessment of early reviews of Morrison's latest novel in "From Pre-Racial to Post-Racial?: Reading and Reviewing *A Mercy* in the Age of Obama." *MELUS* 36.2 (summer 2011): 165-183. Cantiello discusses the misreading of *Sorrow* on the part of critics who attempt to place the enigmatic character within a black-white binary.

<sup>3</sup> "Toni Morrison Finds 'A Mercy' in Servitude." National Public Radio Author Interviews. All Things Considered. October 27, 2008. <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=96118766>.

<sup>4</sup> Houston A. Baker, II, *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature: A Vernacular Theory* (Chicago: U of Chicago Press, 1984); Henry Louis Gates, II, *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African American Literary Criticism* (New York: Oxford U Press, 1988); Michael Awkward, *Inspiriting Influences: Tradition, Revision, and African American Women's Novels* (New York: Columbia U Press, 1989); Mae Gwendolyn Henderson, "Speaking in Tongues: Dialogics, Dialectics, and the Black Woman Writer's Literary Tradition." *Feminists Theorize the Political*. Judith Butler and Joan W. Scott, eds. (New York: Routledge, 1992): 144-166; and Cheryl Wall, *Worrying the Line: Black Women Writers, Lineage, and Tradition* (Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina Press, 2005).

<sup>5</sup> Cathleen Schandelmeier Bartels. "Toni Morrison's Discussion of *A Mercy*: An Experience for a Lifetime." *The NEIU Independent*. November 9, 2010.

<sup>6</sup> "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book." *Diacritics* 17. 2 Culture and Countermemory: The "American" Connection (summer 1987): 64-81.

<sup>7</sup> *The Matrixial Borderspace* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2006).

<sup>8</sup> See Mae Gwendolyn Henderson, *Borders, Boundaries, and Frames: Essays in Cultural Criticism and Cultural Studies* (New York: Routledge, 1995); bell hooks, *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics* (Boston: South End, 1990); Abdul JanMohamed, "Worldliness-Without World, Homelessness as Home: Toward a Definition of the Specular Border Intellectual." *Edward Said: A Critical Reader*, Michael Sprinkler, ed. (Cambridge: Blackwell, 1992); Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge: Harvard U Press, 1992); Carol Boyce Davies, *Migrations of the Subject: Black Women, Writing, and Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1994); and Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2004).

<sup>9</sup> "Home." *The House That Race Built*. Wahneema Lubiano, ed. (New York: Random House, 1998): 3-12.

<sup>10</sup> "Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences." *Writing and Difference*, Alan Bass, translator (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1978): 278-95.

<sup>11</sup> "Toni Morrison's Letter to Barack Obama," Tom McGeeveran, *New York Observer*, January 28, 2008.

<sup>12</sup> The spring 2012 publication of Morrison's tenth novel *Home* and its narrative engagement with the 1950's Korean War through the perspective of the amnesiac, tormented veteran Frank "Smart" Money invite further critical reassessment of the author's evolving canon.



**PART I:**

**‘ARE YOU AFRAID?’:  
MERCIFUL HAUNTING  
IN A NEW WORLD SETTING**

## CHAPTER ONE

# “THESE CAREFUL WORDS ... WILL TALK TO THEMSELVES”: TEXTUAL REMAINS AND READER RESPONSIBILITY IN TONI MORRISON’S *A MERCY*

MARIA RICE BELLAMY

In many respects, Toni Morrison’s *A Mercy* (2008) can be considered a prequel to her masterpiece, *Beloved* (1987). The action of *Beloved* occurs in the years just before and after the end of slavery, while *A Mercy* takes place during the era when slavery becomes entrenched and racialized in the colonies that will become the United States. In *Beloved*, an enslaved mother makes the unimaginable decision to kill her daughter rather than allow her to be raised in slavery, as the traumatic memories of the mother’s enslavement and the presence of her dead daughter’s ghost continue to haunt the elder woman. *A Mercy* portrays the aftermath of another enslaved mother’s decision to offer her daughter in payment for her master’s debt, hoping that a different master will give her daughter the chance of a better future. In this later text, however, it is the daughter who faces haunting memories of her mother’s apparent rejection, while the mother, called *a minha mãe* (Portuguese for “my mother”), whose absence haunts the larger text, returns beyond space and time to deliver the explanatory monologue that closes the novel. Florens, the daughter, is never able to hear her mother’s words, nor does her mother fully know the damage her decision causes her daughter. Instead, three centuries after this critical period in American history, it is the contemporary reader who is privy to both the reasoning of what one might call an abandoning parent and the torment of her abandoned child. Ultimately, Morrison positions her readers to reckon and receive these haunting remains.

My reading of this novel focuses on the figure of the abandoned child and the haunting presences that remain at the end of the text. First, *A Mercy* figures the entrance into slavery as a parent's abandonment of a child and indirectly explores the involvement of Africans in the process of enslaving other Africans. In this novel, Morrison portrays Florens' feelings of abandonment as well as her mother's memories of being taken from her home in Angola and having fellow Africans sell the mother into slavery. A broader reading of this text, however, requires us to recognize the multiplied forms of child abandonment in a period of tremendous social change, as early settlers explore the Americas and build new societies. The novel is thus populated with characters that have been cut loose from ties to kin and culture at an early age and struggle to define themselves and their place in the New World. While Morrison's characterizations of these abandoned children cross lines of race and gender, her special attention to Florens renders the additional level of devastation on the part of the African child in an increasingly racialized and hostile western society. Second, *A Mercy* ends with the physical, textual and ghostly remains of Florens' and her mother's traumatic experiences. Having survived the traumas of her youth and written a text that asserts her subjectivity, Florens remains alive at the novel's close, but the uncertainty of her future, in a society in which her status will become more rather than less precarious with time, haunts the reader. When the mother's ghostly intervention into the text answers Florens' desire to know the reason for the girl's abandonment, the reader of *A Mercy* is left with the knowledge that *a minha mãe* speaks to a daughter who is already lost to her and can never hear her words. Ultimately, the novel offers no assurance that Florens' written words, addressed to her estranged lover, or her mother's spoken words, directed toward Florens, will be received by their intended audiences. Their words remain, nevertheless, begging the questions: who *really* is the intended audience for their words and what are we, the readers, to do with these haunting presences? Morrison leaves them to haunt her contemporary readers and beckons us to receive them within ourselves to restore the personal and familial losses of American slavery.

The haunting presences in *A Mercy* link this text to a growing body of literature on contemporary forms of haunting, particularly in Ethnic American literature. Haunting serves primarily as a means of accessing lost or repressed knowledge, especially among subjugated peoples, whose history and culture is undervalued and under-recorded in mainstream American society. In her sociological study of haunting, Avery Gordon argues that “To write stories concerning exclusions and invisibilities is to

write ghost stories” (17). The haunting aspect of these ghost stories relates to their ability to alter “the experience of being in time, the way we separate the past, the present and the future” and capture the multiplicity of connections that, in this case, enables a twenty-first century reader to be affected by the story of girl abandoned by her mother three centuries ago (Gordon xvi). In her recent study of haunting in African American literature and culture, Marisa Parham offers further nuance to this multiplicity of connections by analyzing the contemporary reader’s internal response to external stimuli: “Being haunted means struggling with things that come to us from outside our discrete experiences of the world, but which we nonetheless experience as emerging out of our own psyches” (6). Haunting relates both to the collapse of time and the sensation that the experiences of a person from another time are our own because her experiences resonate with our own deep-seated cultural memory. This concept suggests Morrison’s explanation of her own efforts to access her ancestral and cultural past and use the memories of others to gain “entrance into [her] own interior life” (Morrison “Site” 115). Morrison designs her novels to offer her readers a similar experience by providing them space to enter the text, allowing their personal memory and interior life to deepen and inform their reading. Finally, Gordon represents haunting as the haunted’s experience with the agency of ghosts, whose “desires ... must be recognized” (179). While Florens and her mother cannot make their intended audiences apprehend their narratives, they reach beyond the confines of the text to speak directly to the contemporary reader requiring us to hear, recognize, and affirm their stories. Their desire forces us to realize that “we are part of [their] story, for better or worse,” and ghosts don’t simply speak, they “speak to *me*” (Gordon 24, emphasis in original). In *A Mercy*, haunting figures of repressed knowledge encourage the reader to engage and respond to that knowledge.

*A Mercy* draws Morrison’s readers into a different discursive space than many recent literary representations of haunting, including *Beloved*. In her exhaustive study of the genre she defines as contemporary narratives of cultural haunting, Kathleen Brogan argues that these texts “organize plots as a movement from negative to positive forms of haunting”<sup>1</sup> (17). Citing *Beloved*, she argues that “in giving narrative organization to Sethe’s experience (the experience of the historical Margaret Garner and by extension, all victims of slavery), Morrison defines historical consciousness as a good form of haunting, in which the denied ghosts of the American past are finally integrated into America’s national identity” (8). By implication, this process facilitates a release

from traumatic repression and repetition, which we might call negative haunting. The expulsion of the ghost in *Beloved* offers some relief from this form of haunting, although the novel's end clearly suggests that neither Sethe nor her contemporaries are fully reconciled to their traumatic pasts or precluded from experiencing other subtler forms of haunting. The reader of *Beloved* is, nevertheless, left with the hope of Sethe recognizing herself as her own best thing and moving on to make a better life with (or without) Paul D. Morrison, however, leaves her readers with little sense of release or reason for hope at the end of *A Mercy*. As much as we would like the novel to organize and resolve Florens' and her mother's traumatic histories, these characters are left unsettled, with no true hope of creating better futures for themselves. For this reason, this novel has drawn criticism from some reviewers, including John Updike and Lenora Todaro, for its pessimism,<sup>2</sup> although some critics, including Waegner, have identified unfounded optimism. Neither pessimistic nor even guardedly optimistic, Morrison intentionally leaves her characters (and readers) in an unresolved middle space at the end of *A Mercy*.

From very different scholarly traditions, theologian Shelly Rambo and literary scholar Marisa Parham theorize this middle space, offering useful applications to our reading of *A Mercy*. In her theory of remaining, Rambo recognizes "a tenuous middle, in which both what is behind and what is ahead are unsettled and threatening and unknown" (Rambo "Redemption?" 109). Derived from the Greek word *menein*, meaning "to live on," remaining describes living on in the middle space after (and before) trauma "as a form of witness to the persistence of death in life" (Rambo "Haunted" 937). At the end of *A Mercy*, the reader recognizes that Florens' trials have not ended, that she and her descendants will live in bondage for generations without the hope of release. In Rambo's words, the moral of a text like *A Mercy* is one of "survival and witness, as opposed to . . . triumph through struggle" ("Redemption?" 112). Rambo's paradigm thus offers the possibility of imagining Florens as one who remains and lives on to witness survival in spite of the very real threat of future trauma.<sup>3</sup> Analyzing its pervasive rituals of mourning and remembrance, Parham characterizes African American culture as inhabiting a middle space between past and present, life and death. She considers such practices a "cultural imperative" requiring the contemporary African American to "remember events that are not [his] own and to testify to their otherwise un-witnessed effects," in other words "to choose to be haunted" (109). Describing haunting as "what it means to live in between things... to live with various forms of doubled consciousness," Parham invokes Du Bois' conception of double consciousness to situate the middle space of

haunting as an implicit component of the African American experience (3). Thus, to be consciously African American requires being haunted, to “claim ownership” over another’s experiences and wonder “what kind of responsibility might one have to this acquired knowledge?” (84, 8) Parham’s question resonates with Morrison’s readers who similarly wonder how to respond to *A Mercy*’s haunting elements and determine what responsibility we owe to the ghostly characters that remain at the novel’s end. Morrison positions her readers to enter the middle space with her characters in order to heal the deep-seated wounds of slavery in the American consciousness.

In interviews Morrison has explained that she was drawn to writing about the colonial period in American history because of “how ad hoc everything was, how fluid and the unlikeliness, the unlikelihood of this nation becoming what it is” (Morrison “Bondage”).<sup>4</sup> The undefined status of the American colonies mirrors the undefined and changeable status of the characters of *A Mercy*. Morrison explains, “everybody was for rent or for sale... particularly young people, children. They were motherless, fatherless... vulnerable” (Morrison “Bondage”). Without exception, Morrison’s characters struggle to define themselves against experiences of abandonment, servitude or enslavement. The cast of characters in *A Mercy* enables Morrison to explore the possibilities and perils of self-definition in the beautiful and unforgiving New World landscape and imagine alternative versions of the American narrative of origin.

Of the characters in *A Mercy*, Jacob Vaark, Florens’ new master, best represents the nascent American spirit of adventure and self-reliance, while his egalitarian ethos enables him to create a household modeling harmonious relations between the races represented in the colonies. The illegitimate child of a Dutchman and an English girl “of no consequence who died in childbirth,” Vaark remembers well his life as an orphan in the streets of England, his stint in the poorhouse, and the series of fortunate events (including inheriting a patroonship in New Netherlands from a distant relative) that transformed “a ratty orphan” into a land owner (Morrison *A Mercy* 33, 12).<sup>5</sup> Traveling through “forests untouched since Noah, shorelines beautiful enough to bring tears,” Vaark “relished never knowing what lay in his path... [and] flushed with pleasure when a crisis, large or small, needed invention and fast action” (12).<sup>6</sup> His embrace of the landscape and possibilities of the New World, tempered by his general disdain for slavery and sensitivity to the struggles of other abandoned children, positions Vaark to create and support an idealized New World family. He accepts Florens in partial payment of her master’s debt, first, because he is “struck by the terror in her [mother’s] eyes” and second,

because he “found it hard to refuse when called on to rescue an unmoored, unwanted child” (26, 33). Vaark then brings her home to his motley crew of cast-off women: his wife Rebekka, whose father ships her from England to a stranger for the cost of her fare and being relieved of the responsibility “of feeding her” (74); Lina, a Native American woman, purchased as a servant from a Presbyterian couple who rescue her after her family is wiped out by small pox but reject her after she engages in what they deem immoral behavior; and Sorrow, a girl of uncertain origins whom Vaark receives from a sawyer simply looking to place her with someone “he trusted to do her no harm” (51). Forced to rely on each other in the untamed American frontier, this unlikely group forms “a kind of family” having “carved companionship out of isolation” (156). In the Vaark household, Morrison figures a New World Eden and offers one possible model for American race relations based on hybridity and mutual interdependence.<sup>7</sup>

Vaark’s “rescue” of Florens, however, represents his first involvement with enslaved Africans and marks his development of the damning American trait of capitalist exploitation.<sup>8</sup> While visiting the plantation Jublio to settle his debt with its owner Senhor D’Ortega, Vaark becomes envious of his host’s grand home, majestic wrought iron gate, and six children, particularly his two nearly grown sons. In spite of being sickened by D’Ortega’s lavish home and ostentatious lifestyle, Vaark experiences a subtle shift in his ambitions, after leaving Jublio, first manifested in his decision to “look into” expanding his small trading operation into the more lucrative commerce in sugar and rum (32). Although this new line of business involves him in the slave-based Caribbean plantation economy, he reasons there to be “a profound difference between the intimacy of slave bodies at Jublio and a remote labor force in Barbados. Right? Right. He thought” (35). After his first concession, Vaark’s fall is imminent. Though he has no heirs, having lost three sons in infancy and a daughter in a freak accident, Vaark becomes consumed with accumulating things, believing ownership to be his lasting legacy. Years later, when his wife asks why he wants to build their third home when they don’t need it and have no one to inherit it, he answers what he has come to believe: “What a man leaves behind is what a man is” (89). Vaark ultimately comes to embody the Native American assessment of the European newcomers: “Cut loose from the earth’s soul, they insisted on purchase of its soil, and like all orphans they were insatiable” (55).<sup>9</sup> Beyond his literal status as orphan, in his pursuit of ownership, Vaark loses his connection to the earth and brings damnation on himself. The ornate wrought iron gate with “two copper snakes” which Vaark builds as the entrance to his new home

represents symbolically the infiltration of the serpent into the garden and becomes, in Lina's estimation, the entrance into "the world of the damned" (51). Vaark's death from small pox on the floor of his still uncompleted mansion articulates Morrison's condemnation of his choices and marks his expulsion from Eden. Indeed, the house which Vaark intends as a monument to his success becomes the manifestation of his folly, all that remains after his fall from grace and the destruction of the idyllic family that exists under his protection.

Jacob's decision to define himself according to an exploitative capitalist model results in his family's expulsion from paradise and leaves each woman vulnerable to the larger forces of their social environment. Babb argues that "The Vaark farm is laid waste by what dooms much in Morrison's work: adherence to egocentric individualism, isolation, and removal from community" (159). While Vaark's household provides a unique community for a time, his death destroys the unifying bond, leaving the women with nothing but isolation and remove from community. Lina notes that none of them are "attached to a church or recorded in its books, and without "some encircling outside thing" to define and protect their status, the women are outside of law, "illegal" (58). Morrison demonstrates, however, that it is the absence of traditional, particularly religious, structures that facilitates the Vaark household's idyllic community. After her husband's death and the loss of the "encircling" patriarchal structure of marriage, Rebekka aligns herself with the local Anabaptists, assuming and practicing their hierarchy and prejudices, including their belief that "Natives and Africans... had access to grace but not to heaven" (99). Her new loyalties destroy any remaining traces of Vaark's egalitarian ethos, and as the novel ends, the household is broken up as Rebekka prepares Florens for sale, seeks to give Sorrow away to whomever will take her, and subjects Lina to beatings and deprivations intended to civilize her.

While Vaark's process of self-definition presents an obvious contrast to the possibilities available to Florens, Morrison uses other captive female characters, including Lina and *a minha mãe*, to highlight the greater peril of Florens' situation. Unlike Lina, Florens does not have memories of a mother who dies struggling to care for her or of "[the] company of other children, industrious mothers in beautiful jewelry, the majestic plan of life; when to vacate, to harvest, to burn, to hunt" (50). Lina's childhood, steeped in a culture that provides her a defined role in a social order that gives her life meaning and purpose, enables her to endure the "solitude, regret and fury" that comes in her later years of captivity among the "Europes" (50, 54). After Vaark purchases her and following a disastrous

and violent relationship with a European man and rejection by her Presbyterian guardians, Lina still manages “by piecing together scraps of what her mother had taught her before dying in agony” to construct “a way to be in the world” (48). Her self-definition incorporates useful elements from all parts of her past: “Relying on memory and her own resources, she cobbled together neglected rights, merged Europe medicine with native, scripture with lore” (48). Lina’s process is characterized by inclusivity, recognition of what has been lost, and willingness to adapt to what has come. Babb compares Lina’s synthesized belief system to “the syncretism of what would become United States culture” concluding that “*A Mercy* casts hybridity... as American fact” (158). In this way, Lina best represents the possibility for American cultural formation and offers an alternative to traditional narratives that emphasize the purity of American cultural origins. Finally, beginning her life in a setting characterized by purpose, dignity and wholeness, Lina does not lose her sense of self-worth, even as the world around her changes and becomes increasingly hostile to her worldview.

Similarly, Florens’ mother, in spite of suffering the traumas of capture, the Middle Passage, enslavement, and sexual exploitation, clearly remembers when her life as a woman of her clan and nation ends and her life as chattel begins. On a slave block in Barbados, *a minha mãe* has the shock of discovering that she “was not a person from [her] country, nor from [her] family. [She] was a negrita. Everything. Language, dress, gods, dance, habits, decoration, song—all of it cooked together in the color of [her] skin” (165). She witnesses herself as a raced object. Her birth, free in Angola, and her original formation as an African woman, however, enable her to see the violence of her situation in the larger context of the violence of patriarchal society. She explains that “men thrive on insults over cattle, women, water, crops” and understands warfare between her tribe and another as the beginning of her enslavement (163). Even on the slave ship she notices that the white sailors who take “pleasure to freshen us with a lash” also find it enjoyable “to lash their own” (164). *A minha mãe*’s broader range of experiences enables her to contextualize her situation and define her own worth in contrast to the role drawn for her in the New World economy. In contrast to Lina and *A minha mãe*, Florens never has the benefit of existing in a social structure that values her as a person with a meaningful role in society. Her life begins in enslavement, and the defining moments of her youth are scenes of rejection and abandonment.

Citing “the breakup of families” as “the monstrous thing that slavery in this country caused,” Morrison intervenes in the earliest moment of slavery to represent the destruction of family bonds and Florens’

experiences of rejection as the beginning of true bondage (Morrison “Bondage”). While a mother’s love and acceptance normally form the foundation of a child’s self-worth, *a minha mãe*’s abandonment becomes the negative basis of Florens’ identity and makes her vulnerable to deeper levels of psychic bondage than Lina or her mother could imagine. First, Florens grows up with the haunting image of her mother, “standing hand in hand with her little boy,” giving her away to a stranger but “saying something [she] cannot hear... something important” (3, 8). The pain of her mother’s sending the girl away, when the mother keeps Florens’ brother, is complicated further by the permanence of the separation, the cessation of communication with her mother, the loss of her love and guidance, and the inability ever to ask why. This experience creates a void in Florens which propels a desperate search for love and acceptance. In the Vaark household, Florens is “deeply grateful for every shred of affection, any pat on the head, any smile of approval” (61). For a time, she and Lina comfort the “Mother hunger—to be one or have one” from which they are both “reeling” (63); however, the appearance of a free man of color, the blacksmith who crafts Vaark’s ornate gate, just as Florens enters adolescence, stimulates an overwhelming, blinding desire: “Nothing stops it. There is only you. Nothing outside of you. ... when at last our eyes hit I am not dead. For the first time I am live” (37, 38). Florens imagines the blacksmith as her “life and [her] security from harm, from any who look closely at [her] only to throw [her] away,” seeing in him the satisfaction of her longing for intimate connection, release from bondage, and protection from future rejection (157). When Florens relives her original scene of rejection as the blacksmith appears to cast her aside in favor of a little boy, a foundling he takes into his custody after the boy’s father or keeper’s death, Florens becomes desperate, offering the blacksmith ownership of herself: “You alone own me” (141). Repelled by her self-objectification, the blacksmith casts Florens out of his presence, telling her to “Own yourself, Woman, and leave us be ... You are nothing but wilderness. No constraint. No mind” (141).<sup>10</sup> With this rejection Florens becomes unhinged, attacking both the boy and the man and discovering that what truly enslaves a person is on the inside: “it is the withering inside that enslaves and opens the door for what is wild” (160). This withering, the destruction of Florens’ sense of her own humanity and worth, has its roots in her mother’s rejection, is reinforced by the blacksmith’s similar rejection, is fed by the brutalizing effects of racist discourse, and finally manifests itself in the wilderness of violence and self-hatred.

Morrison’s concept of wilderness in *A Mercy* resonates with and expands on Stamp Paid’s definition of the “jungle” in *Beloved* (198) and