

Becoming a Wilderness:  
Pre-National Placemaking and Narrative Confusion in Toni Morrison's *A Mercy*  
by  
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*for my grandmother*



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## Abstract

In *A Mercy* (2008), Toni Morrison situates an exploration of the race and gender dynamics underlying myths of American origins in a 17<sup>th</sup>-century New World environment. This thesis examines the ways in which Morrison employs a colonial Virginia setting to question the historical basis of exclusionary traditions underlying practices of hegemonic American placemaking. In doing so, *A Mercy* will be shown to centralize the experiences of women and people of color within an environment that has been used to marginalize and suppress the perspective of these groups in national consciousness. This thesis explores how Morrison activates and reinterprets tropes of the white colonial “errand into the wilderness” by contrasting the experiences of Anglo-European colonists with those of their unfree laborers, including enslaved Black women, a Native American raised by white Presbyterians, and white male indentured servants. Morrison thus imagines a variety of encounters within and relationships to the New World environment that work to transfer recent historiographical recovery efforts into dominant cultural narratives, through the medium of literature and fictional imaginings.

Morrison accomplishes this task through a variety of disorienting formal strategies, which have confused both popular and scholarly reception of *A Mercy*. This thesis will track Morrison’s use of characterization, voice, and narrative structure to reinterpret exclusionary pre-national narratives, with lasting implications for cultural understanding of America’s origins, and for the possible methods through which suppressed histories may be partially recovered or illuminated. *A Mercy* will be shown to use alienating formal techniques to reexamine New World myths through postcolonial and ecocritical lenses, refuting exclusionary practices of American mythmaking and placemaking.

Keywords: Toni Morrison, African American literature, Postcolonial Studies, Ecocriticism, environment and literature, placemaking, pre-national narratives



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## Introduction

Read as both a prequel to and a continuation of the themes of *Beloved*, Toni Morrison's ninth novel, *A Mercy*, represents a return to a distant historical period for Morrison after she set three previous novels in the 20<sup>th</sup>-century. Stephen Best, who conceives of *A Mercy* as something of a sequel, argues that its content and its 2008 publication date reflect a shift in the broader canon of African American literature from the process of historical retrieval—exemplified by Morrison herself in *Beloved*—to an understanding that fictional imaginings are an insufficient means for restoration of lost historical events, so suggested by *A Mercy*'s general opacity and lack of resolution. *A Mercy*'s project, Best argues, is not to retrieve a lost history, but rather to assert the very irrecoverability of the perspectives of the enslaved in American history as a tradition in itself. Readings of *A Mercy* in the vein of Best have sought to examine what its difficult form and narrative approach appear to be obscuring, rather than illuminate what the novel is attempting to decode.

Though perhaps a logical impulse, situating *A Mercy* purely in *Beloved*'s lineage underemphasizes *A Mercy*'s engagement with a historical period quite removed from the events of *Beloved*, and to different effect. A separate thread of critical engagement with *A Mercy* has considered the ways in which it distinguishes itself in both geographical and historical location from Morrison's first eight novels, assessing its late 17<sup>th</sup>-century time period as a means for Morrison to revisit and revise a national origins narrative that privileges the perspective of a white male landed class over that of historically subjugated groups. As Valerie Babb explains, *A Mercy* can be read as an attempt to reinsert “the subjective stories of Africans, Native Americans, white European indentured servants, and women of all races and ethnicities who had little economic means or domestic security” into a cultural narrative that rarely frames such

groups as complex subjects “allowed to recount their experiences in any nonformulaic way” (Babb 148).

Historiographical approaches to *A Mercy* are supported by an outpouring of scholarship in recent decades that has sought to recover marginalized perspectives in pre-national history, just as *Beloved* has been understood to be a product of mid 20<sup>th</sup>-century historiography that turned for the first time to considering slavery from the perspective of the enslaved. Sandra M. Gustafson and Gordon Hutner go so far as to use *A Mercy* to introduce a collection of scholarly work on early America, arguing that the novel’s “multiethnic, multilingual, colonial world—where people of all races suffered from disease, violence, greed, religious intolerance, and political ambition and where disorder was the norm and the deepest wilderness was in the mind” is both historically accurate and only recently recognized (Gustafson and Hutner 214). Though there is little critical consensus as to the overall effect or intention of Morrison’s engagement with America’s mythical origins, many critics (see: Montgomery, Babb, Strehle) have argued that Morrison’s placement of *A Mercy*’s tensions of community and identity in a 17<sup>th</sup>-century setting is meant to reveal “a fuller, more nuanced reading of America’s national history and its diverse citizenry” (Montgomery 635). However, such scholarship has not recognized the ways in which Morrison crucially maps this investigation of belonging onto a tangible American environment, nor does it generally contend with the disorienting formal strategies through which *A Mercy*’s narrative is rendered.

This thesis will track *A Mercy*’s rehearsal and rewriting of American origins myths as situated by Morrison within a suggestively expressed environment of New World wilderness and Eden, to reveal a fuller understanding of *A Mercy*’s seemingly hazy approach to hegemonic but incomplete pre-national narratives. As Stephen Handley explains, in the process of postcolonial

reckoning, “establishing a sense of place is key to a dismissal of colonial discourse because it involves a radical resituation of the marginalized” (Handley, “Sense of Place” 9). This thesis seeks to decode and illuminate the sense of place Morrison establishes in *A Mercy* to recognize race and gender as factors influencing how historically othered groups are positioned within both the American environment and in pre-national narratives, in insidious and often invisible ways. *A Mercy* will be shown to use alienating formal strategies, including its precise rendering of the material world and comparatively muddled characterization, to disrupt and modify hegemonic notions about American placemaking.<sup>1</sup>

In so examining *A Mercy*’s fictionalized New World environment, this thesis seeks also to contextualize Morrison’s at times inchoate and evasive formal tactics, which have been much remarked upon but rarely productively analyzed. John Updike, for one, protests in a review of the novel that “Morrison has a habit, perhaps traceable to the pernicious influence of William Faulkner, of plunging into the narrative before the reader has a clue to what is going on” (Updike, “Dreamy Wilderness”). Hilary Mantel, in another review, similarly laments an impression of *A Mercy* as offering “half-told tales” that merely trail “the great novel it should be” (Mantel, “How Sorrow Became Complete”). Yet considered in the context of *A Mercy*’s exploration of familiar origins narratives in a defamiliarized American environment, the terms of these critiques may instead be applied as a useful framework. Though Updike is correct that *A Mercy* begins without narrative set-up, it quickly takes on a disturbingly familiar context, and Morrison is counting on an audience that has heard some version of her story before. With an ongoing resistance to clarification, *A Mercy* revisits a foundational moment in what would later

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<sup>1</sup> I will use the compound term “placemaking” in this thesis to refer to the combination of historical, political, social, and cultural processes through which a sense of place is established in national consciousness.

become America's national history, exploring a much-mythologized period of increasing colonization largely viewed as prior to both the nation-state and the entrenchment of the racial slave trade. Because this is also a period not traditionally considered from the perspective of those who were and would continue to be enslaved themselves, *A Mercy* can thus be productively conceived of as deliberately invoking a cultural legacy of tales half-told; rather than undermining the novel's potency, their very partiality instead fortifies its central Morrisonian "anxiety of belonging" on the eve of American nationhood (Morrison, "Home" 10). Though Updike titles his review "Dreamy Wilderness," he, and later scholarship surrounding *A Mercy*, does little to interpret the importance of its piercingly invoked material world in the context of late 17<sup>th</sup>-century notions of environment, embodiment, and spirituality as inherently connected on an American terrain. Nor does the body of existing work on *A Mercy* sufficiently recognize how intrinsically Morrison's questions of personhood and nationhood are related to her careful articulation of place in the story of America's national origins. As a result, assessments of *A Mercy* based solely upon the novel's telling—rather than its setting—miss the scope of Morrison's project.

*A Mercy*'s protagonist, Florens, is a young black woman in the 1690s, enslaved by the Anglo-Europeans Jacob and Rebekka Vaark, whose intent to settle "a pristine New World" is immediately recognizable as part of broader cultural narratives surrounding America's origins (Strehle 111). *A Mercy* alternates chapters between Florens's relentlessly present tense, first person narrative and the third person limited perspective of other characters, including Jacob, Rebekka, and Lina, their Native American unpaid servant. This structure allows for Morrison to demonstrate a range of encounters within her New World environment while controlling for race and gender, and also results in a novel that seems to be constantly on the verge of rewriting itself.

*A Mercy*'s fractured approach to narration, among other disorienting qualities, has led many critics to read the novel more for what is lost in its opacity than for what it is gained by its process of decrypting. This thesis will demonstrate instead how the novel's forceful effects of alienation and instability reflect the broader truth that "in the Americas myths of origin have always been especially tenuous" (Casteel 7). I suggest that *A Mercy*'s highly evocative, intentionally indeterminate beginning, as well as Morrison's deliberate withholding of explanatory or orienting information, place greater emphasis on the aspects of the novel that do appear stable and constant throughout, most notably its sharply detailed environment. In making *A Mercy* difficult to read for plot, character development, or other forms of traditional narrative, Morrison forces her reader to attach to what the novel makes immediately evident: its historical period and relationship to myths of American placemaking.

In researching for *A Mercy*, Toni Morrison has stated that "the first thing I had to do was find out what was there—the plant life, the tree life, the weather" (Smallwood, "Back Talk: Toni Morrison"). She drew on William Cronon's *Changes in the Land* for "a grounded sense of the places that I had chosen," and as a result, *A Mercy*'s questions of race, gender, and personhood in the time of America's beginning are closely related to its invocation of environment and the material world (Smallwood, "Back Talk: Toni Morrison"). The novel's uneasiness over whether its characters inhabit wilderness or Eden is central to its larger exploration of the narratives underlying white male dominance and dominion in American history. As Kathleen R. Wallace and Margaret Armbruster have argued prior to *A Mercy*'s publication, Morrison's engagement with landscape and wildness in earlier works "articulates a rich tradition of African American experiences with the natural environment," an aspect of her novels that seeks to expand and revise traditional environmental narratives, and which also, perhaps for this same reason, goes

often overlooked (Wallace and Armbruster 226). Critics have recognized *A Mercy*'s intense awareness of environment as engaging with the legacy of the Romantic pastoral (see: Sandy) and Jennifer Terry even recognizes its rewriting of "dominant accounts and myths of the landscape of the so-called New World," as integral to Morrison's project (Terry 127).<sup>2</sup> However, approaches that assess Morrison's attention to environment without placing it in relation to the novel's 21<sup>st</sup>-century social politics miss the object and intent of *A Mercy*'s preoccupation with the material world. As a result, Morrison's use of environmental narratives to highlight anxieties of community as related to gender- and race-based identities has yet to be fully recognized.

The case for assessing *A Mercy* through the lens of environment becomes clearer when considering the role environmental narratives have played in shaping American culture as a whole. Environmental scholarship of the 20<sup>th</sup>-century and onward has sought to illustrate how notions about the American environment have directly molded facets of American identity. Perhaps the most influential historian to engage with the topic on a grand scale, Roderick Frazier Nash writes in his seminal 1967 *Wilderness and the American Mind* that the nation as a whole has sprung from a Puritan "intellectual legacy concerning wilderness" that continues to inform notions of nature as both "a barrier to progress" and a seat of possibility still present in American culture (Nash 35, 40). The perceived wildness of the American continent, Nash argues, has acted as a symbolic backdrop not only for the events of American history, but also for the formation of American nationhood and national consciousness. Three years prior, Leo Marx's *The Machine in the Garden* similarly asserted that American literature as an entity perpetuates a "pastoral ideal

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<sup>2</sup> Sandy's reading of *A Mercy* purely through Romanticism ignores the social and political dynamics that are intrinsically tied to Morrison's invocation of the material world. The novel in fact subverts the masculinized tradition of Wordsworthian pastoralism Sandy identifies. Terry's approach, though attentive to the cultural implications of the novel's use of environment, does not account for the ways in which *A Mercy*'s form is related to its message, and as a result does not fully capture the nuances of the novel's exploration of American placemaking.

that has been incorporated in a powerful metaphor of contradiction—a way of ordering meaning and value that clarifies our situation today” (Marx 4). By this Marx means that the great writers of the (white male) national canon—Faulkner, Thoreau, Frost, and Cooper among them—“again and again...invoke the image of a green landscape...as a symbolic repository of meaning and value” that persists in national culture (Marx 363). In decades since, other scholars, most notably Lawrence Buell, have developed and nuanced these concepts to argue for conceiving of American nature writing as a barometer for broader American culture, wherein “the nonhuman environment is present not merely as a framing device but as a presence that begins to suggest that human history is implicated in natural history” (Buell 7). The way Americans see the American environment, in other words, has been shown to be highly indicative of how Americans see America as a nation.

A more recent wave of scholarship has sought to expand upon Buell’s briefly articulated caution that “the idealization of nature in American literary mythology has historically been more a masculine pursuit than a female-sponsored endeavor,” and “the natural environment as empirical reality has been made to...serve as a symbolic reinforcement of the subservience of disempowered groups: nonwhites, women, and children” (Buell 16, 21). As Marx himself allows, in an afterword to the 2000 reprint of *The Machine in the Garden*, “today...it would not be possible to write certain sentences...that tacitly generalize about the thought or behavior of ‘Americans,’ unqualified by the explicit distinctions that an informed multicultural consciousness—and conscience—now would compel me to recognize” (Marx 383). Carolyn Merchant and Annette Kolodny, prior to Buell, were among the first to assert that the exclusionary tradition of American nature writing and environmental thought has erased the point of view of “women who were at home in the wilderness...[but] never achieved mythic

status” within it (Kolodny xiii). The archetypal white male Thoreaus and Leatherstockings of our environmental myths, in other words, do not account for the experiences of women and people of color, who physically occupy the same environment of the dominant literary canon, but are situated differently within it. This failure to recognize the full range of encounters within the American environment is not merely problematic for its systemic erasure of women and people of color, but also because it has served to reinforce racist and misogynistic thinking masked as naturalized or organic outputs of American landscape, and therefore American culture.<sup>3</sup> As Kolodny argues, environment matters in a practical way to American history and national consciousness, as “the most immediate medium through which we attempt to convert culturally shared dreams into palpable realities” (Kolodny xii). An incomplete understanding of how women and people of color continue to be situated within the American environment therefore leads to an incomplete understanding of who has the power to influence national reality.

Buell’s framework—and the dominant framework for conceiving of environment in American culture—does not sufficiently reckon with America’s postcolonial legacy, which has long been articulated in relation to American environments. As newer postcolonial scholarship has asserted, “this has led to the tendency to uphold white, masculine settlers as normative subjects and to erase Native American, African American, Asian American, and Hispanic

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<sup>3</sup> The trouble of the androcentric wilderness narrative is not limited to the erasure of women and people of color from the material world. As Leslie A. Fielder explains in *Love and Death and the American Novel*, characters of color often appear in American literature as tropes of the wilderness encounter, associated with primitiveness and with wildness itself, representing for the white male protagonist “whatever in the American psyche has been starved to death, whatever genteel Anglo-Saxonondom has most ferociously repressed, whatever he himself has stifled to be worthy of his wife and daughters...” (Fielding 190). Such racialized figures, including Melville’s Queequeg, Cooper’s Chingachook, and Twain’s Jim, exist to test out and ultimately illuminate the humanity of white men, but are not allowed to claim or exhibit humanity themselves. Morrison and *A Mercy* work against the literary use of people of color as devices for the differentiation of whiteness.

historical presence in the New World” (DeLoughrey et al. 27). This erasure must be addressed not only to more accurately represent the history of Americans within American place, but also to attempt to bridge a “palpable separation between natural phenomena, human history, and their mutual articulation” (DeLoughrey et al. 1). Or, as Morrison herself states elsewhere, there is a critically insufficient national understanding that “the imaginative and historical terrain upon which early American writers journeyed is in large measure shaped by the presence of the racial other” (Morrison, *Playing in the Dark* 46). I suggest that central to *A Mercy*’s project is showing how the idea of wilderness as the terrain where an American becomes an American has always involved the fraught process of differentiation—of the wild from the cultivated, the male from the female, and crucially, of whiteness from the racially othered. It is the conspicuous absence of a mythic status for women of color in particular in the natural world—or any recognized status at all—that Morrison seeks to address through her destabilizing formal tactics in *A Mercy*.

The first chapter of this thesis will trace Morrison’s positioning of Florens and Jacob within a New World environment and pre-national narratives. Using a historical framework for colonial encounters with a 17<sup>th</sup>-century material world, I will show how Morrison represents Jacob as a normative subject experiencing and exploiting North America’s natural resources only to undercut his hegemonic authority through the novel’s structure, replacing him in both *A Mercy*’s narrative and its environment. Though Jacob is characterized as the recognizable American Adam on a precariously Edenic terrain, it is Florens, a female and racially othered subject, who becomes the most crucial actor in the novel’s environment, disrupting extant and problematic assumptions about pre-national myths in relation to American placemaking.

The second chapter shows how Morrison further addresses exclusionary narratives of a masculinized settler process by restructuring *A Mercy*’s own pre-national narrative around a

legacy of maternal loss stemming from colonial disruption. This chapter discusses how Morrison equalizes the experiences of the colonizer and the colonized in the novel's female-centric environment, only to demonstrate how the prospect of female solidarity is unraveled by insidiously racialized power dynamics. In particular, this chapter will explore how Morrison uses the concept of mother hunger and the ghostly figure of Florens's mother to refute hegemonic accounts of national placemaking. In *A Mercy*, motherhood is disordered by both colonization and enslavement, a corruption that is reflected in the novel's slowly degenerating material world.

The final chapter will address the effect of *A Mercy*'s blurring of Florens's internality onto her external environment, and her final, literal externalization of her narrative as she writes it on the physical structure of Jacob's house. This chapter addresses Morrison's formal choices in depicting Florens's interiority, and in particular her speech and narrative voice, representative of broader external obstacles to the communication of suppressed national histories. As *A Mercy* shows, the same insidious practices that have allowed American placemaking to erase the experiences of the marginalized may also be enlisted to reassert suppressed perspectives in pre-national history.

## Chapter 1: Errands into a Wilderness

Because of *A Mercy*'s overall impression of disorientation, Morrison's specific formal strategies for communicating her narrative are not immediately easy to isolate. Though the novel can be said to follow a predictable narrative structure, alternating between first person sections narrated by Florens and sections following the third person point of view of another character on the Vaark farm, its plot developments are never neatly or linearly conveyed, and Morrison rarely clarifies the narrative timeline. Instead, certain important scenes are narrated more than once, with a second character offering a new perspective only to render an earlier depiction unreliable, and the crucial information that Florens is in fact speaking retrospectively in spite of her exclusive use of present tense is withheld until late in the novel. Instead of realism or ready plot development, what emerges in *A Mercy* most urgently is a sharply detailed sense of how each character is situated within the novel's environment.

Perhaps the most visible of Morrison's alienating formal techniques—and the aspect of the novel most at issue in reviews—is *A Mercy*'s apparently uneven characterization. Among John Updike's most stringent critiques in his *New Yorker* review is that Morrison's "epic sense of place and time overshadows her depiction of people" (Updike, "Dreamy Wilderness"). Against the backdrop of *A Mercy*'s striking wilderness, Updike finds the novel's characters to be disconcertingly lightly sketched, too faintly drawn to convincingly occupy its more intricate material world—though for Updike, this problem affects certain of Morrison's characters more detrimentally than others. In particular, he asserts that "the white characters in 'A Mercy' come to life more readily than the black, and they less ambiguously dramatize America's discovery and settlement" (Updike, "Dreamy Wilderness" *New Yorker*). Hilary Mantel's primary complaint in *The Guardian* is similar: that Jacob alone "is vivid in his history and prejudices and

ambitions....Having created him carefully, Morrison sweeps him out of the story...[and] the narrative also loses the firm directed feel of the early pages. The other characters who emerge never manifest as much more than bundles of grievances, each with his or her own skew of disadvantage” (Mantel, “How Sorrow Became Complete”). In identifying Jacob as the most readily interpretable figure in the novel, Updike and Mantel endeavor to point out an unintentional authorial oversight, a flaw in the novel’s general characterization. Yet underpinning their requests for legible motives and psychological realism is a more basic wish for an understanding of how each of *A Mercy*’s characters is situated within the mythical framework Morrison so crucially activates. Far from diminishing the novel’s potency or firm direction, the apparent haziness of Florens’s characterization and Jacob’s early disappearance from the narrative are central to the historical moment Morrison seeks to interpret, and to the novel’s rejection of hegemonic American origins myths and colonial relationships to the material world.

Updike and Mantel are not incorrect in saying Jacob’s presence in *A Mercy* is more decipherable than that of the novel’s other characters, but they ignore the significant cultural and historical implications of this conclusion, and, as a result, misidentify Morrison’s approach to characterization as a misstep instead of a legitimate formal strategy. Jacob, for example, does not appear more “readily” rendered than Florens because of Morrison’s failure to construct a complete protagonist, but because Jacob is meant to activate a set of extant tropes of American origins that Florens—by virtue of her race and gender—is categorically prohibited from representing (Updike, “Dreamy Wilderness”). As Donald E. Pease details:

...the image repertoire production of the U.S. national community can be ascertained through a recitation of key terms....[that are] commonly understood to be descriptive of

that community. Those images interconnect an exceptional national subject (American Adam) with a representative national scene (Virgin Land) and an exemplary national motive (errand into the wilderness). The composite result of the interaction of the images was [that] the mythological entity—Nature’s Nation...could be understood as indistinguishable from the sovereign power creative of nature. (Pease 4)

In *A Mercy*, Morrison uses Jacob to recognizably activate key national images of the American Adam on an errand in New World environment, a strategy this chapter will examine closely. However, it is useful to first understand Jacob’s broader formal function in the text: to emblemize tropes that have been (falsely) understood to represent the pre-national and national history of America, but which in fact serve to perpetuate limited definitions of who America’s national subjects are, and what our national motives should be. Morrison presents Jacob with clarity because Jacob’s role in American national history has been presented and passed on with similar clarity and insistence, in spite of its exclusionary and ahistorical foundations. Likewise, Florens’s more evasively rendered interiority is not an accident, but serves instead to reflect the ways in which the experiences of enslaved women in 17<sup>th</sup>-century America have been similarly muddled and muted in cultural understanding and predicates. By portraying *A Mercy*’s historically marginalized characters in noticeably limited or inaccessible ways, Morrison problematizes the very task of representing the unrepresented in pre-national mythmaking and placemaking. In this sense, I return the readings of Best and others, not simply to locate what Morrison obscures, but to illuminate the purpose behind and implications of *A Mercy*’s narrative opacity.

One primary origins myth *A Mercy* seeks to activate and ultimately complicate is the British colonial errand to cultivate the New World, most vividly chronicled by Early American

historian Perry Miller in *Errand into the Wilderness* (1956). Miller's work takes its title from Samuel Danforth's 1670 sermon, *A Brief Recognition of New England's Errand into the Wilderness*, which details the simultaneously material and religious task the Puritans assigned themselves on the North American continent—a terrain that had the potential to be a new Eden in the eyes of its white settlers, but only if its devilish wilderness could be successfully subdued and cultivated, in order to recover the physical and spiritual form of a garden. Or, as Miller puts it, Danforth recognized that for the Puritans, “a basic conditioning factor was the frontier—the wilderness” (Miller, *Errand* 1). Thus, Miller argues, the Puritan errand had a doubled context not simply in the sense of the simultaneity of its religious and material demands, but also because the concept of an errand itself contained internal contradictions. It meant at once the relatively concrete “...short journey on which an inferior is sent to convey a message or to perform a service for his superior,” and also a complex psychological condition: “the actual business on which the actor goes, the purpose itself, the conscious intention in his mind” (Miller 3). *A Mercy* examines both of these possible understandings as its characters conduct their own errands of varying urgency and intent throughout the New World environment. However, unlike Miller's descriptions of a spotless (if somewhat deluded) Puritan mission of cultivation on the North American continent, *A Mercy's* narrative form calls into question the possibility of any “white Americans' innocent inheritance of landscape” (Westling 39). From the outset, Morrison illuminates the racialized framework underlying American placemaking by contrasting the separate journeys of Jacob and Florens through *A Mercy's* environment. Criticism has largely focused on the exclusive importance of Jacob's rehearsal of a recognizable colonial mission, unfolding on late 1600s American terrain. Equally important, I want to claim, is Morrison's puzzling, and not immediately identifiable, invocation of the colonial errand in the wilderness

carried out in the novel by Florens.

*A Mercy*'s first lines, rather than clarifying historical context or narrative setting, instead situate the reader only within the jurisdiction of Florens's storytelling. "Don't be afraid," Florens commands to begin with, a direction that, for lack of knowledge of its interlocutors, implicates the reader in its address (Morrison, *Mercy* 4). "My telling can't hurt you in spite of what I've done," she continues, further establishing an imbalance of narrative knowledge between Florens and her audience: though Florens possesses the information necessary to understand her story, Morrison at least initially refuses to reveal it, leaving the reader with the ability to do little more than speculate as to why, exactly, Florens might be culpable. Florens proceeds in narrating her "confession," while offering scarcely more information about who she is or whom she is addressing, resulting—at least from the perspective of Updike—in a novel that refuses to explain the story it seems anxious to begin (Morrison, *Mercy* 4). If Jacob's precise characterization turns out to be one of *A Mercy*'s most important formal choices, Updike's secondary grievance, that Morrison begins Florens's narrative in medias res, "before the reader has a clue to what is going on," can also be understood as crucial to the novel's project (Updike, "Dreamy Wilderness"). Updike explains away the significance of the novel's confusing opening as an example of Morrison's "pernicious" Faulknerian tics, but Florens's narrative in fact remains somewhat bewildering for most of its duration (Updike, "Dreamy Wilderness"). She writes exclusively in present tense, addressing her entire narrative to the same initially unspecified "you," who is not revealed until late in the novel to be Florens's lover, an unnamed free African blacksmith. In withholding clarifying information like timeline and audience from Florens's narration, Morrison underscores just how little context most readers have for understanding Florens's experience. Her "errand" in the novel is less obvious than Jacob's, because Florens, as a young enslaved

woman, is a readily recognizable figure neither in hegemonic American history nor within established narratives about the colonial American environment (Morrison, *Mercy* 5). Her hazy “you,” connects Florens’s 17<sup>th</sup>-century address to Morrison’s 21<sup>st</sup>-century reader, and her ungrammatical use of the present tense compounds this effect of an ongoing urgency to her narrative. Morrison thus frames Florens’s struggle to negotiate her experience within *A Mercy*’s wilderness and early American society as unresolved and still ongoing, just as material an exertion in Morrison’s present moment as it was in Florens’s colonial period.

In tension with this sense of general opacity, *A Mercy* does begin by activating the legacy of Miller’s errand into the wilderness. But Morrison does not rehearse the concerns of Danforth’s sermon so much as refute them: Florens’s journey through the New World environment is defined not by its relationship to higher divine glory, but instead to material fears and Florens’s subjugated societal position. She explains: “Nothing frights me more than this errand and nothing is more temptation...I want to run across the trail through the beech and white pine but I am asking myself which way? Who will tell me? Who lives in the wilderness between this farm and you and will they help me or harm me? What about the boneless bears in the valley?” (Morrison, *Mercy* 5). Morrison situates Florens’s errand in a larger narrative context that first recalls, and then diverges from, Danforth’s religious mission to carve an Eden from the wilderness of the New World. Although Morrison gestures to the cultural legacy of Puritan New World colonization with language like “errand” and “temptation,” Florens’s journey is not underpinned by religious motivations. She instead seeks the blacksmith in the hope of producing a form of earthly salvation—he has medical knowledge that might heal an ailing Rebekka after Jacob’s death, therefore preserving the community of women on the Vaark farm that shelters Florens, in spite of her position as a slave. Her motivations are deeply personal, and rooted in her

desire to meet her lover again, injecting individual stakes into the lofty concept of an errand meant to transcend earthly concerns, and her fright is further founded in beliefs that refute the notion of an empty, imperiled wilderness of spiritual pitfalls or male salvation. It is not the devil Florens dreads encountering in the forest, but rather human beings of mixed allegiances, who pose obstacles as daunting as bears and other more obviously wild threats. The environment Florens reckons with, in other words, is not an undifferentiated mass of invisible religious peril, but an articulated, material world of beech and white pine, whose hazards lie in the physical threats of faint trails and both animal and human predators.

Though Florens does invoke New World wilderness in relation to religious peril early on, the expected colonial message is altered by her personal experiences. She recalls her passage by ship to Virginia with her mother, younger brother, and a priest, whom she refers to only as Reverend Father. After someone on the ship steals Florens's shoes, the priest is the first to instill in her a sense of hazard in relation to the New World, although for Florens, the danger is not spiritual so much as physical, and it manifests tangibly in the environment. "When I arrive here I believe it is the place he warns against," she thinks, "The freezing in hell that comes before the everlasting fire where sinners bubble and singe forever. But the ice comes first, he says. And when I see knives of it hanging from the house and trees and feel the white air burn my face I am certain the fire is coming" (Morrison, *Mercy* 8-9). Though she ventriloquizes the European pastor's warning of spiritual peril, Florens projects her uneasiness onto her physical surroundings of snow and ice that seem to suggest it is the environment itself that threatens, not the spiritual forces within it. The later ruin that befalls Florens and her female companions is similarly traceable to the physical environment necessitating that Florens, whose stolen shoes are not replaced, develop feet "with strong soles, tougher than leather, that life requires" (Morrison,

*Mercy* 4). Before she can become physically conditioned to the environment, however, Florens must undertake her errand to find the blacksmith and save Rebekka, wearing Jacob's "boots that fit a man not a girl," acting out a wilderness encounter while moving through the world wearing a physical reminder that her errand is one that history has traditionally assigned to male Europeans (Morrison, *Mercy* 4). Lest the reader forget the stakes of this reversal, Florens's boots also conceal a letter from Rebekka, whose endorsement attempts to grant Florens's black body safe passage through a decisively peopled environment, if only for the purpose of Rebekka's own salvation.

If the significance of Rebekka's letter and Florens's understanding of her environment are at first difficult to recognize, Florens's inhospitable opening to the novel, and the unclear motivation for her errand, rather than working against *A Mercy*'s message, instead turn out to be central to Morrison's project. The novel's overall disorientation can be contextualized by Karla F. C. Holloway's suggestion that works by Morrison and other black woman writers contain intentionally ambiguous or nebulous structural elements as part of a larger narrative strategy. Holloway identifies these as "recursive structures [which] accomplish a blend between figurative processes that are reflective (like a mirror) and symbolic processes....[that are] reflexive" (Holloway 388). This results in "'multiplied'...texts that are at once emblematic of the culture they describe as well as interpretive of this culture" (Holloway 388). Black American women writers, Holloway asserts, working within a national literary culture that neither acknowledges nor esteems the experiences of black women, developed authorial strategies for interpreting the exclusionary cultural traditions they must operate within. Holloway applies these concepts to *The Bluest Eye*, but the recursive elements of *A Mercy*—wherein Florens and Jacob take turns repeating and revising aspects of the other's prior thoughts or perceptions of environment—are

equally important to its interpretation of the cultural myths it activates. Morrison uses Jacob to reflect hegemonic ideas about American environmental relationships through the trope of the American Adam, while simultaneously destabilizing these same ideas by inserting Florens's own symbolic errand back into the novel. If Florens's errand and her motives are more difficult to interpret by comparison, her narrative's conspicuous opacity undermines the apparent transparency of Jacob's rehearsal of American origins, forcing the reader to acknowledge it as false or incomplete.

In an initial formal undercutting of Jacob's narrative authority, Morrison situates his clear embodiment of hegemonic early American environment narratives only after Florens' much stranger and more subversive beginning to the novel. By contrast, Jacob's experience of the novel's landscape is strikingly legible, requiring no later plot information to contextualize, and no subversive analysis to make sense of. So clearly is Jacob meant to trigger extant colonial settler narratives that Morrison identifies him first not by name but by type: "The man moved through the surf, stepping carefully over pebbles and sand to shore. Fog, Atlantic and reeking of plant life, blanketed the bay and slowed him...Unlike the English fogs he had known since he could walk, or those way north where he lived now, this one was sun fired, turning the world into thick, hot gold" (Morrison, *Mercy* 10). In contrast to Florens's narration of her arrival to North America with the expectation of a frozen hell, Jacob's experience of a new and Edenic environment is luxuriantly slow and revelatory as he takes to riding "an old Lenape trail" (Morrison, *Mercy* 11). Though his specific identity as Jacob Vaark is later detailed, his originally nameless presentation allows him to remain at least partially the familiar figure of the archetypal European male, positioned within the landscape of North America in the tradition of the British colonizers Florens so conspicuously does not embody. As Jennifer Terry points out, Morrison

first “aligns Jacob with the pioneer and appears to rehearse familiar interpretations of American landscape” as a site of empty opportunity, an environment that visually and symbolically reflects the literal gold and profit Jacob believes it will offer him (Terry 131). If this symbolism on its own seems almost excessively transparent, Morrison makes Jacob’s legible pre-national tropes even more obvious for their proximity to Florens’s less discernable opening to the novel.

To further establish the link—and contrasts—between Jacob and Florens, Morrison narrates Jacob’s experience of his environment with language that echoes Florens’s first description of her errand. However Jacob’s narration, unlike Florens’s, is immediately easy to historicize. Jacob sees himself as an individual, but Morrison allies him closely with a generally recognizable colonial mentality, reinforced by his later rumination:

...breathing the air of a world so new, almost alarming in rawness and temptation, never failed to invigorate him. Once beyond the warm gold of the bay, he saw forests untouched since Noah, shorelines beautiful enough to bring tears, wild food for the taking....it was hardship, adventure that attracted him...here he was, a ratty orphan become landowner, making a place out of no place, a temperate living from a raw life.  
(Morrison, *A Mercy* 13)

Jacob repeats Florens’s earlier use of “temptation,” but because of his function in the text as a representative white male European encountering the New World, his usage of the word has familiar religious implications, and is much easier to parse. His understanding of the landscape not as Florens’s site of horror and damnation but rather as untrammled and plentiful Eden, a collection of tempting commodities to be maximized for personal gain, is, as Valerie Babb points out, identifiable as an echo of similar mindsets expressed in narratives by early European settlers (Babb 147). However, in *A Mercy*, as Babb neglects to mention, Jacob rehearses not only “a

mythohistory of American origins,” but also Florens’s own first experience of “a world breaking open...[whose] newness trembles me” as a site for both alarm and temptation (Babb 147; Morrison, *Mercy* 6). This recurrence serves not to rewrite or override Florens’s account of her environment, but to highlight the gap between Florens’s unsteady status in the wilderness and the colonial entitlement with which Jacob surveys New World resources.

In contrast to Florens, who requires Rebekka’s authorization in order to undertake her errand at all, Jacob exercises authority over the material world easily and without fear, embodying not just a colonial economic mindset, but also a colonial understanding of the New World environment. Just as early colonists believed in a porous English body that was susceptible to new climates, as nature could be “breathed in, drunk, eaten, absorbed under the skin, and incorporated into one’s faculties,” Jacob too inhales the environment in a kind of mutual possession—he breathes “the air of a world so new,” and in exchange, the place itself makes possible his transformation from orphan into landowner and adventurer (Parrish 78; Morrison, *Mercy* 13). Thus as Jacob travels through the material world, he moves not only from climate to climate, but also through the various types of man he can be in relation to the environment he inhabits, and the various lives made possible for him in different places. Morrison’s use of the word “temperate” to describe Jacob’s understanding of environment hints at *A Mercy*’s later rewriting of Jacob’s relationship to place, since the temperate living Jacob seeks recalls 17<sup>th</sup>-century classifications of environments as justification for racial enslavement. The English distinction between tropical and “temperate zones,” used to validate European enslavement of Caribbean natives and later Africans under the logic that “people in hot climates could not create great civilizations,” underpins with some uneasiness Jacob’s belief that he can

conduct a temperate and therefore great existence in the New World (Parrish 261). As *A Mercy* will later show, Jacob too will base this greatness upon exploited labor in the Caribbean.

However, Jacob, for all his sense of personal opportunity and potential in a place that is “no place,” is, like Florens, not unaware of competing human claims overlying the natural environment (Morrison, *Mercy* 13). He reminisces about becoming acquainted with the territory he travels southward through “when it was still the old Swedish nation,” before cycling past and then dismissing former names that connote shifting imperial interests: “Fort Orange; Cape Henry; Nieuw Amsterdam; Wiltwyck” (Morrison, *Mercy* 14). Curiously, “in his own geography,” Jacob navigates according to more lasting Native American territorial borders, from “Algonquin to Sesquehana via Chesapeake on through Lenape since turtles had a life span longer than towns” (Morrison, *Mercy* 14). Terry points out that Jacob’s sensitivity to the land claims of “natives, to whom it all belonged,” complicates his initial representation of simple “European self-realization and reinvention” (Morrison, *Mercy* 14; Terry 133). In spite of his colonial ambitions, Jacob shows “unexpected respect for the rights and ways of life of indigenous inhabitants...instilling a sense of an existing ‘human geography’” (Terry 133). Terry argues that this has the effect of reducing Jacob’s settler entitlement to an “insignificance,” in the face of a larger “struggle for territory and the right to name” an already populated New World landscape (Terry 133). Yet Terry’s interpretation glosses over the fact that Jacob, though aware of Native American territorial claims and the fragility of European control in North America, is ultimately unequivocal upon reaching his destination that “he was, at last, in Maryland which, at the moment, belonged to the king. Entirely” (Morrison, *Mercy* 15). In understanding the land to be wholly within the jurisdiction of his king, Jacob rejects the nuanced claims he previously recognizes, embracing colonial political structures and land claims. In doing so, Morrison does

not complicate the reader's understanding of Jacob's personal relationship to the environment so much as highlight how flawed his notions of "forests untouched" were from the beginning (Morrison, *Mercy* 13). The myth of an empty America ripe for European settlement has been much revised and ridiculed in historiography of recent decades, and Morrison exposes the inconsistency in the cultural narrative of an early unpeopled wilderness narrative, not Jacob's enactment of it.

Perhaps more importantly, Morrison uses this moment in Jacob's narration not only to critique fundamental myths of American placemaking, but also to highlight the problematic historical processes by which such myths are constructed and perpetuated. The reader is introduced to *A Mercy's* world by Florens, but only through Jacob's perspective does Morrison attach a familiar human political history to the novel's material environment. In doing so, Morrison not only complicates virginal New World environment myths, but also demonstrates the flawed mechanisms through which such myths have been reproduced and perpetuated within cultural consciousness. It is Jacob, not Florens, who takes the reader through the colonial political history of the novel's landscape, just as the political history of America has long been conveyed through the exclusive perspective of landed white males. *A Mercy* thus reflects not only the continued presence of exclusionary, false narratives of American history, but also the reason for their initial creation and continued persistence—the teller of the story, in *A Mercy* as in pre-national history, shapes the story being told. But Morrison disrupts, rather than replicates, the exclusionary narrative Jacob activates by situating it after Florens's first, far hazier account of her role in *A Mercy's* environment, reminding the reader that Jacob's experience of the novel's material world and its history, however legible, is not fully foundational.

*A Mercy* probes colonial narratives further by using Jacob to rehearse an understanding of New World environment as a site for potential profit, echoing his first impression of North America as shrouded in “thick, hot gold” (Morrison, *Mercy* 10) Jacob arrives in Maryland at Jublio, the proto-plantation estate of a Portuguese tobacco trader named D’Ortega, and is immediately struck by two sensations. The first is the sight of D’Ortega’s house behind “wide iron gates,” and the second is “the comfortable smell of tobacco leaves, like fireplaces and good women serving ale, [which] cloaked Jublio like a balm” (Morrison, *Mercy* 16). Morrison positions Jacob as an outsider to the culture of the burgeoning tobacco colonies, a modest Virginia planter experiencing an environment that is alien but not altogether unpleasant—the striking tobacco smell is comforting rather than alarming, and Jacob does not, at first, trace it back to the presence of slave labor. D’Ortega’s house, Jacob decides, is “grandiose...but easy, easy to build in that climate. Soft southern wood, creamy stone, no caulking needed...easy work, easy living, but, Lord, the heat” (Morrison, *Mercy* 17). Jacob connects Jublio’s wealth to the specific conditions of its environment—a geographical location where, it is also necessary to point out, 17<sup>th</sup>-century “tobacco culture harmonized with the Chesapeake climate,” accommodating a plantation society supported by a “lengthy frost-free period” and “well drained soils” (Morgan 33). Yet Jacob ignores an element of Jublio’s ease that *A Mercy* on the whole does not: the estate was both physically built and financially made possible by D’Ortega’s slaves, and the easy work and easy living Jacob covets involves only Jublio’s European inhabitants, not its enslaved laborers.

However, rather than accepting this mindset, Morrison uses Jacob’s naiveté about the connection between North America’s natural resources and the burgeoning system of slavery used to mass produce them as a means of exposing a similar gap in cultural understanding of

commodities as unconnected to the places and conditions of their production. *A Mercy* destabilizes Jacob's embodiment of an innocent American Adam by confronting him directly with D'Ortega's offer of a human being as settlement for his debts. Jacob's immediate reaction is refusal and disgust, as "flesh was not his commodity," and his experience of the other, previously innocuous commodities of Jublio is altered by his belated awareness of the people who produce them: "The tobacco odor, so welcoming when he arrived, now nauseated him. Or was it the sugared rice, the hog cuts fried and dripping with molasses, the cocoa.... he couldn't stay there surrounded by a passel of slaves whose silence made him imagine an avalanche seen from a great distance" (Morrison, *Mercy* 25, 25-26). Jacob, who is initially mesmerized by the profusion of America's natural commodities, is forced to confront for the first time the reality of the human labor that produces them. His physical enjoyment of Jublio's commodities is tainted by their proximity to D'Ortega's human laborers, and his disgust is reflected in the environment itself, with its potent tobacco smell that sickens him. Yet rather than absolving himself of responsibility for America's early slave trade, Jacob ultimately accepts Florens as a form of payment under the delusion that removing her from Jublio's environment is its own small act of mercy, thinking, "from his own childhood he knew there was no good place in the world for waifs and whelps other than the generosity of strangers" (Morrison, *Mercy* 37). Yet *A Mercy* makes clear that Jacob has no reservations about benefitting from Florens's enslavement. He has a preference for "steady female labor," and a conviction that "in the right environment, women were naturally reliable... [Florens's] acquisition... could be seen as rescue" (Morrison, *Mercy* 32, 40). It is Jacob's sense of place reassures him that his actions are acceptable—he is certain his Virginia farmland, "sixty cultivated acres out of one hundred and twenty of woodland" is unlike "the steady controlled labor of Julio and the disorderliness of sugar plantations" (Morrison, *Mercy* 39,

35). Jacob associates the cruelty of slave ownership and plantations only with environments like Jublio and the Caribbean—far removed, in his reckoning, from his own temperate home, a logic that reflects the distancing done on a grander scale throughout the history of the European slave trade. Thus in spite of his initial presentation, Jacob is not an innocent in a second Eden—though aware of the silent avalanche that lies behind his decision, he accepts a young Florens as payment, conceding to the demands of empire, no longer a bystander in the corruption of his pristine new world.

Morrison ultimately turns the unfettered entitlement to material resources that enlists Jacob in colonial processes into a symbol for his relationship to the novel's environment. In the comfort of a self-designated status as Florens's savior, Jacob once again commences moving through the material world, this time while considering investing in Barbados plantations as a means of supplementing his own wealth:

...nothing was in his way. There was the heat, of course, but no fog, gold or gray, impeded him....he fondled the idea of an even more satisfying enterprise. And the plan was as sweet as the sugar on which it was based. And there was a profound difference between the intimacy of slave bodies at Jublio and a remote labor force in Barbados. Right? Right, he thought, looking at a sky vulgar with stars. Clear and Right. The silver that glittered there was not at all unreachable. And that wide swath of cream pouring through the stars was his for the tasting...his dreams were of a grand house of many rooms rising on a hill above the fog. (Morrison, *Mercy* 40-41)

Just as Jacob's initial experience of his gold-swathed surroundings presage the economic ambitions underlying his later acceptance of a human being as a form of payment, he once again reads in his environment questions of the enterprises to be built upon the commodities of empire.

He finds his way forward unimpeded by fog or other physical obstacles, and the riches of the stars convince him that no profit to be made from his surroundings is unattainable or forbidden. If at first Jacob “represents the possibility of an alternative white maleness that does not take advantage of arbitrarily constructed race and gender privilege,” he nevertheless succumbs to the temptation of an empire already well under way in the New World, and his dream of a house upon a hill stands uneasily as a final symbol of Jacob’s way of being in his environment (Babb 632). Though Jacob becomes a slave owner by the end of his narration, he see himself as implicated neither in the casual cruelty of D’Ortega’s tobacco plantation, nor in the brutality of plantations in the Caribbean, in spite of his intention to invest in the sugar trade of Barbados. Instead, his grand ambitions of wealth hover cleanly above the spoils of empire conducted in other locations and other climates, and although the reader is invited to view Jacob as corrupted, his own self-image as a savior and adventurer remains intact.

In presenting *A Mercy*’s environment in this order, first by introducing Florens’s disorienting perspective and then showing how Jacob rewrites or reconfigures narrative developments first gestured to by Florens, Morrison exposes a broader problem in the way American placemaking exists in pre-national narratives. Jacob’s narrative fits comfortably within an extant cultural framework for conceiving of colonial relationships to the environment—Morrison does not need to provide context for Jacob because he readily activates a widely understood male European entitlement to the natural commodities of early America. Florens’s fractured relationship to place, on the other hand, reflects the lack of broader cultural and historical comprehension of the experiences of the enslaved in the New World environment. Though recent historiography has made meaningful strides in recovering perspectives like

Florens's,<sup>4</sup> *A Mercy* illustrates the limits of historical retrieval in reinserting a deliberately suppressed history into hegemonic understanding of authority in the American environment as inherently associated with whiteness and masculinity. Morrison's continual use of fog as a reflection of the pervasiveness and opacity of Jacob's mindset—first as a golden blanket of riches and later as cloaking the reality of slavery—is in this context less an obvious symbolic device than a reflection of a similar blurring that occurs in cultural recounting of America's origins, made all the more potent for its seeming naturalness in the landscape. In *A Mercy*, the environment itself obscures, reflecting the insidious cultural removal of the experiences of black women and similarly othered groups from narratives of American nationhood. Though Florens's perspective is more noticeably opaque, Jacob's narrative is not without its corresponding haziness; Morrison uses Florens's seemingly inchoate narrative to expose the actual incoherency of Jacob's exclusionary myths about American placemaking that have been falsely presented as coherent.

In order to refute such myths, rather than reproduce their marginalizing effects, *A Mercy* resists the same erasure of Florens's perspective that Jacob embodies, first by introducing the reader to *A Mercy's* world through Florens's perspective, not Jacob's, and finally by removing him from the narrative and establishing Florens as the chief voice through which the reader accesses the novel's environment. Florens's first person perspective, like *A Mercy's* sense of

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<sup>4</sup> There is a growing body of work dedicated to recovering and redefining the historical relationships between people of African descent and the North American environment. Philip D. Morgan's *Slave Counterpoint: Black Culture in the Eighteenth-Century Chesapeake & Lowcountry*, for example, details the Virginia plantation economy from the previously unrepresented perspective of its enslaved laborers. Londa Schiebinger's *Secret Cures of Slaves: People, Plants, and Medicine in the Eighteenth-Century Atlantic World* describes in part the medical practices of the enslaved and the role of African naturalists in Atlantic society. Susan Scott Parrish's *American Curiosity: Cultures of Natural History in the Colonial British Atlantic World* discusses understanding and knowledge of the natural world for diasporic 18<sup>th</sup>-century Africans in North America.

place, becomes an element of stability threading through an otherwise evasive novel. Though Jacob seems to rewrite portions of Florens's opening narrative, she is ever in possession of the last word. It is through Florens that the reader learns of the eventual manifestation of Jacob's vision, though Jacob himself falls ill and the house remains incomplete: "I can tell you that even yet it is not complete though your ironwork is wondrous to see. The glittering cobras still kiss at the gate's crown. The house is mighty, waiting only for a glazier" (Morrison, *Mercy* 42-43). Likewise, it is Florens who informs the reader of Jacob's death; he does not live "for even one minute to smell the new cherrywood floors he lies on" (Morrison, *Mercy* 43). Once again, Morrison allows Florens to assume Jacob's expected position in the narrative of American origins, surviving to tell the story as Jacob perishes, just as Florens's journey through the wilderness is ultimately more important to the novel than Jacob's. Jacob, who has indeed built a mighty house from his investments in Barbados, sickens before the house is completed, not even lucid long enough to register the surroundings in which he dies. It is Florens who emerges as central to Morrison's account of American origins, surviving to fully reckon with Jacob's uneasy Eden, admiring the serpents on the gates that have the potential to both separate the Vaark farm from wilderness and swing open to expose it.

*A Mercy* further establishes Florens's perspective as authoritative by recalling Jacob's entitled relationship to his environment in Florens's later narration, exposing Jacob's account of his surroundings as limited. After describing Jacob's death, Florens finally explains the complicated stakes of her errand to bring the blacksmith to heal Rebekka: "For her it is to save her life. For me it is to have one" (Morrison, *Mercy* 43). Florens's sense that taking to the wilderness will deliver her to freedom and agency over her own life is an ironic echo of Jacob's earlier calculations, just as Jacob's experience of a "world so new" rings uneasily for its

proximity to Florens's frightening experience of her world breaking newly open (Morrison, *Mercy* 13). Jacob too finds adventure in the natural world and "never knowing what lay in his path," but unlike Florens, his freedom is not circumscribed by societal systems (Morrison, *Mercy* 14) If Jacob enjoys the experience of a boundless wilderness that erases or mutes societal pressures or demands, Florens, whose perspective is not traditionally acknowledged in the wilderness encounter, experiences freedom in a wild environment that dehumanizes everyone, regardless of race or gender. As she grows more entangled in the material world, she is increasingly forced to obey the demands of her surroundings: "I am hurrying to gain ground before all light is over. The land slopes sharply and I have no way to go but down as well. Hard as I try I lose the road...Can I go more, I wonder. Should I?" (Morrison, *Mercy* 48). Florens becomes physically lost, her movements circumscribed by external conditions like slope and daylight, but she nevertheless retains her agency as an actor in the landscape. Although her questions are laced with fear and uncertainty, she is answerable not to Jacob, Rebekka, or any other human being in wondering whether or where she should continue. Instead, she must respond only to her external environment, which challenges her as it would any other person, enslaved or free.

Florens comes finally reinterpret Jacob's exploitative environmental vision, just as Morrison rewrites, with Florens at its center, an origins narrative that has been used to convey Jacob's story by obscuring Florens's. Florens offers a different vision of the same environment where Jacob saw his house rising on a hill: "Behind the new house...the rise, over the hill beyond. I see a path between rows of elm trees and enter it. Underfoot is weed and soil. In a while the path turns away from the elms...to my left is a hill. High, very high...I hear something behind me and turn to see a stag moving up the rock side. He is great. And grand. Standing

there...I wonder what else the world will show me” (Morrison, *Mercy* 82). Florens’s vision on a hill counters the insidiousness of Jacob’s house as monument to the colonization that erases her enslavement and her history. Instead, she sees grandness in the natural world in the form of a stag, a prey species not traditionally associated with power, that nevertheless gives her the impression that she is “loose to do what I choose, [beside] the stag, the wall of flowers” (Morrison, *Mercy*, 82). Removed from the context of Jacob’s house and placed in a terrain of wilderness, Morrison suggests, Florens may assume an identity and a future not limited by the colonial systems that would silence her. As Terry states of this moment, Florens’s “position as a slave circumscribes her access to dominant versions of American identity and shapes this hopeful yet bewildering vision of agency” that allows Florens to “speak back” to Jacob’s “narrowed, exploitative relation to this environment” (Terry 138, 139). Terry less persuasively asserts that Florens herself, through her recognition of agency in the material world, is allowed to “embody the attributes of the self-reliant pioneer” type first portrayed by Jacob (Terry, 137). This interpretation ignores Florens’s emotional experience of her ability to choose, which differentiates her from Jacob. Florens elaborates: “I am a little scare of this looseness. Is that how free feels? I don’t like it. I don’t want to be free of you because I am live only with you” (Morrison, *Mercy* 82). If Jacob is presented as unbounded and invigorated in the New World, Morrison is careful to qualify Florens’s experience of freedom, precluding the possibility of her assuming Jacob’s colonial mindset over the material world. Florens is frightened by a looseness she has never been offered within the confines of D’Ortega’s plantation or Jacob’s farm, and her reluctance to part with the blacksmith reflects an inability to truly free herself from societal hierarchies of power and mastery, which continue to exert an influence over Florens that Jacob is never forced to contend with.

In threading the language of Florens's narration into Jacob's experiences, and vice versa, Morrison confuses the opacity of Florens's perspective into Jacob's apparently clear account of his own role and actions in *A Mercy*. In doing so, Morrison is able to use Jacob to engage with problematic national origins myths without replicating their marginalizing effects—Florens's perspective ultimately arises in the novel not as fully coherent or legible, but as gesturing towards a fuller account of New World encounters that Jacob's experiences obscure. If Morrison seems all the while to be withholding certain aspects of Florens's knowledge or interiority, she does so to maintain the overarching irrecoverability of the experiences of the enslaved in early American history, which no amount of fictional imaginings can meaningfully or wholly recover. The formal aspects of *A Mercy* that appeared most problematic to its early reviewers—its uneven characterization, its seemingly hazy storymaking—can thus be seen as working “to expose [hegemonic] national identity as an artifact rather than a tacit assumption,” a project that has been undertaken with success by postcolonial historians in recent decades but has not transferred widely to national cultural consciousness (Pease 5). Morrison is among the first novelists—and certainly the only of her literary stature—to have revisited the period in an attempt to rewrite our larger cultural understanding of it. *A Mercy's* revision of America's original myths has real potential to do the work of transferring into national consciousness the revisionist history that has become commonly accepted in academic circles, though Morrison maintains, through her formal choices, the fraught implications of such an undertaking. History impinges on Morrison's storytelling, because history impinges on the stories it is possible to tell, and *A Mercy* constructs a set of narratives that waver in and out of one another, gesturing and circling back to visions of a material world and its human relationships that resist concrete categorization, and continue to evade interpretation.

## Chapter 2: Unmastered Women

*A Mercy*'s underlying motivation, and the structure of the novel as a whole, can be understood as an attempt to reorganize myths of American origins around the central, fundamental separation of Florens and her mother. Though it is not immediately apparent in Florens's initial narration of her errand nor Jacob's account of D'Ortega's plantation, the disruption of the mother-daughter bond, misunderstood by both Florens and Jacob as signifying preference for a male child, is the action that "inaugurates" *A Mercy*'s plot (Best 467). In a novel concerned with the pervasiveness and insidiousness of national and historical myths, the severing of Florens from her mother is, as Stephen Best states, Morrison's own "mythic gesture from which all others flow" (Best 467). Though Florens nominally addresses the blacksmith, her narrative also functions as a relentless appeal to the mother she believes abandoned her.

Yet Morrison buries the centrality of this abandonment within the novel's confusing structure, offering several partial, unclear accounts of it in place of a single emotionally resonant depiction. Florens briefly narrates the event in her opening: "Sir is saying he will take instead the woman and the girl, not the baby boy and the debt is gone. A minha mãe begs no. Her baby boy is still at her breast. Take the girl, she says, my daughter, she says. Me. Me" (Morrison, *Mercy* 8). The episode lacks context, expansion, or clarification—Florens's use of the Portuguese *minha mãe* for "my mother" is a further barrier to the English-speaking reader's understanding—and Morrison clouds its significance by quickly moving on to other matters. The moment is re-narrated through Morrison's depiction of Jacob's experiences at Jublio, but Jacob does not recognize the enormity of the impact this event will have on Florens. Thus Florens's yearning for her mother goes partially unvoiced and unrealized in the novel, both by Morrison and by Florens

herself, and Morrison instead displaces the trauma of Florens's perceived abandonment onto other characters and other entities in *A Mercy*.

Best, in his insistence that Morrison means to overwrite *Beloved* with *A Mercy*, asserts that the ghostly daughter figure in the former novel is a means for narratively transferring a sense of historical complicity in slavery and exploitation to the novel's 21<sup>st</sup>-century reader. "For what else does the ghost's ontology function," Best writes of *Beloved*, "if not to form a bridge between the book's characters and its readers and thus make the act of reading an act of judgment in (and of) the historical past?" (Best 472). But to Best, *A Mercy*'s opaque abandonment of Florens by her mother is a formal tactic of a different, unspecified order, signifying "something other than a haunting" (Best, 472). Yet Morrison's portrayal of Florens's mother *is* ghostly—though she does not literally reappear as Sethe's daughter does in *Beloved*, Morrison does give her an incorporeal presence within *A Mercy*. As both character and historical figure, Florens's mother hovers uneasily throughout the novel, conjured by Jacob and often by Florens, never named or fully fleshed out, until finally the novel concludes with a section narrated by what John Updike calls the "disembodied voice" of Florens's mother (Updike, "Dreamy Wilderness"). Worth noting, too, is that her mother is the only character aside from Florens herself whose voice Morrison renders with the immediacy of the first person, underscoring her presence as a specter, rather than a figure who can only be observed prior to death by the novel's third person narrator, like Jacob. With the understanding the Florens's mother exists in the novel at least in part to communicate a haunting, this chapter will explore the novel's broader concerns of gender inequity within its colonial environment, in order to illuminate the historical and cultural implications of Morrison's use of maternal abandonment as *A Mercy*'s frame.

Florens's mother, in the novel's closing pages, offers what can be viewed as *A Mercy's* most resounding pronouncement, a final aphorism the reader might take away from a novel that undoes so many other myths and parables: "There is no protection. To be female in this place is to be an open wound that cannot heal. Even if scars form, the festering is ever below" (Morrison, *Mercy* 191). This explicitly gendered caution is underscored not only by Florens experiences in *A Mercy's* material world as contrasted with Jacob's, but also by Morrison's continual evocation of the concept of "mother hunger" (Morrison, *Mercy* 73). Mother hunger, more than every other corruption in *A Mercy's* world, festers underneath the impossibility of being female in certain narrative and historical environments, and it is communicated in part through the mechanism of Florens's mother as a final, disembodied narrator. However, to fully understand Morrison's presentation of mother hunger and its effects, it is necessary to first make sense of the underlying gender dynamics in *A Mercy's* narrative environment.

Just as she uses recent historiographical recovery efforts to reexamine American myths of white settler errands into virgin wilderness, Morrison takes a similar approach to gender in the novel. In *A Mercy's* diverse community of women brought willingly or unwillingly together by Jacob, Morrison represents the historical blurring of gender, race, and class structures that occurred in Virginia's pre-national period. *A Mercy* fictionalizes a time when "the racial balance was such that most whites were in both intensive and extensive contact with blacks," and European social hierarchies became confused on American soil, as "there was no readymade template whereby English society could be inscribed on the New World, and the presence of Indians and Africans underlined a crucial difference between colonial and metropolitan society" (Sobel 3; Horn 191). Jacob's early estimation that women become reliable in the right environment echoes throughout the novel, its messaging becoming more urgent when considered

in the context of the long historical association of American spaces with a sense of masculine becoming, or as sites that exclusively reinforce male identity. As if to explicitly speak back to such conceptions, Jacob's servant Lina, a Native American woman captured and raised by Presbyterians, cautions Florens midway through the novel that "we never shape the world...The world shapes us" (Morrison, *Mercy* 83).

The "we" in Lina's statement can be understood to mean women, since Morrison links maleness in *A Mercy* with a heightened ability to materially shape the world. Jacob, initially shown to be freer to move through the environment than Florens, also alters his surroundings with the building of his house—an action that has a corresponding but distanced impact on the Barbados environment Jacob exploits to amass wealth. Underwhelmed by Jacob's self-aggrandizement, Lina assesses his house not for the space it occupies, but rather for what it takes away from its environment, thinking: "the third and presumably final house that Sir insisted on building distorted sunlight and required the death of fifty trees" (Morrison, *Mercy* 50). In Lina's reckoning, Jacob's house is neither grand nor necessary, a "profane monument to himself" that disturbs the balance of the landscape (Morrison, *Mercy* 51). In contrast to the instruction she gives to Florens, Lina shows how Jacob's house clearly does shape the world around it, creating a tangible warp in its environment as sunlight is forced to bend around it and an excessive number of trees must fall to raise it (Morrison, *Mercy* 83). The Vaark's white male indentured servants, Willard and Scully, reinforce this notion that maleness is accompanied by an enhanced ability to influence and survive within the New World environment, Scully thinking that "however many females there were, however diligent, they did not fell sixty-foot trees, build pens, repair saddles, slaughter or butcher beef, shoe a horse or hunt" (Morrison, *Mercy* 182). Though within the community of the Vaark farm women equal and at times outnumber men,

Morrison makes clear that their potency in the environment is relatively muted, just as Jacob's house, built by all the inhabitants of his farm with money acquired through Barbados slave labor, remains a monument to him alone.

Nevertheless, in the beginning, the women occupying Jacob's spaces do succeed in shaping a community based in exclusively female bonds. Lina, who is acquired by Jacob before his marriage, is initially wary of Rebekka, "yet the animosity, utterly useless in the wild, died in the womb...The fraudulent competition was worth nothing on land that demanding...They became friends. Not only because somebody had to pull the wasp sting from the other's arm. Not only because it took two to push the cow away from the fence...Mostly because neither knew precisely what they were doing or how" (Morrison, *Mercy* 62). In spite of the troubled power dynamics between them, the task of surviving in the "wild" place that is the Vaark farm ultimately allows for the formation of friendship between Lina and Rebekka. Conceding to the demands of cultivating their specific environment—fraught with wasps and other physical hazards of a former wilderness—the women experience the material world as an equalizer. Though Lina is Rebekka's unpaid subordinate, they are forced to confront the challenges of their survival together and on equal ground, neither one at an advantage over the other, and their eventual friendship is that of capable equals. In Jacob's absence, when the women on the Vaark farm are left to cultivate alone, the power dynamics that would seem to prevent a friendship between a European settler in the New World and her Native American slave are subverted, and their shared goal of survival forges the sort of "mute alliance that comes of sharing tasks" (Morrison, *Mercy* 87). The bond between Lina and Rebekka is not an ahistorical invention on Morrison's part, but a reflection of an understanding that "race relations in early Virginia were more pliable than they would later be, largely because disadvantaged blacks encountered groups

of whites—indentured servants—who could claim to be similarly disadvantaged” (Morgan 8). *Mercy* depicts a community of indentured laborers of various socioeconomic as well as racial backgrounds, including white male indentured servants, Lina, and Rebekka herself, who is not yet wealthy enough to rid herself of the necessity of laboring alongside her white servants and enslaved people of color. In Morrison’s novel, as in early colonial Virginia, “an approximate social and economic (as opposed to legal) parity sometimes outweigh[s] inchoate racial prejudices” (Morgan 10). However, in spite of their historical basis and genuine roots, the attachments formed between the women on Jacob’s farm are ultimately precarious, threatened by the material and social forces surrounding them, and the female community Jacob brings together and leaves behind is unable to sustain itself without him.

After Jacob’s death, gender emerges more forcefully as a factor affecting the survival and organization of the Vaark community. Without a male head of household, the right of the women to physically occupy Jacob’s farm is jeopardized, along with the emotional ties they have formed within it. As Rebekka lies sick, Lina reflects bitterly that “unmastered women and an infant out here, alone, belonging to no one, became wild game for anyone. None of them could inherit; none was attached to a church or recorded in its books. Female and illegal, they would be interlopers, squatters...Lina had relished her place in this small, tight family, but now saw its folly” (Morrison, *Mercy* 68). All of the conditions that lead to friendship between Lina and Rebekka—their isolation, lack of other family, their tentative female solidarity—are transformed into liabilities after Jacob’s death, and the very land they worked to cultivate eludes their possession. Legally, women and in particular women of color in the early Americas are restricted

from inheriting<sup>5</sup> and therefore shaping the world as men can, and their very personhood is undermined without the mastery of a man—in Jacob’s absence, they are wild game instead of women, interlopers within the boundaries of their own home. Once again, Scully reinforces the differences between his status and that of the Vaark’s female servants and slaves, regardless of his similar socioeconomic position as an indentured servant. From a distance, he watches “the ravages of Vaark’s death. And the consequences of women in thrall to men or pointedly without them...The family they had imagined they had become was false. Whatever each one loved, sought, or escaped, their futures were separate as anyone’s guess...Minus bloodlines, he saw nothing yet on the horizon to unite them” (Morrison, *Mercy* 183). Scully does not include himself or Willard in the problem of Jacob’s death, since it is only the women who are at the mercy of men and subsequent lack of them in a burgeoning Virginia colony that was “emphatically a male society” (Horn 182). Their family is thus falsified not through individual fault, but by the lack of broader power given to female attachments—and, as Scully’s use of “bloodlines” suggests, by an absence of familial reproductive ties between them.

However, Morrison is also careful to highlight the differences in Rebekka’s status after Jacob’s death relative to the rest of the farm, showcasing the settler hierarchy that prevents true equality between Lina and Rebekka. To Lina, the tenuous future of the Vaark farm after Jacob’s

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<sup>5</sup> Rebekka, as a widow without a living son, would have been legally allowed to inherit Jacob’s property after his death, though “under the law of coverture, married women could not own property and had no right to control the fruits of their labor...[women] usually did not acquire lifetime or permanent rights to estates or dower property until they became widows” (Brown 125). Lina’s concern appears to be that Rebekka will die, leaving her female dependents without property. Virginia laws were constructed to restrict the transfer of property to enslaved women “in a colony where many English women worked regularly in tobacco fields, [since] creating a legal identity that would distinguish them from enslaved women was crucial to maintaining English family roles” (Brown 128). Instead Rebekka survives, and in becoming a widow, “assum[es] control over household dependents for perhaps the first time,” legally cementing the previously muted racial differences between the Vaark women (Brown 305).

death results not only from the gendered social structures that prevent Rebekka from inheriting, but also from a larger colonial lack of restraint in the environment: “Pride alone made [Sir and Mistress] think that they needed only themselves, could shape a life that way, like Adam and Eve, like gods from nowhere beholden to nothing except their own creations....As long as Sir was alive it was easy to veil the truth: that they were not a family, not even a like-minded group” (Morrison, *Mercy* 69). With her explicit reference to Jacob and Rebekka as an Adam and Eve who shape and later pollute their Eden, Lina makes clear that gender is not the only fraught dynamic at work in the collapse of the Vaark community. Lina does not include herself, Florens, or the other Vaark servants in her myths of Eurocentric paradise or creation, and her understanding that the Vaark women are not a family is rooted in the perilous dynamic of colonial entitlement that is inherent within Lina and Rebekka’s friendship. Even from the outset, Lina recognizes a self-appointed, godlike power in Rebekka that she herself cannot access, destabilizing *A Mercy*’s earlier presentation of equality within a community that requires colonizers to cultivate alongside the colonized. The disaster after Jacob’s death, when Rebekka turns against Lina and the other women, though unanticipated by the characters themselves, is nevertheless a logical outcome for a community whose racialized power dynamics constantly render its surrogate family less permanent and meaningful “than a swallow’s nest” (Morrison, *Mercy* 69).

Morrison ultimately details the inevitable decay of a female community in an environment that fractures families, disrupts successful reproduction, and requires women to exist under the perpetual mastery of men. Sorrow, the Vaark’s allegorically named and ambiguously racialized final unpaid female servant, observes a changed Vaark farm after Jacob’s death, as Rebekka lies ill and Florens is absent on her errand:

Goats wandered from village yards and tore up both newly planted gardens. Layers of insects floated in the water barrel no one had remembered to cover. Damp laundry left too long in the basket began to mold and neither of them returned to the river to wash it again. Everything was in disarray. The weather was warming, and as a result of the canceled visit of a neighbor's bull, no cow foaled. Acres and acres needed turning; milk became clabber in the pan. A fox pawed the hen yard whenever she liked and rats ate the eggs. (Morrison, *Mercy* 155)

Sorrow describes the careful cultivation of the Vaark farm falling into ruin, conveying the emotional devastation and severed personal ties resulting from Jacob's death through a portrait of pastoral decline that infuses the very environment with a sense of profound weakening. Gardens are torn up and water fouled as livestock die and cease to produce food, and there is little to suggest any future renewal or rebirth—all of which amounts to the impression of a wilderness overtaking a landscape that was painstakingly converted to a garden. The wrongness of this encroachment is visceral, and the protracted waning of Lina and Rebekka's hard won cultivation leads Sorrow to the novel's most explicit pronouncement of doom: "There had always been tangled strings among them. Now they were cut. Each woman embargoed herself; spun her own web of thoughts unavailable to anyone else. It was as though, with or without Florens, they were falling away from one another" (Morrison, *Mercy* 156). The destruction of the Vaark community, though disturbing to each of the women involved, nevertheless appears an inevitable result of the social structures underlying their uneasy alliances even from the outset. Furthermore, if Jacob's environmental visions are ultimately about ownership, succession, and the building of the material environment as a marker of a masculine self, Sorrow portrays the women's existence—and fulfillment—as linked instead to the impossibility of viable

reproduction, a contrast that is heightened by the novel's attention elsewhere to motherhood and maternal longing.

Florens and Lina are first associated with the term "mother hunger," but it can be applied as easily to each of the women who are brought together one way or another by Jacob Vaark (Morrison, *Mercy* 73). When Jacob brings Florens home, Lina "[falls] in love with her right away, as soon as she saw her shivering in the snow" (Morrison, *Mercy* 70). Lina immediately identifies Florens not only as a replacement for Rebekka's newly dead son, but as an orphan who, in spite of her enslavement, paradoxically belongs to no one, and therefore "could be, would be, [Lina's] own" (Morrison, *Mercy* 71). Lina takes Florens in, teaching her how to navigate the Vaark farm and telling her stories, after which "Florens would sigh...her head on Lina's shoulder and when sleep came the little girl's smile lingered. Mother hunger—to be one or to have one—both of them were reeling from that longing which, Lina knew, remained alive, traveling the bone" (Morrison, *Mercy* 73). Florens, haunted by the notion of a mother who chose to save her son and sell her daughter, is equally susceptible to mother hunger as Lina, who delivered Rebekka's four babies to die and can have no children herself. For each of the women on the Vaark farm, mother hunger manifests as a kind of violence—an autonomous, living force that occupies their physical bodies. As Cathy Covell Waegner states succinctly, it also has practical motivations, functioning as a "need to establish a unit which could at least provide a psychological hold" for the women on the Vaark farm, who lack the ability to form legal attachments to one another or the material world they inhabit (Waegner, "Ruthless Epic Footsteps" 99). Sorrow perhaps demonstrates this yearning most clearly, in her craving for "a real person, a person of her own, growing inside her" (Morrison, *Mercy* 145).

This desire to possess someone through motherhood curiously evokes the novel's other less ambiguously detrimental forms of possession, including Jacob's need to conquer his surroundings, and D'Ortega's enslavement of human beings. But mother hunger is a form of ownership that is separate from the way Jacob owns Florens or Sorrow, or even the way Jacob hopes to possess his environment—rather, it is a desire for an ally and a lineage that will mitigate the burden of female powerlessness. Lina's yearning to possess and protect Florens is fueled by childhood memories of her decimated community of "industrious mothers," and when Sorrow does give birth, she is for the first time proud of "having done something, something important, by herself" (Morrison, *Mercy* 58, 157). After her baby is born, Sorrow renames herself "Complete," suggesting that grief in *A Mercy* is dependent upon the involuntary, bodily function of mother hunger, stemming from a need for a connection to the past and an assurance of a future (Morrison, *Mercy* 158). The surrogacy the other Vaark women must resort to, using each other as replacements for their own disrupted families, proves insufficient in satisfying mother hunger's demands.

Crucially, Morrison communicates the origin of and barriers against the fulfillment of mother hunger through a parable of colonial entitlement in the material world. Lina repeatedly tells Florens the story of an eagle who "laid her eggs in a nest far above and far beyond the snakes and paws that hunted them," only to be killed by a traveler who threatens her nest (Morrison, *Mercy* 72):

...one day a traveler climbs a mountain nearby...admiring all he sees below him. The turquoise lake, the eternal hemlocks, the starlings sailing into clouds cut by a 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. The shells of the eagle's eggs quiver and one even cracks. The eagle...swoops down to claw away his laugh...but the traveler...raises his stick and strikes her...Screaming she falls and falls. Over the turquoise lake, beyond the eternal hemlocks, through clouds cut by rainbow. (Morrison, *Mercy* 73)

Morrison transforms Jacob's benign adventurer model into Lina's mythical story of the consequences of colonial possession, and, as Terry explains, "for the reader, this encounter with the landscape...works as an allegory of New World conquest and ownership" (Terry 136). Yet scholarship generally misses the importance of this story as an expression of Lina's mother hunger, and its implications for the gender dynamics of *A Mercy* as a whole. The traveler, caught up in the rapture of possession, ignores the irony of his position—the very perfection that makes him want to own the landscape is perverted by his intrusion, as the eagle dies an unnatural death at the traveler's own hands. Terry reads the ultimate survival of the eggs as hopeful, but in the context of the childless and motherless women of the Vaark farm, it is more appropriate to interpret it as futile (Terry 136). Lina's tale reaches beyond simple condemnation of the ease of colonial entitlement to suggest that generational trauma is linked to the colonial environment: the New World that houses the Vaark farm is a place where motherhood is disrupted, and families unnaturally damaged by various forces of colonization. The eagle's eggs are left to hatch alone, and, if the experiences of the Vaark women—"orphans, each and all"—are any guide, they will be left with a legacy of insatiable mother hunger (Morrison, *Mercy* 69). Just as the traveler's litany of ownership falls on the land itself, booming and expanding across the natural world, it is the environment of Lina's story, its "turquoise lake, the eternal hemlocks," that recurs elsewhere in novel to convey the sorrow of interrupted motherhood (Morrison, *Mercy* 73). Mother hunger, through the lens of Lina's story, can thus be understood as rooted in a colonial environment that

prohibits motherhood from naturally or safely unfolding, manifesting as an appetite the Vaark women cannot control within themselves, a suspended lineage that lives inside their very bodies.

If mother hunger as a whole cannot be resolved in *A Mercy*, Florens's underlying problem of maternal abandonment is addressed, specifically through Morrison's return to Florens's mother at the end of the novel. Early on, Florens describes herself as bothered by a seemingly crucial message from her mother that goes unheard: "...I have a worry....mothers nursing greedy babies scare me. I know how their eyes go when they choose. How they raise them to look at me, hard, saying something I cannot hear. Saying something important to me, but holding the little boy's hand (Morrison, *Mercy* 9). Though Morrison signals that Florens is missing information and may have misunderstood her mother's actions, the reader is left to assume that whatever Florens's mother said to her will remain unknown, and the novel seems to accept the impetus for Florens's abandonment to be her mother's preference for a male child. But belatedly, after Florens has concluded her narration and there seems to be no direction left in which to push the novel, Morrison shifts this frame by turning to Florens's mother. Her *minha mãe* explains that she begged Jacob to take Florens instead of her son in order to shield her daughter from the sexual assault she herself had been forced to endure at Jublio, identifying Jacob as a man "with no animal in his heart" (Morrison, *Mercy* 191). The assumed abandonment that initiates the long legacy of mother hunger in *A Mercy* is revealed instead to be "no protection...but difference," not a divine "miracle" but a human "mercy" (Morrison, *Mercy* 195).

This late information alters the reader's understanding not only of the plot events of the story, but also of the source of mother hunger, a formal move on Morrison's part that calls into question Best's pronouncement that *A Mercy* frees itself from maternal hauntings. No longer does mother hunger seem to be an inescapable female condition, a product of the environment

itself, but instead a more direct result of corruptive colonial processes, supported by the work Morrison does early on in laying out the gendered dynamics of *A Mercy*'s environment and the derailment of female solidarity. *A Mercy*'s final spectral message clarifies Florens's mother's grief: "I stayed on my knees. In the dust where my heart will remain each night and every day until you understand what I know and long to tell you: to be given dominion over another is a hard thing; to wrest dominion over another is a wrong thing; to give dominion of yourself to another is a wicked thing. Oh Florens. My love. Hear a tua mãe" (Morrison, *Mercy* 195-196). Florens's mother returns too late to correct her daughter's understanding of her abandonment, but Morrison does allow her reader access to the truth of the event, suggesting that a restoration of lost addresses and historical voices, though limited (even Florens's mother's name is withheld), is not a wholly futile task. Morrison cannot repair the mother-daughter bond for Florens, nor satiate for any of the women in the novel the maternal disruption born of colonization and the codification of racial and gendered difference as part of American placemaking. These forms of grief remain unresolved in *A Mercy*, as they are in pre-national history. But for her 21<sup>st</sup>-century reader, Morrison offers a recovery of Florens's mother's voice and an explanation of her own mother hunger. Florens remains haunted by her inability to know what her mother meant to tell her, but Morrison's reader does not. Best argues that while *Beloved*'s ghost "...calls us back to witness...*A Mercy* abandons us to a more baffled, cut-off, foreclosed position with regard to the slave past" (Best 472). Yet in concluding the novel with an address from Florens's mother to her daughter that only the reader is able to hear, Morrison allows her reader to bear witness to the truth of her narrative, if not to a cathartic emotional resolution. It is Florens herself who is left with a baffled understanding of her own history and maternal attachment, communicated through *A Mercy*'s earlier, partial scenes of her mother's

choice that foreclose for Florens any interpretation beyond abandonment. Though *A Mercy*'s historical actors remain baffled within the confines of their own time and place, Morrison offers her contemporary readers a wider view, through fiction, of her novel's historical maternal grief and mercy.

In so allowing the reader to bear witness where Florens cannot, Morrison engages her audience not in judgment of past individuals, but in judgment of a hegemonic understanding of the pre-national past as a complete narrative. The tidy colonial myths that continue to pervade cultural consciousness, shown in the first chapter of this thesis to be based in limited beliefs about who can be an actor in the environment, are further exposed in *A Mercy* as making no room for the acknowledgement of colonially-impelled grief, and in particular maternal grief. Morrison centers her own account of American origins around the mythic gesture of Florens's (non)abandonment and Lina's parable of mother hunger, asserting these experiences too as necessary national legends. All the while, Morrison allows her female characters a limited authority or ability to shape *A Mercy*'s material world, and, as a result, a reduced ability to influence the societal systems responsible for their creation of their own mother hunger.

### Chapter 3: Internal and External Environments

If one of *A Mercy*'s central objectives is to mythologize maternal loss alongside pre-national narratives that do not account for race or gender, the novel also suggests that the environment itself may be leveraged to unearth the suppressed histories hegemonic American placemaking has attempted to bury. *A Mercy*'s general effect of disorientation stems in part from a lack of access to the internal concerns or emotions of its characters, rendering their actions at times inexplicable, but the novel's strong sense of place stands in contrast to its more inchoate qualities, often serving to communicate what the characters themselves seem unable or unwilling to convey. Morrison frequently depicts a character's emotional state through a description of the novel's environment, as when Sorrow's dismay at the crumbling of the Vaark family is diverted into a description of pastoral decline, or when Lina's mother hunger is demonstrated through the symbolic story of the eagles and the turquoise lake. Though this muddling of interiority and exteriority makes it difficult to coherently track a character's psychological state throughout the novel, it places heightened significance on what *A Mercy* does communicate through the novel's material world.

As Stephen Best points out, "to read *A Mercy* requires attentiveness to who is speaking, and to whom, and through which medium, and in which genre, but the novel evades capture by resetting all these conditions of utterance with every turn of the page" (Best 469). Narrative voice, it is true, is an unstable entity in the novel. Not only is Florens's narration being constantly intruded upon by another character, but Morrison continuously turns what should be an internally expressed emotion into an external environmental condition, until *A Mercy* almost appears to be conveying its story through the medium of the environment itself. For Best, *A Mercy*'s lack of a cohesive plot-based narrative or psychologically-rich characterization allows the novel to move

beyond *Beloved*'s mode of fictionally retrieving lost history while melancholically asserting the irrecoverability of that same history. Instead, Best argues, Morrison's resurrection of America's masculinized and racialized early history in *A Mercy* "opens the door to an appreciation of the slave past as it falls away, as that which falls away" (Best 468). In Best's approximation, *A Mercy* does not invite melancholy for the irretrievable past, but instead "incites mourning," taking the form of "an archive of dead letters...[whose] failure to arrive comes from never having been sent" (Best 472, 468). Yet to reduce *A Mercy* to a collection of dead letters is to miss the nuances of Morrison's tangled dispatches. Florens, for her part, is intent on composing a message that by nature of its addressees must go undelivered—neither her mother nor the blacksmith are in any position to receive it. She tells her story not in spite of this complication, as a dead letter, but *because* of it, as part of Morrison's constant blurring in *A Mercy* between what is internal and what is external, and which histories can be seen or received and which cannot. Through an eventual, material externalization of Florens's narrative—she inscribes it physically onto the walls of Jacob's house—Morrison is able to convey the living potency of her story, since the past, in *A Mercy*, does not fall away so much as constantly recur as part of the narrative environment itself.

Early in the novel, environment operates externally to shape the actions of Morrison's characters and their communities. Florens and Jacob must confront the outside forces of the wilderness they undertake their errands through, and the female community of the Vaark farm is built and cultivated in accordance to its natural environmental conditions and seasonality. Its eventual decline, though a perversion of Roderick Frazier Nash's identification of the quintessentially American process of "transforming the wild into the rural," is nevertheless a logical result of the outward environmental conditions that require constant taming of wilderness

in order to retain the form of the pastoral (Nash 31). As long as wilderness in the novel remains external, it functions as something of an equalizer, acting upon each of the characters on the same terms. Jacob may be freer to both shape and move through the world than Florens, but he is no more protected than she from its natural external hazards, and it is Jacob, not Florens, who succumbs to illness and an early death. However, as the novel continues into the aftermath of Jacob's demise, it becomes clear that Morrison is also interested in the internalized consequences of *A Mercy's* external environments. Thus an exploration of the novel's pressing material world can also serve to illuminate the significance of the inaccessible internality of *A Mercy's* characters, and in particular Florens's disordered narrative voice.

Though Florens successfully journeys through the novel's material wilderness, discovering, as the first chapter of this thesis shows, some measure of freedom from racialized and gendered subjugation, her personhood is undermined by the encroachment of other human beings. Midway through her errand, Florens encounters a white woman named Widow Ealing and her Daughter Jane who live "in the single lit house" in a village surrounded by forest (Morrison, *Mercy* 125). Widow Ealing's cottage, Florens quickly comes to find out, is not the sanctuary she had hoped for, but rather, as Valerie Babb states, a vehicle for Morrison's exploration of "another key element of American origins narratives: the rationale of religious mission" (Babb 157). In an episode that both recalls and prefigures the 1692 Salem witch trials, Florens discovers that Widow Ealing lashes Daughter Jane apparently daily in order "to save her life," because Jane has strabismus that makes "one of her eyes looks away, [while] the other is as straight and unwavering as a she-wolf's" (Morrison, *Mercy* 127, 126). This is evidence enough for Widow Ealing and the village that her daughter is a witch, and Jane's beatings, which send "dark blood beetling down her legs," are meant to prove to that she is not under the

possession of the devil, since “God’s son bleeds. We bleed. Demons never” (Morrison, *Mercy* 130). When a group of villagers come to investigate Jane’s condition, their suspicion is instead redirected onto Florens. They accuse her not of witchcraft, but of a wholly racialized sin, labeling Florens a “minion” of “the Black Man”<sup>6</sup> (Morrison, *Mercy* 130). Forced to present Rebekka’s letter endorsing her passage through the landscape, Florens is subjected to a racialized and gendered inspection of her naked body in order to prove that she is human, made to “show them my teeth, my tongue...They look under my arms, between my legs... Naked under their examination I watch for what is in their eyes...Swine look at me with more connection when they raise their heads from the trough. The women look away from my eyes the way you say I am to do with bears so they will not come close to love and play” (Morrison, *Mercy* 133).

Though Florens successfully asserts her humanity within the novel’s wilderness, her personhood is undermined almost completely by the villagers who demonize and objectify her for her race and gender. Under the lens of their racialization, Florens is reduced to wild animal instead of human being, as threatening to the villagers as the same “boneless bears” she herself fears earlier in the novel (Morrison, *Mercy* 5). Though Florens successfully navigates the novel’s external hazards of wilderness, the villagers who strip her of humanity allow wilderness to encroach upon Florens’s internality and sense of self, for the first time becoming truly threatening.

Morrison represents the wrongness of Florens’s encounter at Widow Ealing’s not in religious terms that would more clearly align the episode with the Salem trials, but in natural ones, displacing Florens’s internal apprehension onto the novel’s external environment. As Florens approaches the village, “rain starts. Soft. It should smell sweet with the flavor of the

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<sup>6</sup> As Leslie A. Fielder points out, the phrase “Black Man” is a historical colonial term that was not originally racialized, meant to indicate “the devil himself,” until entrenchment of imagined racial difference transformed the “dark-skinned companion [into] the ‘Black Man’” in literature by Hawthorne and others (Fielding, *American Novel* xxi).

sycamores it has crossed, but it has a burn smell like pinfeathers singed before boiling a fowl” (Morrison, *Mercy* 125). Though this description accomplishes more than pathetic fallacy—Morrison is also alerting the reader to the material outflow of Widow Ealing’s spiritual practices—it can appropriately be read as a moment in which *A Mercy*’s external environment is used to convey the presence of an intangible social system, similarly to the way the material world to 1690s colonists was thought to contain an invisible spiritual network. The corruption of Widow Ealing’s society is present in the novel not only within the confines of its physical structures, but also in the natural environment that surrounds it, as the religious distortion of the burgeoning witch hunts perverts and almost chemically alters the natural sweetness of the landscape. Morrison thus embeds her critique of Florens’s subsequent encounter at Widow Ealing’s within the very environment used to justify such racial othering as a guise for the necessary religious task of subduing wilderness, externalizing—and therefore rendering visible—the internalized, intangible consequences the villagers’ religion-fueled racialization will have on Florens.

In a further blurring of the material world and the internal self, Florens comes to experience internally the external effects of the racialization Morrison foreshadows before Florens’s arrival at the village. After Daughter Jane helps Florens escape, giving her crucial directions to the blacksmith’s cabin, Florens’s distress at her examination is displaced onto the novel’s external environment:

I walk alone except for the eyes that join me on my journey. Eyes that do not recognize me, eyes that examine me for a tail, an extra teat, a man’s whip between my legs...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...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....Is this dying mine alone? Is the clawing feathery thing the only life in me? ...I am not afraid of anything now. (Morrison, *Mercy* 134)

Even after leaving the physical space of Widow Ealing's village, Florens cannot rid herself of the watching that alters her way of moving through the world. In contrast to the beginning of her errand, when Florens, though lost in the landscape, is "loose to do what I choose," after Widow Ealing's village, it is as if Florens's external environment leeches her internal power and authority from her body (Morrison, *Mercy* 82). The trees themselves carry on the villagers' terrible, debilitating watching, just as the earlier rain takes on the festering disease of its human environment. In externalizing Florens's distress in this way, Morrison rehearses the ways in which racial "difference" and gendered subjugation are similarly codified and naturalized in American culture, until they appear as insidious and impenetrable as features of the material world. Yet curiously, as if in response to the watchers who shrink her humanity and would reduce her to an animal, Florens comes to understand the life that remains inside her in animalistic terms, as a clawing, feathery thing that recalls the motherless eagles of Lina's story. The external surroundings that make up Florens's environment—the villagers, the watching trees—thus have a measurable effect on the way Florens understands her own internality, and the birdlike wildness inside her that expels her fear is at least partially a response to the external human and inhuman watchers who would see her defeated. By showing so viscerally not only how the villagers' racialization manifests physically in *A Mercy's* New World environment, but also how materially it becomes internalized by Florens, Morrison reflects a broader, insidious process in which racist and sexist historical narratives first become externally embedded within

societies—in their infrastructures, their systems, their very environments—and then internalized by those they seek to target.

Though Babb and others read the episode at Widow Ealing's purely in the context of witch trials and Puritan spirituality, exposing "the theological ideology that evolved in English settlements as intolerant," I argue it is also important to note its location, geographically removed from both Salem and the New England Puritan colonies (Babb 157). Beginning on the Vaark farm in Virginia, Florens travels west, not north to Massachusetts. She does discover spiritual peril in the wilderness, but it comes from colonists whose religion-fueled fear of difference places Florens's physical body and her personhood at risk, not in the form of intangible demonic forces. If these apparent divergences from the historical record further contribute to *A Mercy's* general narrative ambiguity, they also represent an important formal strategy Morrison deploys throughout *A Mercy*, in activating but only partially inhabiting certain recognizable episodes from America's colonial history.<sup>7</sup> Morrison, in other words, does not really rehearse specific moments in American origins so much as gesture to them before turning back to Florens. Maxine L. Montgomery situates the episode at Widow Ealing's not as specifically invoking the witch trials but as taking place within "a liminal space" that recalls Morrison's own mandate to reexamine "the technical ways in which an Africanist character is used to limn out and enforce the invention and implications of whiteness" (Montgomery 633; Morrison, *Playing in the Dark* 52). That is, rather than occurring purely within the material world of the text, Morrison positions Florens's encounter at Widow Ealing's in an intangible liminal space that overlies the

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<sup>7</sup> Florens enacts an errand into a wilderness, for example, as the first chapter of this thesis discusses, in spite of the fact that Virginia was not a Puritan colony, because of the larger cultural significance given to the concept of an errand.

actual environment, much like invisible spiritual hazards that always overhung the wilderness for the Puritans.

I argue that Morrison's depiction of the budding witch trials has to do less with an indictment of Puritan fanaticism on its historical terms, and more with exposing how targeting of gendered and racial difference has since the 17<sup>th</sup>-century been inherent in the formation of American communities, part of the process of defining Americanness in relation to American environments. If *A Mercy* as a whole occupies a kind of liminal narrative space, Morrison also activates a liminal history within the novel, producing an intermediate account of American origins that is tasked on the one hand with representing Florens in a historical context that has obscured and deliberately erased her presence, and on the other exposing as false the same historical myths that perpetuate Florens's erasure. In hegemonic understanding of American history, just as within *A Mercy*, Florens is both present and absent: present because, as recent historiography has endeavored to show, women and people of color *were* present and influential in shaping colonial communities; and absent because their perspective has nevertheless been minimized and remains only partially recoverable. Florens fluctuates between appearing to enter and participate in the recognizable colonial myths discussed the first chapter of this thesis, and simultaneously obscuring time, place, and her own interiority within her narration. Morrison represents her in this way not to fruitlessly confuse history (and her reader), but to reflect on the ways in which figures like Florens continue to exist in a liminal state between presence and absence in cultural understanding of pre-national and national history.

This tension is further represented by Morrison's depiction of Florens's voice, and by the way Florens records the dialogue of others. Florens's present tense, fragmented speech, as reviewers and critics alike have flagged, is not representative of any current or historical dialect,

and lends little to the novel's sense of historical verisimilitude or faithful presentation of its 17<sup>th</sup>-century period. Best succinctly states that "[d]efiant of grammatical rule, Florens's speech confounds temporality and agency. It appears intended to disorient readers. And lacking the signatures of both black grammar and idiom, it sounds like no presently recognizable Bajan dialect, slave cant, or southern seaboard creole. Like so much else in [*A Mercy*], it is of its own world" (Best 471). Best offers this as another example of "failed address" in the novel, but his apparently offhand second observation, that Florens's voice is of its own world, provides a richer pathway for inquiry (Best 469). Florens's unidentifiable, temporally confusing speech not only confuses the novel's historical setting, but also bars full access to her interiority—Morrison leaves a constant gap between what Florens says and what the reader can safely assume she means or knows. For example, when Florens slips from addressing the blacksmith to addressing her mother, she refers to her repeatedly as "a minha mãe," confusing not only grammar but also languages into a singular syntactical creation. Since *minha mãe* means "my mother" in Portuguese and already connotes possession, Florens's use of a definite article is, as Cathy Covell Wagener points out, curiously discordant (Wagner 100). The reader is at a loss for a definitive explanation—does Florens herself know the meaning of *minha mãe* and add the unnecessary article to disassociate herself from the mother she believes abandoned her, or has she simply forgotten how to correctly speak her mother's language? The effect is one of distancing: Morrison leaves Florens's interiority partially inaccessible, obscured within the complications of her own speech. In doing so, *A Mercy* makes a formal move similar to its externalization of racialization in the watching trees, by representing an invisible, internal problem as tangible and externalized. Florens, as this thesis endeavors to point out, is a hazy presence in historical narratives; her speech has generally not been made available throughout

history, and Morrison obscures her too within her own story. Florens in many ways is a figure of the present tense: Morrison must continually work to construct her out of fragments of languages and histories and cultural memories. In this way, Florens can exist more completely in contemporary fiction than her counterparts can in contemporary historiography. If Florens and the historical women she represents have first been made invisible and then partially resurrected, Morrison represents those intangible processes of erasure and retrieval by materializing them within Florens's very language, embedding in her voice the problems inherent in telling her story at all. Florens's inaccessible internality thus can be understood at least in part to be a product of *A Mercy's* pressing external world that perpetuates the marginalizing effects of racialization.

The disorientation of Florens's narrative voice is not confined to her personal peculiar tenses and grammar. Florens records all speech, her own and that of others, without the identifiers of the quotation marks or paragraph breaks that are present in *A Mercy's* third-person sections. Instead, Morrison muddles dialogue into Florens's thoughts, all of it delivered through Florens's choppy tenses and confusing sense of temporality. The dialogue of the villagers, for example, is presented in a single paragraph, with little differentiation between something Florens thinks and something a villagers says:

...each visitor turns to look at me. The women gasp...[the man] retrieves his stick, points it at me saying who be this? One of the women covers here eyes saying God help us. The little girl wails and rocks back and forth. The Widow waves both hands saying she is a guest seeking shelter for the night. We accept her how could we not and feed her...I am not understanding anything except that I am in danger... (Morrison, *Mercy* 131)

Far from representing historical colonial diction, Florens's depictions of dialogue barely serve to convey who is speaking or whom they are addressing. The comments of the villagers are

continuous with Florens's own thoughts and internality, and their frightening assessment of her body bleeds into Florens's consciousness and voice just as her fear and confusion later bleed out into the novel's external environment. Karla F. C. Holloway identifies this lack of quotation marks or clarification of speech as an established formal strategy of black American woman writers, used to "[complicate] the identities of the tellers of the stories" by blurring the "boundaries between narrative voices and dialogue...merging one into the other" (Holloway 391). In Holloway's reckoning, this lack of clear delineation transforms all speech—and therefore narrative voice—into something "liminal, translucent, and subject to disarray..." (Holloway 391). The recovery of voice, Holloway asserts, then requires some external, formal disruption to "[restore] the balance of the text" (Holloway 391). Though she does not recognize them as such, the possibilities Holloway identifies for narrative disruption and recovery of voice all reside within a text's imagined natural world: storms or hurricanes, "trees that are serene and knowledgeable," rivers that can bestow or deny fertility (Holloway 391). In *A Mercy*, the restoration of Florens's narrative voice likewise stems from a disruption in the material world, although in Morrison's case it has a human source instead of a natural one. Florens, it is later revealed, inscribes her story physically onto the walls of Jacob's house, disrupting its symbolic manifestation of the masculinized colonial processes that so disorder Florens's speech and ability to communicate across history. First, however, Morrison takes Florens into further internal turmoil and an inability to order her own narrative.

Florens's initial confusion between her external surroundings and her internality, begun by Widow Ealing, is exacerbated at the end of the novel and the completion of her errand. When she finally reaches the blacksmith, Florens discovers he has been living with an abandoned boy, whom he has adopted as a kind of son. For Florens, this arrangement painfully recalls her

mother's apparent decision to sell Florens to protect her son, and Florens has "a dream that dreams back at me. I am in my knees in soft grass with white clover breaking through. There is a sweet smell and I lean close to get it. But the perfume goes away. I notice I am at the edge of a lake. The blue of it is more than sky...Right away I take fright when I see my face is not there. Where my face should be is nothing. I put a finger in and watch the water circle...Where is it hiding?" (Morrison, *Mercy* 162). Florens discovers herself literally invisible and unreflected in the world surrounding her, though she can touch the grass and water to prove that she is physically there. This erasure is indicative of a broader cultural elimination of the experiences of women and people of color that Morrison gestures towards throughout: Florens finds herself a vanished presence in the environment, unable to shape the world and unable to make her presence known within it. She occupies a literal liminal space within the novel, an intermediate environment that, while present in the world and in the actual events of American history, has not been sufficiently recorded in American culture or American literature.

After internalizing her apparent insignificance to the external world, Florens must struggle to assert herself within an environment that would erase her personhood and her presence. When she somewhat uncontrollably lashes out at the blacksmith's foundling, the blacksmith retaliates by accusing Florens of being "nothing but a wilderness. No constraint. No mind....a slave by choice" (Morrison, *Mercy* 167). This internalized form of wilderness or wildness suggests, as Jennifer Terry states, "a familiar patriarchal hierarchy in which woman is corporeal, irrational, excessive" and requires the mastery of a man (Terry 139). However, in reading the blacksmith's abuse as allying Florens "with the nonhuman world as opposed to masculinized civilization," Terry misses how closely Morrison associates masculinized civilization with the blacksmith's reductive assessment of wildness (Terry 139). It is Florens's

supposed internal wilderness that diminishes her, in the blacksmith's eyes, to a mindless slave, uniting problematically masculinized hierarchies of environment with the colonial process of slavery that oppresses both Florens and the blacksmith. Yet Florens resists this assessment of mindlessness, railing against the blacksmith: "I have no consequence in your world? My face absent in the blue water you find only to crush it? Now I am living the dying inside. No. Not again. Not ever. Feathers lifting, I unfold. The claws scratch and scratch until the hammer is in my hand" (Morrison, *Mercy* 167). Florens asserts herself bodily, as if to physically claw her way into a position of narrative power, undoing any assumptions that her wilderness strips her of human force. The feathery thing inside of Florens, born of the othering of the villagers but ultimately recalling the motherless eagles, forced to survive on their own, manifests finally not as a weakness or deficiency within her body, but as an unfurling and persistent internal life that counteracts the external conditions and systems that would smother her even to the point of death. In bodily asserting her personal strength, Florens takes on internally and expresses externally the mythical wilderness status that the cultural narrative would deny her—she assumes the power of wilderness to threaten the patriarchal colonial mission that exploits her labor and alongside its exploitation of the environment.

When Florens returns to the Vaark farm, finally free from the influence of the blacksmith, she observes a changed environment that scarcely resembles the community she meant to salvage on her errand. She sleeps with Lina in the empty structure of Jacob's house in autumn: "I never before see leaves make this much blood and crass. Color so loud it hurts the eye and for relief I must stare at the heavens high above the tree line. At night when daybright gives way to stars jewelning the cold black sky I leave Lina sleeping and come to this room" (Morrison, *Mercy* 185). In a season that is meant to be a period of plenty and harvest, Florens sees a damaged Eden

of blood and noise that cannot be looked at long. The gradual unraveling of paradise that Jacob begins with his Barbados slave trade comes fully to fruition at the end of novel, with Florens's description of the stars in a cold sky recalling Jacob's earlier interpretation of the riches of the stars stretched out before him. There are no longer crops to reap or profit to be made from the Vaark farm, and Florens is left to an empty room in Jacob's house where "spiders reign in comfort...and robins make nests in pace. All manner of small life enters the windows along with the cutting wind" (Morrison, *Mercy* 186). As wilderness begins to encroach upon the new house's physical structure, Florens inscribes her story on the walls, until the words spill over to "cover the floor" and there is no place left to write (Morrison, *Mercy* 188). If a basic reading of this moment suggests that this is the way in which stories like Florens's are erased from hegemonic national consciousness—as if accidentally, by a natural combination of time and neglect—Morrison moves away from the complicity that accompanies that explanation. Florens writes her story not in spite of the fact that it will remain half-told, but because its deliberate erasure renders its telling all the more necessary.

If Morrison earlier represents the external world as unexpectedly and insidiously influencing Florens's internality, she reveals only at the end of the novel that the reciprocal is also true, since the story Florens has been telling all along is intertwined with and even inscribed upon its material environment. She thinks to the blacksmith, "maybe one day you will learn. If so, come to this farm again, part the snakes in the gate you made, enter this big, awing house, climb the stairs and come inside this talking room in daylight. If you never read this, no one will. These careful words, closed up and wide open, will talk to themselves" (Morrison, *Mercy* 189). Though Florens challenges the blacksmith to read her story and discover her retribution, his absence does not have the effect of silencing. The words that Florens writes have

the power and ability to communicate without a listener, and their talking to themselves sustains her story. *A Mercy* is not, in this context, the collection of dead letters unsent that Best perceives it to be: though Florens's narrative does not reach its intended recipients of the blacksmith and her mother, for the 21<sup>st</sup>-century reader, it literally overwrites the monument to colonial progress and dominion that Jacob erects early on in the novel.

Nor does the materiality of Florens's narrative matter to its potency. If the blacksmith does not come, Florens realizes, "perhaps these words need the air that is out in the world. Need to fly up and 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. Lina will help. She finds horror in this house and much as she needs to be Mistress' need I know she loves fire more" (Morrison, *Mercy* 189). Waegner reads the notion of Lina burning Florens's story as "disturbing," but Florens herself views the potential for its obliteration not as horrific but necessary (Waegner 101). In burning Jacob's house—a monument that by nature erases Florens's presence—alongside her story that is scraped into its walls, Lina would be conclusively combining proof of Florens's presence with Jacob's as the ash floats out across her turquoise lake and eternal hemlocks, cementing Florens's legacy—one of mother hunger and a struggle to be able claim humanity—alongside Jacob's in an environment that has long been used to record colonization as an uncomplicated triumph (Morrison, *Mercy* 73). Jan Furman reads this ending as "a third account of American wilderness—that of assault and survival. [Florens] will accomplish the alchemy of transforming the traveler's *property* back into 'soil' and 'earth' by liberating it from myth through truth-telling" (Furman 139). This interpretation is justified, but it glosses over the force of Florens's act. Morrison is neither liberating nor destroying old American origins myths in telling Florens's story. Florens would not erase the legacy of Jacob's

house by burning it and returning it to soil, any more than the colonial processes Jacob's house represents could be expunged from American history by its destruction. Rather, she would chemically intertwine evidence of her own existence and experience inside and alongside Jacob's monument, suggesting that the same environment that has been enlisted to so clearly support Jacob's version of American placemaking has the capacity to contain and convey Florens's perspective too. The return of the lake and hemlocks, clouds cut by rainbow, and acres of primrose and mallow from Lina's story do not signify healing or reparation, but rather the persistence of loss and mother hunger within *A Mercy's* environment, and by extension the American environment, a sadness that must be reckoned with as part of Florens's legacy alongside Jacob's.

Florens's gradual acceptance of her internal qualities of wilderness and her final, physical externalization of her narrative onto the walls of Jacob's house leads the entire novel of interweaving and unraveling plotlines to what passes for narrative resolution. Florens concedes: "I am become a wilderness but I am also Florens. In full. Unforgiven. Unforgiving. No ruth, my love. None. Hear me? Slave. Free. I last. I will keep one sadness. That all this time I cannot know what my mother is telling me. Nor can she keep what I am wanting to tell her. Mãe, you can have pleasure now, because the soles of my feet are as hard as cypress" (Morrison, *Mercy* 189). Having conclusively reclaimed wilderness not as an oppressively dehumanizing designation but as an internal characteristic that associates her with strength, Florens is also physically, externally transformed to be better equipped for survival in her environment, no longer requiring protection for her hardened feet. In becoming like cypress, a native species of Virginia, Florens asserts a claim not only to autonomy over herself and her own body, but also within her environment, which she has been brought into and traveled through as a result of—

and in continuation of—colonial interests. No longer does Florens need the protection of men: Jacob’s boots to shield her body, the blacksmith’s wilderness skills to guide her. Nor does she require Rebekka’s endorsement of her travel or her errand. Though enslaved, Florens asserts some measure of freedom and authority over the space she has fought to occupy in the world, and this compromised triumph is reflected in her speech: for the first time in the novel, she addresses her mother outright, without the distancing qualifiers of “a” and “my,” appearing, finally, to have resolved the disarray of her address and discovered a channel that will connect her orphaned speech to its intended audience.

Through *A Mercy*’s contradictory characters and multiple, often conflicting perspectives, Morrison offers several visions of the same early American environment, as if to gesture towards the presence of many narratives inside of and pushing against the dominant American origins myths she comes to revise and subvert. If *A Mercy* early does the work of showing how narratives become internalized, by both individuals and larger cultures, the end of the novel is a reversal. Florens finally externalizes her story: she writes it down and mixes it with the material world, and, in doing so, revises at least in part her relationship to an environment that has been used historically and symbolically to control for imagined racialized and gendered difference. Florens comes to assert herself conclusively within the novel’s environment just as she superimposes Jacob in the narrative, literally rewriting her relationship to the wilderness inside of and around her, and clawing against the systems that would prevent her from forming a free and unlimited relationship to American spaces. At the end of *A Mercy*, Morrison offers little hope for future reconciliation or happiness for the former community of Vaark women. She does, however, offer a sense of permanence for Florens’s written legacy as a living and discernable feature of America’s cultural relationship to nation and place.

## Conclusion

If the New World *A Mercy* conjures is one not colonized by a pristine mandate “bestowed by God,” through which mere men may be transformed into practitioners of miracles, Morrison offers an alternative pre-national myth in place of the one the novel lays open to examination (Morrison, *Mercy*, 195). Our national origins are better understood through a fable of maternal loss and human mercy, however compromised or disordered it becomes in its transmission, Morrison perhaps suggests, than by any seductively tidy narratives that would erase the historical reality of the marginalized. The wounds of suppressed histories persist in *A Mercy*, as a festering that permeates outwards even into its material world, and Morrison seems to gesture towards the existence of a corresponding infection in our current place and period. Stephen Best is correct in stating *A Mercy* “throws into question the idea that the slave past is a ready prism through which to apprehend and understand the black political present”—the novel is not even a ready prism through which to apprehend the pre-national past (Best 473). But *A Mercy*’s questions of who is allowed to be involved in the defining of American placemaking are live ones, still central to the structuring of 21<sup>st</sup>-century American communities.

As Florens herself explains, there is no straightforward way in which her narrative might be communicated, either to the blacksmith or to *A Mercy*’s reader. It is written all over to the walls, so that “you will have to bend down to read...crawl perhaps in a few places” (Morrison, *Mercy* 185). If these acts of contortion necessary to access Florens’s full message are just as impossible for the reader to achieve as for the blacksmith, Florens is attentive to the demands of her address. “I apologize,” she declares, in an echo of her opening admission of guilt, “for the discomfort” (Morrison, *Mercy* 185). But Morrison does not apologize, and to understand *A Mercy* wholly is to grow attuned to its discomforts. Jennifer Westling suggests that “to read the

fiction of African-American (or Native American or indeed *any*) writers appropriately is to accept their imagined worlds and learn to serve their visions” (Westling 152). To read *A Mercy* appropriately is to accept that its imagined world is necessarily inaccessible, that Morrison’s vision of pre-national history must remain both partially obscured and painfully illuminated.

*A Mercy* refuses to take for granted the notion that environments are reflective of the nations that contain them. After all, environments themselves, as Morrison endeavors to show, are not immutable but mere human constructions, made out of the narratives with which we also build our national histories and our nations. If *A Mercy* is ever forcing its reader back into the mode of discomfort, of disorientation and at times seemingly irreconcilable confusion, I believe this is because Morrison wishes to incite a perpetual consideration and reconsideration of these questions: Where are we? Who is telling this story? In their multiplicity of answers lie fruitful pathways for assessing the places we inhabit, the nation we have been, and the nation we might become.

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