

# Toni Morrison's *A Mercy*



Toni Morrison's *A Mercy*:  
Critical Approaches

Edited by

Shirley A. Stave and Justine Tally

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

Toni Morrison's *A Mercy*: Critical Approaches,  
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This book first published 2011

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

12 Back Chapman Street, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2XX, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data  
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

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ISBN (10): 1-4438-3300-2, ISBN (13): 978-1-4438-3300-4

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction .....	1
Shirley A. Stave and Justine Tally	

## **Part I: Racially Constructed Space in *A Mercy***

Chapter I .....	9
Eco-Critical Focal Points: Narrative Structure and Environmentalist Perspectives in Morrison's <i>A Mercy</i>	
James Braxton Peterson	
Chapter II.....	23
The Politics of "Home" in <i>A Mercy</i>	
Anissa Wardi	

## **Part II: Intertextual Resonances in *A Mercy***

Chapter III .....	45
Miltonic Journeys in <i>A Mercy</i>	
Tessa Roynon	
Chapter IV .....	63
Contextualizing Toni Morrison's Ninth Novel: What Mercy? Why Now?	
Justine Tally	
Chapter V .....	85
Salt Roads to Mercy	
Keren Omry	

## **Part III: Psychological Explorations in *A Mercy***

Chapter VI .....	103
"Nobody Teaches you to Be a Woman": Female Identity, Community and Motherhood in Toni Morrison's <i>A Mercy</i>	
Mar Gallego	

Chapter VII.....	119
Orphanhood in Toni Morrison's <i>A Mercy</i> Susana Vega-González	
Chapter VIII.....	137
"Across Distances Without Recognition": Misrecognition in Toni Morrison's <i>A Mercy</i> Shirley A. Stave	
Contributors .....	151

## INTRODUCTION

### SHIRLEY A. STAVE AND JUSTINE TALLY

Toni Morrison's comment that she wrote *A Mercy* to explore a time before slavery was identified with race has been reiterated at every conference session that has treated her most recent novel. However, Morrison's portrayal of the colonies that would eventually become the United States is nuanced and intricate, exploring not simply raced issues, but those of gender, religion, geography, among many other, and doing so in ways that engage in an interface with a host of cultural artifacts and foundational myths. Although *A Mercy* is one of Morrison's shortest texts, it is also one of her richest and requires cautious and meticulous excavation to shed light on its complexity.

Which is not to say one can overlook issues of race, but rather that one must consider race in an interplay with other social determiners, such as gender and social class. Moreover, we must resist the trigger reaction that interprets "race" to reference black-white relations, given that in colonial America another different people lived here who were subjected to biological mayhem as well as painstakingly plotted genocide.

This collection of essays, then, is intended as a reader's guide to *A Mercy*, a storehouse of various approaches that will provide Morrison scholars and students with an assortment of avenues into the text. The essays, taken as a whole, open up the text to a multiplicity of readings, all set against a backdrop of cultural knowledge—including literature, sociology, psychology, and history. The structure of this volume, however, allows readers to focus on their own particular interests.

Hence, the collection begins with an exploration of space—geographic, ecological, and domestic, among others. James Braxton Peterson's essay reads the novel through the apparatus of narratology, interrogating Morrison's use of focalization as it functions to direct reader attention to the interaction of her characters with the environments they traverse. The attention given to the geographic spaces through which the characters travel—as well as the historical significance of those spaces for peoples in the process of vanishing—raises questions about how and for what reasons

the environment is valued—or not valued—depending on cultural ideology. Peterson ties this layered perception of space to what he calls the “ontological instability” of characters like Jacob (and, presumably, the white land “owners” who will populate the land), who, unconsciously at least, are aware of the impermanence of human endeavors. In contrast to Jacob, Florens, already devastated by her spatial separation from her mother, then re-traumatized by the witch-hunters’ treatment and the blacksmith’s rejection, foregoes humanity and its zones completely to claim “wilderness” for herself.

Anissa Wardi also explores issues of environment, but does so through an interrogation of the concept of “home.” Wardi highlights the fact that, with the exception of Lina, all of the other characters in the novel live on and off of land whose original inhabitants have been dislodged or destroyed. The assumption of an empty landscape to be had for the taking forecloses the possibility that the white settlers will ever find a home, since they are unable to recognize the significance of the natural world as inherently linked to their own existence. Wardi distinguishes between the figures of Florens and Sorrow, whom she sees as representative of the African Diaspora, and Jacob Vaark, who prefigures generations of European settlers and their descendants, and who exploit the land itself and the bodies of the slaves as a result of their assumption of ownership. However, Wardi argues that while neither Florens nor Sorrow can legally possess a “home,” at novel’s end, both occupy Jacob’s unfinished home, claiming a space for themselves in the New World.

The second section of this work shifts from the geographical locatedness of *A Mercy* to its placement within the tradition of literature that has preceded the novel. Tessa Roynon explores the text’s interface with Milton’s *Paradise Lost* and *Comus*, emphasizing specific images, words, and tropes shared by both authors. Focusing initially on the concept of the journey, Roynon points out the contrast between Milton’s Satan, who travels to the newly created Earth with the intent of destroying the paradisiacal harmony from which he is excluded, and Jacob Vaark, who journeys to the New World hoping to re-enter Eden and establish a domicile there. Another dissimilarity occurs in the journeying of Milton’s Lady, protected by an “attendant spirit,” and that of Florens, left vulnerable to both human and natural threats. Roynon maintains that the connectedness of the two texts enables Morrison to critique the European colonial enterprise and to underscore race, class, and gender in a way Milton did not take into account. This critic goes on to claim that the Chaos prevalent in Milton is echoed in *A Mercy*, but again with a difference. Whereas Milton, and others, have identified the human response to chaos as either naming, in an



endeavor to organize the chaos, or violence, which attempts to destroy it, Morrison argues for a third and more beneficial response—the stillness out of which art can be born, the path taken by Florens as she records her narrative on the walls of Jacob's unfinished mansion.

Justine Tally's essay explores Morrison's novel not in terms of any one writer, but in terms of American foundational texts and myths as well as a variety of pieces of literature. Her underlying premise, that *A Mercy* is an allegory, links it not only with the Bible, but also with two other heavily allegorical canonical American works—Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* and Arthur Miller's *The Crucible*. Tally reads the characters of Jacob and Rebekka Vaark through their biblical namesakes, maintaining that Morrison uses the dissonances between the sets of character, as well as the Book of Ruth, to question the Western assumption of divine authority to own land—and, by extension, people. The two American texts work similarly, raising questions about individual rights, including the rights of women, a subject *A Mercy* blatantly explores. Tally maintains that Morrison's text functions to challenge the ethics of American foundational myths and to critique fundamentalist religious as well as post-9/11 political ideology.

Keren Omry also reads *A Mercy* in conjunction with a different text, in this case Nalo Hopkinson's *The Salt Roads*, which, like the Morrison novel, appeared in print after the bombing of the World Trade Center in 2001. Omry's reading segues particularly nicely with that of Justine Tally in that both authors consider the significance of Judeo-Christian mythology as it plays itself out in the incipient American landscape. Omry believes that both Hopkinson and Morrison recognize the importance of re-telling the stories of origin that underlie American culture, since fiction is vital to the identify-formation of any people. This author sees Jacob's journey as an inscription of the American dream, with its focus on financial success at the expense of domestic felicity. Further exploring the novel's motif of journeying, Omry considers the connectedness of literacy, knowledge, and freedom, and argues that both authors construct literacy and aesthetics as forms of response to the chaos that ensued from the acts of terrorism that shook the Western world.

The final section of this collection of essay focuses on issues of identity formation as tied to the psychological development of Morrison's characters. Mar Gallego-Duran's essay examines the four major women characters in the text, considering the survival strategies they adopt in the face of the overarching patriarchy that restricts their legal, economic, and social possibilities. All of the women have endured trauma, but, during the time they are able to exist in an equitable community, they thrive, using the

strategy of “rememory” that Morrison introduced in her novel *Beloved*. Gallego-Duran maintains that each woman must engage with the implications of motherhood in order to construct a workable, or in some cases, destructive, understanding of self. Sorrow’s renaming herself Complete after the birth of her daughter enables her to anticipate a life apart from the others after their working partnership is dissolved, not because of Jacob’s death, but by Rebekka’s betrayal of the other women. Florens’ survival, on the other hand, is predicated on her arriving at a viable sense of selfhood through claiming her racial identity and rejecting motherhood. While she is the only one of the women who possesses a voice at the end of the novel, Gallego-Duran maintains that because Florens has removed herself from community and perceives herself purely as individual, her achievement, while it enables survival, is also limited and unsound.

Susana Vega-González’s essay treats orphanhood in the novel, both literal and metaphorical, specifically insofar as African-American identity is fraught with the knowledge of an original displacement from home and family that was sustained through the institution of chattel slavery. In *A Mercy*, all of the major characters are orphaned in one way or another; their various responses to their shared plight determine whether or not they are capable of re-creating a healthy sense of identity. Vega-González maintains that the European alienation from the natural world further isolates Jacob and Rebekka, while Sorrow, through motherhood, and Lina, through her identification with nature, are able to overcome their orphaned status. It is Florens, however, who makes a spiritual journey to identity that is empowering and liberating. Reading the blacksmith as what Vega-González refers to as one of Morrison’s “dual characters,” she maintains that he functions as the Yoruba god Shango who guides Florens to a selfhood, which, as her name portends, blossoms with possibility.

The final essay in the collection, by Shirley A. Stave, reads *A Mercy* through a Lacanian lens, particularly focusing on Lacan’s concept of misrecognition as it relates to the Mirror Stage. Stave argues that the grandeur and vastness of the sparsely populated American landscape functions as the mirror into which the Europes, particularly Jacob and Rebekka, gaze and from which they evolve a sense of their own unity and splendor. Like children who have not yet entered the Symbolic Order, they see themselves as limitless and self-sufficient, requiring no community or familial connections. When Rebekka must acknowledge Jacob’s mortality, she abandons human contact altogether, seeking salvation in a mean-spirited, vindictive God. Florens, on the other hand, possesses no sense of self whatsoever once she no longer sees herself reflected in her mother’s eyes. After her dehumanizing experience with the witch hunters and her

rejection by the blacksmith, Florens, Stave maintains, is completely lost to humanity, capable only of destruction, both of herself and others.

While *A Mercy* will continue to be mined for its wealth, we believe this collection of essays is a solid beginning, an opening of discourse, an invitation to response, and a means by which Morrison readers can continue their own interrogation and understanding of this text. Reaching back through time, *A Mercy* compels a reconsideration of America's origins and invites speculation about the current political, social, religious, and economic climate. As such, the novel is well worthy of thorough study; it is the intention of the present volume to inspire further analysis and discussion.

The Editors  
July, 2011



**PART I:**  
**RACIALLY CONSTRUCTED SPACE**  
**IN A *MERCY***



## CHAPTER I

# ECO-CRITICAL FOCAL POINTS: NARRATIVE STRUCTURE AND ENVIRONMENTALIST PERSPECTIVES IN MORRISON'S *A MERCY*

JAMES BRAXTON PETERSON

During a reflective moment in Toni Morrison's *A Mercy*, Florens recalls Lina's claim, "We never shape the world she says. The world shapes us."<sup>1</sup> Lina's observation gestures toward a productive set of critical approaches to Morrison's nuanced narrative. In addition to considering the environmental perspective within this neo-slave/liberation narrative, I also argue that *A Mercy* generates readings that are both eco-critical and cartographically focalized. Lawrence Buell defines eco-criticism as a "study of the relationship between literature and the environment conducted in a spirit of commitment to environmentalist praxis."<sup>2</sup> Moreover, focalization is deftly deployed in *A Mercy* in order to map the landscape of early America through the varying perspectives of the novel's characters. Thus, *A Mercy* is a narratological study of early American landscapes positioned as brilliant backdrops to a womanist liberation narrative. The eco-critically focalized approaches to *A Mercy* include at least two components: 1) Studious narratological and eco-critical readings of the text that map the relationship between characters and the environment on land and sea, paying particular attention to the tensions inherent in certain characters' perceptions of the environment and humanity's relationship to it. 2) Excavation of the maps of specific scenes/allusions in order to engage in a literary cartography, at least to the extent that it yields new understandings of old America specifically relevant to the readers' full comprehension of *A Mercy*. From a more structural perspective, *A Mercy* is a multi-focal narrative. Thus, certain narratological approaches such as the shifting points of focalization—first person versus third person versus third person omniscient—require narrative maps.<sup>3</sup>

In her review of the novel, La Vinia Delois Jennings states: “The telling of the novel rallies, chapter by chapter, between first-person and third-person disclosures. The first-person confessions of Florens—a sixteen-year-old part-African, part-European enslaved girl [...] initiates the narrative. A third-person narrator from a limited perspective provides the back stories for Florens, Jacob and the other characters who live or work on Jacob’s burgeoning Virginia estate.”<sup>4</sup> Upon close reading, *A Mercy’s* narratological structure provides distinct eco-critical perspectives (or, more accurately, focal points) which in turn invest the structure of the narrative with environmentally construed themes and suggestions.

In *Story Logic: Problems and Possibilities of Narrative*, David Herman defines narrative “as a discourse genre and a cognitive style that relies fundamentally on perspective taking.”<sup>5</sup> Thus, through Herman’s formulation, focalization becomes fundamental to our very understanding of narrative itself:

[T]o say that an event or object or participant (in the storyworld) is focalized in a certain manner is to say that it is perspectivally indexed, structured so that it has to be interpreted as refracted through a specific viewpoint and anchored in a particular set of contextual coordinates.<sup>6</sup>

There are a variety of indices that prompt readers to understand (or view, if you will) formal manifestations of the focalized moments in a given narrative. These include: articles (definite and indefinite), perceptive and cognitive verbs, verb tenses and moods, pronouns, certain “evaluative” lexical items, and certain syntax marked by particular points of view. Additionally, Herman discusses the possibility of “Hypothetical Focalization,”

which entails the use of hypotheses, framed by the narrator or a character, about what might be or might have been seen or perceived—if only there were someone who could have adopted the requisite perspective on the situations and events at issue.<sup>7</sup>

It is in/through the relationships between hypothetical and (regular/normal) focalization that certain eco-critical and narratological understandings emerge in close readings of Morrison’s *A Mercy*.<sup>8</sup>

Florens opens the novel in a first-person narrative that emphasizes the telling nature of the narrative itself and, at least in this incarnation of the first-person narrative voice, the narrator comes to the precipice of “omniscience.” She warns,



Don't be afraid. My *telling* can't hurt you in spite of what I have done and I promise to lie quietly in the dark. [...] I explain. You can think what I *tell* you a confession, if you like, but one full of curiosities familiar only in dreams and during those moments when a dog's profile plays in the stream of a kettle. Or when a corn-husk doll sitting on a shelf is soon splaying in the corner of a room and the wicked of how it got there is plain. (3)

Although I emphasize the “telling” and the “tell” in order to underscore the narrative suggestiveness and the internal focalization established at the outset, there are also various references to the hypothetical focalization present in this passage in the discursive turns set up in the “I/You” exchanges. You (the reader—hypothetically speaking) “can think” this narrative is a confession “if you like.” If you do, then the narrator hypothesizes that your (the reader's) perspective will be dream like and/or elusive/illusory, as is the imagery of a “dog's profile in the steam of a kettle” or when a toy mysteriously migrates from one place to another. The storyworld “you” referenced here is actually the Blacksmith, but the readerly/narratological effect is the conflation of the “storyworld – you” with the “readerly you.”

In his critical survey of modern fiction and the ecological, Robert Marzec revisits Joseph Conrad's oeuvre in order to establish his discussion of the representation of environments coveted by Western empires in the modern world. For Marzec, the narratives of/about these environments

take on significance of a kind that calls into question the very ontological grounds of comprehension for the narrators, characters, and texts. Thus, for Conrad representation is a fundamental problem for the interaction of human communities and environments in an increasingly globalized landscape.<sup>9</sup>

In the above passage/excerpt from *A Mercy*, the hypothetically internal focalization of the narrative troubles the “ontological grounds of comprehension” for the narratee (in this case the Blacksmith but also, figuratively, the reader as well). The shifting imagery of the kettle's steam is an initial signifier of the novel's thematic rendering of several eco-critical focal points. In this particular case, the eco-critical focal point is that of the internally focalized narrator, who is hypothesizing that the narratee's perspective will be fluid and elusive—a suggestion that points to both the readers' and characters' perceptual limitations of the environments depicted in *A Mercy*.

Florens' internally focalized narration reflects her youth but also her various perspectives as a narrator. Although this entree to the novel may be, on first reading, disjointed and difficult to follow, Florens'

narratological glimpses into the perspectives of many of the main characters and actors are instructive for the novel's themes as well as for the full-fledged characterization of Florens herself. Of particular note here is her reference to *a minha mae*. *Minha mae* translates from the Portuguese as "my mother." Thus the fact that Florens' narrator/narrative indexes "my mother" as "a my mother" proves to be another example of the interpretive purchase of reading *A Mercy* with focalization in mind.<sup>10</sup> According to Herman,

[C]hoices between indefinite and definite articles create [...] a binary distinction between information that is given and information that is new vis a vis the discourse. [...]nssofar as given and new information will be given or new from a particular perspective, the alternation between indefinite and definite articles [...] marks objects, participants, and events as filtered through someone's perspective.<sup>11</sup>

Morrison's alteration (not alternation) and juxtaposition of the focalizing possessive pronoun "my" and the indefinite article "a" subtly suggest the emotional and geographic distance between Florens and her mother—a distance that grounds our understanding of Florens' character and the ways in which she is haunted by enslavement and abandonment as well as the powerful significance of the novel's title and the futile sadness of the novel's conclusion. The under- (or un-) developed environment that separates Florens from her mother signifies the emotional distance and early alienation that shape Florens' character. The narratological use of "a" to modify "my mother" indexes Florens' emotional and environmental relationship with her mother. It is yet another albeit more subtle example of the novel's eco-critical focal points.

The second chapter of *A Mercy* is focalized through a third-person narrative centered on the consciousness of Jacob Vaark, "[...] a Church of England Dutch trader [who] accepts [Florens] from [...] D'Ortega, a Portuguese Maryland planter, as partial payment for an outstanding debt."<sup>12</sup> In the following excerpt from the novel, the narrative of Jacob's journey instantiates a subtly complex eco-critical focal point:

In his own geography he was moving from Algonquin to Sesquehanna via Chesapeake on through Lenape since turtles had a life span longer than towns. When he sailed the South River into the Chesapeake Bay, he disembarked, found a village and negotiated native trails on horseback, mindful of their fields of maize, careful through their hunting grounds, politely asking permission to enter a small village here, a larger one there" (13).

In the first line, the narrator establishes a mild irony between the suggestion that Jacob owns (t)his geography and is moving through environments that are named according to the native peoples who were settled there long before the colonial forces that he represents set about the naming and claiming of the land. Of particular interest here is the allusion to the Lenape region. The Lenape Indians were eventually renamed the Delaware Indians by European colonialists. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the Lenape were agricultural people, hunter-gatherers who migrated throughout the Delaware, New York, and Pennsylvania regions. Jacob's geography is actually theirs, but of course indigenous Americans did not conceptualize ownership in the manner that Europeans did. For all his troubles with ownership—he is initially a very reluctant slave owner—this passage helps to develop an important eco-critical focal point that hinges on an unexplained cultural belief held by the Lenape people. One of the tragic aspects of Jacob's life is that his children die at early ages. Although readers will not be exposed to this mortally tragic set of narratives until later in the novel, the Lenape allusion, once unpacked/excavated, is an element of the narrative that haunts Jacob's character, particularly his experiences as a father. According to Harrington, “[a] new-born child, in Lenape belief, did not obtain a firm hold on this world for some time after its arrival, its little spirit being easily coaxed away by the ever-present ghosts of the dead.”<sup>13</sup> Because none of Jacob's children ever “obtain a firm hold on this world,” this passing allusion to the Lenape region can also be read as an embedded allusion to the cultural belief systems of American Indians. This particular tidbit, of the tenuous grip that Lenape children had on “this world,” again underscores Marzec's discussion of the unstable “ontological grounds” of the modern eco-critical narrative—the point here being that this ontological instability reflects the naturalistic quality of the environments in which the characters of *A Mercy* exist and the colonially rendered invisibility of native folk mores and cultural beliefs that center on certain eco-critical relationships.

In addition, allowing these shifty or eco-critically subtle focal points to emerge through complex readings, note here also that Herman's language, particularly terms such as “consciousness,” “spatiotemporal,” and “perceptual,” helps to shift the burden from the visual senses that are metaphorically emphasized in Genette's oft-repeated query “Who sees?” to the cognitive faculties that a more in-depth understanding of focalization clearly requires. This becomes all the more perceptible through the ways in which Jacob, via third-person narrative, directly interacts with the environment, most notably with the animals that he

encounters. Because (in the excerpt above) Jacob is rushing toward his destination, he dismounts only twice, once to free an injured raccoon. The narrative claims that upon liberation, “the raccoon limped off, *perhaps* to the mother forced to abandon it or more likely into other claws” (13, my italics). Herman suggests that the lexical item “perhaps” is a key indicator of (direct) hypothetical focalization featuring a counterfactual witness—in this case, the raccoon and/or its mother. According to Herman, “*perhaps* is an adverb with both alethic and epistemic functions, indicating both possibility and doubt. More precisely, *perhaps* is a sentential adverb that sets up a particular belief context, a candidate mental model.”<sup>14</sup> This hypothetically focalized passage within the narrative works to establish Jacob’s compassionate interaction with animals.

Much of this theme is carried through in his interaction with his horse, Regina. His compassion for his horse is reflected in his intermittent comments about the extent to which he pushes her physically as he rides to Virginia. When he stops for a respite,

he saw a man beating a horse to its knees. [...] Few things angered Jacob more than the brutal handling of *domesticated animals*. [...] [H]is own fury was not only because of the pain inflicted on the horse, but because of the mute unprotesting surrender glazing its eyes. (32-33)

The hypothetical focalization here is that of Jacob’s perception of the horse’s “unprotesting surrender,” which could just as easily be anger, hatred, pity, or even acceptance. And if we accept Jacob’s compassionate viewpoint of the brutalized “domesticated animal,” then, and here is where Morrison’s manipulation of focal points is quite brilliant, readers/narratees must also begin to question Jacob’s capacity to own human brutes, mostly women, and why his compassion for “domesticated animals” somehow does not extend to those domesticated animals that are human. This irony is further present in and through the implication that Jacob is (allegedly) a reluctant slave owner. Ultimately, Jacob’s focal points present an eco-critical dilemma between ownership, ideology, and humanity. The ideology of human enslavement somehow does not contaminate his love for the creatures of the environment, yet his inability to appreciate the humanity of his slaves is put into bold relief by his perspective on animals and the background facts regarding the Lenape beliefs that provide some ontological explication of certain tragic aspects of his life.

As the novel shifts back to Florens’ focalization, she is charged with delivering a message to the Blacksmith so that he might return to her owner and provide some medicinal relief from the family’s bout with small pox:

Mistress makes me memorize the way to get to you. I am to board the Ney brothers' wagon in the morning as it travels north on the post road. After one stop at a tavern, the wagon will arrive at a place she calls Hartkill just after midday where I disembark. I am to walk left, westward on the Abenaki trail<sup>15</sup> which I will know by the sapling bent into the earth with one sprout growing skyward. (39-40)

Florens' first-person narrative here begins to develop a panoramic viewpoint of the environment she must navigate in order to fulfill her mission. Once again, Morrison deploys an environmental allusion (here to the Abenaki trail) in order to suggest certain cultural, eco-critical focal points that expand the reader's sense of the characters' situational dilemmas. Interestingly, Florens is directed to memorize her journey—she has to, at least cognitively, own her geography. Moreover, her memory of the Abenaki trail will in ways (to the modern reader) signal the disappearance of (i.e., the absence of memory of) those folk for whom the trail was named. Again, Morrison references a geographic space to suggest certain eco-critical readings of the folk for whom that space is named. In an article on frontier justice and the legality of treaties, Ghere and Morrison detail the unequal treatment of the Abenaki, especially when it came to the settling of property disputes:

[...] Massachusetts officials found it [...] difficult to assess monetary amounts to Abenaki loss of subsistence resources from blocked fish runs or trespassing hunters. Moreover, from the English perspective, these claims were less valid as property rights, and the officials were reluctant to recognize them as legitimate losses.<sup>16</sup>

One nuance of the eco-critical interpretation of the Abenaki's relationship to English colonizers is that the assignment of material value to the environment was one that derived exclusively from the European perspective. One way that the Abenaki (and other American Indians) were systematically displaced from the environment was through legal means and/or legal remedies that devalued their relationships to the land. In another essay on the Abenaki, Ghere (solo here) concludes that “[t]heir ‘disappearance’ from history resulted more from the ethnocentric views of colonial observers and the misunderstandings of early historians than from an absence of Indian inhabitants.”<sup>17</sup> If history and the legal system directly contributed to the erasure of American Indians—exactly what happened according to many modern historical and anthropological accounts—then Florens' walk through the Abenaki trail might also signal her comparable plight. After all, the narrative of *A Mercy* is etched in the walls of a crumbling purposeless colonial residence. If Florens is to exist (even in her

own storyworld), she must avoid the fate of the people upon whose trail her most important journey takes her. She will know this trail by “reading” the environmental signal of the “sapling bent into the earth.” Her record/memory of the image will assist her in the processes of mapping the natural environment that she must traverse in order to locate the Blacksmith. This connection between individual memory and environment is an eco-critical perspective on the relationships between humanity and environmental discourses.

Finally the Abenaki allusion signals the socio-historical context of the Abenaki war (1675–1678): “The Abenaki war had two related levels. Some Abenaki responded angrily to frontier lawlessness; others attempted vainly to address the social insecurities which inflamed English-Indian legal misunderstandings.”<sup>18</sup> According to Ken Morrison, “[...] broader cultural issues suggest that Indians’ real concerns lay less in receiving justice in English courts than in thwarting the violence done to their own social philosophies of law.”<sup>19</sup> Morrison’s research establishes the environment (referred to as territory or land) as an extremely important priority amongst the Abenaki. The allusion to the trail at this point in Florens’ first-person narrative summons an eco-critical movement for American Indian liberation and their systematic attempt to resist and “thwart” the oppressive forces against them.

The narrative of *A Mercy* continues to shift in focalization throughout the novel, varying between several iterations of Florens’ first-person narration and other characters’ third-person narrations, including those of Lina, Rebekka, Sorrow, and Florens’ mother. Each of these shifts present interesting examples of focalization, hypothetical focalization, and eco-critical focal points, most notably Lina’s retelling of a colonial myth-narrative:

One day a traveler climbs a mountain nearby. He stands at its summit admiring all he sees below him. The turquoise lake, the eternal hemlocks, the starlings sailing into clouds cut by rainbow. The traveler laughs at the beauty saying, “This is perfect. This is mine.” (73)

Almost immediately within this narrative (at this point), Lina shifts the focalization to that of the animals, especially an eagle: “Creatures come out of caves wondering what it means” (73). The “it” is the travelers’ possessive declaration, and although the creatures may be wondering, readers can deduce what “mine” means in this early-American colonial context. The mother eagle in this narrative (yet another instance of hypothetical focalization) is so disturbed by the strange reverberating sound of the traveler’s possessive declaration and wicked laugh that she

attacks him. He promptly beats her back with his walking stick and she falls, and according to Lina, “she is falling forever.” Lina concludes her story within the narrative here, and Florens promptly asks about the eagle’s abandoned eggs: “Do they live?” Here, Morrison fuses the focalizations of Lina’s narrative with that of the abandoned eggs when Lina replies: “We have” (73).

Throughout *A Mercy*, Lina occupies a narratologically marginal space. She is enigmatic, and her stories, reflections, and expressions tend toward an eco-critical analysis of the early American colonial environment. In a scene in which Jacob and his servants are engaged in the work of constructing his third house, the narrative is eco-critically focalized from Lina’s perspective: “Lina was unimpressed by the festive mood, the jittery satisfaction of everyone involved, and had refused to enter or go near it. That third and presumably final house that Sir insisted on building *distorted sunlight and required the death of fifty trees*” (43, emphasis added). Lina sees the construction of the colonial home as destructive of the natural habitat. Moreover, “[k]illing trees in that number, *without asking their permission*, of course his efforts would stir up malfortune” (44, emphasis added). She offers a cultural perspective that runs counter to the European assumption of territorial domination. Lina’s eco-critical focal point, however, finds validation in the story’s denouement.

Several other instances of focalization in *A Mercy* incisively help to generate critically productive readings of the novel. The psychological nature of Sorrow’s narrative and her (initially obscured) running discourse with Twin provide an interesting example that underscores the import of focalization both as a writing strategy and as a critical reading strategy. In the opening chapter, in which the perception of *A Mercy*’s storyworld is filtered through Florens’ first-person narrative, she recalls her first encounter with Sorrow as follows: “Nor is Sorrow happy to see me. She flaps her hand in front of her face as though bees are bothering her” (9). Readers revisit this scene towards the end of the novel from a different focal point:

When Florens arrived that bitter winter, Sorrow, curious and happy to see someone new, smiled and was about to step forward just to touch one of the little girl’s fat braids. But Twin stopped her, leaning close to Sorrow’s face, crying, “Don’t! Don’t!” Sorrow recognized Twin’s jealousy and waved her face away, but not quickly enough. (146)

Here, Morrison combines multiple internal focalizations with a narrative that mostly employs variable internal focalization. In the multivalent version, narrative perception resonates across various centers of

consciousness detailing distinct aspects of the storyworld—like Jacob’s travels through the landscape versus Lina’s perception of nature. In the multiple version, two “perceivers” narrate the same scene/experience/encounter in the same environment, producing distinct versions of the situation. This example then helps to highlight Morrison’s deliberate manipulation of focalization and makes some strong suggestions about the ways in which focalization can be used to establish an interface among characters, readers, and the environment of the storyworld. Morrison’s play on sorrow and happiness thematically reflects the instability of the narrative, the perspective fluidity of the characters, and the cultures that populate *A Mercy*.

In the end, Florens, crushed by the Blacksmith’s rejection, concludes, “I am become wilderness but I am also Florens” (161). Her (e)merging sense of herself as part of the environment derives first from her utter willingness to transfer ownership of herself to the blacksmith, second, from her travels through the wilderness to locate the blacksmith, and finally from her wild and violent outburst in the confrontation with the Blacksmith’s adopted son. The accretion of these experiences diminishes her conception of herself as separate and distinct from the experiential environments within which her life’s most tellable moments—including her outdoor lovemaking sessions with the Blacksmith—occur. The main character’s eco-critical focal points reflect certain themes within/across the novel. And several of these themes are pervasive in the other characters’ narratives. When Lina claims that the “world shapes us,” she is making an ontological claim about the relationships between the characters of the novel, the world/storyworld/environment that they inhabit, and the perspectives that they have/take. These eco-critical focal points function as tethers that bind the characters to the wilderness, to an environmental history that features lost Indian communities, and to the historical loss of eco-critical ideologies.

## Notes

1. Toni Morrison, *A Mercy* (New York: Knopf, 2008), 71. All other references to the novel will be included in the text and will refer to this edition.
2. Lawrence Buell, *Writing for an Endangered World: Literature, Culture, and Environment in the U.S. and Beyond* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard UP, 2001), 420.
3. In an article entitled “Focalization and the First-Person Narrator: A Revision of Theory,” William F. Edmiston claims that “the concept of focalization has been the subject of a great deal of debate. [...] Focalization is defined by Genette as a restriction imposed on the information provided by a narrator about his characters”



(*Poetics Today* 10.4 [1989]: 729). Edmiston's paraphrase of Genette's definition states that these restrictions manifest themselves in three ways/types.

A nonfocalized text or zero focalization, means that the narrator is unlimited spatially and unrestricted in psychological access to the characters. In internal focalization, the narrator is limited spatially but has access to the mind of the focal character. External focalization also involves spatial limitation, but this time the narrator has no psychological privilege and is limited to the role of witness (730).

For Edmiston, Genette's theorization of focalization is lacking in its inability to account for all of the complexities and nuances of first-person narrative. In a similarly critical vein, William Nelles, in an essay entitled "Getting Focalization into Focus," suggests that Genette's terminology in his original definition of focalization invites "critical confusion" mostly because in his original discussion, even by his (Genette's) own admission, he relies too heavily on metaphors of vision where other cognitive descriptors might be more apropos or comprehensive. Nelles reproduces Genette's definition thusly: "The concept of focalization stems from Genette's interest in separating two elements of what used to be called point of view: the difference, as he put it, between the question 'who sees?' and the question 'who speaks?'" (qtd. in William Nelles, "Getting Focalization into Focus," *Poetics Today* 11 [Summer 1990]: 366). Note that I am crudely synopsisizing these critiques. Suffice it to say that Genette's concept of focalization, the abstract aspect of "point of view" that attempts to capture the "who sees?" of a given narrative, has proven to be one of the most contested (and discoursed) concepts in the history of narrative. This suggests the extraordinary import of this concept to the discipline and provides sufficient reason for its continued use in applying narrative strategies to literary interpretation.

4. La Vinia Delois Jennings, "A Mercy: Toni Morrison Plots the Formation of Racial Slavery in Seventeenth-Century America," *Callaloo* 32(2009): 646.

5. David Herman, *Story Logic: Problems and Possibilities of Narrative* (Lincoln, NE: U of Nebraska P, 2002), 301. Perhaps because he has the benefit of the discussion generated by the aforementioned scholars or (and this is the more likely answer) because he himself is a scholar deeply invested in cognition and/or cognitive practices (especially as they apply to linguistics, literature, and narrative), Herman wrestles a modicum of clarity from these contested discourses on the concept referred to as focalization.

6. *Ibid.*, 303.

7. *Ibid.* Herman exemplifies these indices and iterations of focalization and he too finds Genette (and many of his critics) a bit lacking in that they do not (or cannot through their respective theoretical formulations) account for what he christens "Hypothetical Focalization."

8. Briefly (and by way of recap) then, Herman defines the modes of focalization in narrative as follows: 1) External focalization "involves a mode of perspective taking transcending ordinary limits of space and time; characteristic of texts with an 'omniscient' narrator" (322); 2) Internal focalization "involves perspective

taking associated with a center of consciousness, i.e., with the perceptual activity of a storyworld participant” (ibid). Internal focalization generally manifests in narratives in three ways: 1) fixed, where “the center of consciousness is singular, remaining constant throughout the narrative”; 2) variable, where “there is more than one center of consciousness over the course of the narrative, and each focalizes different spatiotemporal segments of the storyworld”; and 3) multiple (internal focalization), where “there is more than one center of consciousness over the course of the narrative, and each focalizes the same (or at least overlapping) spatiotemporal segments of the storyworld” (ibid). Note here that Morrison’s *A Mercy* dwells mostly within the realm of variable internal focalization. There are also two types of hypothetical focalization. Direct hypothetical focalization “involves explicit appeal to a hypothetical witness,” and indirect focalization “involves implicit appeal to a hypothetical witness, whose focalizing activity must be inferred” (322). At issue now are the ways in which all of this focalization theory finds applicable purchase in critical readings of Toni Morrison’s *A Mercy*.

9. Robert P. Marzec, “Speaking Before the Environment: Modern Fiction and the Ecological,” *Modern Fiction Studies* 55 (2009): 421.

10. In Portuguese, “*a minha mae*” means “the my mother” and it is generally the way someone would refer to his/her mother. In addressing her, one would say, “*minha mae*”—my mother—but in speaking about her, the correct form would be “the my mother.” Morrison likely understood that most English-speaking readers would not necessarily be aware of this and thus the narrative manipulation of indexical articles is worth considering here.

11. Herman, 307.

12. Jennings, 646.

13. M.R. Harrington, “A Preliminary Sketch of Lenape Culture,” *American Anthropologist* 15 (1913): 212.

14. Herman, 312.

15. It is likely that the Abenaki were among the first people in North America who migrated here via the Bering Straits some 17,000 years ago. These indigenous populations spoke a variety of languages and had a diverse array of cultures, customs and civil practices. One of the largest groups of these populations that settled in New England (especially Maine, Vermont and New Hampshire) were called *Abenaki*, the “People of the Dawnland.”

16. David L. Ghere and Alvin H. Morrison, “Searching for Justice on the Maine Frontier: Legal Concepts, Treaties, and the 1749 Wiscasset Incident,” *American Indian Quarterly* 3 (2001): 381.

17. David L. Ghere, “The ‘Disappearance’ of the Abenaki in Western Maine: Political Organization and Ethnocentric Assumptions,” *American Indian Quarterly* 17 (1993): 193.

18. Kenneth M. Morrison, “The Bias of Colonial Law: English Paranoia and the Abenaki Arena of King Philip’s War, 1675–1678,” *The New England Quarterly* 53 (1980): 364.

19. Ibid.

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## CHAPTER II

### THE POLITICS OF “HOME” IN *A MERCY*

ANISSA WARDI

In *A Mercy*, Toni Morrison explores the sites and politics of home, the most fundamental way in which humans come into physical contact with the nonhuman world. The novel provides models of social and ecological habitation—how individuals place themselves in biotic and human communities—from the displacement of indigenous people to the consumption of natural resources to the trafficking in human flesh. Set at the close of the seventeenth century, at the dawn of the slave trade when race was not yet rhetorically constructed as an absolute category, *A Mercy* links nation building—the creation and inhabitation of the country—to the forced labor of Africans, the decimation of Native American nations and the transmutation of earth into farms. The establishment of “home” in the colonies is dependent on the dislodgment of others; thus the Diaspora, represented materially as land and water, structures *A Mercy* and is embodied in Florens and Sorrow. If Florens is untamed land, Sorrow, who had “never lived on land,”<sup>1</sup> is water. Together, they map a biophysical environment inflected with African diasporic history. On the other hand, Lina, the Native American servant on Jacob Vaark’s Virginian farm, critiques the Europeans’ lack of harmonious habitation of the earth:

They would forever fence land, ship whole trees to faraway countries, take any woman for quick pleasure, ruin soil, befoul sacred places and worship a dull, unimaginative god. They let their hogs browse the ocean shore turning it into dunes of sand where nothing green can ever grow again. Cut loose from the earth’s soul, they insisted on purchase of its soil, and like all orphans they were insatiable. (54)

Following this scathing critique, Lina tempers her sweeping admonition of the colonists, excepting Jacob and Rebekka. Jacob, an Anglo-Dutch farmer and landowner, sent away for Rebekka, a mail-order bride from

England, and they, together with Lina, initially attempt to live harmoniously with the land. But in addition to farming, Jacob increases his wealth by lending money. In fact, it is Jacob's collection on the obligation owed to him by Senhor D'Ortega that is the catalyst for his participation in the slave trade. D'Ortega, who has lost his human cargo, cannot discharge his debt unless Jacob accepts one of D'Ortega's slaves. Jacob initially rejects this offer, for he purportedly disdains the slave trade, and is repulsed by D'Ortega's life. And yet he is seduced by the grandeur of the estate:

[I]n spite of himself, [he] envied the house, the gate, the fence. [...] So mighten it be nice to have such a fence to enclose the headstones in his own meadow? And one day, not too far away, to build a house that size on his own property? [...] Not as ornate as D'Ortega's. None of that pagan excess, of course, but fair. And pure, noble even, because it would not be compromised as Jublio [the Ortega plantation] was. (27)

This moment shapes the novel in seemingly contradictory ways: it is the catalyst for Jacob's construction of his palatial estate—financed through the slave trade—as well as his acceptance of Florens, a young, Angolan girl, an act that provides the title for the novel. Jacob, the soon-to-be financier of the Barbadian sugar trade, shows Florens' mother an act of mercy in accommodating her daughter into his home. Notwithstanding Jacob's merciful act towards a desperate mother, from Florens' perspective, she is being cast out from her only known home, the domain of the Portuguese planter, and, more importantly, from a maternal homespace. Florens is a symbol of the African Diaspora insofar as her painful status as orphan mirrors the conditions of collective displacement:

Sometime during their journey, in one terrifying moment, they understood that family, friends, and country were gone, never to be seen again. Lineage, the most important source of social cohesion in African society, was dissolved. Sons could no longer follow fathers or daughters their mothers. The captives had been orphaned.<sup>2</sup>

What Florens cannot know is that her mother's choice to exile her is a protective gesture from Senhor D'Ortega's sexual predation.<sup>3</sup> Although her mother's desperate intent is a noble one, Florens is thrown out of a maternal shelter and becomes an orphan, an exile, desperately seeking home.

Home, which according to Johnson in *Home, Maison, Casa*, “hinges on material dwelling places as well as abstract categories of being,”<sup>4</sup> is irretrievable for Florens, and Morrison underscores her diasporic experience by punctuating her life with episodes of migration, arrival and return.