

**Our Traumas, Our Hopes:  
The Dynamics of a Multicultural Community in Toni Morrison's *A Mercy*<sup>1</sup>**

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“I got shoes you got shoes all God’s children got shoes  
When I get to heaven gonna put on my shoes  
I’m gonna walk all over God’s heaven.”  
— “I Got Shoes”, a traditional African-American spiritual

### **1. An American Genesis**

*A Mercy* (2008), Toni Morrison’s eighth novel, could be described as a New World Genesis, the title sounding like *America*. Proceeding with the project of writing about various important moments in African-American History, from the colonial period until contemporary times, this novel is, chronologically, a prequel to *Beloved* (1987), the author’s most celebrated book. However, as a historic novel, *A Mercy* concentrates *less* in grandiose events and *more* in the way the frame of slavery affects the quotidian life of several women who live in a farm in Virginia, in particular. In the essay “The Art of Fiction CXXXIV” (1993), Morrison emphasizes her interest in “the kind of information you can find between the lines of history. (...) It’s right there in the intersection where an institution becomes personal, where the historical becomes people with names” (Morrison, *Art* 105).

In this context, private narratives help us understand History in a dimension that transcends the factual coldness of scientific works, and empower voices that have been silenced for belonging to ethnic minorities. Fictional characters present a singular characteristic: they condense innumerable traces of *real* people and, therefore, propitiate a more intimate perspective of the nation (Bennington 121).

### **2. Trouble in Paradise**

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In *A Mercy*, historical background is fundamental to contextualize the plot. In the second chapter, Morrison alludes to an event that legitimated the development of slavery in the colonies: the People's War, also known as Bacon's rebellion, which took place in 1676 (Morrison, *A Mercy* 8). As it occurs in the vast majority of revolutions, this one took place at a time of social crisis, and simmering tensions, aggravated by a fall in the price of tobacco and a rise in taxes. Poverty was so much that Governor William Berkeley stated: "a People where six parts of seven at least are poor, indebted, discontented and armed" (Tindall and Shi 62). The leader of this rebellion between the common man and aristocracy was Nathaniel Bacon, a twenty-nine-year-old Englishman with a hot temper, according to his companions. Reacting against the status quo, black slaves, white servants and groups of Native Americans united efforts against the powerful planters of Virginia. The rebellion was quickly contained by Governor Berkeley, twenty-three men were hanged and several estates confiscated (Tindall and Shi 83). This aborted attempt justified a series of laws that reinforced slavery and European-American dominance. As Morrison explains, in *A Mercy*:

By eliminating manumission, gatherings, travel and bearing arms for black people only; by gathering license to any white to kill any black for any reason; by compensating owners for a slave's maiming or death, they separated and protected all whites from all others forever. (Morrison, *A Mercy* 10)

Most of the action of *A Mercy* occurs in 1690, fourteen years after Bacon's Rebellion, in a farm with one-hundred and twenty acres, in Virginia. This is the property of Jacob Vaark, a Protestant of Anglo-Dutch origin, who inherited the farm from an uncle, and, therefore, decided to try his luck in the New World. I argue this space constitutes a microcosm of some of the differences and inequalities existent in the colonies, during the age of slavery. It is possible to establish a series of contrasts, varying according to:

a) The status of characters: Vaark and his wife, Rebekka, are free, while all the other workers in the farm are either white servants (Scully, Willard and young Sorrow), or slaves (Lina and the protagonist, Florens);

b) Gender: Morrison reflects upon the condition of women, especially European immigrants or European-American females belonging to middle or lower classes, in a patriarchal system;

c) Ethnic group: some characters are Europeans (particularly English, Portuguese and Dutch immigrants), European-Americans, Native Americans and Africans.

Of the intersection of these differences results the great American paradox, as

explained by Morrison in *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*: “The need to establish difference stemmed not only from the Old World but from a difference in the New. What was distinctive in the New was, first of all, its claim to freedom, and second, the presence of the unfree within the heart of the Democratic experiment” (Morrison, *Playing* 48).

Vaark’s farm, a small multicultural community, mirrors tensions, alliances and challenges arising from differences and asymmetries. In the context of this paper, I’m interested in analyzing the interaction between Vaark, his wife, and two young slaves: Florens and Lina, a Native American. I wish to understand how these women represent their ethnic groups, juxtaposing their fictional private narratives and History; and also to anticipate the challenges Abraham Lincoln would face, when he declared that all slaves would be forever free.

### 3. Two Eves in the distant garden

Florens and Lina are two Eves in the garden of the New World, victims of the circumstances, trying to *survive* — a keyword in this novel —, by communicating and understanding their differences. Each section of *A Mercy* concentrates on the background of a specific character, presented by the first or third person narrator — a strategy Morrison had already resorted to in other books, such as *Paradise* (1994) or *Love* (2003). This polyphony allows the reader to have a comprehensive knowledge of each character, especially Florens, who assumes the voice of the narrator in chapters one, two, five, seven, nine and eleven.

The arrival of Florens results from an act of mercy from Vaark, and justifies the title of the novel. Portuguese D’Ortega, owner of Jublio, a plantation in Maryland, offers Vaark the eight or nine-year-old servant, in order to meet a debt. Initially, the Dutch farmer refuses, on the basis that slavery is against his principles and Protestant ethics (Morrison, *A Mercy* 24). However, an interesting detail, which reveals the importance of hazard, makes him change his mind and accept the payment in human flesh: “On her feet was a pair of way-too-big woman’s shoes. Perhaps it was the feeling of license, a newly recovered recklessness along with the sight of those little legs rising like too bramble sticks from the bashed and broken shoes, that made him laugh” (Morrison, *A Mercy* 24).

His roar of laughter allows the transference of Florens from the cruelty of D’Ortega’s plantation to the amenity of Vaark’s farm; however, it does not free her from slavery. The girl’s ordeal echoes the journey of numerous Africans and African-Americans during the process of colonization, since the first slaves originated precisely from Angola. According to a recent

research by historian Tim Hashaw, Spanish ship *San Juan Bautista*, which carried three hundred slaves, was attacked by two pirate vessels, *The White Lion* and the *Treasurer*, in the Gulf of Mexico. Thirty of those slaves, with Portuguese names such as António, Maria and Francisco, were sold to five or six planters in the Bermudas or in Virginia, in 1619 (Hashaw 71).

Being Vaark against slavery, why did he accept Florens as payment for the debt? On one hand, this would be the sole way of receiving the amount due; on the other hand, the proprietor understood the potential of slave workmanship as an agent for economic development in the New World. As Peter Jones, an investor, told him, referring to sugar cane plantations: “Crop plentiful, eternal. Slave workers, same. Buyers, eager. Product, heavenly. In a month, the time of the journey from mill to Boston, a man can turn fifty pounds into five times as much” (Morrison, *A Mercy* 29).

Two centuries later, Lincoln would face this tension between ethics and economic matters. Even though he loathed slavery, and believed in its extinction, the future president was neither an abolitionist, nor believed in the possibility of a peaceful coexistence between the two ethnic groups (Tindall and Shi 708-709). As late as August 1862, Lincoln stated: “My paramount object in this struggle is to save the Union and is not either to save or destroy slavery” (White 504). The measures he undertook against slavery — with prominence to the *Emancipation Proclamation*, in 1863 — occurred too late in History.

In the seventeenth century, the situation of Native American slaves didn't differ much from the one experienced by Africans. In *A Mercy*, Lina's tribe succumbs to diseases brought by European colonizers, viruses being carried in blankets distributed by the army. Recent studies suggest the transmission of smallpox may have been involuntary, at first, but was used with the purpose of extinguishing certain tribes, later. In 1763, the commander-in-chief of the British troops, Sir Jeffrey Amherst, ordered Bouquet, a subordinate: “You will do well to [infect] the Indians by means of blankets as well as to try every method that can serve to extirpate this exorable race” (Jaimes 32). It is estimated that one hundred thousand Native Americans, mainly belonging to Mingo, Delaware or Shawnee tribes, perished due to this bacteriological war (Jaimes 32). The event is described in this step, where Morrison reveals her artistic power:

(...) her family and all the others dying around her: on mats of rush, lapping at the lake's shore, curled in paths within the village and in the forest beyond, but most tearing at blankets they could neither abide nor abandon. Infants fell silently first, and even as their mothers heaped earth over their bones, they too were pouring sweat and limp at maize hair. (Morrison, *A Mercy* 44)

In the novel, French soldiers surround with fire Lina's village and hand her to the care of a group of Presbyterians. The religious community sees the girl as a typical pagan, descending from a poor and lazy tribe, that doesn't transform nature, simply living in communion with it (Morrison, *A Mercy* 45). This misinformed perspective of Native Americans as vagrants would persist during several centuries (Cronon 55).

Shortly after receiving the Native American child, Presbyterians began a process of acculturation through baptism: "They named her Messalina, just in case, but shortened it to Lina to signal a sliver of hope" (Morrison, *A Mercy* 45). The act of naming symbolizes the power over the invaded people — and slavery starts precisely there. According to the Bible, to give a name is the equivalent to creating, and, therefore, to possessing. The loss of one's name is recurrent in Morrison's writing, as the author acknowledges in an interview granted to Thomas LeClair: "It is particularly problematic because it is not just your name but your family, your tribe. When you die, how can you connect with your ancestors if you have lost your name? That's a huge psychological scar" (LeClair 126).

In the context of the imposed acculturation, Lina's customs are demonized and replaced by Christian beliefs: "She learned that bathing naked in the river was a sin; that plucking cherries from a tree burdened with them was theft; that to eat corn mush with one's fingers was perverse" (Morrison, *A Mercy* 45-46). Interestingly enough, this acculturation presents several contradictions, because even though it is perceived as necessary to the integration of the individual in the community, it does not result in a social promotion: Messalina was mentioned in the Presbyterians' prayers, for instances, but forbidden to take part in the religious ceremonies, and was enslaved and sold, when she was fourteen, to Vaark.

#### **4. An ambivalent interaction in the multicultural kaleidoscope**

*A Mercy* proves that, in the quotidian interaction, there is a wide variety of attitudes towards difference, ambivalence predominating. For instances, Vaark admires Native Americans and respects their ways of life, "mindful of their fields of maize, careful through their hunting grounds, politely asking permission to enter a small village here, a larger one there" (Morrison, *A Mercy* 11). However, he has an Indian slave, Lina, in his farm. Similarly, he believes slavery is "the most wretched business" (Morrison, *A Mercy* 26), and still he owns Florens, who does all sorts of jobs and keeps company to his wife. In spite of feeling downright uncomfortable with having slaves, Vaark does not exclude the possibility of a future investment in sugar cane plantations in the comfortably distant Caribbean islands: "there was

a profound difference between the intimacy of slave bodies at Jublio and a remote labor force in Barbados" (Morrison, *A Mercy* 33).

Similarly, his wife, Rebekka, experiences mistrust and animosity towards Lina, at an early stage of their relationship: "(...) hostility between them was instant. The health and beauty of a young female already in charge annoyed the new wife, while the assumption of authority from the awkward Europe girl infuriated Lina" (Morrison, *A Mercy* 51). However, soon Rebekka will consider her essential for the productivity of the farm, since the Native American young lady knew the secrets of nature and tried to understand the new agricultural techniques.

The novel also reflects upon the Native American views and opinions about European-Americans, marked exactly by the same ambivalence. About Vaark, Lina states: "He mystified Lina. All Europes did. Once they terrified her, when they rescued her. Now they simply puzzled her" (Morrison, *A Mercy* 42). Gradually, the young slave understands that not all the pale faces are the same, and that the small community only survives thanks to the interaction between all its members, since they were not "like Adam and Eve, like gods from nowhere. (...) they were orphans, each and all" (Morrison, *A Mercy* 56-57).

Lina is the character who better understands the dynamics of this community — almost a tribe — and, therefore, is able to transcend the fear or aggressiveness generated by differences, and to concentrate in the similarities between all the individuals, such as Florens and herself, both slaves:

Lina had fallen in love with her right away, as soon as she saw her shivering in the snow. A frightened, long-necked child who did not speak for weeks but when she did her light, singsong voice was lovely to hear. Somehow, some way, the child assuage the tiny yet eternal yearning for the home Lina once knew where everyone had anything and no one had everything. (Morrison, *A Mercy* 58)

The words "home", "community" and "family" are recurrent in this novel and refer, macroscopically, to the future nation, which Lawrence Fuchs described as "a cultural kaleidoscope", replacing static images, such as "mosaic", "salad bowl" or "rainbow": "The most accurately descriptive metaphor, the one that best explains the dynamics of ethnicity, is 'kaleidoscope'. American ethnicity is kaleidoscopic, i.e., complex and varied, changing form, pattern, color" (Fuchs 276).

In the United States, or in any other multicultural country, national cohesion and social progress depend upon mutual understanding. Abraham Lincoln understood the difficulty of governing a house divided between North and South, lords and slaves, Native Americans,

African Americans and European Americans. One century and a half afterwards, citizens still debate identity politics and affirmative action policies, the reconstruction of the literary canon and academic syllabi, among many other contentious issues. As contemporary Native American poet Joy Harjo, the voice of a new generation that tries to transcend the traumas of History and turn the page in multicultural relations, states: “If these words can do anything / I say bless this house / with stars. / Transfix us with love” (Harjo 3).

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### Resumo

Decorrendo em Maryland, durante a década de oitenta do século dezassete, *A Mercy* (2008), o

mais recente romance de Toni Morrison, aborda os temas da colonização, escravidão e relacionamento multiétnico. Três personagens femininas — Florens, uma rapariga africana; Lina, a única sobrevivente de uma tribo dizimada por doenças transmitidas pelos europeus; e Sorrow, a filha de um capitão naval — vivem juntas numa quinta, propriedade de um comerciante anglo-holandês. Nesta comunidade multicultural, partilham os seus traumas e esperanças, tentando compreender as diferenças individuais e multiétnicas que as dividem. Neste artigo, analiso como as narrativas destas mulheres: a) Permitem aos leitores compreender os primórdios da escravidão e as raízes do ódio racial; b) Revelam a dinâmica da relação entre três mulheres de diferentes grupos étnicos; c) Ecoam problemas relativos à interação com o Outro ainda presentes nos EUA contemporâneos. Para abordar estes temas, recorro a uma combinação de abordagens literárias e históricas, bem como à minha opinião.

#### **Abstract**

Set in Maryland, during the 1680s, *A Mercy* (2008), Toni Morrison's most recent novel, approaches the themes of colonization, slavery and multi-ethnic relationship. Three female characters — Florens, an African girl; Lina, the only survivor of a tribe decimated by diseases transmitted by Europeans; and Sorrow, the white daughter of a sea captain — live together in a farm owned by an Anglo-Dutch trader. In this multicultural community, they share their traumas and hopes, while trying to understand the individual and ethnic differences that divide them. In my paper I examine how these women's narratives: a) Allow readers to understand the beginnings of slavery and the roots of racial hatred; b) Reveal the dynamics of the relationship between three females belonging to different ethnic groups; c) Echo problems related to the interaction with the Other still alive in contemporary USA. In order to approach these subjects, I will resort to a combination of literary and historical approaches, as well as to my own opinion.