

# Palimpsestic Images of Landscape, Gender, and Ethnicity in Toni Morrison's *A Mercy*

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## Abstract

This study explores Morrison's *A Mercy* as a palimpsest, both in terms of its adoption of multiple narrators and in the way, landscape is layered with vestiges of history, myths, and most importantly, with traces of black women creativity. Reading landscape in Morrison's novel as a multi-textured palimpsest entails an assessment of the interplay of ethnicity and gender in the novel. This study finds in Alice Walker's employment of the symbolic connotations of the "garden" to depict the creativity of black women discussed in her book *In Search of Our Mother's Garden* (1984) a theoretical framework for interpreting Florens's creativity in reading the land and the development of her identity in relation to the natural realm. This study also explores the palimpsestic aspects in Morrison's text both synchronically and diachronically. The diachronic aspect examines the way Morrison's *A Mercy* delves into history towards earlier representations of the American landscape and shows how her text reads and overwrites others. As a model of intertextuality, the palimpsest enables Morrison to overwrite the writings of American Transcendental figures such as Emerson and Thoreau, who have gained precedence in writing and visualizing the American landscape. Conversely, the synchronic angle addresses the implications of Morrison's adoption of multiple voices, which are laid over each other and either rival or endorse each other in the form of a palimpsest. Reading each experience as a separate layer reveals other minor embedded layers that surface through Morrison's stylistic language and evocation of smells and colours.

**Keywords:** contemporary African American fiction, nature, gender, ethnicity

## 1. Introduction

We live in a land where the past is always erased and America is the innocent future in which immigrants can come and start over, where the slate is clean [emphasis added]. The past is absent or it's romanticized. This culture doesn't encourage dwelling on, let alone coming to terms with, the truth about the past. That memory is much more in danger now than it was 30 years ago. (Morrison, 1993, p. 176)

In her interview with Paul Gilroy, Toni Morrison emphasizes the need to rewrite memory in a world where history "is always erased", and where landscape is portrayed as a new "slate". This study therefore explores how Morrison rewrites a forgotten and silenced history through her representation of the landscape in *A Mercy* (2008a). Rewriting the past is significant for African American writers such as Morrison as during slavery, black people were excluded from education or gaining literacy. The key contribution of this study lies in its argument that Morrison's *A Mercy* can be read as a palimpsest, both in terms of its narrative structure and in the way, landscape is layered with vestiges and traces of memory. Morrison's *A Mercy* reveals traces of history, fables, myths, and most importantly, it alludes to the creativity of black women within the layers of its landscape. While Morrison's *A Mercy* is a story told by multiple narrators from different perspectives that subvert any single narration of events, this study explores the affinities this text holds with a medieval palimpsest, where multiple stories are written and overwritten, with one eradicating or perhaps supporting another. In particular, it explores how Morrison layers her landscape with vestiges of black women's creativity that question the authority of dominant accounts of American history that tend to devalue black women and nature. In response to an interview question about *Jazz* (1992/2016c), a novel that explores the possibilities and challenges of freedom and how modernity does not live up to its promises, Morrison explains: "[a]lthough history should not become a straitjacket, which overwhelms and binds, neither should it be forgotten. One must critique it, test it, confront it, and understand it to achieve true, adult agency" (cited in Schappell, 1993, p. 20). These words are significant to the current argument as they reveal Morrison's concern about finding room for manoeuvre and agency within the

constraints of history. This tension between her sense of being entrapped in language and her efforts to find a sort of inner space is evident in Morrison's *A Mercy*. She is concerned with finding ways of moving toward agency that can fit with the sense of being unhomed and homed at the same time. Setting *A Mercy* in the world to be of the 1680s, Morrison explores Florens's attempts, as an African American girl, to find herself a space in the New World that as Florens's mother describes it "to be female in this place is to be an open wound that cannot heal. Even if scars form, the festering is ever below" (p. 161). In comparing the intersection of *A Mercy* with prior representations of race, gender and landscape, Florens's perception of nature seems to revisit the creativity of black women that is discussed in Alice Walker's *In Search of Our Mother's Garden* (1984). Walker gives voice to the forgotten creative voices of African American mothers and grandmothers, whose creativity was kept hidden behind their endless struggle in an oppressive society that judged them by their race. Walker's main aim was to trace and revive the buried creativity of women of color under oppression, in what later came to be known as womanism of which Walker writes,

But this is not the end of the story, for all the young women—our mothers and grandmothers, ourselves [italics original]—have not perished in the wilderness. And if we ask ourselves why, and search for and find the answer, we will know beyond all efforts to erase it from our minds [emphasis added], just exactly who, and of what, we black American women are. (p. 235)

Building on Walker's theory, both Florens's and Lina's perception of the natural world seems to be characterized by creativity, artistry, and yearning for knowledge. Florens's response to the landscape of the New World is a reflection of her creativity and persistent attempts to understand and read the signs of the world around her. Florens's search for self-recognition and her final return to record her story on the walls of the white man's house resonates with Walker's fears of "eras[ing]" the creativity of black women "from our minds" (p. 235). However, Florens's attitude of nature, as a black girl, is layered repeatedly with other narrations, which creates confusion and uncertainty. As Morrison's representation of the landscape allows for an exploration of evidence of African American creativity, it also reveals a Native American cultural presence. Morrison's portrayal of Lina's role as a Native American woman guiding Florens in the New World, resonates with both Philip Deloria's *Playing Indian* (1998), or even Morrison's manifesto of the cultural influence of black people in European American literature in *Playing in the Dark* (1992). Whereas Morrison argues in *Playing in the Dark* that European American identity could not be imagined without what she describes as an "allegorical, sometimes metaphorical, but always choked representation of an Africanist presence" (p. 17), in *A Mercy*, she suggests that African American survival is also informed and shaped by Native American traditions and individuals. During her journey to the blacksmith, Florens asserts, "I need Lina to say how to shelter in wilderness" (p. 40). Morrison's palimpsestic representation of landscape is layered with Lina's parable of the traveller she introduces to Florens early in the novel (a metaphorical story of a traveller who attacks birds and steals their eggs), which Florens recalls throughout the novel and up to the very end.

## 2. Reading Morrison's *A Mercy* as a Palimpsest

"A palimpsest" is defined in *The Concise Oxford Dictionary* (2001) as "a parchment, or other surface in which later writing has been superimposed on effaced earlier writing. 2. something bearing visible traces of an earlier form ... [the word is derived from the Greek] palimpsestos, from palin 'again'+ pesto 'rubbed smooth'" (p. 1,026). Another detailed definition of the term "palimpsest" is offered by Robert Eaglestone and Jonathan Beecher Field (2015):

A palimpsest (palim-sest): it means, literally, "Scraped again", one document that has (at least) two scripts on it. Today, a palimpsest has become a metaphor for thinking about how things are marked by different layers or processes ... Geologists describe landscapes as palimpsests, where an earlier form of rock formation is still visible despite many thousands of years of other physical processes "overwriting" it. (p. 14)

In literary theory, notably in the French theorist Gérard Genette's *Palimpsests: Literature in the Second Degree* (1997), the term "palimpsest" has been related to the theory of intertextuality, a term first coined by Julia Kristeva in the 1960s (Note 1). Genette's substitution of Kristeva's "intertextuality" with what he terms "transtextuality" complies with his broad awareness of how literary texts connect with each other as palimpsests. Genette defines transtextuality as "all that sets the text in a relationship, whether obvious or concealed, with other texts" (1997, p. 1). Genette argues that such relationships "can be represented by the old analogy of the palimpsest: on the same parchment, one text can become superimposed upon another, which it does not quite conceal but allows to show through. It has been aptly said that pastiche and parody 'designate literature as a palimpsest'" (p. 399). My study argues that *A Mercy* portrays a landscape that can be likened to a parchment that

reflects traces of handwritings, footprints, and signs, which can be related to earlier texts in American literature and African American cultural traditions. My adoption of Genette's palimpsest is, therefore, helpful in interpreting how Morrison overwrites preceding ecological images in American literature, though it is not my intent to verify whether the author does this on purpose or not.

Furthermore, Genette's *Narrative Discourse* (1980) stretches the theory of the palimpsest to interrogate both the structural relations between literary texts (the synchronic or horizontal features) and the "functional criteria" (the diachronic or historical relationships) (pp. ix-x). This study examines the palimpsestic characteristics in Morrison's *A Mercy* both synchronically and diachronically. In its constitution of several journeys, which are taken by the characters at different times, Morrison's representation of the landscape of the New World appears to display the attributes of a palimpsest by embracing vestiges of footprints, writings, scars and marks. Interpreting *A Mercy* with reference to the attributes of a medieval palimpsest is not solely related to the nonlinear narrative structure, it also encapsulates Morrison's representation of a landscape that involves immersion in a multi-layered landscape that overwrites the Transcendentalism of both Emerson and Thoreau. Morrison's employment of the palimpsest thus works both synchronically and diachronically. In portraying the landscape of the New World in terms of an Emersonian notion of immersion and sliding into a "fluid universe", questions arise such as: What is it that Morrison is trying to overwrite through *A Mercy*? How can the novel's focus on reading and writing be examined through a post-colonial lens? Does Florens' journey in nature toward self-revelation echo Emerson's perspectival notions of nature and patriarchy? Furthermore, if Florens' journey recalls the creativity of the black women portrayed in Alice Walker's *In Search of Our Mother's Garden*, her revelation through a multi-layered landscape also seems to echo Emerson's Transcendentalism. Therefore, the concept of the palimpsest deconstructs and complicates patriarchal ideas that posit that images of landscape are governed by the concept of the palimpsest deconstructs and complicates a European American projection of history.

### 3. The Narrative Structure in *A Mercy*

The narrative structure Morrison uses in *A Mercy* has resulted in a series of thought-provoking studies that align her with modernist authors such as William Faulkner, James Joyce, Joseph Conrad, and Virginia Woolf. John Updike (2008) suggests 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" (p. 112). La Vinia Delois Jennings (2009) also perceives Morrison's narrative style as profoundly influenced by Faulkner. Morrison begins her novel with scattered incidents that require readers to synthesize the plot. Jennifer Terry (2014) also links the newness of *A Mercy* to "William Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936) and the furtive first-person articulation of Charlotte Perkins Gilman's protagonist in 'The Yellow Wall-Paper' (1892)" (p. 144). These studies confirm that Morrison's use of multiple points of view resonates with the writings of Faulkner. The story is told by multiple narrators, shifting between Florens's first-person narration and the other characters' third-person narration, thus pushing the black girl's voice to the surface of the narration. This crisscrossing structure creates a fluid form that coincides with the fluctuating aspects of the novel's era, a time when, in Morrison's words, "what we now call America was fluid, ad hoc." (Morrison, 2008b). In *A Mercy*, perspectives and events vary according to the speaker. Hence, the structure is composed of the various voices as the misconceptions of each perspective are exposed by other interpretations provided in the subsequent chapters, readers come to understand the plot of every dynamic incident as they proceed.

However, in *A Mercy*, each character's third-person voice is interrupted by Florens's first-person voice. Florens narrates most of the incidents. She is the only character who speaks in the first person, a technique justified by Morrison as follows: "I wanted her to be on a journey, going somewhere important, and I wanted her voice, which was cut into the other voices so she is first-person and present tense, to give it the immediacy. Everybody else is third person" (2008b). Florens's voice follows every other voice, as if her perception of landscape is overwritten onto every other experience, thus achieving Alice Walker's dream that the memories of black women will not be "erase[d] ... from our minds" (1984, p. 135). The only voice that overlays Florens's voice is that of her mother, *minha mãe* (Florens calls her mother *minha mãe* which is an African term meaning mother). Morrison's narrative technique shifts in the end: after Florens burns the house and the ashes of her story are sprinkled over the landscape, we expect this to be the end of the story. Allowing Florens's illiterate and enslaved mother to narrate her memories of the Middle passage at the end of the novel demonstrates the tension between written records and oral stories. Morrison gives voice to a silenced African American enslaved mother and leaves a lasting impression upon readers.

In his analysis of Morrison's narrative structure, James Peterson (2011) contends, "*A Mercy* is a narratological study of early American landscapes positioned as brilliant backdrops to a womanist liberation narrative" (p. 9).

Building upon Peterson's argument, I argue that instead of being a mere background, the landscape in *A Mercy* is used as a textual space overwriting earlier records of American history. The text appears to be haunted by the future, as the landscape of the New World is introduced as a space of what is to come. The complexity of palimpsest, in Ashraf H. Rushdy's words, lies "where different historical periods are marked on the same textual space, and highlights the multiplicity of writing subjects within a given text" (2001, p. 7). In *A Mercy*, each perspective is layered over the other; each layer has its own sovereignty. Jacob's story, for instance, resembles travelling through the future where he refers to historical events such as Bacon's Rebellion in Virginia, in 1667. Moreover, Florens's authorial voice initiates the story with her memory of the Reverend Father teaching Florens's family how to write: "we have sticks to draw through sand, pebbles to shape words on smooth flat rock. When the letters are memory, we make whole words" (p. 4). The novel also ends with Florens engraving her memories on the walls of the white man's house. Between Florens's smooth letters on the sand and her final solid nail-engraved words on the walls of Jacob's house, the landscape of the New World in *A Mercy* seems to be a text on which Morrison re-writes what is absent in the slave narratives. She is concerned with the various long-forgotten oral tales that are excluded from written manuscripts. Moreover, in the final chapter, Florens articulates her wish to scatter the words of her story like ashes on the surface of the landscape's fields and lakes (p. 159). That scene is followed by the voice of Florens's mother narrating stories of slaves suffering before their arrival on American shores. Florens's mother's oral testimony surmounts Florens' written words.

Florens's narration concludes by using the landscape as a palimpsest on which she overwrites the history of black women's art. In *A Mercy*, Morrison calls into question the authority of history and memory, and the authority of the text in general, as reflected in Florens's skeptical speculations about the blacksmith's ability to read her written story—"Suddenly I am remembering. You won't read my telling. You read the world but not the letters of talk. You don't know how to. Maybe one day you will learn" (p. 158)—which takes readers back to the two questions with which Florens begins her narration: "who is responsible? Another is can you read?" (p. 1). Although Florens doubts the blacksmith's ability to read her written words by the end of the novel, this chapter suggests that Morrison's text is an investigation more than an answer. *A Mercy* is a historical palimpsest where the "straitjacket" of history is called into question (cited in Schappell, 1993, p. 20). It interrogates the possibility of overcoming the historical understanding that links race to slavery. The novel does not offer definite and complete answers to questions relating to history, but readers develop a nuanced awareness, through the different stories in the novel, instead of indubitable answers.

#### 4. Florens: A Black Girl's Creativity in Rewriting History

Although Genette (1980) argues that understanding intertextual relations among literary texts does "depend on constitutive judgement: that is, on the reader's interpretive decision", he asserts that such an "attitude would invest the hermeneutic activity of the reader—or arch reader—with an authority and a significance that [he] cannot sanction" (p. 9). However, in Morrison's *A Mercy*, such an authority is granted seamlessly to the audience. Florens's puzzling questions at the beginning of the novel—"Who is responsible?" ... [and] 'Can you read?'" (p. 1) underline the importance of the readers' role in interpreting hidden implications. These questions provoke the curiosity of the reader, who does not even know the speaker or the addressee. Like Florens, the reader is immersed in a sphere of exploration and investigation. Several reviews note the correlation between Florens and knowledge. Jami Carlacio (2012), for instance, explores the narrative methods of inspection and revelation through which knowledge is obtained by Florens as well as by readers. As Carlacio explains, Florens is the narrative, embodying it through the symbolic journey in which the soles of her feet "[become] hard as cypress" (p. 161), rendering her able to walk in the world. She embodies it through the imagery of the phoenix described both at the novel's opening (4) and at the end, during her struggle with the blacksmith (p. 144).

Carlacio's main focus is on the development of knowledge represented via Florens's journey. Yet Florens's voice is interrupted by the voices of the other characters. She is also unable to hear *minha mãe's* confession in the last chapter. Florens's failure to understand what her mother was trying to tell her is clear by the end of the novel. Florens ends her story with deep frustration as she says "I will keep one sadness. That all this time I cannot know what my mother is telling me. Nor she know what I am wanting to tell her" (p. 159). Although Florens achieves "self-knowledge and self-consciousness, which could only occur through recognition and that could only come through the telling of the story" (Carlacio, p. 145), her quest for knowledge is not fulfilled. In *A Mercy*, Morrison is representing a world in which black people are lost in a colonial system of signs. Written cultures imprison them into a state of visual dominance. They are trapped by the dominance of the eye that Florens resents:

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. Wondering eyes that stare and decide if my navel is in the right place if my knees bend backward like the forelegs of a dog. They want to see if my

tongue is split like a snake's or if my teeth are filing to points to chew them up. To know if I can spring out of the darkness and bite. (pp. 112–113)

The examination of Florens's body recalls Morrison's *Beloved* (1987–2007), in which Sethe is subjected to scientific research. In overwriting a world that is controlled by written signs and scientific observation, Morrison values the scenes of nature over the signs of human beings. Florens's journey to the blacksmith through which she bravely learns to overcome fear and to rely on her senses represents the triumph of experience over the world on paper. The words Florens writes on the walls of Jacob's house are burnt and scattered on the meadows and lakes of the landscape.

The novel's involvement in such philosophical debate as written versus spoken words also resonates with J. M. Coetzee's *Foe* (1986) as an example of intertextuality working within post-colonial ideas. Coetzee rewrites the castaway myth of the colonising Western (white) man and the way in which he takes possession of a speechless man (Friday), who is introduced in the earlier English novel, Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719/1992). As a white South African writer revisiting that narrative, Coetzee expresses an opposing perception to that of Crusoe when he asks, "What is this ship? But this is not a place of words. Each syllable, as it comes out, is caught and filled with water and diffused. This is a place where bodies are their own signs. It is the home of Friday" (1986, p. 157). His interest in the drowned and silenced slave bodies can be related to Morrison's *A Mercy*: like Coetzee, Morrison is interrogating the ways through which silenced and oppressed slaves can participate in a national narrative written by others. Despite their exclusion from historical written records, the bodies of those slaves are impermanent signs. The ways in which Morrison's *A Mercy* corresponds to the text by Coetzee (1986) reverberates with Genette's discussion of intertextuality (1980). Morrison's representation of vulnerable words leads to important insights: it suggests the fragility of historical written records in capturing the ghostly silence of the enslaved. Similar to Coetzee's (1986) image of diffused words, the words that Florens inscribes on the walls at the end of the novel turn into ashes. Jacob's house is also "a place where bodies are their own signs" (p. 47).

As a young black slave whose skills are revealed through an immersion in nature, Florens's perception of the landscape is associated with a tendency to learn writing with the help of the Reverend Father. Florens remembers the earlier days of her childhood with her mother and brother and how they were taken by the Reverend Father to study in the wilderness: "once every seven days we learn to read and write. We are forbidden to leave the place so the four of us hide near the marsh" (p. 4). Because the black characters in *A Mercy* are deprived of education, the Reverend Father takes Florens and her family into the haven of nature to teach them how to read and write, using sticks as pens and the ground as a slate. In seeking protection "near the marsh", the landscape in *A Mercy* appears as a palimpsest on which black women rewrite a new history of creativity within the constraints of a society that affords them no privilege: "not maleness, not whiteness, not ladyhood, not anything" (Morrison, 1971, para. 19). Constraints of race, slavery and gender obstruct African American women's dreams of education. When Florens's mother compares the black woman's suffering to an "open wound" (p. 161), *A Mercy* recalls the image of the tree in Morrison's other novel *Beloved*, on Sethe's back that, though healed, still revives painful memories. Burdened with painful traumas of sexual violation, both Florens's mother and Sethe seek to protect their daughters from similar experiences, even if their decisions might entail death or abandonment. Florens's mother asks the Reverend Father to teach her daughter writing and reading as "there was no protection and nothing in the catechism to tell them no. I tried to tell Reverend Father. I hoped if we could learn letters somehow someday you could make your way ... What I know is there is magic in learning" (p. 161).

Although the tension is difficult for Florens, and she declares her need for Lina to guide her in the wilderness of the New World, Florens begins to use her intuition to respond to the outside world. Florens's attempts to resolve the surrounding dangers in ultimate darkness resemble Morrison's blind woman's challenge in her Nobel Prize Lecture, to guess whether the bird in the boys' hands was alive or dead. The blind woman was supposed to answer "one question, the answer to which rides solely on her difference from them, a difference they regard as a profound disability: her blindness" (Morrison, 2008c, p. 198). As for Florens, her dark skin is what might be taken as either a social disability or a difference that makes the acquisition of an education more difficult. As Florens comes to see, reading the world through her journey requires more than either a letter from her Mistress Rebekka or advice from her friend Lina. It is a process of learning that involves direct touching, smelling, examining and finding solutions. By linking the moment of getting lost to the advent of darkness, Morrison is playing with the symbol of darkness as a sphere of challenge and of first being lost, unseen and oppressed and then of being strong and creative. Florens's quest for her black female identity is metaphorically represented through her immersion in the darkness of the landscape, which takes her towards a gradual revelation (Note 2). In the same night, Florens's creative abilities to read the signs of nature begin to flourish, "I don't need Lina to

warn me that I must not be alone with strange men with slow hands when in liquor and anger they discover their cargo is lost. I have to choose quick. I choose you. I go West into the trees. Everything I want is West. You. Your talk” (p. 39). Florens begins to rely on her intuition and to stand on her own. She realizes that she can solve problems without Lina’s help. She examines the situation and evaluates the importance of making quick decisions to survive in the wilderness. When a bear passes near her in the darkness, Florens recognizes its approach by its smell: “it is the smell of wet fur that stops me. If I am smelling it, it is smelling me, because there is nothing with odor left in my food cloth, only bread” (p. 40). In absolute darkness, Florens relies on her olfactory sense that will guide her throughout her journey to the blacksmith. This creativity in reading the land is confirmed by Terry (2014), who argues that although Florens is walking through “unknown territory, vulnerable both as a lone female and as an unescorted slave”, she shows “alertness and bravery” (p. 137). Florens’s courage, in Terry’s conception,

recall[s] Jacob’s earlier emphasis on the importance of reading the landscape and pride in his adaptability and readiness. Yet, as a young female slave stepping forth alone, unversed in the ways of the “wide, animated darkness,” but coping nonetheless, it is now Florens who seems to embody the attributes of the self-reliant pioneer. (p. 137)

Terry (2014) explains how Florens uses general clues of smell, sound and colour to survive in the wilderness of the New World, however, Terry’s discussion of fire is limited to the scene of the scattered ashes after Florens burns the house. What Terry terms as Florens’s “alertness” (p. 137) can nevertheless be seen in the reliance on her olfactory skills over her visual powers in a “wide, animated darkness” (p. 32). Both the text as a literary palimpsest and the memory-provoking aromas create a collage of multiple perceptions and different attitudes within the same landscape. In linking the multiple odours in *A Mercy* to the idea of the palimpsest, the polychronicity of smells represent a kind of sensory landscape in which experiences and stories are fleeting. Given that Morrison is concerned with what leaves no mark and what has been silenced, smells, as in the case of spoken words, resist textualization. Regarding olfactory senses, the way the characters breathe the landscape clarifies its relation to the palimpsest. Words themselves are not sensorial, however, we imagine as we read, which develops a sensory relationship that is translated by us through the text. Given that Morrison’s *A Mercy* is set in a historical moment before the landscape has been over-systematised through signs, the characters in the novel are sensing the land rather than reading a sign-posted world. In spite of the fact that Morrison represents a literate society, some of the characters, such as Florens, are directed towards their destinations by smells and by sensorial signs.

In layering the landscape in *A Mercy*, Morrison also uses figurative terms that are loaded with landscape hues, such as shades of colours and even dimensional layering of the landscape, to establish a geographical connection between nature and the multiple memories with which they intertwine. These colours in the landscape appear in fluid expressions such as “honey-coloured stone” (p. 12) and “soft southern wood, creamy stone” (p. 13); here the solid stones are described in terms of liquids, varying from honey tones to creamy shades, which coincides with the fluidity of the New World as discussed earlier in this chapter. While Morrison employs a chromatic perception that moves from honey to a creamy shade, she also brightens up the dark green colour of the trees with the bright light of the warm sun: “A day of hot, bright sun that freshened and tinted trees into pale green mist” (p. 64). These contrasts also surface when the blackness of the night is juxtaposed with the twinkling “jeweling” stars and by the beam of the moon projecting a silver tone onto the skin of black people: “how, as the sky darkened and the moon rose, the edges of their night-black skin silvered” (p. 120); “I never before see leaves make this much blood and brass. Colour so loud it hurts the eye and for relief I must stare at the heavens high above the tree line. At night when day-bright gives way to stars jewelizing the cold black sky” (p. 156). Whilst the flashing colours of red and copper are mingled with the light colours of the sky, Morrison maintains a chromatic awareness that furnishes the memories of the characters with a profound layering of colourful shades. Layering the landscape is showcased not only in offsetting dark colours with lighter shades, but also when the memories of the late Jacob and his children are presented in the form of layers within the landscape, echoing the layering of the memories themselves, in the form of a grave and clouds: “[t]he best husband gone and buried by the women he left behind; children rose-tinted clouds in the sky” (p. 156). Another palimpsestic feature of the landscape is communicated through the simile in which the layers of memory are comparable to “[t]he sky ... [that] has forgotten [emphasis added] completely its morning fire” and “tricked out in cool stars on a canvas smooth and dark as Regina’s hide” (p. 32) (Note 3). Each segment of the day seems to articulate a layer of memory, which is erased or even forgotten by the following one. These natural shades of colour sustain a palimpsestic sensation of the land that stems from the characters’ recollections.

Like many of the black mothers and grandmothers represented in Walker’s *In Search of Our Mother’s Garden*

(1984), Florens's journey is a one of suffering, pain, poverty, and frustration. Walker explains their struggle:

When we have pleaded for understanding, our character has been distorted; when we have asked for simple caring, we have been handed empty inspirational appellations, then stuck in the farthest corner. When we have asked for love, we have been given children. In short, even our plainer gifts, our labors of fidelity and love, have been knocked down our throats. To be an artist and a black woman, even today, lowers our status in many respects, rather than raises it: and yet, artists we will be. [emphasis added] (p. 237)

Florens's eternal question is: why has her mother chosen her to be sold and not her little brother? Although the answer comes in the final chapter, Florens cannot hear her mother's voice. Her inability to understand the motivations behind her mother's behavior leads Florens to project her trauma onto many elements in the natural world. When walking among the chestnut trees on her way to the blacksmith, Florens's sense of abandonment is clear:

I am walking among chestnut trees lining the road. Some already showing leaf hold their breath until the snow melts. The silly ones let their buds drop to the ground like dry peas. I am moving north where the sapling bends into the earth with a sprout that points to the sky. Then West to you. (p. 39)

After being abandoned by her mother, Florens perceives the dropping of buds as an inappropriate action of the chestnut trees. Morrison's employment of the seed simile is clever if compared to Florens's situation. Her mother's abandonment, albeit painful, is an opportunity for Florens to move far away from her physical exploitation under the power of D'Ortega. Additionally, when the villagers show scepticism towards Florens's humanity, she continues to articulate her pain through comparisons with nature: "With the letter I belong and am lawful. Without it I am a weak calf abandoned by the herd, a turtle without a shell, a minion with no tell-tale signs but a darkness I am born with, outside, yes, but inside as well and the inside dark is small, feathered and toothy" (p. 113). Through such descriptions, Morrison appears to echo the Transcendentalism of Emerson. Attesting to the power of the language of nature, Emerson writes, "Nature offers all her creatures to him [the poet] as a picture-language ... Things admit to being used as symbols, because nature is a symbol, in the whole, and in every part" (Porte, 1983, p. 8). Morrison's employment of the bird metaphor also seems to be a reconstruction of the past that resurrects itself inside Florens's head. This small "feathered and toothy" bird looks hostile because it can fly upwards and downwards and spin inside Jacob's house. The aggressiveness of this bird is seen when the blacksmith confronts Florens with his contempt of the way she offers herself: "Now I am living the dying inside. No. Not again. Not ever. Feathers lifting, I unfold. The claws scratch until the hammer is in my hand" (p. 139). Like the Egyptian phoenix that can resurrect after death, Florens's memories are revived and united with the present. The action of unfolding the bird's wings represents Florens's readiness for flight and for spiritual transcendence.

### 5. Lina and the Power of Prophecy

In contrast to the other characters in *A Mercy*, Lina's perception of the natural realm aims to maintain the ecological integrity of all its creatures. As a Native American, Lina shows reverence and deep respect for the earth as a living and breathing entity. She rejects the European exploitation of nature and the environment. Her presence in the novel stands for the spirit of the Native American exaltation for the earth as asserted by Michael J. Caduto and Joseph Bruchac (1988): "Native Americans emphasize a close relationship with nature versus control over the natural world" (p. xxiii). Lina's attachment to nature enhances within her mind a talent of prophecy that enables her to foresee most of the events prior to their occurrence. When Jacob cuts fifty trees to build his third luxurious house, Lina anticipates his fatal destruction: "[k]illing trees in that number, without asking their permission, of course his efforts would stir up malfortune. Sure enough, when the house was close to completion, he fell sick with nothing else on his mind" (p. 42).

Although Lina hates how the Europeans destroy the land, her behaviour reflects a sense of co-existence and tolerance. This aspect of co-existence is what makes America, later on, a melting pot of cultures. In her discussion of *A Mercy*, Maxine Montgomery (2011) suggests that Lina's "rites of healing, storytelling, and midwifery are much more than just practices that establish a sense of community at Vaark's farm; they represent a creative engagement with a reality existing apart from colonial labels" (p. 731). However, for Lina, because she is forced to live away from her birthplace, her main aims are to preserve her culture and to create a secure space for herself. On expressing her sense of belonging to Rebekka, Lina says: "You and I, this land is our home", she whispered, "but unlike you I am exile here" (p. 58). Morrison deconstructs the plurality of "our home" into a singular form of "I am exile". Although all the women in the novel reflect American identity in one way or another because they are all Americans, the implication is that the term "American" is exclusive to the white population, as Morrison explicates in *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (1992):

Deep within the word “American” is its association with race. To identify someone as South African is to say very little; we need the adjective “white” or “black” or “colored” to make our meaning clear. In this country it is quite the reverse. American means white and Africanist people struggle to make the term applicable to themselves with ... hyphen after hyphen after hyphen. (p. 47).

As a Native American, Lina is not only exiled within her homeland but is also stripped of her American identity. Her belonging to the word American requires the adjective “Native” to define her racial background. Given that Florens is experiencing similar feelings of abandonment and loss, Lina aligns herself with Florens. She refers to Florens and to herself with the collective pronoun “we” when she tells Florens about the bird story. Being the only survivor of her family, Lina conjures her ancestral Native legacy by constructing a spiritual space of power and wisdom, which she frequently shares with Florens.

The relationship between Florens and Lina in many ways nurtures them both by satisfying their psychological needs and fostering their creativity. For example, when Lina meets Florens, she falls “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, singing voice was lovely to hear. Somehow, some way, the child assuaged the tiny yet eternal yearning for the home Lina once knew” (p. 58). Since they both lack mothers, Florens’s strong bond with Lina can be taken as a form of emotional compensation which satisfies their longing for familial bonds. Lina suffers from “mother hunger—to be one or have one—both of them were reeling from that longing which, Lina knew, remained alive, traveling the bone” (p. 61), and it is only through her close friendship with Florens that she can quench such yearning. For Teresa G. Jimenez (2010), in separating Florens from her mother, Morrison “deploys the idea of “mother-loss”—of being orphaned—as a metaphor for familial and cultural displacement and alienation” (p. 1). Given that most of the characters in the novel are orphans, Morrison’s treatment of motherlessness is not limited to black folk. Lina’s sense of abandonment and oppression is reflected through a parable she narrates for Florens:

One day... an eagle laid her eggs in a nest far above and far beyond the snakes and paws that hunted them... She is fierce, protecting herorning young. But one thing she cannot defend against: the evil thoughts of man. One day a traveler climbs a mountain nearby. He stands at its summit admiring all he sees below him. The turquoise lake, the eternal hemlocks, the starlings sailing into clouds cut by rainbow. The traveler laughs at the beauty saying, “This is perfect. This is mine.” And the word swells, booming like thunder into valleys, over acres of primrose and mallow. Creatures come out of caves wondering what it means. Mine. Mine. Mine. The shells of the eagle’s eggs quiver and one even cracks. The eagle swivels her head to find the source of the strange, meaningless thunder, the incomprehensible sound. Spotting the traveler, she swoops down to claw away his laugh and his unnatural sound. But the traveler, under attack, raises his stick and strikes her wing with all his strength. Screaming she falls and falls. Over the turquoise lake, beyond the eternal hemlocks, down through the clouds cut by rainbow. Screaming, screaming she is carried away by wind instead of wing. (p. 60)

This parable demonstrates the dilemma of creativity for both Florens and Lina. The image of the eagle invites comparison with Morrison’s Nobel Lecture and the fable of the bird and the black blind woman cited in the early discussion of Florens’s final passage about the destiny of her words. Through the image of the bird, Lina focuses on the mother’s efforts to defend its eggs as a sort of compensation for Florens who blames her mother for abandoning her. However, the man’s violence and acquisitive attitude cannot be resisted by the eagle. In striking the eagle with his stick, the man is “responsible for the corpse” because, as Morrison argues, he “thinks of language as susceptible to death, erasure; certainly imperiled and salvageable only by an effort of the will” (p. 200). The thundering words of the man, “mine, mine,” fall like a storm on all the surroundings, as “creatures come out of caves wondering what it means,” implying a reference to the effects of killing a language on its users: “language dies, out of carelessness, disuse, indifference and absence of esteem, or killed by fiat, not only she herself, but all users and makers are accountable for its demise”. When asked by Florens about the bird, Lina tells her that it is “still falling ... She is falling forever,” whereas the eggs will “hatch alone” (p. 60). Florens’s second question, “Do they live?” is uttered with difficulty as if she is figuring out her future. Lina’s reply is, “we have” (p. 61). The meaning behind this fable runs throughout the text. Florens’s journey in the American landscape represents her hatching that begins with the trauma of a mother’s abandonment, just as when “the shells of the eagle’s eggs quiver and one even cracks”. This story clarifies some of the implications embedded within the text, but it also affirms Lina as a prophet who anticipates Florens’ survival, and accordingly the survival of language.

Lina, as a woman of prophecy, uses the parable to put Florens on the alert prior to her journey in the New World. Via her multi-layered narrative, Morrison utilizes the features and functions of the parable to alert Florens as



well the reader to what to expect in the coming chapters. In *The Literary Mind: The Origins of Thought and Language* (1996), Mark Turner traces the origin of the term “parable” in the Greek language and links the term to the “Greek verb “paraballein” [that] had a much wider, schematic meaning: The tossing or projecting of one thing alongside another” (p. 7). Morrison therefore casts this allegorical story alongside the main story as a teaching tool for Florens in her coming journey. Most of Morrison’s story operates through the lens of Lina’s parable, through which the novel satisfies some of the main functions of the parable described by Turner. Through prediction, Lina foresees Florens’s ability to survive and to resist patriarchal restrictions. Through projection, she anticipates the power of Florens’s creativity to flourish and to “hatch alone” (p. 61). Through evaluation, Lina not only predicts Florens’s fate, but she also evaluates her loneliness and isolation. Through planning, Lina imagines Florens’s goal to remaining strong throughout her journey. Lina also encourages Florens to release her creativity in an unbounded sphere: “Over the turquoise lake, beyond the eternal hemlocks, down through the clouds cut by rainbow” (p. 60). The parable therefore ends by shifting away from the falling bird to the hatching and surviving eggs. Morrison attempts to evoke hope and a sense of resistance inside Florens. Although Florens makes her way afterwards without any reference to or memory of Lina’s parable, she scatters her final words over the same landscape described in Lina’s parable. The parable is embedded within her memory, and it motivates her to become more independent. Lina uses the landscape as the text for her parable in which the bird is stricken and lost. However, on the same landscape, a different story is over-written by Florens, a story which is also characterized by tensions between power and vulnerability.

## 6. Jacob Vaark: A Consumed Consumer

As a white European man arriving to the New World, Jacob Vaark’s experience of the landscape is characterized by a growing desire to consume the resources of nature and expand his trade at the expense of other creatures. In tracing Jacob’s journey through Maryland to meet D’Ortega, readers notice a transformation in his attitudes and his vision of the landscape, from a content man for whom “flesh was not his commodity” (p. 20) to an addicted consumer whose “trading and travelling fill his pockets” (p. 42). When Jacob enters D’Ortega’s plantation Jublio, he is uncomfortable, sweating, and disgusted. In a place where the smell of tobacco prevails over everything, he notes “swatting mosquitoes” and “mud snakes” (p. 12). He is struck by D’Ortega’s grand house, since “the wealthiest men he knew built in wood, brick, riven clapboards with no need for grand pillars suitable for a House of Parliament” (p. 13). Despite Jacob’s criticism of D’Ortega’s grand house, Jacob himself later engages in a similar action by building a third house, against the will of both Rebekka and Lina, which requires the loss of many trees. In *A Mercy*, Morrison uses the image of the house as a metaphor for Western imperialism as discussed in Edward Said’s *Culture and Imperialism* (1993). In Said’s vision, Western imperialism comprises “impressive ideological formations that include notions that certain territories and people require and beseech domination” (p. 8). In his discussion of the engagement with colonialism in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century British and French literature, Said notes that the country house often serves as the means through which colonial ideology is explored. He explicates what he terms “a structure of attitude and reference” (p. 73):

As a reference, as a point of definition, as an easily assumed place of travel, wealth, and service, the empire functions for much of the European nineteenth century as a codified, if only marginally visible, presence in fiction, very much like the servants in grand households and in novels, whose work is taken for granted but scarcely ever more than named, rarely studied (though Bruce Robbins has recently written on them), or given density. (p. 75)

In *A Mercy*, the houses of both D’Ortega and Jacob resemble the expansion of Western colonialism into the territories of other nations or cultural groups. Despite the economic power of the West, it relies entirely on the resources and the efforts of other nations and ethnic groups. For instance, although the blacksmith created Jacob’s tremendous gate, he is known to readers solely via his craft, he has no name. In addition, the scene that follows Jacob’s detailed description of D’Ortega’s extravagant house shows the slaves crushed beneath his possessions who have to do all the work inside the house and in the fields. Said describes colonial authority over other cultures:

There is first the authority of the European observer, traveler, merchant, scholar, historian, novelist. Then there is the hierarchy of spaces by which the metropolitan center and, gradually, the metropolitan economy are seen as dependent upon an overseas system of territorial control, economic exploitation, and a socio-cultural vision; without these stability and prosperity at home-‘home’ being a word with extremely potent resonance-would not be possible. (p. 69)

During a dinner with the D’Ortegas, Jacob’s appetite “shrank when presented with the heavily seasoned dishes ... [as] everything is overcooked” (p. 15). The situation becomes intolerable as “his rough clothes were in

stark contrast to embroidered silk and lace collar” (p. 15). The details of their food and clothing, which drive Jacob into a state of disgust and repulsion, evoke a European appetite for extravagant exploitation of everything in America. In evaluating what she coins as “Euroexpansionism” and its relativization of culture, Mary Louise Pratt (1992) argues that the population of the New World is portrayed as lacking an appetite for making a profit and expanding the economy. Pratt explains that:

The bottom line in the discourse of the capitalist vanguard was clear: America must be transformed into a scene of industry and efficiency; its colonial population must be transformed from an indolent, undifferentiated, uncleanly mass lacking appetite, hierarchy, taste, and cash, into wage labor and a market for metropolitan consumer goods. (p. 155)

Jacob gradually begins to envy D’Ortega for having healthy sons and a grand house. On his way home, Jacob’s stomach starts to “seize. The tobacco odor, so welcoming when he arrived, now nauseated him” (p. 21). In linking the impact of tobacco to his sudden change, Morrison shows how Jacob’s unlimited consumption turns into addiction. Rebekka notes this addiction through the unnecessary things Jacob buys: “a silver tea service which was put away immediately; a porcelain chamber pot quickly chipped by indiscriminate use; a heavily worked hairbrush for hair he only saw in bed, a hat here, a lace collar there” (p. 86). Jacob’s addiction to expanding his possessions stems from this imperial vision, in which ethical values and morality are ignored in favour of economic power and reputation. Said (1993) notes that, “[i]n the expansion of the great Western empires, profit and hope of further profit were obviously tremendously important, as the attractions of spices, sugar, slaves, rubber, cotton, opium, tin, gold, and silver over centuries amply testify” (pp. 9–10). The Europeans’ extravagant appetite for exploiting every element of the New World can be related to Morrison’s employment of the image of fever in the novel. The outbreak of smallpox on the farm raises questions about the toxic aspects of the New World, which can be seen through the snake-framed gates of Jacob’s dream house.

Apart from its exposure of the dark underpinnings of European imperialism, Jacob’s journey to Maryland reveals a multi-layered land. As Jacob plunges into the shores of Maryland, he also observes that he is moving

through the surf, stepping carefully over pebbles and sand to shore. Fog, Atlantic and reeking of plant life, blanketed the bay and slowed him. He could see his boots sloshing but not his satchel nor his hands. When the surf was behind him and his soles sank in mud, he turned to wave to the sloopmen, but because the mast had disappeared in the fog, he could not tell whether they remained anchored or risked sailing on. (p. 7)

Wrapped in fog, Jacob, like Florens, slips into a multi-layered landscape and loses the ability to see either his own hands or those of the sloop men with whom he arrived. As Jacob is immersed in an era when “Virginia was still a mess” (p. 9), Morrison seems to be visualizing the forthcoming cultural colonial layers synchronically. When viewed as a historical palimpsest, *A Mercy* seems to be an Emersonian multi-layered entity requiring both immersion and engrossment. As Morrison adopts a multi-perspectival narrative structure, the reader visualizes via each narration multiple historical incidents that belong to the future. The landscape in Morrison’s text is depicted as a yet to be built upon space. *A Mercy* seems to be haunted by the future and provides its readers with various crisscrossing voices in order to sustain a synchronic sense of history.

Morrison compares Jacob’s “penetrating” of the world of Virginia to “struggling through a dream” (p. 7). In confusing dreams with reality, Morrison strikes another Emersonian note in casting an illusionary hue on both the real world and the characters’ perceptions of experiences. In “Experience,” in 1844 Emerson meditates on the reliability of human understanding. He dramatizes how humans’ search for a true conception of life, being controlled by one’s own mood and vision, is characterized by uncertainty and fails to offer a definitive version of truth. According to Emerson, “Dream delivers us to dream, and there is no end to illusion. Life is like a train of moods like a string of beads, and, as we pass through them, they prove to be many-colored lenses which paint the world their own hue ...” (cited in Porte, 1983, p. 34). Jacob’s journey to Maryland to meet D’Ortega uncovers the white male dreams of exploring and possessing the fertile American landscape. Annette Kolodny (1975) notes that the earliest inhabitants of America in the seventeenth century “declared themselves virtually “ravished with the ... pleasant land” and described the new continent as “a paradise with all her Virgin Beauties” (p. 4). However, Jacob plunges into a world devoid of safety, where “he could not be sure of friend or foe” (p. 8). The Edenic aspects of the New World are complicated in the novel: graves and coffins, several deaths of children, wars and fires, foggy and creepy nature, and epidemic fever. suggest that his power is fragile. It is an environment full of threats. On his return journey, Jacob’s appetite is whetted on seeing “forests untouched since Noah, shorelines beautiful enough to bring tears, wild food for the taking” (p. 10). The virginity of the New World has awakened consuming desires to dominate the land and expand his dream of building a great reputation. Although Rebekka thinks there is no need for a third house, Jacob’s plan for “a grand house of many rooms

rising on a hill above the fog” seems “as sweet as sugar” as it is based on the exploitation of the enslaved (p. 33). Jacob’s perception of nature is controlled by an imperialist desire to exploit every component of the land. In casting the attributes of sugar, which is in itself a commercial product created by slave labour, to his idea to build a new house, Jacob represents an enthusiastic Western imperialism that seeks to conquer and exploit everything for profit. Jacob’s addiction to consumption can also be seen through the smell of the tobacco, which is also another profitable commercial product that has brought welfare and prosperity to many European traders at the expense of the labour of the enslaved. Moreover, Jacob’s excitement increases when “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” (p. 33). In ascribing words such as “cream pouring” and “tasting” to the natural world, Jacob expresses a perception of nature controlled by a gluttonous appetite for consumption.

### 7. Rebekka: A Maternal Perception of Nature

In contrast to the other characters’ experiences in the novel, Rebekka’s romantic vision of the New World as a European immigrant woman articulates a maternal perception of landscape. She perceives the natural world as a maternal shelter through which she escapes her home country. In the midst of multiple narrators, Rebekka’s voice helps the reader to understand the perspective of the white mistress who is depicted by other women in the text in terms of prejudice and racism. Like Florens and Lina, Rebekka’s life is not void of familial abandonment, pain, suffering, and struggle to carve out a space of love and dignity in the haven of nature. Morrison has intelligently deployed Rebekka’s voice to focus on the miseries of white women and to expose the common suffering of women of different races in America during the seventeenth century.

Raised in London, Rebekka experiences both as a daughter and a wife, confining patriarchal contradictions that limit white women’s choices to “servant, prostitute, wife, and although horrible stories were told about each of those careers, the last one seemed safest” (pp. 75–76). Although her marriage to Jacob seems to be a kind of “sale” since her “father would have shipped her off to anyone who would book her passage and relieve him of feeding her” (p. 72), Rebekka finds this marriage an opportunity to escape her oppressive family, the violent conditions in London and, most importantly, “the leers and rude hands” (p. 76) of its men. To escape the injustice of patriarchy in England, Rebekka chooses to become a possession of an unknown man living overseas.

During her journey from London to America, Rebekka is struck by the silence of the ocean. In her apostrophe to the sea she whispers “[s]tay still, don’t hurtle me. No. Move, move, excite me. Trust me, I will keep your secrets: that the smell of you is like fresh monthly blood; that you own the globe and land is afterthought to entertain you; that the world beneath you is both graveyard and heaven” (p. 71). Rebekka is addressing “Mother Nature” whose ‘fresh monthly blood’ nurtures the land. Driven by of maternal smell towards the sea, Rebekka’s speech echoes a womanist sexual desire, represented through her words “[s]tay still, don’t hurtle me. No. Move, move, excite me. Trust me”. Since Rebekka is obsessed with making a family and having children, her perception of nature articulates maternal perspectives. Yet, the paradoxical aspects of the sea create a sense of complexity; the sea is related to both graveyard and haven, images that can be related to the power of nature to provide both welfare and deprivation, life and death. Morrison complicates perceptions of the sea (as she does with nature more generally) as Rebekka later declares her dream of a motherly relationship that she hopes her marital life, if it fails, will bring children and hence emotional gratification. Caught by the silence of the ocean, Rebekka describes her perception of time during the journey:

Wretched as was the space they crouched in, it was nevertheless blank where a past did not haunt nor a future beckon. Women of and for men, in those few moments they were neither. And when finally the lamp died, swaddling them in black, for a long time, oblivious to the footsteps above them, or the lowing behind them, they did not stir. For them, unable to see the sky, time became simply the running sea, unmarked, eternal, and of no matter. (p. 83)

The women’s state of oblivion is similar to the enclosure of the fetus inside the womb. In a similar vein, Kolodny explicates such a motherly relationship with the landscape as a “resurrection of the lost state of innocence that the adult abandons when he joins the world of competitive self-assertion... regression from the cares of adult life and a return to the primal warmth of womb or breast in a feminine landscape” (1975, p. 6). Moreover, in the moment “where a past did not haunt nor a future beckon”, time appears to be confused. Most of the nonlinear incidents in *A Mercy* sustain an elusive or illusory atmosphere and appear to be detached from any solidly fixed place or time. Given “the running sea” has become their only perception of time, there is a sense of blurring between time and space as well as between reality and dream conveyed via the word “running” (p. 83).

Given that Rebekka’s whole story is told in a period “somewhere between fever and memory” (p. 71),

Morrison's *A Mercy* is situated in a historical moment between a long era of feverish racism and the forgotten history when slavery was separate from race. Like a palimpsest where stories overlay each other, "Rebekka's thoughts bled into one another, confusing events and time but not people" (p. 70). Like the other narrators in *A Mercy*, Rebekka's narration has built up a dream-like quality that blurs reality with the imaginary.

### 8. Sorrow: A Journey towards Wholeness

The narrative perspective told by Sorrow results in an entirely opposing picture of the incidents and characters introduced elsewhere in the novel. As Sorrow's story overwrites the inscriptions of the other characters, Morrison's *A Mercy* reinforces the image of a palimpsest upon which each character layers his or her unique, peculiar trace and trauma. Sorrow, whose ethnic background is unknown, has never lived on land before the ship on which she was raised is wrecked on the shores of the New World (p. 118). Although she is accompanied by an imaginary and unseen spirit named Twin, who both supports and amuses her in an unjust world and guides her towards self-worth and a sense of wholeness, her perceptions of the landscape are characterized by fear and desolation. The New World "was as foreign to her as ocean was to sheep. Twin made it possible. When they descended, the earth—mean, hard, thick, hateful—shocked her" (p. 124).

In giving voice to Sorrow's suffering, Morrison returns to a moment of the past where the sorrows and pains of marginalized women were buried and silenced. Although Sorrow ends up changing her name to Complete, a name that suggests power and determination, this particular change also implies a reference to the burial of suffering and pain in the memory of American history. As Sorrow's name bears witness to forgotten sorrows and unrecorded pains, Morrison's novel works as a palimpsest embracing what has been forgotten and erased from American memory. When first introduced to Jacob, the Sawyer asks Jacob not to mind her name: "You can name her anything you want. My wife calls her Sorrow because she was abandoned. She is a bit mongrelized as you can see. However, be that, she will work without complaint" (p. 118). As a heterodiegetic narrator, Sorrow speaks in a passive tone that exhibits no involvement; readers are given no idea of her thoughts and emotions. The conversation between Jacob and the Sawyer reveals how such oppressed women were considered animal-like and were traded for their physical capabilities. Nevertheless, when she turns into Complete, Sorrow speaks for the first time and in the first person, as she looks into "her daughter's eyes; saw in them the gray glisten of a winter sea while a ship sailed by the lee. "I am your mother", she said. "My name is Complete" (p. 132). Complete is speaking as an homodiegetic narrator rather than as an observer. *A Mercy* calls its readers to look carefully at both the miserable life of Sorrow and the moment in which Complete looks into the eyes of her baby with confidence. When Complete glimpses through the eyes of her baby "a ship sailed by the lee", which contrasts with Sorrow's shipwreck, *A Mercy* appears as a bridge that links the memory of the past with the present. In connecting the sea with the land via the image of the sailed ship, Morrison revives the buried sufferings of slaves who died during the Middle Passage. Although Sorrow is not identified as African in the novel, she is still a girl of colour who is born on the shipboard. She belongs to those slaves who are taken by force from their homeland to be sold on American shores. Thus, from a black diasporic perspective, the sea is suggestive of trauma and loss, but it also represents 'history' for many black writers such as the Caribbean poet Derek Walcott's "The Sea is History" (1986), in which he writes:

Where are your monuments, your battles, martyrs?

Where is your tribal memory? Sirs,

in that grey vault. The sea. The sea

has locked them up. The sea is History. (p. 364)

Yet, in contrast to Walcott's "vault" and "locked up" sea of history, Morrison's *A Mercy* gives voice to the victims of the past and works as a diachronic source of many untold sufferings and pains. The connection between the sea and the traumatic memories of the slaves is also evident in the speech of Florens's mother:

We come to a house made to float on the sea. Each water, river or sea, has sharks under. The whitened ones guarding we like that as much as the sharks are happy to have a plentiful feeding place. I welcomed the circling sharks but they avoided me as if knowing I preferred their teeth to the chains around my neck my waist my ankle. When the canoe heeled, some of we jumped, others were pulled under and we did not see their blood swirl until we alive ones were retrieved and placed under guard. (p. 164)

The waters of the sea are mixed with the bones and blood of the slaves, much as their memories are drowned at the bottom of history. The ship in the eyes of the baby seems to connect the land with its solid nature "that remembers the burning of itself" (p. 104), with the fluid sea that bears no trace of those long-forgotten crimes. In the fluid realm of the 1680s, Morrison overwrites American history and revives what leaves no trace. Sorrow's

memories of her killed baby who is “breathing water every day, every night, down all the streams of the world” is also a reference to the fluidity of history (p. 123). Morrison revises through the image of the baby “breathing down all the stream of the world” overwrites Thoreau’s transcendental vision of the earth in which he asserts the organic feature of this world. Thoreau argues that “[t]his earth is not, then, a mere fragment of dead history, strata upon strata, like the leaves of a book, an object for a museum and antiquarian, but living poetry, like the leaves of a tree, —not a fossil earth, but a living specimen” (1964, p. 47).

Moreover, Sorrow’s immersion in the landscape is characterized by certain olfactory nuances of memory. As a girl who knew only of ships, Sorrow is haunted by the smell of wood which appears intermittently. She smells the “odor of wood chips” (p. 116), “the smell of milled wood” (p. 115), and she states that “pine-scented air erased the odor of the sickroom” (p. 128). The idea of odours erasing each other, such as the aroma of pine and the sickroom, sustains a sense of a palimpsestic landscape in which aromas and colours overlay each other. In a world known for its fluidity, Morrison’s *A Mercy* articulates the fragility of the text via the various vanishing smells. The novel is haunted by smells as much as by what leaves no mark or trace. *A Mercy* works to voice the unvoiced and to articulate what historical records usually omit, including the smells and odours of the landscape.

## 9. Conclusion

Through the process of writing and re-writing, Morrison’s landscape emerges as a palimpsest with various racial inscriptions forming its layers. Reading each experience as a separate layer reveals other minor embedded layers that surface through Morrison’s stylistic language and evocation of smells and colours. Such a nonlinear structure works to portray many historical events synchronically. While *A Mercy* works as a palimpsest upon which each of the characters leaves his or her own traces, layer by layer, the text leaves readers with a multiplicity of experiences and a sense of fragmentation rather than wholeness and solidity. At the same time, the diachronic model traces history by digging, vertically, down to the roots embedded in the memory of history. It is concerned with what lies beneath the surface, with what has been silenced and hidden from historical records.

As the last chapter ends with the narration of Florens’s mother speaking in broken English of older memories of the black diaspora, readers are led in a circular motion rather than through chronological development. Such circular patterning upholds the palimpsestic features of stories being layered over one another. While Florens’s mother appears at the end of the novel to narrate her story, Morrison tests the permanence of both oral culture and spoken language, as compared to the vulnerable, ash-like written word. Yet the story of Florens’s mother is still written and communicated to us through Morrison’s *A Mercy*. Without the last chapter, how could we know about the diasporic past of Florens’s mother? Therefore, *A Mercy* is a validation of both the power and the limitations of language as an articulation of reality and as the antithesis of silence. In a text that is alert to the expressive potential of the senses, notably sight and smell, Morrison is interested in what is transferred outside of verbal communication.

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## Notes

Note 1. Intertextuality, in Kristeva's words, is "a mosaic of quotations; any text is the absorption and transformation of another. The notion of intertextuality replaces that of intersubjectivity, and poetic language is read as at least double" (Moi, 37).

Note 2. Perceiving darkness as a route to self-revelation bears a Transcendental implication, as Emerson notes "When it is dark enough, you can see the stars" (cited in Porte, 1983, p. 43).

Note 3. Regina is the horse Jacob rides through his journey to Maryland.

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