

Flesh as Word: Reading and Writing the Black Female Body in Toni Morrison's *A Mercy*

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Abstract

Set in late seventeenth-century America, Toni Morrison's novel *A Mercy* (2008) follows the story of Florens, a young plantation slave recently purchased and separated from her mother. In this narrative, Morrison complicates accounts of race and gender in the New World by creating a slave character who is literate, but whose literacy alone does not allow her agency. By trailing the ways in which Florens' body is read by those around her, Morrison postulates that bodily readings are filtered through a patriarchal framework that governs readership, immeasurably marking the Black female body as inferior. Morrison's slave protagonist, instead, refashions the readings of her body and enforces her own self-definition by rendering herself the tool of creation, thus supplanting the rigid characterizations of gendered and racialized subjectivity. Drawing upon the intersectional and feminist cultural criticisms of Hélène Cixous and Audre Lorde, this work deliberates the ways in which we are simultaneously products of and subjugated to the modes of the linguistic discourses we are placed in. Hence, how is one able to transcend discursive systems that otherwise overlook values they can't measure? By adopting an entirely new system of language (what Cixous dubs *écriture féminine*) that focuses on the female body and its experience, Morrison's female characters thus negate the maligning effects of rhetoric and language which allow space for resistance and empowerment that is conducive to permitting an ownership of the self to occur. This work posits that Florens takes up a narrative of embodiment—that her process of storytelling through the use of her body as the tool for narration is also a process of sense and self-making—giving her the ability to liberate herself from the physical and self-enslavement imposed on to her in the New World.

Keywords: Toni Morrison, embodiment, subjectivity

1. Introduction

Toni Morrison's *A Mercy* is a vivid piece of work that is foregrounded in a narrative where slavery and race have yet to merge in late 17th century "America." She offers us, her audience, a rich articulation of the perspectives that complicate accounts of slavery in the New World, and a new way in which to "read" the black female body. Morrison sees our female slave protagonist Florens "creat[ing] the universal...[by] pay[ing] great attention to the specific."¹ Florens, who is literate, but whose literacy alone does not offer her the key to freedom and agency, uses the only tool she has for expression—her voice, her body—to plainly write her narrative onto the structure of her master's house, literally revising the meaning behind it. Morrison's portrayal of the woman writer composing flesh as word, allows space for resistance in the New World that still reads the black female body as inferior. *A Mercy* views the use of female-created language as allowing room for the black female body to escape the maligning effects of rhetoric and language—which are bound to a much larger and powerful patriarchal discourse—and offers a space that is conducive to permitting an ownership of the self to occur. Female-centered writing allows for self-reflection, and to read oneself

and one's body, outside of patriarchal thought. For Florens specifically, it gives her the opportunity to liberate herself from her physical and transcendent enslavement.

2. Literary Critiques

Morrison coaxes her readers directly in the novel's introduction, and prepares us for the personalized narrative that is specifically created by and for Florens, asking us: "Can you *read*?"² In engraving her story in Vaark's mansion, Florens can be seen as writing herself as a woman to retrieve her suppressed experiences, as means of identity construction, and as something to stand for the existence of the voiceless. French psychoanalytic theorist Hélène Cixous says in "The Laugh of the Medusa" that "woman must write her self: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies."³ It's here where Cixous is explaining that it is through the writing of the body that women's voices are heard, and which would challenge the phallogocentrist tradition (privileging of the masculine in language or in meaning-making) that has predominately imprisoned women in their own silence. Cixous' theory is emphasized by several of the novel's female characters, especially Lina, who claims in a discussion with Florens that "we never shape the world...the world shapes us."⁴ One's stance in the world is mediated by larger ideologically-coded institutions, and the way a woman is "read" in the New World stems from patriarchal binary thought. For Florens, Lina, *minha mãe*, and Sorrow, their roles as women have been mediated by patriarchy, leaving them "female and illegal"⁵ and "be[ing] female i[s] to be an open wound that cannot heal."⁶ Because Florens is marginalized due to her gender and race, her literacy acquisition does not grant her automatic agency, especially when juxtaposed to Jacob Vaark's acquisition of literacy during his time in an orphanage. To try and claim space for a marginalized text, Florens must work from her situated position within the world to produce and actually cultivate a narrative.

While Florens is existing in a world that privileges patriarchal ideology, her body is constantly being read in the novel, especially by those who are in positions of power. Jacob Vaark, for example, recounts seeing Florens for the first time in "a pair of way-too-big woman's shoes...along with little legs rising like two bramble sticks from the brushed and broken shoes."⁷ To read Florens as "bramble" is to connote her chance for growth—as bramble is capable of producing fruit—but also as a means to protect herself, as bramble also is prickly and is capable of inflicting harms unto others. The motif of the shoes refashions itself constantly in *A Mercy*, but here specifically, her shoes symbolize security—whether from the elements, the natural world, or even from larger societal institutions. The shoes—more specifically the boots of Vaark, which Florens has utilized on her journey to the blacksmith, return again in the novel, but are not on Florens' feet. When Florens is at the Widow Ealing's house, she is subjected to an irreverent bodily inspection by the townspeople, asking her to strip all of her clothes, including her fortified footwear, where her body again is exposed to a reading: "Naked under their examination I watch for what is in their eyes. No hate is there or scare or disgust but they are looking at me at my body across distances without recognition."⁸ This incident underscores the intense scrutiny that the black female body undergoes. Florens as an already inscribed body by patriarchal thought is further interrogated and invaded, as well as being examined as a body that does not legally belong to herself. This reading of the body sees Florens' physical presence actually being mediated by absence; The black female body being present but absent at the same time is signifying that Florens has been fashioned to "stand outside the circle of society's definition of acceptable women"⁹ and specifically to have a body that "has been more than confiscated from her... [a body] turned into the uncanny stranger on display—the ailing or dead figure."¹⁰

This reading of the body then warrants Florens to her submit her own self-reading, one that ends up being fueled by patriarchal ideology—which cripples and further diminishes her selfhood, as she equates herself with something primal, inhumane, and evil: "I am losing something with every step I take. I can feel the drain. Something precious is leaving me. I am a thing apart...a darkness I am born with, outside, yes, but inside as well...The sun's going leaves darkness behind and the dark is me. Is we. Is my home."¹¹ Florens ends up losing identity and power, after subjecting herself to this reading—she becomes non-woman and non-self. The "precious" thing that is leaving her, is her sense of self. The core darkness she feels foreshadows her eventual fallout with the blacksmith, leading up to her individual fragmentation, thus prompting her to compose her written narrative.

Though the imagery of darkness is provoking a loss or waning selfhood within Florens, Audre Lorde in her famous essay, "Poetry is Not a Luxury" theorizes that the "dark" is actually a space where a woman's deepest and most intrinsic selves are housed:

For each of us as women, there is a dark place within, where hidden and growing our true spirit rises...These places of possibility within ourselves are dark because they are ancient and hidden; they

have survived and grown strong through that darkness. Within these deep places, each one of us holds an incredible reserve of creativity and power, of unexamined and unrecorded emotion and feeling. The woman's place of power within each of us is neither white nor surface; it is dark, it is ancient, and it is deep.¹²

By describing this innate darkness as something needed to be tended to and embraced, Lorde challenges several worldviews: the conventional literary connections that often equate darkness with evil, while also using darkness as a metaphor for the oppression of African Americans. Florens learns that experiences like this do not only mark her as slave and "Other" to the outside world, but that an internal "withering" harbors the idea in someone that they too are marked slave, to themselves: it is the withering inside that enslaves and opens the door for what is wild... a lion who thinks his mane is all. A she lion who does not."¹³ The real struggle for Florens thus far in the novel has not been the mere task of learning to read and write, but actually learning to read and write the world around her, specifically understanding how she is read by her landscape. Having a critical literary eye like this for Florens not only allows her to comprehend how language practices have worked to keep slaves like her disempowered and locked away in a culture of voicelessness, but also invokes a way to attempt to transform that very structure of oppression. Like scholar Justine Baille claims, "her wearing of Jacob's boots, so necessary for her journey, prefigures Florens's occupancy of his house. Having taken possession of his boots, Florens appropriates the other tools of the master, namely writing and property, and shifts from dependence on others as a commodity to the ownership of herself."¹⁴

So Florens comes to understand a reading of her world, giving her an even greater sense of the literacy she already has, propelling her to write her saga. She claims that her story is not a "confession,"¹⁵ or a request for forgiveness, but merely a way to write her story into the world that has neglected her: Having been cast aside by the blacksmith whom she loves, called "nothing but wilderness, [with] no constraint. No mind"¹⁶ and returning to a home full of women who no longer pretend to be a family, Florens writes on the walls and floors of her deceased master's house, lamenting how her mother gave her away when she was only a child, and how she has lived as a slave to the Vaark family and to her desires. Florens thus writes as a way to liberate herself from her physical enslavement and the enslavement she has cast upon herself. By defacing a home that is as much her master's property as she is, Florens rebels against the structures of power that control her for the very first time in her life. Her words transform the space into a "talking room of daylight"¹⁷ and give Florens a transcendent voice that allows her to be more than slave; it allows her to claim, cultivate, and sustain a self, to be "Florens. In full. Unforgiven. Unforgiving:"¹⁸

There is no more room in this room. These words cover the floor. From now you will stand to hear me. The walls make trouble because lamplight is too small to see by. I am holding light in one hand and carving letters with the other. My arms ache but I have need to tell you this. I cannot tell it to anyone but you. I am near the door and at the closing now. What will I do with my nights when the telling stops? Dreaming will not come again. Sudden I am remembering. You won't read my telling. You read the world but not the letter of talk. You don't know how to. Maybe one day you will learn.¹⁹

There is irony in transcribing her narrative onto the floors and walls of the lavish, uncompleted, and never-to-be-occupied house her master Jacob Vaark builds before his sudden death. The inscription of her story can be seen as a "dismantling of the master's house," to quote Audre Lorde's famous essay "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House:" "the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house. They may allow us temporarily to beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change."²⁰ As if symbolically obeying Lorde's instructions, Florens creates her own "tools"—she does not use the "master's tools"—being language and rhetoric, which operate solely within a patriarchal discourse, but her own voice. This is significant to consider in Florens' case as Lorde asks, "what does it mean when the tools of a racist patriarchy are used to examine the fruits of the same patriarchy?" answering that "it means that only the most narrow parameters of change are possible and allowable."²¹ For a woman like Florens, one needs to cultivate an entirely new kind of discourse—one that to "divide and conquer, must become define and empower."²² Florens uses her own unique voice as the dismantling tool—*écriture féminine* as Hélène Cixous would put it—to work against a larger system of power that silences and marks the black female body as damned and as "Other." This language that Cixous refers to as *écriture féminine* which translates to feminine writing, marks itself as freely associative and fluidly organized. It resists patriarchal modes of writing and thinking and calls to attention women's lived experiences.

Her act of carving into the wooden floors and walls of Vaark's mansion using a nail specifically, also proves to be significant. Not only is the nail a representative of the blacksmith—a free man—and the work that he does, it most importantly alters the room into a canvas or a journal, materials that are suitable for transcribing one's expressions, sentiments, and reveries, and thus, one's agency. It is an act of art that is comparable to the blacksmith's skills but transforms Florens from the one who is "shape[d by] the world"²³ into the one who is doing the shaping. Florens,

during the inscription of her body, actually consoles herself with the possibility of how an audience may even react to her narrative: “If you are live or ever heal you will have to bend down to read my telling, crawl perhaps in a few places. I apologize for the discomfort.”²⁴ While Florens imagines the physical burden of those stooping down to read her personalized tale, she is simultaneously inviting her audience to feel the same “discomfort” she has felt in her role as a female slave in the New World. Like Lorde posits about the written word of women, about Florens’ word, “women have survived. As poets. And there are no new pains. We have felt them all already. We have hidden that fact in the same place where we have hidden our power.”²⁵ Florens’ composition ends up being a cathartic process, one where all the pain she has endured within her lifetime is exorcised.

Ultimately, Florens’ liberation from the blacksmith proves to be the hardest. She has only understood the world she has been raised in, where a man owns a woman as wife, lover, or slave. She writes that while Lina says, “the world shapes us,”²⁶ the blacksmith is “my shaper and my world as well.”²⁷ Florens has to have someone make a world for her because she doesn’t know “the feeling of or what it means, free and not free.”²⁸ The blacksmith, however, is repelled by Florens’ abject surrender to him. “Own yourself woman,”²⁹ he tells her, when he “expels” her from his house, “Your head is empty and your body is wild”³⁰...“You are a slave” he says, to which Florens responds “I am slave because Sir trades for me...No you have become one”³¹ responds the blacksmith. Florens realizes, in this fallout with the blacksmith that to be “slave” is to be treated as an object, looked upon only as a body, and nothing else, to be silenced: “no sound, just the knowledge of a roar [one] could not hear”³²—to evoke the “she-lion”³³ imagery once more, an animal who is continually of authority and rule, of robust power and glory—but is actually voiceless, causing them to deviate from their role as “she-lion” and delegitimizing their truest function.

Writing is the way then that Florens takes ownership of herself, for the words that Florens writes on the floors and walls of her master’s house are ultimately not for the blacksmith; like Cixous says, “Writing is for you, you are for you; your body is yours, take it.”³⁴ Acknowledging that the blacksmith cannot read, she tells us, “these careful words, closed up and wide open, will talk to themselves.”³⁵ In the end, the words end up belonging to no one. Like Florens, they belong to themselves. Though her inscription into the foundation of her master’s house can be seen as an act of disobedience, it is an act that obeys her own need, where she can express her desire, explain her story, and see herself reflected in the engravings.

Her words serve as much larger purpose though, as Lorde exclaims, it “coins the language to express and charter the revolutionary demand, the implementation of freedom.”³⁶ The engraved story in Vaark’s house, a house that is literally a representative of patriarchy, forced labor, and even gendered enslavement, showcases the significance of female-created language especially when it is utilized as an available and participatory narrative. Florens reveals how her language ends up being a medium of power, as her identity and those of the women around her have been sustained, by rejecting patriarchal discourse and replacing it with their own discourse. Florens at the end of her inscription postulates that “perhaps these words need the air that is out in the world. Need to fly up then fall, fall like ashes over acres of primrose and mallow. Over a turquoise lake, beyond the eternal hemlocks, through clouds cut by rainbow and flavor the soil of the earth.”³⁷ Florens’ story has come around full circle; she grabs ahold of her agency and her narrative functions as disfiguring the very physical manifestation of the social establishment that has wounded her. There is hope in Florens’ words, which serve as a testament to her life and it “flavors” the actual terrain on which she walks on. Her story will grow and thrive as the seasons change, but will forever be rooted in the world, much like “those little legs rising like two bramble sticks.”³⁸ Florens poetically envisions a composition project that transcends her text’s material constraints and even those constraints of her own. Her engraved words become bountiful, settling over the landscape of the New World, helping her “become wilderness.”³⁹ Her voice will never end up being discounted. Like Vaark, who initially reads Florens as an emerging “bramble,” a perennial plant, which are long-lived and come to full blossom every year, her words will last—she will last: “Hear me? Slave. Free. I last.”⁴⁰

Similarly, Patricia Hill Collins discusses the notion that “rearticulating a Black woman’s standpoint refashions the particular and reveals the more universal human dimensions of Black women’s everyday lives...poetry, or any writing, is but a reflection of the moment. The universal comes from the particular.”⁴¹ Florens, like what Collins is articulating, is attempting to make her female-centered language more accessible and as something that is to remain within the world indefinitely. Morrison reveals how intersectional paradigms work to brand oppression that doesn’t operate solely on a unilateral level, and is in fact used to mark or in this case, “write,” someone’s location within history and within the world. Through the writing of oneself, Florens actually destabilizes patriarchal binary thought that considers her inferior and works to silence her inscribed position in the world as a woman and as a slave: “she lets go of herself...she physically materializes what she’s thinking...she draws her story into history.”⁴² Though Florens suspects that Lina who “finds horror in this house and...loves fire more”⁴³ will probably burn down the master’s house, the engraved story will still nonetheless fly and scatter as ash and debris over the emerging American landscape and add her voice to the tableau of human history and lived experience that has been neglected

and overlooked. For Florens, to digress from the role in which one has been placed in, and to reclaim agency, she, “a universal woman subject...must bring women to their senses and to their meaning in history.”⁴⁴

3. Conclusion

In all, Morrison’s *A Mercy* has revealed to us, the audience, the quintessential role that language demonstrates: as something that not only reflects the world one lives in but also holds the ability to directly affect it. Florens’ inscription of her tale onto the walls and floors of her master’s house is a direct characterization of this notion: for words carry weight and hold the ability to channel one’s lived subjectivities and experiences—one’s universal moments—into the particular, the known, and the accessible. Florens’ writings—the writing of herself, her body—brings beauty to an otherwise dismal world, one that “remind[s] us that oppression cannot be reduced to one fundamental type, and that oppressions work together in producing injustice.”⁴⁵ To read and write the black female body, as Morrison seems to postulate in her work, is to also read knowing that patriarchal thought has created a framework that governs readership. Florens’ composition is something that works to retrieve the buried self that has been sent into suppression by larger social forces of one’s world, and to “give her access to her native strength...her goods, pleasures...which have been kept under seal.”⁴⁶ The room in Vaark’s house is a literal space of agency for Florens, marked from top to bottom with her words—her flesh—she owns her body and finally her story.

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