

Megan Griffin

Dr. Kilpatrick

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Florens's Displaced Identity in Toni Morrison's *A Mercy*

Toni Morrison's *A Mercy* is set in the British colonies during a time that Morrison terms the age of "pre-racism." Her novel, *A Mercy*, shows the devastating realities of a world of orphans and wanderers struggling to create an identity and legacy for themselves. Florens, a sixteen-year-old slave girl still haunted by the misunderstood abandonment of her mother, shares in this struggle for self-identification within a fractured community. However, despite her declaration at the end of the novel that she is "Florens. In full," Florens ultimately does not develop her own identity, mostly as a consequence of the world she lives in.

From her very first selection of narration, Florens reveals herself to be a narrator with a subjective view on the world that is shaped by her traumatizing abandonment as a child. Florens is born into a world of slavery where human beings are routinely reduced to a commodity and price. She spends the first part of her life on a plantation owned by D'Ortega, a man who represents the Portuguese slave trade in that he objectifies his slaves and lives luxuriously despite his inability to repay debts. When she is eight years old, Florens's mother chooses to send her away with a stranger: Jacob Vaark. Morrison clarifies this scene through two other points of view: a third-person omniscient narrator and, in the end, Florens's mother. The objective truth of the situation lies in that when D'Ortega cannot repay his debt to Jacob, Jacob agrees to accept a slave in place of the money. After trying to barter for Florens's mother, Jacob settles on taking Florens instead after her mother falls on her knees and begs him to take her daughter. Florens's

mother stays behind with D'Ortega and Florens's younger brother, who is still nursing. Jacob, who initially had no desire to settle for Florens, does not reflect on the true intentions behind her mother's begging but gives in and takes her in as yet another orphan to help on his land. This moment, however, becomes the lens through which Florens sees every other relationship in her life.

This objective perspective of the situation is crucial to the understanding of the novel because it reveals insight into the situation that goes beyond Florens's interpretation. Jacob Vaark is portrayed as a relatively good man compared to D'Ortega. He has a heart for mishandled animals and orphans, knowing from his own experience that they rely on "the generosity of strangers" and that "they [are] less doomed under adult control" (Morrison, *A Mercy* 37). In the beginning of his narrative, he is portrayed rescuing a young raccoon from a trap. After he releases it, "the raccoon limp[s] off, perhaps to the mother forced to abandon it or more likely into other claws" (Morrison, *A Mercy* 12). In the same way, he "rescues" four women by bringing them into service in his home: Lina, his native slave; Rebecca, his mail-ordered bride; Sorrow, an odd girl of unknown ethnicity; and Florens. While temporarily rescuing them from undesirable situations, Jacob ultimately dies, abandoning them to find their own way in the world with no connections to outside organizations. Florens, removed from her mother and primary source of identity, is released into a world that does not take kindly to young, wounded girls.

In this original moment of abandonment lives ever-present in Florens's mind and perception. She reflects on this moment in the present tense, despite the eight years that have passed since living with D'Ortega: "Me watching, my mother listening, her baby boy on her hip. Senhor is not paying the whole amount he owes to Sir. Sir saying he will take instead the woman

and the girl, not the baby boy and the debt is gone. A minha mãe begs no. Her baby boy is still at her breast. Take the girl, she says, my daughter, she says. Me. Me,” (Morrison, *A Mercy* 7-8). Her reemphasis on the pronoun *me* reveals her own inability to see this moment beyond her own experience of it. She cannot place herself into the possible mindset of her mother beyond her own hurt and betrayal. It is in this moment that Florens loses her identity. In her article about recognition in *A Mercy*, Shirley Stave writes, “Having initially seen herself reflected in her mother’s eyes, Florens is undone when those eyes look away, or choose another object to reflect. As a result, Florens is haunted by fears of abandonment and desperate for approval. ...She welcomes the gaze of another to indicate who and what she is” (144). This fear is such a part of who she is that it frames her perception of Sorrow’s pregnancy, eight years after the fact. Florens admits, “I have a worry. Not because our work is more, but because mothers nursing greedy babies scare me. I know how their eyes go when they choose” (Morrison, *A Mercy* 9). This prohibits her from sharing in community with other women and, thus, gets in the way of her ability to grow socially with others. She defines herself by this abandonment and puts no effort into finding an identity in any other community.

This issue echoes into the community of women that live with Jacob Vaark. Each of these women is orphaned in some way and must build her own identity. Lina’s self-identification is clear within her section of the text. Lina’s tribe has been wiped out, so her identity cannot be found within the community she was born into. At a young age, she was moved to live as a slave for Presbyterians who admired her as a native female woman able to work hard. However, despite their admiration, they required her to live as they did, changing her name and teaching her to be conscious of sin rather than the natural world around her. It is only after this dual childhood that she is purchased by Jacob and begins to form her identity. Morrison writes,

“Relying on memory and her own resources, she cobbled together neglected rites. . . . Found, in other words, a way to be in the world” (*A Mercy*, 56-57). For Lina, creating her identity meant finding a way to reconcile different experiences in her past to decide how she would live in the present. This reconciliation of pieces became “an activity which shaped her inside and out,” so that long before Florens arrives with Jacob “[Lina’s] self-invention was almost perfected” (Morrison, *A Mercy* 59). Even Sorrow is able to find her identity by the end of the text. When she becomes a mother, Sorrow is able to rename herself *Complete* and find her fulfillment in her child. These are a stark contrast to Florens, who cannot reconcile her mother’s choice with her current world and, thus, becomes formed by the things that happen to her rather than actively creating an identity for herself.

However, the community of women in which Florens finds herself is not necessarily a place where she is able to grow from her trauma. This group of women is exclusive, each finding herself in a different position of authority, none willing to compromise her title. Though Lina does temporarily become a mother-like figure to Florens, she abandons this role after the blacksmith arrives and captures Florens’s attention. In her article about motherhood in *A Mercy*, Sandra Cox discusses the issue that lies in the differences of privilege among the women in the household due to economics, race, and social status. Rebecca is at the top of the hierarchy as the mistress of the household; Lina falls in second as the longest-working slave and her friendship with Rebecca; Sorrow is next because of her position as an expecting mother. This leaves Florens at the bottom as a young, orphaned slave of African descent. Cox believes that these women could have all become surrogate mothers for Florens in order to assist in her development, but “none refuse the small measure of privilege granted by their position above Florens in that hierarchy” (112). This is not merely a criticism of these women; it is a criticism of

the system in which they find themselves. Morrison points out in her interviews that she specifically chose this time period because there were so many “various stages of enslavement” (Morrison, “Toni Morrison on Human Bondage and a Post-Racial Age”). Almost everyone was displaced in some way—even Jacob, the master of the household, is an orphan. The time period was not suited for effective communities, and the hierarchy that these women find themselves in is not a rare circumstance. Florens’s inability to find her identity with this haphazard community of women shows “how cross-cultural identification is all but impossible because of the ways that colonialism...disrupts identification” (Cox 106). Thus, the time period serves to build upon the tragedy of Florens’s narrative.

Of course, Florens’s character shifts when she first lays eyes on the blacksmith. Lina reflects that “Florens had been a quiet, timid version of herself at the time of her own displacement. Before destruction. Before sin. Before men” (Morrison, *A Mercy* 71). She learned quickly, longed for affection and approval, and looked to Lina for guidance. The moment the blacksmith arrives, Florens’s interest is immediately awakened and she decides even before he has noticed her, “There is only you. Nothing outside of you. ...Before you know I am in the world I am already kill by you” (Morrison, *A Mercy* 44). Without question, she places herself at his mercy and willingly hands herself over to him. Her identity, displaced since the abandonment of her mother, is finally rediscovered in his eyes as she realizes, “And when at last our eyes hit I am not dead. For the first time I am live” (Morrison, *A Mercy* 44). Florens abandons any relationship she had with Lina for the attention of the blacksmith, despite warnings that while he is everything to her, she is only “one leaf on his tree” (Morrison, *A Mercy* 71). Jami Carlacio acknowledges that “Florens has willingly placed herself as the subordinate in this unequal relationship, which she must ultimately reconcile in order to achieve self-consciousness,” and

through that self-consciousness, identity (139). The issue here is that, in order to achieve adulthood and form her identity, Florens must be able to think for herself rather than completely surrendering to another human being.

Florens's narrative progresses through her journey to retrieve the blacksmith to save her mistress from smallpox. Though displacement is a very common thing in this time period, Florens's journey is significant due to her "gender, race, age and aloneness" (Roynon 49). In this way, her dangerous voyage rejects traditional expectations. Armed with only Lina's directions and her mistress's letter, Florens sets off donning her master's boots. Along the way, she encounters yet another defining moment in her development of identity. For the first time in her memory, her humanity is questioned in her encounters with Widow Ealing and the witch hunters. When Daughter Jane asks how Florens can prove that she is not a demon, the Widow responds, "It is they who will decide" (Morrison, *A Mercy* 128). Florens does not get an opportunity to defend herself as, for the first time in her life, her race becomes significant. Rather, it is Rebekka's letter that defines Florens as a "female person" (not by her name). Even so, Florens is examined naked, and as she watches their eyes to once again find her identity, she discovers, "No hate is there or scare or disgust but they are looking at me my body across distances without recognition. Swine look at me with more connection when they raise their heads from the trough" (Morrison, *A Mercy* 133). Since Florens's identity rests in the eyes of others, she accepts here that in this moment, she is something less than human. She also observes, "The women look away from my eyes the way you say I am to do with bears so they will not come close to love and play" (Morrison, *A Mercy* 133). Thus, she is introduced to the idea that she is dangerous and something to be feared. Though the blacksmith has not yet defined her as "wilderness," in these moments she is identified as such. Rather than finding her voice, Florens listens to the

conversation regarding her fate silently. It is Daughter Jane who helps her escape; Daughter Jane who has agency as well as an understanding of her own identity. From this point forward, Florens is aware of “the eyes that join [her] on [her] journey,” all questioning her humanity (Morrison, *A Mercy* 135). Because of this, she begins to change how she defines herself, once again framed by the abandonment of her mother:

Inside I am shrinking. I...know I am not the same. I am losing something with every step I take. ...Something precious is leaving me. I am a thing apart. Without [the letter] I am...a minion with no telltale signs but a darkness I am born with, outside, yes, but inside as well and the inside dark is small, feathered and toothy. Is that what my mother knows? Why she chooses me to live without? (Morrison, *A Mercy* 135)

Mar Gallego-Durán argues that in this moment, Florens chooses “to embrace that darkness as an act of liberation, of retrieval, even of poetic justice, from all she has been taken away starting from her own mother,” which signifies the beginning of Florens’s path to self-knowledge and self-respect (112). However, instead of doubting the witch hunters and finding her identity within herself, Florens turns her questions towards the blacksmith: “You will tell me. ...And when I see you and fall into you I know I am live” (Morrison, *A Mercy* 136). When presented with the opportunity to grow and embrace her outer or inner darkness, Florens falls back on the blacksmith even though he too has abandoned her. Thus, this cannot be a moment of self-identification.

With her arrival at the blacksmith’s cabin, Florens finds herself once again abandoned. The blacksmith is caring for a child who cannot come along on the journey back to Rebecca, and Florens learns that she must stay behind with the child. This moment is framed by the immediacy of her first abandonment narrative:

This happens twice before. The first it is me peering around my mother's dress hoping for her hand that is only for her little boy. The second time it is a pointing screaming little girl hiding behind her mother and clinging to her skirts. Both times are full of danger and I am expelled. Now I am seeing a little boy come in holding a corn-husk doll. ...I worry as the boy steps closer to you. How you offer and he owns your forefinger. As if he is your future. Not me." (Morrison, *A Mercy* 160)

Despite the passage of time, Florens finds herself immediately in the position of her eight-year-old self when her mother chose her brother over her. Thus, her sudden possessiveness over the blacksmith is not surprising; it is the normal reaction of a small child jealous of a younger sibling. She decides that she must stay with him, for apparently juvenile reasons: "Here I am not the one to throw out. No one steals my warmth and shoes because I am small. ...With you my body is pleasure is safe is belonging. I can never not have you have me" (Morrison, *A Mercy* 161). She places her entire identity in the blacksmith, despite the fact that he has not claimed her for himself or offered anything in return. He becomes like her replacement mother, stepping in where her real mother chose to leave her, and she becomes as if she is eight years old, longing to wear others' shoes.

Therefore, it is not surprising that she is fiercely jealous of the blacksmith's adopted boy, Malaik. When Malaik hides her shoes, Florens over-reacts, physically lashing out at him and injuring him. When the blacksmith arrives and shouts for the boy, Florens relives her mother's abandonment and her loss of identity as if in the same moment: "[I] know I am lost because your shout is not my name. Not me. Him. Malaik you shout. Malaik" (Morrison, *A Mercy* 165). Wyatt describes this scene as "a broken record" that merely plays the same scenario that Florens has relived over and over in her mind already: "because he is in the place next to the parent/lover's

body, the place where Florens wants to be, there is no place for Florens, who must be cast out” (138). Florens is utterly destroyed as she realizes that the blacksmith assumed that she had hurt the boy even though he had not seen the accident. She sees this as his confirmation that he wants the boy rather than her and confirmation that her mother chose her brother because of the inherent badness inside of Florens. Her heartbreaking realization is revealed in the words, “You see the boy down and believe bad about me without question. ... No question. You choose the boy. You call his name first. ... I am lost” (Morrison, *A Mercy* 165). Without her identity being owned by the blacksmith, she does not know who she is. She is once again stripped of identity, killed by his words. This shows that Florens’s perceived abandonment by her mother not only causes Florens to dissociate with others and abandon her identity; it also becomes an obstacle to understanding other human beings. Words become physical objects that can deeply wound her, as her mother’s words did, rather than information about another’s thoughts or feelings. Jean Wyatt writes,

Since the mother’s words evict the daughter from her presence, the mother’s message is not just baffling, it is traumatizing; rather than activating the daughter’s signifying processes, the mother’s enigmatic speech shuts them down. It would seem, from Florens’s inability to read others’ words as clues to what they are thinking and feeling, that her capacity to make meaning out of others’ signifiers is permanently lamed. (130)

However, her namelessness only lasts for a moment. In her following conversation with the blacksmith, he names her “a slave” and “nothing but wilderness” (Morrison, *A Mercy* 166). Though he rejects his ownership of her, she is left with the only identity she now knows: the wild inhuman thing the witch hunters feared, confirmed by the blacksmith’s assessment of her. It is with this identity that she attacks the blacksmith. Carlacio claims that in this moment, Florens

“comes to realize that she is always already wilderness” and that “Florens has finally arrived at the self-consciousness that she needs in order to assume agency” (143). Though I agree that Florens recognizes the wilderness which has always been a part of who she is, I do not think that this is a defining moment that shapes her self-consciousness. Rather, this is a moment where she chooses to believe what the witch hunters and the blacksmith identified within her, and this is why she tells him, “You should be [afraid]” (Morrison, *A Mercy* 184). This “wilderness” is a temporary identity brought about by the expectations of others, so it is apt to shift again.

Florens’s shoeless journey home has become the representation of her fullness of identity to many critics. Indeed, Morrison’s attention to footwear is significant because, throughout the novel, Florens adorns shoes that do not suit her. In the beginning of her story, Florens writes that as a child, she “always beg[s] for shoes, anybody’s shoes, even on the hottest days” (Morrison, *A Mercy*, 4). Because of her dependence on shoes, Lina predicts that Florens’s feet will become “useless” and “will always be too tender for life” (Morrison, *A Mercy* 4). It seems that Lina is correct, for Florens must again borrow a pair of shoes in order to make the journey to find the blacksmith. This shoe motif seems to symbolize her dependence upon others to define her, until the journey back to Rebecca where she is barefoot and wild. Susana Vega-González explains that the blacksmith’s criticism acts as “spiritual guidance” for Florens, and Florens’s becoming “‘feral’ suggests the idea of wilderness, freedom, and lack of enslavement” (128-29). Florens’s hardened feet from the journey home “symbolize the strength of her new self” (Vega-González 129). Even Morrison seems to agree in her interview for NPR: “But by the end...she’s saying, ‘Are you afraid? You ought to be.’ That’s a whole different human being. ...[Florens] become[s] something very close to an adult human being, whatever her fortunes are” (Morrison, “Toni Morrison on Human Bondage and a Post-Racial Age”). Indeed, in the eyes of Scully, another of

the slaves working for the Vaarks, Florens is a completely different person. She has become “untouchable” (Morrison, *A Mercy* 179). Indubitably, Florens returns a very different woman than she was when she departed. However, she is very clearly “wilderness”—very nearly to the point of being inhuman—which is what the blacksmith and the witch hunters identified her to be. Thus, the question lies in whether the person she becomes is an adult woman, confident in her own identity or if she is still relying upon the identity others have bestowed upon her.

Carlacio sets the standard that “in order to be complete, [Florens] must move from an (unconscious) slave ‘by choice’ or as the blacksmith asserts, from a slave to herself and her passion, to a person who can ‘own [her]self’” (139). If this is so, then Florens must be able to be satisfied with herself independent of other’s opinions and definitions of her. This is where the significance of Florens’s literacy comes into play. In Florens’s final section, she explains that she has been writing her story upon the walls of Jacob’s empty house in epistolary form to the blacksmith. She begins this letter after returning from her long journey, *after* her transformation into a wild self, yet her first words are, “Don’t be afraid. My telling can’t hurt you in spite of what I have done and I promise to lie quietly in the dark...but I will never again unfold my limbs to rise up and bare teeth” (Morrison, *A Mercy* 3). Not only are her words addressed to the blacksmith: she promises to be submissive to him once again. She ends her letter with, “See? You are correct. A minha mãe too. I am become wilderness but I am also Florens. In full. Unforgiven. Unforgiving. No ruth, my love. None. Hear me? Slave. Free. I last” (Morrison, *A Mercy* 189). Despite her claim that she is free, Florens’s narrative is confined to a letter written to a man she still loves. It does not matter that he cannot read; she only remembers this in the end of her letter. She writes to tell him that she has become the woman he and others defined her as over the course of her journey. She begs for his attention, using his words about slaves and free

men that she remembers from before Jacob died (Morrison, *A Mercy* 187). She tells him, “My arms ache but I have need to tell you this. I cannot tell it to anyone but you. What will I do with my nights when the telling stops?” (Morrison, *A Mercy* 188). Despite his throwing her out, Florens still devotes her energy and countless nights to telling only him her story. Her final words, however, suggest that he is not the only owner of her identity. Her sadness that she cannot hear her mother and her note that “the soles of [her] feet are hard as cypress” suggest that she still requires affirmation from her mother (Morrison, *A Mercy* 189). Her identity of wilderness and freedom was only temporary; with nowhere else to turn, her story once again belongs to the blacksmith and the idea of her mother.

Florens’s identity (or lack thereof) is not only reliant upon her ability to own herself, however; as with many of Morrison’s novels, identity is also found through participation in a community. As Vega-González points out, Sorrow ultimately achieves her identity when she becomes a mother. It is “the act of giving birth [that] represents for this character the ability to achieve things in life by and for herself” (Vega-González 125). It is relevant, also, that Sorrow finds community with her child. Becoming a mother is what causes her alternative personality to leave “unmissed” and what gives her life routine and purpose (Morrison, *A Mercy* 158). Becoming a mother and participating for the first time in a community is what causes Sorrow to change her name to “Complete.” This juxtaposes Florens’s ending; upon her return, Florens exists in complete desolation, unable to participate in any kind of community. Stave goes as far as to claim, “Florens can no longer cohabit with other humans, but she has immense capacity for destruction” (147). Scully and Willard’s description of Florens after she returns supports this assertion:

The docile creature they knew had turned feral. When they saw her stomping down the road...they were slow to recognize her as a living person. First because she was so blood-splattered and bedraggled and, second, because she passed right by them. Surely a sudden burst of sweating men...would have startled a human, any human, especially a female.

But this one neither glanced their way nor altered her pace. (Morrison, *A Mercy* 171-2)

Barely human, Florens arrives back on the scene, yet Scully adds that her transformation was “predictable” (Morrison, *A Mercy* 179). Though it is a significant change, this shift is not surprising in the slightest. Florens is an impressionable slave girl who gave her entire identity to a free man who inevitably rejected her. Florens is not a new woman; she is a wounded girl who never recovered from the original abandonment of her mother. As Cox points out, “Because of her ignorance of her mother’s motives, Florens’s abject status inhibits her ability to form a solid sense of self and this inhibition seems to have a causal relationship with her arrested coming of age in the novel” (111). And because she cannot settle back into community with the women and ultimately excludes herself, Florens’s development of identity is prematurely stopped. Gallego-Durán writes, “[W]omen like Florens need other needy women to open new paths for individual and collective affirmation and to effectively challenge and deconstruct the insidious mechanisms of racist and sexist prejudice, and the perpetuation of the harmful practices of racial and sexual objectification, nullification and commodification” (113). Because she cannot find a comfortable place within a community, Florens is unlikely to grow into her own identity rather than looking to others to define her. She may already be unconsciously aware of this fact because of the dream she has while still at the blacksmith’s cabin. Within this dream, she looks into a reflective lake and is frightened when she cannot see her own reflection, “not even a shadow” (Morrison, *A Mercy* 162). Then, when she sees her mother holding Malaik in place of Florens’s brother,

Florens hides in the blacksmith's blanket rather than confronting the figures (Morrison, *A Mercy* 163). In her dream, Florens is faced with her own lack of identity and then sees the original cause of it, but she responds by hiding within the security of the blacksmith. Though within the dream, Daughter Jane offered encouragement, Florens ultimately rejects the support of the small community and instead focuses on her fear (Morrison, *A Mercy* 162). Since she rejects her community, Florens falls back to relying upon the blacksmith and her mother to define who she is.

Florens's confusion of self is represented through the form of her narrative. While she is the first-person narrator, her sections are broken apart by omniscient retellings of scenes focalized by characters who have little-to-no "emotional stake" in the events (Wyatt 133). Jacob provides a second viewpoint of Florens's abandonment; Lina gives insight into Florens's relationship with the blacksmith; Willard and Scully narrate Florens's return. This narrative style is parallel to Florens's unfinished quest for her identity; while she has emotional stake in the narrative, it is others who tell us how we should really perceive the events. It also represents the issue created by Florens's displacement from her mother: though both Florens and her mother desperately desire to communicate with one another, "the mother's explanatory narrative is placed outside the frame of the novel's action, as a coda following the daughter's story, which has already reached its painful conclusion" (Wyatt 131). Her mother's message is relevant and necessary to Florens. Her first point gives one more perspective of Florens's "abandonment," which is entirely focused on her love of Florens and hardly even mentions her son. Second, she gives Florens insight that critiques how she has since lived her life: "to be given dominion over another is a hard thing; to wrest dominion over another is a wrong thing; to give dominion of yourself to another is a wicked thing" (Morrison, *A Mercy* 196). Tragically, Florens never

receives her mother's message, ultimately rejects her female community, and places her identity in the hands of two people she will never be able to speak to again.

In the end, Florens's story is an incomplete coming-of-age narrative, partly due to the trauma caused by her abandonment by her mother and partly due to her inability to find a community in which she could safely develop her own identity. The agency that comes from her ability to share her story is undercut by her reliance still upon the blacksmith and the futility of her words. Her trauma cannot be reversed because she cannot hear her mother's true reasons for giving her away. Her mother's final act of sending her away is much like Jacob's releasing of the injured raccoon from the trap. Though both the raccoon and Florens were not guaranteed a safe journey into their futures, perhaps the mere act of setting them free is enough to be considered a mercy.

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