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“Breathing the Air of a World So New”: Rewriting the Landscape of America in Toni Morrison’s *A Mercy*

JENNIFER TERRY

This article explores Toni Morrison’s preoccupation with, and reimagining of, the landscape of the so-called New World. Drawing on scholarship that has investigated dominant discourses about freedom, bounty, and possibility located within the Americas, it identifies various counternarratives in Morrison’s fiction, tracing these through the earlier *Song of Solomon* (1977), *Tar Baby* (1981), and *Beloved* (1987), but primarily arguing for their centrality to *A Mercy* (2008). The mapping of seventeenth-century North America in the author’s ninth novel both exposes colonial relations to place and probes African American experiences of the natural world. In particular, *A Mercy* is found to recalibrate definitions of “wilderness” with a sharpened sensitivity to the position of women and the racially othered within them. The dynamic between the perspectives towards the environment of Anglo-Dutch farmer and trader Jacob Vaark and Native American orphan and servant Lina, is examined, as well as the slave girl Florens’s formative encounters in American space. Bringing together diverse narrative views, *A Mercy* is shown to trouble hegemonic settler and masculinist notions of the New World and, especially through Florens’s voicing, shape an alternative engagement with landscape. The article goes some way towards meeting recent calls for attention to the intersections between postcolonial approaches and ecocriticism.

In *Beloved* (1987), through Paul D’s story of oppression, itineracy, and alienation, Toni Morrison offers a suggestive sense of the ex-slave’s relationship with his environment: “he could not help being astonished by the beauty of this land that was not his.”¹ Here the natural features of the North American continent are linked both to well-established associations of wonder, beauty, and possibility and to minority experiences of dislocation, disentanglement, and confusion. Morrison’s rich fictional articulation of African American perspectives in this instance complicates dominant accounts and myths of the landscape of the so-called New World. While this revisionary preoccupation can be traced through such novels as *Song of Solomon* (1977), *Tar Baby* (1981), and *Beloved*, in the recent *A Mercy* (2008), set on the colonial eastern seaboard,

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¹ Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (London: Picador, 1987), 268. Subsequent references given in text.

it is foregrounded as a central concern and constitutes a key part of the author's imaginative engagement with early America.

How European American canonical literature and travel accounts embedded anxieties about encounters with an untamed wilderness alongside dreams of freedom and bounty located within a newfound land has been extensively documented by scholars. As Lawrence Buell writes,

Much colonial and early national literature was taken up with exploring, mapping and celebrating the land. The American literary renaissance of the antebellum period, influenced by romantic naturism, nurtured the image of a wild, unsettled continent as an article of cultural nationalism well into the age of industrial revolution.²

The meanings of the continent for African Americans have been less fully explored, brought as they were to the New World by force and subsequently denied equal forms of belonging, ownership, and security, and therefore narratives of self-realization and home.³ In particular, as Kathleen Wallace and Karla Armbruster note, "Morrison's profound engagement with the natural world has thus far been overlooked by most of her critics."⁴ Morrison seeks to revisit the founding myths and hegemonic accounts of the past of her nation and does so in *A Mercy* through focalizing a diverse and dialogic set of experiences of the land. This article will probe the author's delineation of the relations between people and natural environments and ask how such representations are interventions in, or reinscriptions of, familiar discourses of "Americanness" and American spaces. Morrison's fiction maps not just fearful, alienated, or acquisitive responses but also narratives of learning, restoration, and connection within New World geographies. As we will see, she provides a complex picture of modes of inhabitation and of black relations to "wilderness."

From "discovery," exploration, and early settlement by Europeans, the New World has been conceived as a site of possibility, where the vastness of

² Lawrence Buell, *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing and the Formation of American Culture* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), 14.

³ See Brian Jarvis on the "acute sensitivity to the politics and poetics of space" in African American writing, arising from the historical experience of the "dislocations of the diaspora . . . segregation, ghettoisation and incarceration." Brian Jarvis, *Postmodern Cartographies: The Geographical Imagination in Contemporary American Culture* (London: Pluto Press, 1998), 113.

⁴ Kathleen R. Wallace and Karla Armbruster, "The Novels of Toni Morrison: Wild Wilderness Where There Was None," in Kathleen R. Wallace and Karla Armbruster, eds., *Beyond Nature Writing: Expanding the Boundaries of Ecocriticism* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2001), 211–30, 211. For other readings that explicitly address the symbolic and/or natural landscapes of Morrison's novels see Melvin Dixon, *Ride Out the Wilderness: Geography and Identity in Afro-American Literature* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1987); and Maria Diedrich, "Caves and Mountaintops: American Landscapes in Toni Morrison's Novels," in Mick Gidley and Robert Lawson-Peebles, eds., *Modern American Landscapes* (Amsterdam: VU University Press, 1995), 232–49.

the continent and the boon of virgin, unoccupied, and historyless geographical space offers up an unprecedented freedom of thought and action as well as a plenitude of natural resources. Foundational Americanists Henry Nash Smith and Leo Marx examine such imagery and thinking in influential representations.⁵ The figures of the "American Adam," the pioneer, and the self-made man have long been bound up with grand narratives of US character and regeneration, as reflected in the nation's cultural and literary production.⁶ As Morrison herself observes in *Playing in the Dark*, "For the most part, the literature of the United States has taken as its concern the architecture of a *new white man*."⁷ She continues, "Young America distinguished itself by, and understood itself to be, pressing toward a future of freedom . . . the attraction was of the 'clean slate' variety."⁸ Twentieth- and twenty-first-century scholarship has interrogated such accounts, laying bare their implication in modes of imperialism and patriarchy, and erasure of alternative voices. As elaborated by Annette Kolodny, among others, writings within the pastoral tradition have identified the New World wilderness as feminine, projecting gendered fantasies onto the apparently unmarked topography they penetrate, tame, and idealize.⁹ Discussing discourses of the American West, Eleanor Porter points out how they celebrate "virile [male] self-assertion," something "not surprising if we consider the gendering of the territory as the female object of the masculine gaze."¹⁰ Yet, extending earlier feminist analysis,

⁵ Nash Smith "traces the impact of . . . the vacant continent beyond the frontier on the consciousness of Americans," looking at conceptions of a maritime empire, liminal wilderness pioneers, the "agricultural paradise in the West" to follow and the "master symbol of the garden." Henry Nash Smith, *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth* (New York: Vintage, 1962; first published 1950), 4, 138. Considering various canonical writers, Marx identifies "a new, distinctively American . . . version of the pastoral design" in a recurrent pattern that combines the idealized landscape and garden idyll of an unspoiled virgin continent with a counterforce, often in the form of an intruding machine, representing "an encroaching world of power and complexity . . . history." Leo Marx, *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964), 32, 24.

⁶ See R.W.B. Lewis on the "Adamic myth," the recurring, shifting image of "the authentic American as a figure of heroic innocence and vast potentialities, poised at the start of a new history." R.W.B. Lewis, *The American Adam: Innocence, Tragedy and Tradition in the Nineteenth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1955), 1, 5.

⁷ Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (London: Picador, 1992), 14–15, original emphasis.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 33–34.

⁹ Kolodny focusses on male-authored texts to uncover "the potency, the continued repetition of the land-as-woman symbolization in American life and letters," and to probe this as an adapting but archetypal fantasy of harmony and nurture. Annette Kolodny, *The Lay of the Land: Metaphor as History and Experience in American Life and Letters* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1975), ix, 4.

¹⁰ Eleanor Porter, "Heroic Trajectories," *Borderlines: Studies in American Culture*, 4 (1997), 153–65, 155.

Louise Westling asserts that while the “‘melodramas of beset manhood’ which predominate in official versions of American literary culture require a feminized landscape where solitary heroes can escape the demeaning responsibilities of communal life,” alternative representations “substitute new stories that suggest other ways of living in the land.”¹¹ In this vein, my analysis will explore how Morrison shapes a telling response to familiar narratives of the continent as enabling a masculinist process of self-actualization for European Americans. Unlike the Old World, marked by prior struggles and preexisting social structures, the discourse of an uninhabited landscape facilitated and justified its appropriation by settlers. Morrison’s multifaceted literary countermapping exposes colonial relations to place, explores African American experiences of the natural world, and recalibrates engagements with the wild through a sharpened sensitivity to naturalized alignments with it of women and the racially “othered.”

With a narrative present of the 1680s and 1690s, and encompassing the memories of characters of various gender, ethnic, and class backgrounds, *A Mercy* offers a range of encounters with the colonial-era New World. One particular dynamic worthy of attention is that between the perspectives towards the land of Anglo-Dutch farmer and trader Jacob Vaark and Native American orphan and servant Lina. The relation to her environment of slave girl Florens also contributes an important emergent African American sense of place. As Cathy Covell Waegner writes, with these many, sometimes conflicting, viewpoints in mind, “Morrison’s novel serves as a tough counterpoise to any unreflective patriotism which glorifies the American project while neglecting the ruthless exploitation based on ethnicity, gender, and class, historically part and parcel of the European advancement into the Americas.”¹²

In the early stages of *A Mercy*, travelling the eastern seaboard on business, Jacob exhibits a sense of awe at, and adventure in, the landscape. Following “an old Lenape trail” through “precarious” territory in Virginia, he

took delight in the journey. Breathing the air of a world so new, almost alarming in rawness and temptation, never failed to invigorate him. Once beyond the warm gold of the bay, he saw forests untouched since Noah, shorelines beautiful enough to bring tears, wild food for the taking . . . it was hardship, adventure that attracted

¹¹ Louise H. Westling, *The Green Breast of the New World: Landscape, Gender and American Fiction* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1996), 169–70.

¹² Cathy Covell Waegner, “Ruthless Epic Footsteps: Shoes, Migrants, and the Settlement of the Americas in Toni Morrison’s *A Mercy*,” in Jopi Nyman, ed., *Post-national Enquiries: Essays on Ethnic and Racial Border Crossings* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2009), 91–112, 91. See Sandra Gustafson and Gordon Hutner on how Morrison draws on recent historical and Americanist scholarship to correct idealizing images of colonial encounter. Sandra M. Gustafson and Gordon Hutner, “Projecting Early American Literary Studies: Introduction,” *Early American Literature*, 45 (2010), 211–16, 211.

him . . . Now here he was, a ratty orphan become landowner, making a place out of no place, a temperate living from raw life. He relished never knowing what lay in his path, who might approach and with what intention.¹³

This passage establishes Jacob as "invigorate[d]" by the challenges presented by America and experiencing wonder at the beauty and resources of its "wild" natural environment. The word "rawness" not only suggests the rough and ready state of nascent settler society, but also points towards a long-standing Eurocentric opposition of the civilized and the savage, with Jacob relishing his active participation in the process of taming and tempering. His sense of movement from "raw life" to "temperate living" seems to accord with the potent notion of "the Westward progress of civilization over savagism" investigated by Roy Harvey Pearce in his early study of the construction of "savagism" in America.¹⁴ Discourses of newness, of a world "untouched," here reinforce a European vision of limitless possibility, of fresh beginnings for the American Adam figure.¹⁵ This attitude is echoed by Jacob's wife Rebekka's briefer meditation on "this clean world, this fresh and new England" to which she has sailed, an idealized "land of . . . space and perfume" (90, 76). In the extract focalized through Jacob, biblical reference is employed to indicate antiquity, or rather timelessness, "since Noah," with the mention of "temptation" perhaps anticipating a fall in this "world so new."¹⁶ At this stage, Morrison aligns Jacob with the pioneer and appears to rehearse familiar interpretations of American landscape.

A Mercy's lyrical invocation of Edenic myths recalls how *Tar Baby*, with its distinctive Caribbean island setting, addresses dominant narratives about the New World. Early in *Tar Baby*, Morrison offers a brief but beguiling account

¹³ Toni Morrison, *A Mercy* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2008), 12. Subsequent references given in text.

¹⁴ Roy Harvey Pearce, *Savagism and Civilization: A Study of the Indian and the American Mind*, 2nd edn, rev. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 48. Harvey Pearce in particular looks at "the development in the American mind of the Indian as a symbol for all that over which civilization must triumph." *Ibid.*, 73.

¹⁵ Indeed, Waegner, 94, notes, "when [Jacob] enters steamy Virginia . . . his arrival is suggestive of the European explorers' first footsteps in original landfall." The use of a colonial-era map of East Coast territories on the title page of the hardback edition of the novel additionally highlights such concerns.

¹⁶ Several reviews of *A Mercy* note Morrison's invocation of these biblical paradigms. Lenora Todaro finds "the genesis of racist America, with Adam and Eve played by the Anglo-Dutch trader Jacob Vaark and his mail-order bride, Rebekka . . . cast out of this new American Eden." Lenora Todaro, "Toni Morrison's *A Mercy*: Racism Creation Myth," *Village Voice*, 18 Nov. 2008, available at www.villagevoice.com, accessed 10 April 2011. In his at times dismissive review, John Updike observes the depiction of "a new world turning old, and poisoned from the start." John Updike, "Dreamy Wilderness: Unmastered Women in Colonial Virginia," *New Yorker*, 3 Nov. 2008, available at www.newyorker.com, accessed 10 April 2011.

of environment and the impact of an incursive settler presence: “When labourers imported from Haiti came to clear the land, clouds and fish were convinced that the world was over.”¹⁷ The destruction of “a rain forest already two thousand years old and scheduled for eternity” to build luxury housing alters the local climate and terrain: “never again would the rain be equal”; “Evicted from the place where it had lived . . . [the river] could not form its pools or waterfalls, and ran every which way” (7). *Tar Baby* presents an unusual, sentient natural world in which clouds and fish foresee peril, and serene “champion daisy trees” ignore change until “persuade[d]” of the end of their habitat (7). At the same time, we find suggestion of an original landscape with biblical resonances of an ancient past, transgression, and a shattering “fall” which transforms understandings of permanency (8).¹⁸ The creation is evoked alongside the first sin of environmental damage, complete with “diamondback” snakes, as Morrison’s phrasing echoes the Old Testament: the men “folded the earth where there had been no fold” (7). Through this setting she both summons up the familiar notion of the Americas as offering a new start, a kind of second Eden, and demonstrates this vision to be tied into imperialist, acquisitive ventures and catastrophic exploitation of natural resources.¹⁹ If Jacob’s view of “forests untouched since Noah . . . wild food for the taking” recalls this earlier depiction, then the destructive pattern established in *Tar Baby* may presage developments in *A Mercy* (12).

Indeed, in the later novel prelapsarian mythologization is swiftly complicated. This is demonstrated as the description of Jacob’s journey towards Maryland continues:

He knew the landscape intimately from years ago when it was still the old Swedish Nation . . . there had never been much point in knowing who claimed this or that terrain . . . Other than certain natives, to whom it all belonged, from one year to another any stretch might be claimed by a church, controlled by a Company or become the private property of a royal’s gift to a son or a favorite . . . he paid scant attention to old or new names of towns or forts: Fort Orange; Cape Henry; Nieuw Amsterdam; Wiltwyck. In his own geography he was moving from Algonquin to Sesquehanna via Chesapeake on through Lenape . . . [he] negotiated native trails on horseback, mindful of their fields of maize, careful through their hunting grounds, politely asking permission to enter a small village . . . Recognizing the slope of certain

¹⁷ Toni Morrison, *Tar Baby* (London: Vintage, 1981), 7. Subsequent references given in text.

¹⁸ “The men had gnawed through the daisy trees . . . In the huge silence that followed their *fall*, orchids spiralled down to join them” (8, emphasis added).

¹⁹ *Tar Baby* also elaborates different relations to the land, inflected by the history of colonialism: those who will own and occupy the new homes are of European and European American descent; the workers on the building project are “imported from Haiti,” implied to be nonwhite, economically dependent labourers; and the only group shown to exist in harmony with the forests is the *chevaliers*, “descended from some slaves who went blind the minute they saw Dominique” (153).

hills, a copse of oak, an abandoned den . . . all of that was more than valuable; it was essential. (12–13)

Jacob's navigation of "ad hoc territory" offers a pointed dialogue with colonizing relations to the land and previous canonical representations (13). On the one hand, his positioning as a resourceful orphan and migrant, "making a place out of no place," models an established discourse of opportunity for European self-realization and reinvention in the New World (12). Yet, on the other, this trader and farmer quickly shows an unexpected respect for the rights and ways of life of indigenous inhabitants, his narrative view instilling a sense of an existing human "geography" and suggesting the insignificance of current political manoeuvres and settler ambitions. Jacob's sensitivity towards Native society, "mindful of their fields of maize," and his observational skill and "intimate" familiarity with "the slope of certain hills," disrupt dominant colonial patterns. His list of shifting appellations, "Fort Orange; Cape Henry; Nieuw Amsterdam," maps not unmarked space ripe for European conquest, nor a fixed sense of ownership, but a layering of histories in which "land claims were . . . fluid" and the struggle for territory and the right to name is recognized as a process, not always already determined or destined (12–13). This response echoes Sarah Phillips Casteel's assessment of the diverse visions of nature in contemporary diasporic writing as sharing a "reimagining [of] the New World landscape as infused with history and as subject to competing claims."²⁰

The narrative references to extant tribal inhabitation develop the invocation of Native American pasts via the Byrd family in Morrison's *Song of Solomon* and the "camp of sick Cherokee for whom a rose was named" featured in *Beloved* (111–12). Jacob's close engagement with the landscape also recalls the positive learning experience of the earlier protagonist Milkman Dead. In *Song of Solomon*, as Milkman travels from his home in the urban North to increasingly remote, rural, and southern sites, his journey charts a specifically African American geography linked to the history of slavery in the South and later northward migration. It simultaneously celebrates redemptive intimacy and affinity with the natural environment: Milkman moves from "the city man's boredom with nature's repetition" to being "exhilarated by simply walking the earth," paying attention in order to "hear what . . . [it] had to say."²¹ However, in *A Mercy* attuned understanding of the land and respectful views towards those "to whom it all belonged" are not gained by an African

²⁰ Sarah Phillips Casteel, *Second Arrivals: Landscape and Belonging in Contemporary Writing of the Americas* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2007), 16.

²¹ Toni Morrison, *Song of Solomon* (London: Vintage, 1977), 226, 279–81. For a reading of this kind see Jennifer Terry, "Buried Perspectives: Narratives of Landscape in Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*," *Narrative Inquiry*, 17 (2007), 93–118.

American questing figure but attributed to a revised white male pioneer (12). Jacob's apparently receptive attitude towards Native peoples to some extent echoes the positive but limited account found in earlier American leatherstocking tales. Morrison perhaps here gestures towards the idealized Deerslayer type featured in the frontier fiction of James Fenimore Cooper, a European figure presented as harmonized with nature and as having learnt indigenous ways.²² As the narrative moves on to other perspectives and relationships with the land, it becomes clearer how Jacob, although initially sympathetically treated, serves both to summon up seductive American paradigms and to demonstrate their partiality and complicity.

The Native servant Lina's focalized viewpoint operates in a dialogic relation with that of Jacob, playing an important role in conveying the changes he undergoes and prompting reevaluation. When Jacob constructs a new house on his northern homestead the reader is aligned with Lina's judicious perspective: "That third and presumably final house that Sir insisted on building distorted sunlight and required the death of fifty trees . . . There was no need for [it] . . . bigger, double-storied, fenced and gated" (43). Lina sees Jacob's waste of resources and status affirming consumption as "a profane monument to himself" (44). The building of his third house marks a shift from the sensitivity towards the environment and other residents shown previously. "[K]illing trees in that number, without asking their permission," proves a trespass that accords with, and is underwritten by, his decision to invest in remote slave labour and sugar production in Barbados, within the schema of the text a corruption leading to "malfortune" (44). Jacob is thus shown to become one of the "insatiable," increasingly acquisitive and now driven on by an unforgivable sense of settler entitlement (54). As his prior affinity with the landscape is distorted, his emphasis shifts to property relations; according to Lina, "Cut loose from the earth's soul, they insisted on purchase of its soil" (54).

The figure of Lina, whose perspective troubles a celebratory view of Jacob, herself offers a dense set of meanings. On the one hand, her identity is coupled with respect for "the earth's soul" and a location of value and belonging in natural environments where she "cawed with birds, chatted with plants . . . and opened her mouth to rain" (54, 48–49).²³ Such an alignment with the nonhuman world not only echoes the oppositional definitions of savagery and civility shaped by early European Americans, but also potentially reflects the modern turn to a representative other for access to "authentic" relations as

²² The early nineteenth-century leatherstocking novels of Cooper have proved significant to much scholarship on ideas of American landscape and indigeneity, including that of Harvey Pearce, Nash Smith and Kolodny.

²³ We are told that Lina becomes "one more thing that moved in the natural world" (48).

explored by Philip Deloria in his codification of the "natural Indian."²⁴ Indeed, Sarah Phillips Casteel has recently warned against a narrative mobilization of Native figures that recurrently portrays them as continuous with landscape and nature. Looking at current minority and diasporic writing, Phillips Casteel identifies how such a disengagement of "indigenous peoples from culture and history" can rehearse "colonialist ways of seeing."²⁵ On the other hand, while there are clear dangers in a "given" contiguity with land and environment, and in the Native as mere symbol or vehicle in the development of other characters, *A Mercy's* Lina resists one-dimensionality. Morrison sets up an outside perspective on her as "heathen" and savage, for example through her exclusion from local church rites, but at the same time establishes the young woman's own insightful awareness of power relations and her determined negotiation of a hostile community and culture, unbroken by "[s]olitude, regret and fury" (47, 50). The vivid detailing of her interior and world views in the narrative helps to position Lina as an individual and social agent in her own right, also working against any potential disconnection from history. Tensions remain in the novel's activation of a Native American presence but Lina's prominence and particularity counter narrow stereotype.

Both Lina's assessment of Jacob and the foregrounding of her process of "self-invention" contribute to a complex portrayal (50). While Lina recounts her sachem's prophecy of European expansionism, greed, and powers of destruction – "more would always come" – *A Mercy* as a whole resists the sense of inevitable doom tied to dominant ideas of the vanishing Indian (54).²⁶ Lina herself refuses to see all "Europes" as a threat, concluding that it was "[b]est to judge them one at a time," and evolves a syncretic belief system to ensure survival (46). The narrative charts the loss of her family and community to a disease introduced by the colonizers, but also details her adaptability: "Relying on memory and her own resources, she cobbled together neglected rites, merged European medicine with native, scripture with

²⁴ Philip J. Deloria, *Playing Indian* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 101–3. Looking at "images of Indianness" in European American disguise and performance, Deloria explores their potency in national culture as markers of both oppositional savagism and latterly, in a modern, nostalgic, primitivist turn, a more free "natural" other, "represent[ing] authentic reality in the face of . . . alienating mass society." *Ibid.*, 6, 74.

²⁵ Phillips Casteel, 93, 92. Phillips Casteel considers how by "appropriating [iconic] rural and wilderness landscapes . . . diasporic writers of the Americas . . . position themselves to contest exclusionary narratives of the nation." Yet, in doing so, they risk "reproducing the very conceptual structures" they seek to oppose. *Ibid.*, 1–2, 3–4. Here the specific critique of "Native envy," in which a primitivist identification with figures of indigeneity serves to bolster migrant claims to belonging, is shaped against the fiction of Joy Kogawa. *Ibid.*, 101.

²⁶ See Harvey Pearce, 74, 49, on the forging of "the Indian as the vanishing American," an ambivalent figure of both censure and pity in the dominant imagination, but ultimately a "savage . . . who would inevitably be destroyed by the civilized."

lore . . . Found . . . a way to be in the world" (48). This decision to "fortify herself by piecing together scraps" marks out a tale of hybridity and endurance which, together with her presence at the end of the novel, counters a notion of manifest destiny anticipating and facilitating Native disappearance with westward advancement (48).

The discourse of ownership, with implications in terms of slavery *and* colonization of land, is treated in brief in an instructive, poignant tale that Lina shares with Florens:

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 . . . Mine. Mine. Mine. (62)

Both deprived of their families, Lina and Florens bond over the story of the traveller killing a mother eagle, orphaning her offspring. For the reader, this encounter with the landscape, of admiration, inspiration, possession, and, eventually, destruction, works as an allegory of New World conquest and ownership. The European figure's staking of claim is bound up with perceptions of the "beauty" of the natural environment and its lyrical description. This chimes with Mary Louise Pratt's identification in "discovery rhetoric" of the monarch-of-all-I-survey scene, predicated on a relation of vantage and mastery.²⁷ The vision of "the word . . . booming" and spreading through this space, of the "traveler" in effect naming and thus asserting entitlement to the mountains and valleys, is taken up again with positive revisions towards the end of the novel. Yet even here, where the repetition of "Mine. Mine. Mine" suggests a bleak inevitability to colonization, some resolve and hope is conveyed. When Florens asks of the baby eagles "[d]o they live?" cut off from nurture and home, Lina affirms, "We have" (62–63).

Taken as a whole, *A Mercy* disrupts the dominant account of the Americas, undermining deterministic notions of expansion and presenting diverse viewpoints.²⁸ Readers are offered multiple and competing experiences of place, nature, and wilderness. Indeed, key to the text's resolution is the firsthand inscription of the story of the slave girl Florens into the floor and walls of Jacob's vainglorious house, "careful words" that may in the future "flavor the soil of the earth" (161). The memories and perspectives of Jacob, Lina,

²⁷ Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*, 2nd edn (New York: Routledge, 2008; first published 1992), 197–201.

²⁸ For an exploration of Morrison's dialogue with founding documents and the "American origins narrative," see Valerie Babb, "E Pluribus Unum? The American Origins Narrative in Toni Morrison's *A Mercy*," *Toni Morrison: New Directions, MELUS*, 36, 2 (2011), 147–64, 147.

Rebekka, Sorrow, Willard, and Scully are each in turn focalized through sections of third-person narrative. Florens's first-person voice, however, is set apart in intervening chapters, spanning the entire novel and, we learn at the end, being written over the European male's attempt to leave his mark in American space. Florens's troubled narrative describes abandonment and hurt but also a violent form of self-assertion. Waegner locates in the young African American woman's struggle a revisionary sense of representative Americanness.²⁹ I would suggest that her voicing offers up an articulation to contest hegemonic settler and masculinist takes on the New World and, in particular, will pursue this line through Morrison's invocation of the terms "wild" and "wilderness."

Sent on an urgent mission to find the blacksmith, Florens gladly seizes the opportunity to be reunited with the free man she loves but is fearful of travel through unknown territory, vulnerable both as a lone female and as an unescorted slave. As she sets off into the landscape that we have previously seen Jacob negotiate with caution in "the relative safety of his skin," her own solitary journey through untamed prairie and woodland presents an alternative narrative of such space (11). The first danger Florens confronts is of the natural environment, an unidentified animal presence of "creep and slouch": "I do not hear the paws or see any shape. It is the smell of wet fur that stops me . . . I cannot tell if it is bigger than me or smaller or if it is alone" (41–42). The forest seems a hostile, threatening location yet the girl shows alertness and bravery, maintaining "stillness" until "the odor fades at last" (42). Although lacking experience and knowledge in this habitat, recognizing "I need Lina to say how to shelter in wilderness," Florens resourcefully retreats up a tree during her first night of travel: "Any one is good cover even though it tears and fights me" (41–42). She eventually moves down to rest: "I am happy to find a hollow log, but it is wavy with ants. I break off twigs . . . from a young fir, pile them and crawl under . . . I am watchful for snakes" (67). Her strength, improvisation, and watchfulness here recall 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 (149).

Florens's frontier journey is anticipated earlier in her narrative, for she has already speculated on running "across the trail through the beech and white pine" to rejoin her lover (5). However, she questions "[w]ho lives in the wilderness between this farm and you and will they help me or harm me?" and,

²⁹ Waegner, "Ruthless Epic Footsteps," 92.

without directions, “fear[s] pathless nights” (5). This terror is realized when Florens embarks into the unknown “wilderness” that lies between her home on Jacob’s farm and the blacksmith’s forge. She has been warned of “the boneless bears in the valley” whose “pelts sway as though there is nothing underneath . . . Their smell belying their beauty” (5). The spectres of fantastical “[g]iant birds . . . bigger than cows” and hostile Natives further indicate perceptions of the dangers of the space out beyond familiar settlements (5). In spite of not knowing the way and encountering pelted “beasts,” Florens does successfully negotiate such a terrain (5). Indeed, as I will explore, the transformative damage done to her on her journey arises not from the natural world but through her interactions with a human society offering both “help” and “harm.”

Connected to Florens’s experience of American landscape are interlocked discourses of wildness and freedom. When trying to comprehend and define liberty for herself, the African American girl associates it with an awe-inspiring vision of nature and choice:

I have a memory . . . To my left is a hill . . . Climbing over it all, up up, are scarlet flowers I never see before . . . The scent is sweet. I put my hand in to gather a few blossoms. I hear something behind me and turn to see a stag moving up the rock side. He is great. And grand. Standing there between the beckoning wall of perfume and the stag I wonder what else the world may show me. It is as though I am loose to do what I choose, the stag, the wall of flowers. I am a little scare of this looseness. Is that how free feels? (69–70)

Florens recollects the appeal of both a “wall of flowers” and a “great . . . grand” stag, being drawn to, and overwhelmed by, the “beckoning” natural environment. Her sensory stimulation is conveyed as she responds to smell, colour, and sound while moving in the terrain. There is a feeling of discovery and wonder coupled with “what . . . the world may show” her, again summoning up Jacob’s relishing of New World encounters. Yet there is as well a pointed racial specificity to how Florens employs the remembered scene of nature to articulate the “looseness” that is the closest understanding of freedom that she has. The phrase “I am loose to do what I choose” suggests an instance of being unregulated or unbounded, but the formulation “as though” qualifies this as a rare, barely recognized state. Her position as a slave circumscribes her access to dominant versions of American identity and shapes this hopeful yet bewildering vision of agency.

Florens’s awe parallels Paul D’s astonishment at “the beauty of this land that was not his” in *Beloved*:

He hid in its breast, fingered its earth for food, clung to its banks to lap water and tried not to love it. On nights when the sky was personal . . . he made himself not love it. Its graveyards and low-lying rivers . . . Anything could stir him and he tried hard not to love it. (268)

Via Paul D's travels as an escaped slave and when living a vagrant existence during Reconstruction, Morrison explores the seductive sights of a pastoral environment and the welcome shelter it offers the refugee. In some respects this description echoes traditional, gendered patterns in which the land is feminized, "He hid in its breast," and the lone mobile male is "stir[red]" to self-realization. However, while in *Beloved* Morrison aligns this kind of inspirational encounter with the masculine, her narrative iteratively insists on the disenfranchisement felt by the ex-slave, so combining his wonder and attraction with the necessity of *not* loving the terrain, not becoming endangered through attachment.³⁰ Paul D's "[l]oving small and in secret" is a furtive, modest claiming of place where "a big love . . . would split you wide open" (221, 162). Although his simultaneous dispossession and intimate affinity is suggestive in terms of counternarratives of being in the land, *A Mercy* develops the engagement further, foregrounding the travels of an African American woman through less idealized settings and connecting nature with a powerful freedom at the very same time as exposing the pitfalls of ideas of the wild. Morrison's recent fiction first shows the European male, Jacob, drawn to an awe-inducing unsettled space, then has Florens speak back to his ultimately narrowed, exploitative relation to this environment.

"You are nothing but wilderness. No constraint. No mind": these words form the blacksmith's damning response to witnessing Florens hurt the foundling child that he has left in her care (141). While there is some justification for his condemnation, his chosen terms classify the African American girl as uncontrolled, without thought and, therefore, wild. This interpretation of Florens's actions associates her with a "nature" that is impulsive, dangerous, without boundaries, which presumably requires the order and restraint represented by man. Making no attempt to fathom the cause of her resentment and violence, Florens's former lover activates a familiar patriarchal hierarchy in which woman is corporeal, irrational, excessive, and aligned with the nonhuman world as opposed to masculinized civilization. For him she represents a lack of freedom: "you are a slave . . . You have become one . . . Your head is empty and your body is wild" (141).³¹ Yet Florens's journey exposes this designation as constructed, in this case shaped by early North American society's othering of women and nonwhites. Wallace and Armbruster have also taken up the terms "wild" and "wildness," focussing on earlier fiction by Morrison and observing how dominant American culture "has employed the concepts of natural and

³⁰ For Morrison's portrayal of estranged African American experiences of American landscape through Paul D, see also 162.

³¹ There is an echo here of Paul D's condemnation of Sethe in *Beloved*, another example of the dehumanization of the black woman articulated in terms of nature or animality: "You got two feet, Sethe, not four" (165).

unnatural to reinforce ideological boundaries . . . often in the service of denying African Americans their full humanity.”³² Pressing beyond their reading, I contend that *A Mercy* draws attention to an intraracial gendered dynamic and emphasizes the connection between discourses of wildness and New World imperial fantasies and colonization.

An earlier experience of dehumanization on Florens’s travels sets up the confrontation with the blacksmith in which she is named wild. Although given shelter in the home of a widow and her daughter, Florens meets with suspicion from others within their Quaker community. Faced with her physical “racial” difference, the villagers react with fear and hostility, associating Florens with animality as well as evil: “I have never seen any human this black” (111). Florens immediately grasps their failure to categorize her as like themselves: “I think they have shock that I can talk” (111). The most traumatic part of her formative ordeal comes when she is inspected: “Without touching they tell me what to do. To show them my teeth, my tongue . . . They look under my arms, between my legs” (112–13). The perception of racial otherness leads to scrutiny and reading of the black woman’s body, a process of looking “across distances without recognition” which requires disavowal of emotional and intellectual communion: “Swine look at me with more connection when they raise their heads from the trough” (113). The episode resonates with the intimate inspection of slaves as livestock prior to auction, as exemplified elsewhere in Florens’s mother’s story: “One by one we were made to jump high, to bend over, to open our mouths” (165). If the treatment of Florens positions her as less than human, and informs her later reaction to definitions of wildness, then her own reference to swine hints at a kind of closeness to animals that perhaps offers an alternative to the negative terms of the dominant view.³³

Florens remains haunted by the encounter, during which she learnt her place within a racial hierarchy that naturalizes her proximity to the nonhuman. Indeed, it plants a form of wilderness in her:

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 . . . Wondering eyes that stare and

³² Wallace and Armbruster, “The Novels of Toni Morrison,” 216. Wallace and Armbruster’s work moves across *Sula*, *Song of Solomon*, *Tar Baby*, *Beloved* and *Paradise*, considering culturally induced wildness, a transgressive wildness that exceeds culture, and the need for wildness to be integrated into and expressed through living ancestral traditions and folk culture.

³³ Florens is also subject to a troubling definition of herself when on her journey she meets a group of young male Native Americans. Although they give her much-needed water and food, she experiences “misery and fright . . . [one] says baa baa baa like a goat kid and they all laugh and slap their legs,” afterwards carrying “an echo of [the] laughing boys” who likened her to an animal (102–3).

decide... if my knees bend backward like the forelegs of a dog... Inside I am shrinking... I am a thing apart... a darkness I am born with, outside, yes, but inside as well and the inside dark is small feathered and toothy. (114–15)

Through these "[w]ondering eyes," Morrison captures the budding racial assumptions that will accompany American society as it evolves. Florens cannot leave the staring, othering gaze behind and, after this objectification, starts to lose her previous sense of self. What develops is a "darkness . . . inside" which she distinguishes from her skin colour, a biological inheritance, that shows on the outside. Florens lends this new aspect of herself animal attributes, appearing to reflect back the expectations of the villagers who wanted to "know if [she could] spring out of the darkness and bite" (115).³⁴ The image "small feathered and toothy" distinctively merges avian and mammal features, suggesting threatening sharpness and perhaps flight. Florens has envisioned a sense of freedom in nature and proven herself on her frontier journey but, at the same time, has found herself designated inferior, dehumanized through a dangerous narrative of the wild.

While Florens's inner "clawing feathery thing" is traced to the Quakers' racially othering eyes, a process of sexualization also contributes to her external definition and violent backlash (115). Her passionate relationship with the blacksmith is first shown from Florens's view as an awakening to powerful physical desire and reassuring attachment after prior dislocation: "With you my body is pleasure is safe is belonging. I can never not have you have me" (137). The mutuality and nonpassivity of Florens's lovemaking with the free man is also valued by another marginal figure in Jacob's household, the orphan Sorrow, who observes, "This here female stretched, kicked her heels and whipped her head... It was a dancing" (128). However, other narrative perspectives dismiss Florens's "bleating desire beyond sense," furthering associations of femininity with "appetite," not reason; animal urge, not order or control (60). This calls up Florens's mother's original plea that Jacob, a man with "no animal in his heart," take her young daughter (163). Although Florens experiences this as a rejection, her mother fears the lasciviousness of their sexually exploitative owners turning towards the girl whose body is starting to attract attention. Florens's liking for the Mistress's castoff shoes, which give her an appearance of maturer femininity, only increases the threat. When her mother remonstrates that "[o]nly bad women wear high heels,"

³⁴ Florens is aware of this process: "it is the withering inside that enslaves and opens the door for what is wild. I know my withering is born in the Widow's closet" (160). In considering American Romance, Morrison discusses how "Americans' fear of being outcast . . . of Nature unbridled and crouched for attack; their fear of the absence of so-called civilization" was outworked through a fabricated blackness that she terms Africanism. Morrison, *Playing in the Dark*, 37–38.

the protective warning rehearses traditional gender classifications (4).³⁵ Significantly, this moment of policing marks the first invocation of the discourse of wilderness in the novel: “I am dangerous, she says, and wild” (4). It thus underlies subsequent instances of female vulnerability to sexual predation, such as when the cart driver, to her shame, “handles [Florens’s] backside,” and anticipates the blacksmith’s crushing response: “Your head is empty and your body is wild. I am adoring you. And a slave to that too” (137, 141). Sexualized constructions of woman, particularly the black woman, as promiscuous and therefore available feed into her othering association with nature. The interpretation of Florens as in thrall to desire is initiated when she is earlier said to “hunt” her lover “like a she-wolf” (151). Although Florens figures her own vengeful actions in animalized terms – “Feathers lifting, I unfold. The claws scratch” – by the end of the novel she has forged a narrative that counters the blacksmith’s hierarchical labelling of her as wild and thus “a slave by choice” (142, 141). Indeed, her articulation emphasizes their gendered positions: “You say you see slaves freer than free men. One is a lion in the skin of an ass . . . Still, there is another thing. A lion who thinks his mane is all. A she-lion who does not” (160). Shifting the fable from her lover’s valorization of slaves who exhibit free spirit through self-control, Florens points out the masculinist pride that shapes he “who thinks his mane is all.”

In *A Mercy* Morrison dwells on various interactions with the natural environment and revisits myths of the American landscape, extending and developing preoccupations introduced in *Song of Solomon*, *Tar Baby*, and *Beloved*. It is in the figure of the young African American woman Florens that we find the author’s most powerful reimagining of New World encounters. Florens’s solitary journey recalls aspects of the pioneer struggle; her experience of nature, sometimes terrifying, sometimes inspiring, rewrites those narratives of self-actualization tied to dominant racial ideologies and masculinity. When Florens herself is named wilderness, Morrison shows how discourses of the wild have been employed in othering and subjugating certain peoples. This exposes some constructions of nature as imperialist and highlights processes of naturalizing difference. As ecocritic Buell comments, “nature has historically been not only directly exploited but also the sign under which women and nonwhites have been grouped in the process of themselves being exploited even while being relished as exotic, spontaneous, and so forth.”³⁶ If the slave girl is dehumanized through the “nature” of both her race and her gender, then, as I will examine lastly, she eventually is able to reclaim wilderness for herself.

³⁵ She explains, “you wanted the shoes of a loose woman, and a cloth around your chest did no good” (166).

³⁶ Buell, *The Environmental Imagination*, 21.

When the blacksmith condemns Florens as "nothing but wilderness. No constraint. No mind," his terms reinforce a hierarchy also found in settler conceptions of civility, of manifest destiny and of colonization (141). The narrative subtly draws out this connection by having the free black man's rhetoric of "mind, mind, mind" echo the earlier tale of the traveller who calls "Mine. Mine. Mine" into the landscape (141, 62). Florens's first-person voicing articulates the conjunction of ideas of a New World wilderness and the invocation of unharnessed "nature" to fix particular groups as lesser. When Florens makes her way back to Jacob's farm, "barefoot, bloody but proud," Willard and Scully believe she has "turned feral," a description that again suggests animality (148, 146). Yet, as the final few pages reveal, she returns to write her story, exhibiting durability and self-belief, offering her own account of negotiating the American landscape: "I walk the night through. Alone. It is hard without Sir's boots. Wearing them I could cross a stony riverbed. Move quickly through forests and down hills of nettles . . . I walk the day. I walk the night" (157–58). Florens's path is a difficult one but, where before her feet were soft and she was ill-prepared for independent, self-determined life, now her "feet are hard as cypress" (161). Having started her journey in "Sir's boots," she walks back across riverbeds and nettles unshod, no longer reliant on Jacob's resources or ownership. As her narrative draws to a close, she asserts, "I am become wilderness but I am also Florens. In full . . . Slave. Free. I last" (161). This proclamation revisits the blacksmith's view of her as enslaved by her lack of control but at the same time affirms survival and a complete identity, the word "free" evoking her earlier vision of the stag and the perfumed flowers that associated liberty and choice with the wild.

Towards the end of *A Mercy*, addressing her former lover, Florens concludes,

These careful words, closed up and wide open, will talk to themselves. Round and round . . . all across the room . . . Or perhaps no. Perhaps these words need the air that is out in the world. Need to fly up then fall, fall like ash over acres of primrose and mallow . . . beyond the eternal hemlocks, through clouds cut by rainbow and flavor the soil of the earth. Lina will help. She finds horror in this house and . . . loves fire. (161)

Florens's writing of her life on the surfaces of Jacob's empty house, and the words' potential dispersal throughout the landscape via ash from a cleansing fire, offer a lingering vision in the penultimate section of the novel. The rich imagery of "acres of primrose and mallow" and rainbow light closely echoes Lina's tale of the traveller whose response to such beauty is "[t]his is perfect. This is mine" (62). However, Florens's inscription constitutes a revisionary African American voicing that too "need[s] the air that is out in the world," is as much a part of early America as the narrative of the male explorer or migrant. As Jacob's house is returned to nature, as Florens, like Sorrow, declares herself whole, and as Lina's potential for renewal is revived, *A Mercy*

scatters its multiperspectival lines “beyond the eternal hemlocks” to ensure a proliferation of narratives of being in the land and change our sense of “the air of a world so new” (10).

The late passages of Morrison’s novel, in addition, can be seen to evoke and reimagine various earlier literary representations. They are suggestive of the haunting southern vision of the ex-slave Clytie defiantly burning down Sutpen’s house in William Faulkner’s *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936) and the furtive first-person articulation of Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s protagonist in “The Yellow Wall-Paper” (1892), circling the domestic interior as she reinterprets patterns that entrap American women.³⁷ However, in view of the layered, cumulative imagery presented by *A Mercy*, perhaps Morrison’s key referent is the old spiritual “Mary Don’t You Weep,” which offers the lines “God gave Noah the rainbow sign, / No more water, the fire next time.” This takes us back to mythologized descriptions of the American landscape, “untouched since Noah,” “clouds cut by rainbow,” and points us forward to Florens’s resistant self-definition and the spreading of her burning counter-narrative “like ash” to “flavor the soil of the earth” (12, 62, 161).

As Florens writes back to the accounts of America and of herself asserted by Jacob and the blacksmith, we find the culmination of Morrison’s treatment of engagements with the natural environment. In *A Mercy* the navigation of untamed New World spaces assumes a central position as the seventeenth-century characters present different modes of relation to the site of the colonial eastern seaboard. Through Jacob, European American fantasies are played out of an Edenic terrain, filled with promise and opportunity, where adventure, self-realization and property holding become possible. Although he comes to represent an acquisitive and colonizing force, Jacob’s portrait is complex and includes a positive sense of intimacy with nature and, at least initially, a sympathetic bond with the marginal. Lina offers a Native American perspective, closely attuned with what settlers have labelled the wilderness, but also shown to be adaptable and enduring in a changing and disadvantageous social habitat. Lina’s presence proves significant in Morrison’s revisiting of earlier idealizations of America, for example notions of a “blank slate” ready for European inscription and the vanishing Indian. In Florens’s “wide open words,” the disentanglement felt by Paul D is undone through a new account of a landscape of wonder and freedom (161).

The novel’s distinctive addressing of environmental concerns invites reappraisal of how they feature in Morrison’s earlier fiction and in African American literature more broadly. In particular, the foregrounding of

³⁷ William Faulkner, *Absalom, Absalom!* (London: Vintage, 1995). Charlotte Perkins Gilman, “The Yellow Wall-Paper,” in Jeanne Campbell Reesman and Arnold Krupat, eds., *The Norton Anthology of American Literature*, 7th edn, Volume C (New York: Norton, 2007), 808–19.

conflicting understandings of the natural world suggests scope for extending recent scholarship exploring intersections between postcolonial and ecocritical approaches.³⁸ The joining of a colonizing dynamic with ideas of nature is encapsulated by the processes of othering, dehumanizing, and rendering wild which *A Mercy* uncovers and challenges. As Morrison's focus opens up questions of minority estrangement and belonging in the New World, she perhaps can be ranked with those diasporic writers identified by Phillips Casteel who, "Refusing to observe the carefully policed boundaries of iconic rural and wilderness landscapes and the exclusionary definitions of national belonging that they naturalize, . . . intrude upon such landscapes and transform them into more inclusive and heterogeneous spaces."³⁹ The novel's colonial-era setting and narrative construction allow a "fluid," plural mapping of "claims" to place (12). While itself idealized, this map prompts reassessment of hierarchical geographical relations, naturalized associations, and both the rehearsal and appropriation of national myth in terms of differences of race, gender, and class in our own twenty-first-century moment.

³⁸ Attempting to redress a lack of dialogue between postcolonial and environmental literary studies, and shifting from a pattern of narrowly defined US nature writing, a recent Caribbean-oriented collection calls for "a sustained ecocritical focus on the ways in which race, gender, and other social vectors help constitute environmental experience." Elizabeth DeLoughrey, Renée Gosson, and George Handley, "Introduction," in DeLoughrey, Gosson, and Handley, eds., *Caribbean Literature and the Environment: Between Nature and Culture* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2005), 1–30, 4.

³⁹ Phillips Casteel, *Second Arrivals*, 6.