
Got on My Traveling Shoes: Migration, Exile, and Home in Toni Morrison's *A Mercy*

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Maxine L. Montgomery¹

Abstract

“Got on My Traveling Shoes” examines Toni Morrison’s (2008) *A Mercy* in terms of its engagement with tropes of migration, exile, and home. This article builds upon the scholarship of critics such as Paul Gilroy, Homi Bhabha, Carol Boyce Davies, bell hooks, and Morrison herself in arguing that the author’s latest novel refigures the essentialist model of double-consciousness reified in W.E.B. DuBois’s *The Souls of Black Folk* and gestures toward a liminal home existing outside fixed cultural bounds. The article’s unique contribution to the transnational studies conversation centers on the analysis of Morrison’s re-inscription of the moment of race consciousness. Through an inventive use of language, Morrison not only disrupts the fixed historiography underlying figurations of the American Empire, she also creates a new, hybrid personal whose complex subjectivity defies reductive attempts at racial categorization. *A Mercy* therefore mediates against simplistic genealogical notions embedded in “DuBoisian” ways of perception, even as it lays the groundwork for a more nuanced reading of American history.

Keywords

double consciousness, matrixial borderspace, tropes of home, the Black Atlantic

¹Florida State University, Tallahassee

Corresponding Author:

Maxine L. Montgomery, 433 Williams Building, Department of English,
Tallahassee, FL 32306-1036

Email: mmontgomery@fsu.edu

At the beginning of Toni Morrison's *A Mercy*, as Florens embarks on a journey in search of the African blacksmith, Lina, the novel's central mother figure, offers a pair of Sir's boots and places a letter from Rebekka Vaark inside. Lina's gesture is much more than an act of kindness designed to enable Florens's travel; it is a coded sign that underscores the shifting identity of the migratory subject. Florens evolves throughout her perilous journey in ways that encourage a rethinking of colonial inscriptions of time, space, and identity.

More than any other Morrison novel, *A Mercy* reveals the author's closest engagement with what she has described as "the anxiety of belonging" (Morrison, 1998, p. 10). The map of pre-colonial New England included at the beginning of the novel foregrounds an authorial interest in America's beginnings, just as the journey to the New World on the part of a global citizenry directs attention to the demographic shift associated with the mission into a peculiarly American wilderness. Despite the obvious concern with places of origin, Morrison's latest and most ambitious novel to date troubles the recognized historiography underlying the country's move toward nation building, Empire, and imperialist conquest, and it does so through a focus on the largely untold stories of a transnational assembly of outcasts.

The collective narratives from characters representing a range of ethnic backgrounds serve as a locus for reexamining tropes of migration, exile, and home. Morrison rewrites the story involving the quest for home using the voices of a worldwide group of displaced travelers in ways that foreground the creative use of language among a global community of migratory subjects. Among a transnational assembly of displaced travelers, language is a subversive medium that disrupts simplistic genealogical constructions and, by implication, established conceptions of identity and place. W. E. B. DuBois's (1903) notion of psychic dualism is under constant interrogation in the fictional world Morrison constructs. Through an inventive reliance upon discourse, Morrison accomplishes two things: First, there is a dismantling of the fixed identity constructions DuBois invokes; and second, she fashions a new self at odds with socially prescribed categories. Memory, a catalyst for the stories that fictional characters recount, is central to her narrative project. Karla Holloway (1992) explained that in the work of Black women writers, (re)membrance is an "activation in the face of stasis, a restoration of fluidity, translucence and movement to the traditions of memory" (p. 68). As an inspiration for remembrance, the maternal figure is at the middle of the stories characters recount. If the collective recollections on the part of the migratory subject fail to render a one-dimensional portrait of this persona, it is because the disjointed reminiscences of her locate the mother in what Paul Gilroy (1993) described as a transnational space existing outside the perimeters of Whiteness and Blackness.

In "Racial Memory and Literary History," Steven Greenblatt (2001) has made a persuasive case for a more intricate appraisal of literary history—one that takes into account "the disruptive forces . . . that principally shape the history and diffusion of languages" (p. 62). For him, language is "the slipperiest of human creations; like its speakers, it does not respect borders, and, like the imagination, it cannot ultimately be predicted or controlled" (p. 62).

Morrison's intriguing tale of upheaval, dislocation, and travel lays the groundwork for the complex reading of national origins that Greenblatt encouraged, and it does so by situating tropes of home within a liminal space where language is insistently fluid and bereft of an association with established linguistic meaning. The requisites of meta-fiction as a literary mode are especially well-suited for Morrison's re-inscription of the journey to a utopian home—a place where parts torn as a result of the transatlantic voyage are restored. The story of Florens, the Portuguese slave girl whose mother barter her in exchange for D'Ortega's bad debt, sheds light on the epic journey on the part of the pre-colonial migratory subject. Much of the novel involves her attempt to redefine herself in the face of maternal loss. As she scripts her life's story onto the walls of Jacob Vaark's ostentatious house, figure for constructions of Empire, Florens must not only create a language that will allow her to convey her checkered experiences in a New World setting, like countless other migratory subjects, she has to do so in the absence of a monolithic maternal history or mother tongue.

The novel thus relies upon the alternating reminiscences of a diverse group of cultural orphans, with the voices of Florens and her mother, the *minha mae* who exchanges the youth, serving as bookends for the narrative. Florens and her mother call to each other in dialogic fashion in a highly symbolic gesture that seeks to bridge the psychic, geographic, and linguistic gulf between Africa and the New World. Even as the novel opens with the voice of Florens, whose confessional tale of maternal rejection, displacement, and unrequited love links her with the other migrants, it closes with the uneasy apology on the part of the African mother who attempts to explain why she sends her daughter away. Throughout the novel, Florens is plagued by recurring dreams of her mother who wants to tell her something. But the fact that neither Florens nor her guilt-stricken mother hears the other woman's cathartic account lends a rich ambiguity to the novel, which depends as much upon aurality as it does orality, upon the decoding of signs, symbols, and gestures as literal meaning. It is as if Morrison sets up the mother-daughter bond as the site for a retelling of the story involving the voyage to the United States only to complicate the grand, meta-narrative of America as the novel unfolds.

Migration, exile, and home are inextricably linked in the fictional world that Morrison fashions. Much of the novel involves the passage—with literal and symbolic dimensions—to a transcendent, de-racialized place characterized by unfettered articulacy.¹ The many crossings in the novel direct attention to the move toward a transcendent domestic place where the tension between self and other, male and female, Black and White ceases. It is Florens's unnamed African mother whose scattered recollections of the flight from Africa to Barbados to D'Ortega's Virginia farm signal the instant at which notions of race assume currency in the New World ethos. "It was there I learned how I was not a person from my country, nor from my families. I was negrita. Everything. Language, dress, gods, dance, habits, decoration, song—all of it cooked together in the color of my skin" (Morrison, 2008, p. 165).² While Florens's subjectivity is more involved than that of her mother, reflecting the double-consciousness DuBois associated with life in a racially polarized setting, neither the young girl nor her African mother has an identity apart from the essentialist roles she is forced to assume.

Lina's character offers insight into the complex subjectivity that mediates against reductive attempts at racial categorization. That Lina is first to arrive at Vaark's farm suggests her preeminent position as an ageless, timeless, all-wise maternal figure. She is not only a gifted storyteller but also a healer and midwife as she carries out the practices that invite a comparison between the earthy American Indian woman and rural Black women in literature and life. The Presbyterians who name the young woman Messalina after a scheming woman, the wife of the Roman Emperor Claudius, engage in a signifying act that at once imprisons Lina within a socially constructed role, even as it places her outside hierarchal models of power, dominance, and authority. Beyond the bounds of pre-colonial America with its religious, ethnic, race, class, and gender strife, Lina is free to draw upon her multifaceted heritage in framing a self that owes no allegiance to fixed cultural designations. The death of Lina's mother, who functions as what Gil Zehava (2003) has depicted as "a valuable source of unmediated, direct memory and as such is frequently and forcefully kept in the past, located outside of history" (p. 1), is a catalyst for the young woman's formation of a hybrid self. Lina's adjustment to a New World setting reveals "the process of cultural mutation" that Paul Gilroy (1993, p. 8) attributed to the collusion between seemingly disparate societal traditions. She

decided to fortify herself by piecing together scraps of what her mother had taught her before dying in agony. Relying on memory and her own resources, she cobbled together neglected rites, merged Europe medicine with native, scripture with lore, and recalled or invented the hidden meaning of things. Found, in other words, a way to be in the world. (p. 48)

Lina remakes herself apart from European designations. For her, rites of healing, storytelling, and midwifery are much more than just practices that establish a sense of community at Vaark's farm; they represent a creative engagement with a reality existing apart from colonial labels.

The eclectic assembly of displaced travelers points to a confluence of cultural traditions that renders simplistic accounts of the past as obsolete as the prefatory map at the beginning of the novel.³ The inevitable consequence of the passages across time and space is an end to the oppositional tension underlying essentialist conceptions of identity—a conflict that is reified, in the language of DuBoisian analysis, with the dualistic split between self and other, Black and White, male and female. Lina recounts the moment when the African blacksmith first encounters Rebekka Vaark. In this meeting, he fails to exhibit the deferential gaze that would affirm his subservience to wealthy Europeans. The Native American woman recalls the sense of outrage among Whites when “a not-Europe looked a Europe in the eye” (p. 46), using terms that invoke the binary thinking resulting in established social arrangements. Much of what distinguishes the nameless blacksmith from his counterparts in the New World, however, is his disassociation from social codes governing race relations in pre-colonial America. He offers an alternate model of selfhood—one that is not dependent upon hierarchal social arrangements.

If pre-colonial America is a place that is hostile to the sense of belonging characters seek, Vaark's Upstate New York farm serves as an ambivalent home for an unlikely assembly of indentured servants, slaves, European immigrants, Native Americans, and Africans. These individuals are united by their inability to find a place to fit in elsewhere. With its agrarian way of life, bustling activity, and extended family network, the residence is an interstitial domestic arena that recalls similar textual spaces in the tradition of women's writing. What comes to mind are sites such as Eve's ambiguous boardinghouse/bordello in Gloria Naylor's *Bailey's Café*, Sutton's Glen in Sherley Anne Williams's *Dessa Rose*, and, of course, Sweet Home in Morrison's Pulitzer Prize-winning *Beloved*. These places are characteristically female and hark back to life in a pre-industrial past. Yet Morrison's representation of the farm as a transnational locale critiques figurations of the raced, gendered space that exists not only in the tradition of Black women's writing but also in her earlier works. Here, in her most recent novel, in a place similar to what scholars have labeled the place of liminality, characters possess an unprecedented level of freedom as they stand aloof from social constructions and form a potentially unlimited set of communal configurations (Henderson, 1995; JanMohammed, 1992; Turner, 1974). Unlike *Beloved's* Sweet Home, for instance, Vaark's farm is not the exclusive purview of Africana women, as the presence of European indentured servants Willard and Scully reveals. The two males enjoy

a homoerotic bond that upsets the heterosexual identity politics subjugating women to the position of subservient “other.” It is, of course, Willard and Scully who serve as midwives in delivering Sorrow’s child.

Vaark’s farm is a place of contradiction that brings to mind the contested nature of home for the migratory subject (Davies, 1994; Said, 1984). bell hooks (2008) described her own sense of alienation as an African American woman when she wrote, “I have yearned to find my place in this world, to have a sense of homecoming, a sense of being wedded to a place” (p. 2). No doubt it is this same sense of estrangement that prompts Lina to tell Rebekka, “You and I, this land is our home . . . but unlike you I am exile here” (p. 59). The trope of the ship in motion gestures toward the myriad crossings that render set conceptions of race and gender obsolete (Gilroy, 1993). As a European immigrant, Rebekka describes her voyage aboard the *Angelus* in terms suggestive of a move away from Great Britain, with its ongoing religious, ethnic, and gender tension, toward an America that holds the promise of new beginnings. Dreams of the largely female group of outcast women who accompany her during her journey lend emphasis to the desperate plight of women in the New World setting. Her arrival in the United States, a place she refers to poetically as “Jacob’s land” (p. 78), not only summons the Judeo-Christian exodus narrative, it encourages the reader to situate her journey within a masculinist framework that privileges males as architects of the American domain.

It is Sorrow whose tragic tale both recalls the psychic dualism associated with border subjectivity and disrupts masculinist figurations of the American Empire. As the daughter of a ship’s Captain, Sorrow is the victim of repeated sexual exploitation from the sons of the sawyer who acquires her. Not only do the fanatical villagers forbid her to enter the town, Lina ascribes the plagues and premature deaths befalling residents of Vaark’s farm to the benighted slave girl. Memories of Sorrow’s past are reduced to the rambling recollections of life aboard a slave ship evocative of those of the ghost-child Beloved.

But the second self or alter ego Sorrow forms refigures the oppositional tension underlying a socially constructed identity in ways that herald the creation of an entirely new persona not dependent upon a split between self and other. Tropes of doubling figure prominently throughout Sorrow’s story. As a result of Twin’s affirming presence, Sorrow embraces an alternate, intensely maternal, model of self-identity at odds with patriarchal constructions. She accesses a specifically feminine psychic zone similar to what Bracha Ettinger (2006) has referred to as a “matrixial borderspace.” In this intuitive place, “borderlines between subjects and objects become thresholds, borderlinks between partial-subjects are transgressed, and traces of diffracted objects are shared between, and are transferred among, several partial-subjects with-in

active-passivity in metamorphosis” (p. 71). The companionship that Twin offers allows Sorrow to traverse colonial designations of the Black female self in attaining the wholeness Ettinger has depicted. It is significant that Twin disappears only after Sorrow becomes a mother. When Sorrow looks into her daughter’s eyes the mother recalls the Middle Passage. The African girl’s recollection through her daughter’s eyes bears little resemblance to the painful past both she and Beloved first recount, however, as there is a symbolic reversal of the psychological trauma associated with the transatlantic journey. Sorrow sees “the gray glisten of a winter sea while a ship sailed by-the-lee” (p. 134). The young woman’s declaration, “I am your mother” and “My name is Complete” (p. 134) is an emancipating act of self-naming that underscores the potentially healing, redemptive dimensions of maternity, and hence domestic space among a global community of outcasts.

As an example of the prototypical journey to a reconstituted home place, Florens’s trek in search of the blacksmith reveals a dissolving of conventional historiography. She must rely upon memory and the verbal directions from the Widow Ealing’s daughter in finding the way to his secluded hamlet. Lina gives Florens a pair of Sir’s boots, emblems of a constructed identity. The interaction with the fanatically religious villagers is the culminating episode in Florens’s trek through a liminal space, and it is an event that lends itself to the critical inquiry Morrison (1992) has called for in *Playing in the Dark* when she invited an interrogation of “the technical ways in which an Africanist character is used to limn out and enforce the invention and implication of whiteness” (p. 52). In her representation of Florens’s humiliating confrontation with Widow Ealing, Morrison scripts the moment involving the origins of racist attitudes arising from Europeans’ impressions of Blacks before Africans became, for the most part, slaves in North America. Even as race and chattel slavery are becoming intertwined in the national ethos, European settlers are in the act of defining themselves as Americans. Florens therefore serves as the raced subject steeped in Western mythology concerning Whiteness and Blackness. Although the letter from Rebekka Vaark is to allow Florens safe passage en route to the blacksmith, it also highlights the fluid identity on the part of the migratory Black subject in a world privileging written discourse or the language of the oppressor. Florens confronts an objectifying Western gaze when the villagers examine her

for a tail, an extra teat, a man’s whip between my legs. Wondering eyes that stare and decide if my navel is in the right place if my knees bend backward like the forelegs of a dog. They want to see if my tongue is split like a snake’s or if my teeth are filing to points to chew them up. To know if I can spring out of the darkness and bite. (pp. 114-115)

Her painful realization that she is “a thing apart” occurs alongside the constitution of Whiteness on the part of colonial settlers (p. 115).

The confrontation between Florens and the villagers is a rendering of the self-reflexive encounter with Africanism Morrison (1992) referred to as a salient moment in the tradition of American literature. Along these lines, the nameless blacksmith functions as “a dark and abiding presence,” “an invisible mediating force,” and “shadow [that] hovers in implication, in sign, in line of demarcation” (pp. 46-47). Ascribing the name *blacksmith* to the shadowy figure constitutes an act of metonymic displacement that underscores one of the linguistic strategies employed in literature to engage the Black subject.⁴ Florens’s lover has no identity apart from his occupational role. He is the always-present but invisible constituted Africanist presence that enables a sense of American-ness on the part of White colonists.

The blacksmith’s rebuff recalls the maternal rejection Florens experiences when her mother sends her away. His suggestion that the young woman is a slave by choice evolves out of an awareness of the perils associated with obsessive love, a familiar theme in much of Morrison’s writing. The blacksmith misreads the incident involving Malaik’s injury, attributing that event to Florens’s intentional brutality. What she discovers is that his hamlet is no more securing a place than Vaark’s residence.

At the novel’s end, however, Florens returns to Vaark’s farm, but she does so without Sir’s boots. Malaik’s theft of the shoes forces her to travel without the protection those shoes afford. She also evolves from a place where she is, at first, unable to decipher the coded information in her complex world to a site where she is a speaking subject who accurately interprets the symbols around her. Initially, Florens fails to read the sign of the dog’s profile rising from Widow Ealing’s kettle or that of the garden snake crawling up to the door saddle to die (p. 4, 139). Later, though, in light of her lived experiences, those signs assume fresh meaning. As if to signify her new personhood, the woman who begins her story with “the hands of a slave and the feet of a Portuguese lady” (p. 4) concludes her tale as someone for whom the “soles of my feet are as hard as cypress” (p. 161). Because she self-identifies with natural world, not the social conventions of Early American society, she no longer experiences the fragmentary split that once characterized her life. It is from this empowered, self-defined position that Florens addresses her story to the nameless blacksmith as she writes in “the talking room” (p. 161).

Although Florens’s new self-identity signals a challenge to, if not a dismantling of, the architecture of race, she knows the ostensibly unlettered blacksmith will not read her tale. “You won’t read my telling,” Florens writes.

“You read the world but not the letters of talk. You don’t know how to. Maybe one day you will learn” (p. 160). Much like the nameless African mother who never hears her daughter’s confession or Florens herself who will not be privy to the mother’s explanation, the blacksmith fails to comprehend Florens’s saga. But the deeper meaning of Morrison’s novel is in the dynamic interaction between fictional characters and places of origin and the imaginative ways in which the migratory subject re-envision home.

Morrison’s latest novel engages tropes of migration, exile, and home, but it does so in ways that encourage a reexamination of the 17th-century journey to America. The many crossings on the part of a global community of travelers exist across time and space and lead to a domestic arena where established conceptions of identity cease to exist. While power, authority, and dominance may be in the hands of European colonialists, through the stories of displaced citizens of the world, Morrison destabilizes fixed notions of self and society, even as she works to create a transcendent realm leading to freedom, autonomy, and self-identity. *A Mercy* therefore sets the foundation for a fuller, more nuanced reading of America’s national history and its diverse citizenry.

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Notes

1. In “Home,” Morrison outlines her search for racial sovereignty and literary authority in terms suggestive of the need to dismantle the architecture of race. Although her use of architectural terms recalls DuBois’s metaphorical description of America as a “prison-house,” her narrative project moves toward dissolution of the binary tension resulting in racial circumscription.
2. Subsequent references are included parenthetically.
3. Morrison’s use of the map recalls the one of Willow Springs included at the beginning of Gloria Naylor’s *Mama Day*. Both documents direct attention to the unreliability of established boundaries.
4. Drawing upon the work of James A. Snead, Morrison outlines the linguistic strategies employed in fiction in order to engage the implications of the Black character

(see *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*, Morrison, 1992, pp. 67-69).

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Bio

Maxine L. Montgomery is an associate professor of English at Florida State University, where she teaches courses in African American, American Multi-Ethnic, and Women's Literature. Her articles have appeared in journals such as *African-American Review*, *College Language Association Journal*, and the *Literary Griot*. She is the author of *The Apocalypse in African-American Fiction* (University Press of

Florida, 1996), *Conversations with Gloria Naylor* (University Press of Mississippi, 2004), and *The Fiction of Gloria Naylor: Houses and Spaces of Resistance* (forthcoming University Press of Tennessee, 2010). Currently, her research interests focus on African Diaspora Writing, Gender Studies, and Contemporary African American Women's Fiction.