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Raising Specters: Queer Reclamation in Toni Morrison's *A Mercy*

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RAISING SPECTERS: QUEER RECLAMATION IN TONI MORRISON'S *A MERCY*

A Thesis
Presented to
the Graduate School of
Clemson University

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts
English

by
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Accepted by:
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ABSTRACT

An enslaved individual usually escapes or is manumitted before writing his or her narrative. But what if an individual composes that narrative while still enslaved? Toni Morrison teases out this question in *A Mercy*, a novel told in part by Florens, an enslaved African girl in seventeenth-century colonial America, who etches her narrative with a nail on the interior of a mansion, exhibiting her resourcefulness and desperation to write her story. However, a third-person narrator fills in the gaps of what Florens cannot know about the other characters. This other narrative voice becomes necessary because Florens suffers from the trauma of believing that her mother has abandoned her in favor of being with her younger brother, and consequently, this trauma creates narrative lacunae because Florens does not and cannot know everything.

Even as Florens fixates on this separation, which influences all of her future decisions, she can invoke her own agency, based on her abject resistance of her feeling of loss so that she herself may become a spectral force that actively haunts the archive of slavery, not merely someone who is passively haunted. This archive constitutes an exploration of the factual and fictional narratives that broaden the scope of not only what happened, but also what could have happened, the latter being necessary due to the inaccessibility of a complete, unbiased history. Florens achieves a sense of queerness based not primarily on her sexual practices but because of her liberating resistance to linearity and alignment with abjection as recuperative power against her low social position as black, female, and enslaved. While she remains enslaved, Florens attempts to unsettle such a marginalized position, which results in her committing violence against

the blacksmith and her composing a narrative addressed to him that attempts to push against the boundary between enslavement and freedom albeit this freedom extends only to her claim of subjectivity, not a legal upturning of these definitions, which shows that despite this power that Florens gains to deal with her loss, she is still caught in the system of slavery.

DEDICATION

Thank you to my committee members for their support.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
TITLE PAGE	i
ABSTRACT.....	ii
DEDICATION.....	iv
CHAPTER	
I. INTRODUCTION	1
II. CHILDHOOD TRAUMA: THE (RE)CONSTRUCTION OF BREAKDOWNS	10
III. MOTHER, INTERRUPTED: THE TRANSFERENCE OF AFFECTION	16
IV. DUELING WITH DUALITY: PSYCHIC FRAGMENTATION FOILED	22
V. “MORE HUMAN THAN HUMAN”: THE HAUNTING CONCLUSION	27
REFERENCES	44

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

An enslaved individual usually escapes or is manumitted before writing his or her narrative.ⁱ But what if an individual composes that narrative while still enslaved? Toni Morrison teases out this question in *A Mercy*, a novel told in part by Florens, an enslaved African girl in seventeenth-century colonial America, who etches her narrative with a nail on the interior of a mansion, exhibiting her resourcefulness and desperation to write her story. However, a third-person narrator fills in the gaps of what Florens cannot know about the other characters. This other narrative voice becomes necessary because Florens suffers from the trauma of believing that her mother has abandoned her in favor of being with her younger brother, and consequently, this trauma creates narrative lacunae because Florens does not and cannot know everything.

This inability to access all of her thoughts does not negate the value of Florens's writing. Rather, her writing "suggests the need to acknowledge the existence and validity of stories on the margins" (Babb 159). Although Florens does share her narrative, it is still susceptible to what Hortense Spillers refers to the "overdetermined representability, or texts overwritten" under language and law, which "locates authority on an exterior, as the seizing of discursive initiative seems to define a first order of insurgency wherever it appears in the New World" ("Who Cuts the Border?" 8-9). For an enslaved African, literacy functions as a form of "insurgency," yet the power is largely circumscribed within the institution of slavery. Florens's testimony of her experience through her writing is held within the representability of this system, contributing to her as property

under the law and therefore always vulnerable to legally sanctioned trauma.ⁱⁱ Florens, however, enters a space where she can “cut,” or unsettle, borders because she remains an enslaved African at the end of the novel though she asserts her psychic freedom, which she illustrates through her ability to share her narrative on the interior walls of her deceased master’s unoccupied mansion.

Because the conditions of slavery have constructed a spatial and temporal wall that prevents her mother from speaking to her, Florens mistakenly spends her life perceiving the separation as maternal rejection, although Morrison shows at the end of the novel that Florens’s mother has not abandoned but rather saved her daughter from their libidinous master D’Ortega. Her mother gives Florens away to Jacob Vaark for her own daughter’s safety though Florens does not discern this motive. This destabilizing event functions as the only fixed force in her life as it resurfaces in her thoughts throughout the novel, collapsing spatial and temporal boundaries in which she endlessly relives the scene of abandonment but cannot grasp the truth of her mother’s motivation.ⁱⁱⁱ Florens, who re-experiences the separation with a sense of immediacy, cannot search for other interpretations of this scene, for this very closeness to the event makes it more difficult for her to interrogate other modes of interpretation. This “break in the experience of time” aligns with signs of trauma and catalyzes the unsettling and attempted suturing of knowledge that characterizes haunting since Florens remains unable to close all of the gaps in her narrative on her own (Caruth, “Parting Words” 10). Instead, she must construct what she believes has happened, which is premised on her separation. Florens’s splitting and suturing of self as a result of the experience of separation and her perception

of it evinces more than her own psychic fragmentation; it suggests the need to explore a history wherein gaps still remain.^{iv} A certain level of inaccessibility of the full event always remains because of a traumatic event's ability to disrupt linear time, yet this temporal disjunction in part enables survival, which means that for Florens, she can live to interrogate and attempt to disseminate her narrative.

Even as Florens fixates on this separation, which influences all of her future decisions, she can invoke her own agency, based on her abject resistance of her feeling of loss so that she herself may become a spectral force that actively haunts the archive of slavery, not merely someone who is passively haunted. This archive constitutes an exploration of the factual and fictional narratives that broaden the scope of not only what happened, but also what could have happened, the latter being necessary due to the inaccessibility of a complete, unbiased history. Florens achieves a sense of queerness based not primarily on her sexual practices but because of her liberating resistance to linearity and alignment with abjection as recuperative power against her low social position as black, female, and enslaved. While she remains enslaved, Florens attempts to unsettle such a marginalized position, which results in her committing violence against the blacksmith and her composing a narrative addressed to him that attempts to push against the boundary between enslavement and freedom albeit this freedom extends only to her claim of subjectivity, not a legal upturning of these definitions, which shows that despite this power that Florens gains to deal with her loss, she is still caught in the system of slavery.

Florens can never learn that her mother has not rejected her, and this misperception causes Florens to have stultified connections with other characters. Her transference of affection to other characters becomes entrenched in a false etiology that shows the ultimate horror of *not knowing* that slavery causes, as demonstrated first when she meets Lina, who attempts to act as a surrogate mother to Florens. Because she fears rejection from all maternal figures, Florens cannot put her trust in Lina, reflecting Florens's inability to use this relationship to cope with her psychic trauma. This inability never to understand her biological mother or fully reenter the realm of motherhood contrasts with Sorrow, who enmeshes her entire identity under the marker of "mother" yet remains vulnerable as someone enslaved and female. But even as Florens removes herself from this maternal realm, she still places herself in a world to which she alone now contributes—the literal writing on the wall. As a figure that nobody else claims to see during her nocturnal writings, she attains a status not confined within the merely human because of the writing's ability to seemingly move beyond the walls and into collective memory—into the consciousness of readers, even if the readers do not see the actual writing. While this writing is actually a love letter to the blacksmith, her uncertainty regarding his literacy does not stop Florens from her project. While this writing does not cause her to fully overcome the trauma, it nevertheless provides an outlet for her to try and make sense out of what remains a source of horror to her.

Further, with her ability to unsettle boundaries, Florens's horror allows her body and mind to become part of the archive of slavery and reflects not only her suffering, but also the suffering of millions. For Saidiya Hartman, this archive of slavery comprises "a

history of an unrecoverable past; it is a narrative of what might have been or could have been; it is a history written with and against the archive” (“Venus in Two Acts” 12). By constructing the “recovery” of the experiences of the enslaved as an archive, Florens therefore functions as a fictional testimony to the abjection of slavery, yet she attempts to defy the constraints of this experience through the very sharing of her narrative, which moves both “with and against” the archive.^v Although Florens has her own traumatic experience, hers is not singular; rather, she functions as a fictional representation for the inconceivable loss (such as Morrison’s dedication to the “Sixty million and more” in *Beloved*).^{vi}

Analyzing this trauma through a queer lens enables *A Mercy* to be read as a site of resistance not only for Florens as a subject who attempts to unsettle boundaries that confine her within a marginal position as enslaved, black, and female, but also larger structures of narrative representability and the effects of slavery on both individual and collective memory. For Judith Halberstam, “‘queer’ refers to nonnormative logics and organizations of community, sexual identity, embodiment, and activity in space and time” (6). This designation outside normativity encompasses various aspects of identity beyond the sexual, including gender and race; the refutation of normative logics allows for a slippage of the self. Sara Ahmed also examines queerness within multiple realms: “what is ‘oblique’ or ‘off line’” and what encompasses “nonnormative sexualities.” She further explains, “This means recalling what makes specific sexualities describable as queer in the first place: that is, they are seen as odd, bent, twisted” (Ahmed 161).^{vii} Florens’s existence is “oblique” as a marginalized figure due to her blackness, femaleness, and

enslaved status; further, her destructive attraction to the blacksmith may extend to an “oblique” sexuality, which comes from her need to transfer her lack of mother-love. As both Halberstam and Ahmed show, sexuality plays a significant role in formulating queerness, but so do movements in and against space and time.^{viii}

Florens is thrown into psychic entropy because of her trauma, which causes her to abjure the logic of linear space and time. This anti-linear placement puts her in a queer position because she *believes* she escapes her trauma by enacting violence against the blacksmith, a violence that unmoors her from her endless fear of rejection from her mother, which has been the defining event of her identity. Aligning with the non-normative also calls attention to a queerness of marginalization and abjection. Darieck Scott notes this connection: “In queer uses of *abjection*, generally we begin with the inescapable slippage across necessarily porous but desperately defended boundaries: the boundary between the ego and what it excludes in order to constitute itself,” asserting that these exclusions may take the form of the “ab-jecting” of different genders, sexualities, and so on (17). While Florens does “ab-ject” her former response to her trauma, she does not fully remove her feelings toward her mother—she cannot forget. Despite a hardening of self, Florens does not completely repudiate others, namely the blacksmith and her biological mother, from her consciousness; rather, her only boundary is the walls on which she writes while she remains open to the possibility of sharing her narrative (albeit it is intended only for the blacksmith) and still acknowledges the pain of separation from her mother.

A queer reading of *A Mercy* takes instability to the extreme because queerness and haunting are connected in Morrison's novel. Haunting comprises an eldritch ontology that does not delimit itself to any given space, whether absent or present, living or dead; queerness unsettles boundaries not for the sake of unsettling, but rather to interrogate the traumatic loss of those who have been marginalized so that their narratives are revealed as the spectral forces that continue haunting Americans throughout history. The instability of "queer" actually underscores the spectral sliding found in *A Mercy*: the maternal ghost that haunts Florens is (most likely) in her head, and Florens becomes a haunting force primarily because of her ability to testify to the experience of the enslaved through her writing, which she can do only in secret where no one can witness her creating an account of her history.

This spectral reading reflects how Florens can gain agency in a time when the status of an African in the American colonies was comparatively more fluid in that race was not inextricably linked to enslaved status.^{ix} Warren Billings elaborates on how in the seventeenth century not only was indentured servitude un-raced, but also the term itself maintained a certain lability wherein "the numerous forms of the covenant merely personal were flexible enough to encompass whatever conditions someone might negotiate, which explains why extant indentures vary so widely in their wording and in their substance." Despite this flexibility for the individual contracts of servants, however, "there was no legal distinction between servants and clothing or furnishings or livestock" (49, 51). Significantly, Veronica Hendrick observes, "use of the term slave only began to appear in the later part of the 1600s. Up until that point, many of these workers were

considered servants and treated much the same as indentured servants” (686). Thus, the ability to name someone as “indentured servant” or “enslaved African” was not originally a given; rather, these labels acquired their more restrictive (i.e. racialized) designations once the slave codes were enacted, beginning in the latter half of the seventeenth century. Although *A Mercy* takes place after Bacon’s Rebellion in 1676, there still exists the potential for Florens to resist the designation of enslavement based solely on her blackness.^x

Florens’s temporal gaps can point toward her spectral potential rather than be parts of her life that “must” be filled. As part of her narrative representability, these gaps can function as a way for her to extend this agency by allowing her to enter a queer temporality, which enables her to discover a power within herself even as she feels haunted. In *Extravagant Abjection*, Darieck Scott configures this agency in terms of a “black power,” which links blackness to abjection and “center[s] around the figure’s usefulness for dramatizing or actualizing alternatives to linear temporality: such alternative temporalities arise largely in the temporal paradox that characterizes trauma” and gives “a *liberating* escape from linear time” (9, 11; original emphasis). Scott’s work links this black abject to queer readings of various texts whose characters enact agency despite their traumatic experiences, as in his analysis of *Beloved*, which interrogates the limits of masculinity and shows that queerness can still be eroticized but that the repudiation of linearity is also significant to the potential queerness of his “black power.” Similarly, Kathryn Bond Stockton questions whether value exists in embracing shame and debasement, including at times “erotic debasements” such as anality. She invokes a

language of abject power that shows the appeal of debased social positions: “As for depictions of beautiful debasements, they have emerged on the backs of details extravagant, decorative (even when bloody), lyrical, passionate, highly ambitious, and strangely attractive (even when cruel)” (Stockton 205). As Florens enacts her violence against the blacksmith—the most ostensible form of her debasement—she acquires her spectral power, a power premised on retaliating against her confined position as enslaved, black, and female in colonial America.

This consideration of a power based on someone’s marginal position appears counterintuitive, yet embracing the abject may be a productive way to better understand the significance of the persistent haunting power of slavery. Keith Byerman furthers this point when he claims that Toni Morrison “is willing to tell horrific stories of black life, stories that allow the American public both to feel pity for and to replicate black abjection by imaginatively experiencing the suffering” (5). Florens’s narrative reaches across time so that even contemporary readers are confronted with the need to experience her testimony as an enslaved African, for it is a story that will not be silent. Further, Evelyn Jaffe Schreiber notes, “Unfortunately, American culture has failed to integrate the slave experience so as to perform the witness function [...] Morrison's novels serve the witness function" (11). As a witness, Morrison’s works promote awareness and attempt to give a voice, however incomplete, to the unpalatable, the traumatic, the inaccessible.

CHAPTER TWO

CHILDHOOD TRAUMA: THE (RE)CONSTRUCTION OF BREAKDOWNS

Florens associates believes that her mother has rejected her in favor of her younger brother, which affects the way she deals with future relationships, especially her brief encounter with Malaik toward the end of the novel. Because she sustains this misperception that her mother rejects her in order to stay with her infant brother, she experiences a stultified “capacity to read the meaning of others’ words” and their actions (Wyatt 128). She extends this projection of her trauma, in fact, to all mothers with sons, stating, “[M]others nursing greedy babies scare me...saying something I cannot hear. Saying something important to me, but holding the little boy’s hand” (Morrison 9). All mothers with sons terrify Florens because she believes they will always choose the son, never the daughter, never her. Her inability to hear the maternal message reflects an effect of trauma, an attempt not to fully relive the horror. Caruth explains that psychic trauma is linked to bodily effects, as when she asserts, “[T]he barrier of consciousness is a barrier of sensation and knowledge that protects the organism by placing stimulation within an ordered experience of time” (*Unclaimed Experience* 61). Despite this break in communication, Florens’s sight overpowers the lacuna of aural communication, presenting visual “evidence” that she remains unworthy of love, a belief that never leaves her consciousness but rather serves to reify her misunderstanding. This reification of her purported unworthiness results directly from her inability to hear her mother (or any mother for that matter), and consequently, all of her future interactions are stymied by her inability to understand others.

By extending her closed-offness to other explanations of the separation to all mothers, Florens evinces the ability of psychic trauma to enact a spatiotemporal collapse. Dori Laub and Susanna Lee affirm, “Massive psychic trauma has an amorphous presence, not delimited by place, time, or agency. Lacking a beginning, a middle, and an end, it weaves through the memories of several generations” (449). This ability of trauma to move through space and time does not have to be necessarily linear but rather spreads out so that understanding the history of slavery cannot have a single epicenter, an originary moment. Florens’s trauma, then, has the potential to reflect not just the separation from her mother but also the loss of enslaved Africans across generations and geographies, rendering psychic trauma a symptom of the fissures of such borders.^{xi}

These elided borders may, in fact, provide a space to deal with a history of trauma, even if a full understanding remains inaccessible. For Darieck Scott, “[T]here is a dimension of human existence that lies in excess of narrative capture (trauma, the Real, anonymous or amorphous existence) and for which an insistence on linear historicity has the effect of suppression” (130). While reading all of human existence as inherently partially hidden allows for an understanding of why the process of not knowing the full history remains, it has incisive implications regarding slavery in particular. Scott’s goal, at least in part, encompasses the way anti-linear narratives can engage in a healing process; however, the “recovery” of slavery remains part of a wounded history that appears susceptible to be written as over or complete, although this narrative is always under revision due to discovery of more evidence. Looking at the “amorphous existence” of some of the characters in *A Mercy* can create a space to haunt beyond the novel and

into the archive of slavery. This haunting illustrates the trauma that Morrison cannot capture in her novel as no single character can reveal or understand everything that happens, and even any form of healing that Florens may experience remains enveloped within her psychic trauma to which is she persistently vulnerable because of her marginalized identity.

By erasing the temporal boundary, Florens must relive the trauma as if it were a fresh wound, not a scar that can heal, although this psychic closeness does not necessarily indicate that she can gain a more critical understanding of the event. Her mother's absence makes this freshness possible, which proves so pervasive that it becomes a *presence* of an absence, or a force that haunts Florens. Melanie Anderson considers both literal and metaphorical specters, placing the specter as a fulcrum that hinges on temporality. For *A Mercy*, she notes, "Slavery attempts to erase the mother/child bond by creating loss and absence—the ghostly parent" (Anderson 142). Her inclusion of slavery as a structure causes the power of the mother's absence to fall further out of Florens's favor because slavery acts as an instigating and sustaining factor of separation. Avery Gordon's *Ghostly Matters* also provides insight on the experience of haunting: "Haunting raises specters, and it alters the experience of being in time, the way we separate the past, the present, and the future. These specters or ghosts appear when the trouble they represent is no longer being contained or repressed or blocked from view (xvi)." Such a temporal slippage similarly characterizes the effects of trauma, and the spectral nature of figures like those unnamed or unaccounted for in the Diaspora can haunt others left to deal with this loss. For Florens, her mother is not lost from view although she cannot hear

and correctly read her intention to save Florens; instead, Florens repeatedly experiences the separation, or ghosting, of her mother though she does not know why her mother appears to choose her younger brother over her or even whether she is still alive.

As a spectral figure, Florens's mother cannot fully articulate any message to her daughter, and slavery remains a driving force between them, showing that even communicating to her daughter would not offer legal protection. Notably, Florens claims to "see" her mother over the years but can never hear her, much like she sees other mothers always rejecting her. When she takes care of Malaik, the blacksmith's charge, Florens's sees this figure prior to committing her acts of violence against him and subsequently the blacksmith: "A minha mãe leans at the door holding her little boy's hand, my shoes in her pocket. As always she is trying to tell me something" (Morrison 161). This scene differs from the previous one in that Florens knows that the maternal figure wants to tell her something though Florens remains caught in the tumult of *not knowing* the message and wants the spectral presence to depart. Despite her ghostly propinquity, Florens's mother still cannot speak even after eight years; the trauma demarcates a space where time can temporarily fall away yet stymies closure.^{xii} Slavery has distorted the closeness of a normative bond between the two beyond the moment of separation because her mother can never fully protect her daughter, and only in Florens's mind can she try to reconfigure her mother as an absent presence.

When Melanie Anderson shifts her focus beyond a single family, she explores the implication of spectrality on the institutional forces that undergird haunting in Morrison's novel. She explains, "These individuals [on D'Ortega's plantation] are social ghosts:

victims of physical and psychological torture who are attempting to hold onto their agency in spite of the erasure of being someone else's property" (Anderson 133). Thus, a social ghost is a figure that does not have to be dead in order to haunt, but rather can pervade the psyche of the one who must see her. Because of the possibilities of psychic and physical torture, even death, slavery imposes a miasmatic aura of always-incipient loss. The social ghost disrupts time and space so that the entity appears unbidden, a force that cannot provide full comprehension to the seer because a past trauma cannot be explained by the figure who is presently absent.

The possibility of the living ghost—a presence imbued with a power to haunt another human being whether the “ghost” is dead or alive—emphasizes the ways that such uncertainty may allow an enslaved person whose physical movement is curtailed to move through the interstices of the archive wherein a queer spatiality may develop. Juda Bennett, author of *Toni Morrison and the Queer Pleasure of Ghosts*, notes, “Morrison’s ghosts are at turns fascinating presences, disturbing absences, but mostly provocative embodiments of both and therefore prime figures to trouble the binaries that queer theory seeks to deconstruct” (4). For Bennett, ghosts in Morrison’s novels transcend time and geography so that ghosts may haunt both within and beyond such borders, whether they are living, dead, or in an unknown state of spectral animation, as Florens’s mother is for her.^{xiii} Florens positions herself in the spectral realm because she does not recognize borders but rather claims, “I don’t know the feeling of or what it means, free and not free” (Morrison 81). Here, Florens presents herself not simply in between but rather outside established borders, which she complicates even more by the end of the novel so

that she becomes just as much haunter as haunted. Because this disruptive power of haunting forces does not recognize borders, the archive of slavery is exposed to abjection, what Julia Kristeva defines as “what disturbs identity, system order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules” (4). Abjection aligns itself with queerness in its refusal to function within preconceived limitations, even the boundary between the living and the dead; thus, a ghostly presence (or, for example, Anderson’s “ghostly parent”) can be simultaneously present and absent, can simultaneously propel and confabulate Florens’s narrative.^{xiv} Yet while Anderson focuses on the haunting presence of Florens’s mother, I will extend this form of haunting to Florens, who remains certainly alive. For Florens, her spectrality comes from not simply the unsettling of borders, but also her instigation of violence as a form of subjectivity, the catalyst to queer designated borders.^{xv}

CHAPTER THREE

MOTHER, INTERRUPTED: THE TRANSFERENCE OF AFFECTION

Before she reclaims herself, Florens undergoes a search for the affection she craves as a consequence of her perceived rejection, motivating her actions for the rest of the novel and leading to further unstable, even brutal results that open her identity to a new level of abjection. She first transfers her need for love to Lina, who attempts to act as Florens's surrogate mother. Lina and Florens both experience "[m]other hunger—to be one or have one," a feeling "traveling the bone" (Morrison 73), although Lina appears to be the only one to really understand the forms that a mother/daughter relationship may take. Morrison buttresses the need for their connection by construing it as a biological need that moves under the skin and encompasses the whole body, not merely the mind or a metaphorical heart. Andrea O'Reilly considers Morrison's exploration of what she terms "motherwork" in her analysis of Morrison's fiction, claiming, "Morrison challenges the received view, or what she calls in another context the master narrative of motherhood. Motherhood is a cultural construction that varies with time and place; there is no essential or universal experience of motherhood" (29). O'Reilly considers part of the master narrative of motherhood as primarily focused on nurturance, but as Morrison's novels show, motherhood encompasses so much more than this feature, which is based on in part on middle-class values (29).^{xvi} The need, or "hunger," to have a mother (and to be a mother) may be connected to but not necessarily rely on biology; rather, a mother teaches and takes care of someone she treats as a son or daughter, which, in the case of Lina (as in the interrupted case of Florens's *minha mãe*), focuses on survival.

Lina acts as a substitute mother to Florens—baking birthday cakes and warning her about falling in love with the blacksmith—yet she cannot repair the trauma Florens has undergone. She cannot seal the gap in Florens’s consciousness that would answer why her *minha mãe* has abandoned her daughter. Ultimately, Lina cannot save Florens, whom she describes as a “love-disabled girl” (Morrison 52). This idea of trauma affecting one’s ability to love underscores the stunted nature of Florens’s search for affection, whether she seeks relational closeness from the positionality of a child or as a sexual partner. Once she experiences this perceived maternal rejection, Florens finds it difficult to forge a filial connection toward another woman not only because the fear of another rejection remains ever present, but also because “Florens is a symbol of the African Diaspora insofar as her painful status as orphan mirrors the conditions of collective displacement” (Wardi 24). As an enslaved African, Florens undergoes a psychic trauma experienced by an incalculable number of people, so her emotional impairment emblemizes a collective weight, which markedly increases her fear and turmoil even as she searches for other outlets to fulfill her “mother hunger.”^{xvii}

Since her first mother-daughter relationship fails, Florens attributes this failure to all potential maternal figures. The connection between her and Lina constructs a binary that instills an unconscious miscommunication based on the characters’ final interactions with their mothers. Florens is not the only character to experience childhood trauma; like Florens, Lina also undergoes horrific experiences, including the destruction of her village and the death of her mother.^{xviii} Despite these traumas, Lina does not give in to the horror

because her own mother has successfully fulfilled the role of teacher. After the Presbyterians abandon her, Lina does not internally crumble; instead, she

decided to fortify herself by piecing together scraps of what her mother had taught her before dying in agony [...] she cobbled together neglected rites, merged European medicine with native, scripture with lore, and recalled or invented the hidden meaning of things. (Morrison 56)

Her mother's teaching enables this shift from an identity based on trauma to a multivalent outlook that combines cultural practices of the natives and the Europeans, and more importantly, Lina's ability to recall or even invent meanings not viewed through the lens of a single traumatic event. While Florens fixates on a single trauma with a unilateral perspective that shapes all future decisions, Lina acknowledges her own traumas and allows them to change her on her own terms as she gets older. Shirley Ann Stave, in her Lacanian reading of *A Mercy*, elucidates this difference by affirming that Florens "accepts her status as child and as slave, fractured by the loss of the mirror/mother" and that unlike "Lina, who pieces together a self from memory and imagination, Florens simply accepts her lack of self" (145). Although Florens later enters a state of hybrid subjectivity as free yet still enslaved, she continues feeling a lack that stretches between the spatiotemporal distance between her mother, herself, and the institutional weight of slavery that has effected their separation.

While Lina can differentiate relationships without premising all of them on the one with her mother, from whom she, too, has been separated by the rapacity of colonialism and slaveholders, Florens cannot "cobble together" a coherent identity

because her mother has not effectively taught her daughter how to live. However, she has endeavored to help her daughter within her limited power to speak by asking Jacob to take her, a lesson Florens never learns. Florens herself recognizes this gap in her knowledge, especially when she meets Widow Ealing and her daughter Jane and realizes, “If my mother is not dead she can be teaching me these things” (Morrison 129), which, in this scene, refers to Christian doctrine, but more broadly applies to survival skills. The condition of slavery prevents Florens’s mother from keeping her daughter safe, and this ignorance further contributes to her lack of safety. Although her mother warns her that “Only bad women wear high heels” (Morrison 4), Florens does not understand that her liking of the shoes entrenches herself more deeply as a potential victim at the hands of their master D’Ortega because she cannot “read” what it means for an enslaved girl to wear something associated with licentiousness, which reflects her inability to grasp cultural meanings. Hortense Spillers breaches such a space of uncertainty when she claims, “The destructive loss of the natural mother, whose biological/genetic relationship to the child remains unique and unambiguous, opens the enslaved young to social ambiguity and chaos” (“Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe” 272). While for Spillers this chaos extends to the often ambiguous identity of the father and the connection to siblings of someone enslaved, this matrix focuses solely on the maternal for Florens. In this case, the loss of the mother not only provides an instigating force that propels Florens into entropy, but also underscores other “social ambiguities” from which she does not learn—the volatile potential hybridity of enslavement and freedom, which she achieves once she enters into a spectral state herself.

Florens's lack of knowledge about the consequences of her own behavior leaves Florens with only mismatched shreds of an identity that she cannot suture into a pre-traumatized self because the system of slavery, not simply the traumatic moment of separation, has stolen the truth of her relationship with her mother from her. All of Florens's relationships fail and her writing is a secret act that her intended audience, the blacksmith, may never read. Both of these "failures" are premised on the mistaken belief of her abandonment, and thus, these actions seemingly *must* fail in Florens's search for self unless she can acquire a form of limited power that may appear destructive—an agency dependent on the abject. This interaction with the abject may bring Florens closer to a queer comprehension of herself and therefore a form of power. In *The Queer Art of Failure*, Judith Halberstam considers the "secret history of pessimism," which, for her, is "a tale of anticapitalist, queer struggle [...] a narrative about anticolonial struggle, the refusal of legibility, and an art of unbecoming" and that "[t]he queer art of failure turns on the impossible, the improbable, the unlikely, and the unremarkable" (88). For Florens, who lives on the margins of colonial society yet moves between boundaries of activity/passivity and presence/absence, such "failure" gives her the "survival skill" to resist capitulating to a trauma that appears to engulf her. Ironically, her writing, a sign of what an enslaved individual "should not" do, gives her a tangible way of confronting the separation, even if she fails to understand the larger scope of inequity she must deal with as black, female, and enslaved.

Reading Florens's pursuit for comprehending the incomprehensible as queer focuses on her repeated attempts to make relationships work although they appear to fail

almost inevitably because of her inability to consider other possible interpretations of the traumatic separation. In the context of Darieck Scott's black abject, "[S]uffering seems, at some level or at some far-flung contact point, to merge into something like ability, like power (and certainly, like pleasure) without losing or denying what it is to suffer" (11).^{xix} Queering suffering may allow for the queering of haunting wherein those present or absent may speak beyond the massiveness and selectiveness of history. Those haunted, like Florens, are channeled as witnesses, similar to Hartman's claim regarding the Middle Passage. For Hartman, "[T]races of memory function in a manner akin to a phantom limb [...] a sentient recollection of connectedness experienced at the site of rupture, where the very consciousness of disconnectedness acts as mode of testimony and memory" (73-74). Hence, a single slave narrative has the power to testify to the trauma of more than the experiences of its author or the people mentioned in the narrative. Although most of those who composed slave narratives did not endure the Middle Passage, each horror within the archive collectively haunts future generations. These unheard voices of the archive come closer to a still-partial accessibility, rendering a greater awareness of the haunting that continues to be uncovered even as learning every story about every enslaved African appears incomprehensible.^{xx}

CHAPTER FOUR

DUELING WITH DUALITY: PSYCHIC FRAGMENTATION FOILED

Although we only see Florens's firsthand account of a fragmented life, Sorrow also presents a case of a damaged psyche, enabling Morrison to construct these two characters as foils and permitting her to explore multiple teleological paths toward selfhood in relation to these characters' different approaches to motherhood. For Sorrow, trauma stems largely from her sexual abuse from various men, including the sons of the sawyer who sells her to Jacob after his wife demands that she leave and possibly Jacob himself. Further, Sorrow does not appear to have a primordial connection to her own mother; rather, she only appears to know her father with whom she travels on the sea until she is the only survivor of a deadly shipwreck. Despite these differences, Florens and Sorrow share some similarities. Wardi asserts, "Sorrow bespeaks an ontological hybridity that, in this case, encompasses human and water. Like Florens, Sorrow is uncultivated, uncontrollable and unrestrained" (27). This hybridity correlates to Florens's spectral, abject agency because both women upset borders, whether it is humanness/spectrality (in the case of Florens) or race (in the case of Sorrow) though Florens's hybridity stems specifically from her coping with her trauma. Both of them also share what Barbara Schapiro refers to in her analysis of *Beloved* as "[t]he hunger for recognition [...] so overwhelming that it threatens to swallow up the other and the self, destroying all boundaries in one total annihilation" (201). These women can only discover recognition of the self once they determine how to deal with their crises related to motherhood. For Florens, it leads to her violent resistance while for Sorrow, it leads

first to the creation of her imaginary friend Twin (who functions as an invisible yet primordial mirror) and then to her later status as a mother.

Both Florens and Sorrow show that although agency exists for both of them, they are sealed in their own worlds and therefore are able to maintain only fragmented perspectives of their world. Yet this fragmentation suggests the unknowability of the lives of those whose traumas remain unknown under the historical weight of slavery since each woman represents the inability to know the full extent of this institution. As a victim of rape, it would be understandable that Sorrow's resultant pregnancy and childbearing would incur sorrow, which would cause her emotional state to correspond with her exterior identity as "Sorrow"; however, this name is given to her by the wife of the sawyer who saves her from the shipwreck. Others impute to Sorrow her "cursed" nature, such as Lina, who believes that Jacob may have impregnated Sorrow. In reality, "Sorrow" becomes a name others use to characterize her, but she does not mind that no one knows her origin because she has Twin, an invisible being who can call Sorrow by her real (but unknown) name, a figure necessary only when Sorrow still *appears* to suffer from her traumas. Twin functions as a correlative to the psychological duality within Florens. Whereas Sorrow divides herself between the self that others see (Sorrow) and the invisible self she considers external rather than a construct of her mind (Twin), Florens demonstrates her disjointedness between her mind and the narrative she composes on the walls of the mansion. Because Florens remains unaware of the perceptions of others to an even more alarming degree than Sorrow does, Florens contorts

all externalized constructions of self into her own version of reality by writing this perspective in the mansion that all are forbidden to enter.

However, Morrison shows that the satiation of “mother hunger” is the sole method that can effectively reconsolidate the fragments of Sorrow’s identity instead of portraying her childbearing as traumatic. No matter how broken Sorrow is before, she believes she can enter the “real” world so that she no longer needs Twin. But casting off Twin does not necessarily signify a surmounting of trauma. Sorrow delimits her existence by encompassing her identity within the realm of motherhood even though like Lina, she appears to “cobble together” an identity on her own terms when she renames herself “Complete” (Morrison 158); however, this identitarian suturing that Sorrow undergoes does not place her safely out of harm in the present. Gallego-Durán claims that for Sorrow, “[B]ecoming a mother is a blessing that literally saves her and engenders her trust in herself as never before” (111). While Gallego-Durán also acknowledges her vulnerability as enslaved and female in colonial America, he does not show that this “blessing” causes her to negate awareness of her and the others’ daily lives on their farm. Despite this self-proclaimed completion, Sorrow remains outcast among the women, and in fact, she does not know that the small plantation is falling apart because her identity becomes wrapped up in her child and “remains separate and alone, a kind of cautionary figure for those who would deny the possibility of coalition-building” (Cox 114). Maintaining this spilt between oneself and others proves dangerous in this context. Sorrow’s “completion,” then, does not integrate her into the psychic fulfillment that she perceives she has attained but instead emphasizes the persistent need to deal with her

trauma (for her, the death of her father and her subsequent rape) in a way that rejects the fixation on a single object of affection in favor of developing a community of healthy relationships, which is difficult on the Vaark farm because none of the living characters seek connection with one another by the end.

While Florens's literacy enables her to achieve a form of freedom, or at least a form of resistance against the confines of her status wherein she produces a narrative without the sanction of her master, she writes a truth that does not exist except in her own mind for a man who will never read this slanted narrative. Valerie Smith affirms that Florens's writing transforms her into a state of liberty, what she terms "legally enslaved yet psychically free" (119). Because Florens gains a queer ontology premised on the welcoming of abjection, she does unsettle the binary between freedom and enslavement, at least to the extent that she names herself a subject; however, she remains alone and "can no longer cohabit with other humans" (Stave 147). Florens becomes impenetrable, unwilling to open herself to the possibility that her mother has committed any act other than rejection and therefore unable to ever achieve awareness of the truth although her abjection allows her to revise her reaction to her horror.

Still, Florens's testimony regarding her experiences as an enslaved African serve to help her deal with her loss, even if she cannot breach the physical space and learn from her mother. Her ability to share the experience of the enslaved depends in part on telling a narrative that signifies beyond the self and imputes meaning to the collective, an exposure of the horror ever present in the archive. W. Lawrence Hogue claims that stories are marginalized based on the types of experiences they delineate because "Those literary

texts that reproduce particular literary ‘experiences’ are promoted and certified. Those that do not reproduce certain ‘experiences’ or ideological effects are repressed or subordinated” (332). Because Florens, a voice already marginalized by her gender, race, and enslaved status, tells a false truth, a life story premised on a misperception she tries to construct as a love letter, she tells a new story, yet it is subordinated by the conditions of her existence as a marginalized figure. This subordination is further maximized by her inability to share her narrative. Even though the illiterate blacksmith is her intended audience, she still challenges marginalization through the very composition of her narrative. Because Florens will never have an audience—the blacksmith cannot read, and if he could, he likely would not return to the woman who has attacked him—her “truth” crumbles unless she can heal herself through abjection, wherein she aligns herself with the haunting. By taking on an active spectral position, Florens may haunt the archive as a reminder of the limited yet sometimes necessary reconfiguration of the truth so that the traumatized subject may reclaim some of herself, however fragmented that subject may be.

CHAPTER FIVE

“MORE HUMAN THAN HUMAN:” THE HAUNTING CONCLUSION

Florens cannot fully process why her mother would give her over to Jacob, and years later, the reasoning remains inaccessible, contributing to Florens’ abjection. In her work on “mother hunger” in the fiction of Morrison, Sandra Cox attributes Florens’s anguish primarily to the traumatic event itself: “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). The initial separation initiates Florens’s misperception of her mother’s motivations, inhibiting her ability to develop properly, but this trauma is propelled by more than this single event. The haunting effect of not knowing caused by slavery closes off more than the reconciliation with her mother; this condition effectively shuts down true understanding of the self, an ironic position for a character attempting to tell the (limited) truth of what she knows through her life story by etching it on the interior of the mansion. Yet even writing down an incomplete understanding helps Florens to put into words what so disturbs her and permits her to commit an extralegal act because this manifestation of her literacy is more than a love letter; it is also a way to push against the confinement of her enslaved status.

Once Florens transfers her need for affection from Lina to the unnamed blacksmith, she endeavors to understand her inchoate sexuality and ostensibly appears to distance herself from her spectral *minha mãe* and Lina along with their advice that encourages self-preservation. Although Florens is not ready for an “adult” relationship—

she remains a psychologically damaged child—only Lina discerns the danger of Florens’s attraction, yet even she mitigates the chance for catastrophe by believing that the blacksmith will choose non-virginal Sorrow instead. Still, the other characters cannot imagine what Lina perceives as the inevitable “disruption, the shattering a free black man would cause” because he has “already ruined Florens, since she refused to see that she hankered after a man that had not troubled to tell her goodbye” (Morrison 71). Florens does not understand the significance of the blacksmith’s silence; rather, she misinterprets their relationship, as she has misinterpreted the words of her biological mother that result in their separation. She believes she is not merely a part of him but that she *is* (or rather is possessed by) him, as shown in her response “I am his tree” after Lina claims that Florens is only “one leaf on his tree” (Morrison 71). Florens’s inability to correctly “read” her relationship reveals how her childhood trauma has perverted all of her future relationships, for she searches for the feeding of “mother hunger,” a connection that encompasses the body and mind, by pursuing a man who stands outside this realm of possibility since he cannot connect with Florens as either maternal figure or devoted lover.

Unable to correctly understand her interior self, Florens does not understand how to construct her own identity as a distinct entity; she considers herself an object either worthy or unworthy of acceptance and lacks the ability to understand the internal states of others. When she tries to annex herself to both the bodies and minds of those from whom she seeks connectedness, she does not consider anything beyond the acceptance/rejection binary. Florens’s assurance that she is the blacksmith’s tree, then, functions as a

repudiation of self, a rejection of her own interiority that allows her to believe she is possessed by him. Similar to Scott, who considers the power of abjection within “a constellation of tropes” such as race and the body (9), Kathryn Bond Stockton examines the connection between race, gender, and queerness. For Stockton, Morrison “dares to value debasement” (72). By invoking a politics that embraces being debased, or “on the bottom,” of the American social scale, Morrison’s novels show the potential for a love that aligns more with Ahmed’s “oblique” or “off line” sense of queerness.^{xxi} As in the case of Florens, her desire to be possessed refutes the normative logic of autonomy. Even though she does not have the legal power to give herself to another, she believes she does, and this belief evinces a desperate need to transfer her love to another.

If Florens psychically enslaves herself to the blacksmith, her interaction with the Anabaptists she meets when staying with Widow Ealing opens up a new reading of the black body. This interpretation complicates, even potentially unravels, Smith’s belief that Florens is psychically free because her attraction to the blacksmith suggests a repudiation of the self. Although Morrison shows that slavery is not yet racialized in seventeenth-century colonial America, race still matters as a point of xenophobic differentiation. Upon seeing Florens, the Anabaptists begin viewing her as malignant because of her skin color. One of them affirms, “The Black Man is among us. This is his minion” (Morrison 131). While “Black Man” generally refers to Satan, Florens does not appear to have any knowledge about Christian doctrine, yet “Black Man” may code for the blacksmith, the only free black man in the novel. He takes on an otherworldly position, which, like the mythic Satan, negates the necessity of his immediate presence to influence others.

The fear of blackness symbolizes a fear of the recondite; a mystery, assumed pernicious, must hide within the body, so the Anabaptists scrutinize Florens's body to discover her seemingly unbridgeable Otherness. Florens notes, "They look under my arms, between my legs...No hate is there or scare of disgust but they are looking at me my body across distances without recognition" (Morrison 133). Their analysis of Florens's body illustrates her Otherness—but they cannot analyze the black male body, the "Black Man" to which Florens has psychically enslaved herself. Her body becomes a singular form put on display in a way that is eerily prescient of the auction block that future generations of enslaved Africans endured. However, Florens cannot detach herself from the blacksmith, and thus, this foreign attempt to categorize her based on race fails to put a solid marker of identity on her.

Yet Florens actually gains some limited agency within the realm of the black abject because she diverts the Anabaptists' original mission to accuse the widow's daughter Jane of witchcraft. As Stave explains, "In refusing to acknowledge their commonality, in refusing to see Florens's ability to speak their language, even to read, as evidence of a shared humanity, the witchhunters [sic] must render Florens invisible and alien to maintain their own delusion of superiority" (146). I am reading beyond Stave's critique of the shame of the Othering process in this scene to explore this more in line with abject queer potential, which does not necessarily rely on shame. Although her "alien" status results in their cold scrutiny, Florens is the reason why the Anabaptists leave the Ealings alone, at least for now, for she has arrived as a queer, apparently supernatural (or at least haunting) force, upsetting the limited perspective of these

characters' expectations for what can walk the earth. This scene, then, offers Florens the opportunity reclaim herself as one who haunts, not just one who is haunted, even as she stands passively while the Anabaptists analyze her body.

Nevertheless, Florens's wish for the blacksmith to encompass her with his affection causes her to revert to the traumatic scene in which she binarizes her mother's decision between the rejection of herself and the acceptance of her younger brother. The blacksmith takes care of a young boy named Malaik, and when Florens dislocates the boy's shoulder while the blacksmith is away, he blames her for the injury. Florens, distraught because the blacksmith has censured her, not because she has harmed the child, claims, "I am lost because your shout is not my name. Not me. Him. Malaik you shout. Malaik" (Morrison 165). Here, she re-experiences the horrific unknowability of slavery and relives the trauma of the one she loves choosing the boy, or fraternal figure, again since, for Florens, Malaik becomes a competitor for the blacksmith's affection. Consequently, she attacks the blacksmith with his tools and wounds him, possibly fatally. Susanna Vega-González figures the blacksmith's repudiation as "the beginning of her emotional coming-of-age and the engendering of a sense of self" (128). For Smith, Florens's violence against the blacksmith, a figure from whom she wishes to receive an all-encompassing love, functions as "Florens' attempt to reassert her humanity" (126). By enacting this violence, Florens becomes an agent responding to the persistent feeling of rejection she has not overcome. The brutality suggests an active response not to be impaired by the haunting but rather to achieve a fluidity that enables her to deal with her loss on her own terms although she continues to misinterpret the significance of the

events: the blacksmith would not have necessarily rejected her if she had not harmed a child, especially since he trusts her to take care of Malaik on her own.

This final interaction with the blacksmith has changed Florens but does not repair the fragmented psyche caused by her trauma; rather, she re-stitches a self that moves beyond “mother hunger” and communal affiliation as opposed to Sorrow, who delimits herself solely within her role as mother. On her return to the farm, the indentured servants Willard and Scully are “slow to recognize her as a living person” (Morrison 172). In contrast to her journey to the blacksmith, her return involves no mishaps: Florens simply appears. Not only does this arrival suggest Florens’s now obvious ability to unsettle the border between life and death, but also no one can ever know how she has returned and what her trip back to the farm is like because this section is told from third-person point of view rather than narrated by Florens. This particular narrative gap, the aftermath of Florens’s claim not simply to Smith’s affirmation of humanity but rather the movement between the human/inhuman and living/dead, evinces the haunting capacity of the archive of slavery. Never can this gap be filled though it is a turning point for Florens. Florens revels in a fluid subjectivity as a human being who consciously distinguishes herself from others yet still moves between boundaries. As an enslaved African, she is property; however, her rage evinces an attempt to surmount the trauma of rejection by hardening herself so that she no longer tries to attach herself to others despite her writing to the blacksmith. This interpretation allows for Florens to embrace a queer response to rejection in that her subsequent emotional hardness enables her to forge a distinct subjectivity not wholly reliant on the acceptance or rejection of another because the her

writing is not only an attempt to make the blacksmith understand, but also to make herself understand, however incomplete her narrative must be.

This fluidity marks Florens as spectral because she has made a life-changing decision on her own, which will haunt others around her; even the indentured servants Willard and Scully, who do not know about Florens's violent actions, do know that she has changed into a being not limited by the boundaries of humanness. Gordon asserts that the ghost is a figure "pregnant with unfulfilled possibility, with the something to be done that the wavering present is demanding" (183). A haunting presence suggests temporal collapse and opens the space for a ghostly figure to attempt to deal with past traumas. To challenge the trauma, Florens ghosts herself, becoming the ultimate abject figure by situating herself within paradoxes. She resides in the world of the living yet appears not to be just human; her absence and presence are conflated because she spends most of her time alone in the mansion yet remains under the dominion of Rebekka; and she creates a space as both enslaved and free, asserting, "Slave. Free. I last" (Morrison 189). Thus, Florens attains selfhood in her mind, which remains fragmented; however, she forges this seemingly aporetic space in order to protect herself.

Because she has aligned herself with amorphous spectrality, Florens can choose her own method of recovery, or at least reclamation of self: an ontology that allows her to finally understand how to manipulate her power as someone who can choose an abject, even potentially catastrophic path toward understanding her life. Although they both seal themselves off from everyone else, Florens's limited power differs from Sorrow's because she embraces a queer position wherein she assumes a more active role. As Antze

and Lambek affirm, “[M]emory offers a certain scope for the kind of play or freedom that enables us to creatively refashion ourselves, remembering one thing and not another, changing the stories we tell ourselves (and others) about ourselves” (xvi). Her role as spectral storyteller allows her to rearticulate the archive and reveal the need for some form of closure, even if this closure is premised on misperceptions or appears antithetical to recovery. While closure regarding slavery cannot be attained—and acknowledging new narratives tears open historical wounds—the process of writing is the testimony that grounds Florens. She may be desperately writing in hopes of making the blacksmith understand her motives, but she actually accounts for the institutional horror that slavery causes, even if she can only comprehend the trauma on a personal level. Regardless or rather because of this lack of complete understanding, Florens’s narrative reaches beyond the walls of the mansion so that her voice, albeit fragmented, works as a site of dealing with psychic trauma and its consequences.

Although Florens repudiates her mother, leading her further away from understanding the truth, this decision may be the safest option for her psyche since she cannot breach the space and hear the actual words of mercy from her mother’s lips. For Florens, the trauma of the separation and the unquenched “mother hunger” writhe beneath her skin. Because Florens transforms into a violent woman with an exterior that appears emotionally impregnable, her final comment for her mother reminds us of her sustained ignorance about the separation from her mother: “[A]ll this time I cannot know what my mother is telling me. Nor can she know what I am wanting to tell her. Mãe, you can have pleasure now because the soles of my feet are hard as cypress” (Morrison 189).

Even eight years later, Florens does not understand the damning significance of the high heels she has worn as a child; she acerbically asserts her physical hardness as a sign of goodness, an abjuration of the softness of “bad women,” and a repudiation of emotional attachments. This sustained misperception denies Florens the opportunity to explore the possibility of other truths about her mother, and she only wants to reconnect with the blacksmith, who has inadvertently ushered in an awakening of her recognition of her selfhood.

Florens’s incompleteness becomes most evident in the final chapter when her mother speaks a message that her daughter will never receive due to the distance caused by their enslavement. Her mother imparts advice that would allow Florens to construct a stable, whole self: “[T]o be given dominion over another is a hard thing; to wrest dominion over another is a wrong thing; to give dominion over yourself to another is a wicked thing” (Morrison 196).^{xxiii} This message proves fruitless because her mother’s final command (or perhaps plea) is for Florens to hear her mother, a condition rendered impossible by the spatial barrier that slavery has erected and maintained. The maternal advice that Florens does not hear not only underscores the lacuna of her understanding of their relationship, but also shows the catastrophe of a mother unable to teach her daughter because of the spatiotemporal divide and legal vulnerability enacted by slavery. Unlike Lina, Florens does not learn from her mother and commits “wickedness.” In her quest for love, she attempts to attach herself to the blacksmith, which ironically demonstrates her primordial “mother hunger” rather than an erotic pursuit of a “competent” person. Conner shows the peril for Florens when she gives up herself because “[t]his is a dangerous

evacuation of the self, and one of the principal arguments of this novel is that such dependence is precisely another form of slavery” (162). Her mother’s last lesson is not to choose slavery, that giving oneself to another would be the most damaging choice of all. The transference of love from the filial to the erotic proves contrary to Florens’s humanity because she desires to forget herself in favor of putting all thought into the blacksmith, as exemplified by her extended, untraditional love letter to him.

This claim of subjectivity, then, does not free her from slavery, but rather metamorphoses her into a self-aware entity that erroneously believes she has conquered her mother’s rejection although she remains unaware of her mother’s mercy. This transition also permits Florens to articulate her trauma, which opens her up to a sense of reclamation, however misguided. She asserts, “I am become wilderness but I am also Florens. In full. Unforgiven. Unforgiving” (Morrison 189). Her consciousness is partial: she writes a letter to the blacksmith that he will not read, and she cannot truly reconcile with her mother. Although she acknowledges her sadness and her state of un-forgiveness, her inability to ever know the truth of her own story leaves her in a state of split selfhood, a crack that separates her mind from the reality of her environment. However, a lack of legal freedom does not necessarily constitute a lack of agency, as evinced by enslaved Africans who could refuse their masters’ wishes even if there were negative consequences so that their alleged insubordination became a method of resistance to demonstrate their own humanity.^{xxiii}

For Florens, her agency exists in her ability to share her narrative; although intended for an illiterate audience (a fact about which she remains unsure, as illustrated

when she asks, “[C]an you read? [Morrison 3]), this writing gives voice to the experience of slavery. As a marginalized voice demanding to be heard, Florens testifies for those who have died and whose narratives remain unknown, even if her narrative appears self-centered. Yvonne Atkinson considers the power of such a strategy, averring that it constitutes “a shared collective memory, a cultural ritual that promotes solidarity and cohesion, creating a living archive of African American culture” (23). The most individualized narrative still haunts the archive; one enslaved person’s trauma could very well have been another’s, such as the separation of family members even if the psychological effects might have differed. This form of haunting creates a spectral voice that can tell stories that need to be heard but cannot, for we can never know every one of the “Sixty million and more.”

ⁱ There are exceptions to these conditions, such as the ekphrastic portrayal of enslaved persons. For example, in the 20th-century art of Jacob Lawrence, W.J.T. Mitchell considers such portrayals a form of historical appropriation. While these pictorial narratives may further open the conversation on slavery, they are not narratives necessarily from the enslaved themselves. For further discussion of this approach to narrativizing slavery through art, see Birgit Haehnel and Melanie Ulz, *Slavery in Art and Literature: Approaches to Trauma, Memory and Visuality*. Berlin: Frank and Timme GmbH, 2009.

ⁱⁱ Spillers notes the “vulgar oxymoron of purposes and motivations insists on the combo—human-as-property” (6) in slavery. Yet Florens attempts to break through a limited representation of herself as an enslaved young woman by invoking her literacy, which both functions as a love letter to the blacksmith and exposes the horror that this system imposes on human beings, showing her resolve to break through the untold experiences of many of the enslaved. Even if this text remains unread, Florens has still endeavored to make her voice known.

ⁱⁱⁱ This disintegration of time and space has queer potential. To read Florens as disoriented by her condition as enslaved and the specific trauma of maternal separation as queer provides different modes of living that may help her to cope with her traumas. Her shaky ground, as it were, reveals that her orientation to the world is always already less stable because of her status as enslaved, black, and female. See Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 160.

^{iv} Because of the incomprehensible nature of trauma, it is significant to incorporate the language of haunting, which does not necessarily seek to overcome trauma but rather gives power to the past; hence, Florens's collapse of boundaries can provide a limited agency, even if she is still under legal subjection.

^v Stephen Best presents further evidence of the power of the archive of slavery to "irritate...feelings of historical loss" (157) in "Neither Lost nor Found: Slavery and the Visual Archive. *Representations* 113.1 (2011): 150-63. However, this irritation may be necessary to process a history of subjection and horror. Acquiring this knowledge does not indicate a complete recovery when a "recovery" of every enslaved African's story is impossible, yet this work serves to help Americans better understand their history and not gloss over historical traumas.

^{vi} In both *Beloved* and *A Mercy*, Morrison explores the actions of individual enslaved women—Sethe murders her child; Florens may have killed the blacksmith. By detailing such "unspeakable" violence, Morrison shows that the archive contains so many stories untold in or forgotten by American history. Perhaps *Beloved* haunts *A Mercy* to the extent that this attempt to recover the complete experience of slavery opens the space for more abjection, possibly because even *A Mercy* still cannot capture a true originary moment of the "birth" of slavery on North American soil.

^{vii} Ahmed's reading of queerness as "off line" reinforces the ways that queerness unsettles assumptions regarding space and time in addition to features of identity such as gender, race, and sexuality. I extend her reading of queerness, which for her deals primarily with

spatiality, to an anti-linear temporality in order to emphasize the ways that it influence an understanding of the abjection and narrative gaps of the archive of slavery.

^{viii} Cathy J. Cohen troubles the qualifications of normative sexuality further by claiming that any sexual relations between enslaved persons were “non-normative” because they were outside a privileged social position—white, male, and free. Interpreting a different-sex relationship between those were enslaved as queer points toward a legal and cultural reinforcement of how enslaved persons were labeled as always already outside normativity. See Cohen, “Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens: The Radical Potential of Queer Politics?” *Black Queer Studies: A Critical Anthology*. E. Patrick Johnson and Mae G. Henderson, eds. Durham: Duke UP, 2005. 21-51. Print.

^{ix} Morrison herself notes this fluidity during the colonial period. See Toni Morrison, “Toni Morrison on Bondage and a Post-Racial Age.” Interview by Michel Martin. *Tell Me More*. National Public Radio. 10 Dec. 2008.

^x For a further analysis of this phenomenon, see T.H. Breen and Stephen Innes, *Myne Own Ground: Race and Freedom on Virginia’s Eastern Shore, 1640-1676*. New York: Oxford UP, 1980.

^{xi} Morrison’s fiction has previously explored coping mechanisms when her characters are confronted with trauma. Wyatt discusses the psychosomatic effects of trauma in *Beloved*, contending that Denver’s deaf-muteness results from an inability to deal with the incomprehensible trauma of the Diaspora, not just the truth about Sethe. See Wyatt, *Risking Difference: Identification, Race, and Community*. New York: SUNY P, 2004, 5-6.

^{xii} Although Florens perceives that there is a story her mother wants to tell her—the unknown act of mercy—she cannot hear it, for hearing it would cause her to fully relive a trauma from which she has not recovered. Even if re-experiencing the event with the knowledge of her mother’s motivations may mend Florens’s psychic fragmentation, this spatiotemporal divide cannot be breached.

^{xiii} The labeling of ghosts does not appear to be absolute in Morrison’s fiction, especially in *A Mercy*. Referring to some characters as ghosts serves to reify the haunting power that they have because of their seeming ability to twist through space and time. Bennett notes that even though “it would be tempting to count the ghosts in Morrison’s novels [...] the measure of their importance lies mainly in their elusiveness, their resistance to naming and fixity” (10).

^{xiv} Scott attributes in part his analysis of the black abject within the Kristevan realm by considering abjection’s role in the construction of subjectivity. See Scott, *Extravagant Abjection*, 16-17.

^{xv} Slavery deprives Florens of the opportunity to learn how to love her mother as an entity distinct from herself, and she must accommodate that lack by reintroducing her mother in her fragile imagination. Florens lays claim to an agency that permits her to recognize her traumatized state yet seek modes of living to move beyond the initial psychically debilitating feeling of loss, even if the truth cannot be grasped.

^{xvi} For further examples of Morrison challenging of marginalized forms of motherhood see her depiction of Eva Peace in *Sula*, New York: Random House, 1973 and Sethe in *Beloved*, New York: Random House, 1987.

^{xvii} For further discussion on the link between home, motherhood, and history in African American literature, see Verena Theile and Marie Drews, eds. *Reclaiming Home, Remembering Motherhood, Rewriting History: African American and Afro-Caribbean Women's Literature in the Twentieth Century*. Cambridge: Cambridge, 2009.

^{xviii} For Florens, the concept of home is more difficult to define because before living with the Vaarks, she lives on the D'Ortega plantation and never feels fully connected to any community or location; rather, she places her focus only individuals, not the places where she lives.

^{xix} Scott's linking of pleasure and power to abjection suggests an eroticized queerness, not solely a queerness premised on anti-linearity. For Florens, there may be such an abject pleasure in her violence against the blacksmith because her act brings them closer together and drives them apart, showing the volatile, ludic twists of power of a relationship that has been unmistakably erotic.

^{xx} J. Brooks Bouson also points toward the collective power of memory regarding slavery in her analysis of Toni Morrison. See *Quiet as It's Kept: Shame, Trauma, and Race in the Novels of Toni Morrison*. SUNY P: Albany, 2000. Print.

^{xxi} For an extended discussion of Morrison's "bottom politics," see Chapter 3, "Bottom Values: Anal Economics in the History of Black Neighborhoods" in Stockton's *Beautiful Bottom, Beautiful Shame*.

^{xxii} This dictum echoes Sethe's assertion not only to free oneself but also to "[claim] ownership" of oneself; see *Beloved*, 111-12.

^{xxiii} For examples of enslaved women who challenged their masters in order to claim a sense of agency, see Jenny Sharpe, *Ghosts of Slavery: A Literary Archaeology of Black Women's Lives*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2003.

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