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A Mercy: Florens' Appropriation and Abrogation
of Language

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Introduction

From its very beginning, colonialism, i.e. “the state of being a colony” (Pope: 141), has shaped the lives of the oppressed and has had to do with the destruction of these people’s culture and the elevation of the language of the colonizer. These enslaved and conquered people have produced a vast variety of literature in order to oppose the Empire whose main objective has been to impose their own language and suppress the native language of the colonized. Literature is one of the main means through which these marginalized people have expressed their realities, their feelings and their experience of colonialism. As Ashcroft claims (2002:2) “what each of these literatures has in common beyond their special and distinctive regional characteristics is that they emerged in their present form out of the experience of colonization and asserted themselves by foregrounding the tension with the imperial power, and by emphasizing their differences from the assumptions of the imperial centre.” These literatures have all sought their natural identity. They are known as post-colonial literatures and their main focus has been to assert what Ashcroft (2002:4) considers “difference from the imperial centre.”

Thus, language is the vehicle through which a writer can put his/her message across. Furthermore, in post-colonial literature, language has become one of the most important tools to depict the oppressor and the victim. For the former, Standard English has been the preferred code, while the oppressed have resorted to different varieties to differentiate themselves. As Pope (2005:240) states: “Varieties are the linguistic products of difference; they are constituted by differences according to person, place, medium, context and function. Variation refers to the historical processes of differentiation...”

Chloe Ardelia Wofford, popularly known as Toni Morrison, the Nobel Prize-winning author, makes use of her dominant position as a writer and uses language to bring the oppressed to the surface. In other words, she manages to bring their voice to the surface. In “The Tanner Lectures on Human Values” delivered at The University of Michigan (1988:135), she argues that one of the approaches to the study of Afro-American literature has to do with “the examination and reinterpretation of the American canon, the founding nineteenth-century works, for the “unspeakable things unspoken”, for the ways in which the presence of Afro-Americans has shaped the choices, the language, the structure—the meaning of so much American literature.” Rigney posits (1991:1) that “her [Morrison’s] own language and her theory of language [...] reflect a consciousness that she writes both from and about a zone that is “outside” of literary convention, that disrupts traditional Western ideological confines and modifies patriarchal inscriptions.” Morrison’s position as a “Postcolonial writer” or an “African American writer” is to denounce the tragedy of slavery and the “affirmation and reclamation of the millions of voices lost as a result of the Middle Passage,” (Beaulieu 2003:31) which referred to the slaves’ passage from Africa to America on board ships where they were packed like cargo and had to endure inhumane treatment.

A Mercy, Morrison’s ninth novel, is a powerful African American narrative, set in the late seventeenth century, in which the “stepmother” tongue is adapted to reflect the feelings, the prejudices and the thoughts of the characters. In this novel, characters belong to the periphery and use their own language varieties. Furthermore, the choice of language and its use is crucial to the characters’ definition of themselves. It is through their varieties that Morrison manages to expose the “silence” of the oppressed and rescues the voice that was not heard.

In Lister’s words (2009:13): “For Morrison, the function of the novel is not to instruct the reader through the elaboration of formulaic, end-determined narratives, but to illuminate and engage with social and cultural conflicts and do justice to their complexities. The novelist is under no obligation to furnish the reader with solutions.” Morrison believes that her job is not to explain anything to the reader as her work bears witness. Therefore, the reader is there to “hear” the language and the story, participate and put the pieces of the puzzle together. In her “Lecture and Speech of Acceptance upon the Award of the Nobel Prize for Literature delivered in Stockholm in 1995, she tells us that for her, “language involves agency, an act with consequences”. She starts her speech with an anecdote of an “old blind woman” and through her story she puts forward her view on language by comparing it to a fragile bird which is in the hands of some children. She denounces the abuse of language: of the words used to oppress people, to obscure horror and deny the truth. She talks of “oppressive language” which “has no desire or purpose other than maintaining the free range of its own narcotic narcissism, its own exclusivity and dominance.” She believes that “oppressive language does more than represent violence; it is violence.” She goes on to say that “It

[oppressive language] must be rejected, altered and exposed" because it permits no new knowledge. In other words, the English language must be abrogated and appropriated to reconstruct the African American culture and strengthen the experience of storytelling that lies beneath. She considers language as a weapon to silence the weak and in her story, the old woman represents the writer and the children represent her readers. The old woman tells the children that what they do with the bird [language] depends on them as she believes in the creative aspect of language because it is not dead. These children urge the old woman to explain things to them, to tell them "what moves at the margin", to make up a story. At the end of her speech, the woman says: "Finally, I trust you now. I trust you with the bird that is not in your hands because you have truly caught it. Look. How lovely it is, this thing we have done—together." By this, she implies the reader and the writer must collaborate and in order to achieve this, the writer needs to engage the reader so that they can reconstruct "her [Morrison's] story."

It is the objective of this present study to analyse how Morrison's *A Mercy* constitutes a perfect narrative example to expose instances of abrogation and appropriation of language. In addition, whether the effect Morrison achieves as she makes Florens, the main character, use English in her process of remembering has to do with providing a voice to the unvoiced and engaging the reader and making them participant of "her story".

Theoretical background

According to Ashcroft (2002:37) "...post-colonial writing defines itself by seizing the language of the centre and re-placing it in a discourse fully adapted to the colonized place." In other words, people who are in the "periphery" adapt their language to express themselves. Furthermore, Ashcroft goes on to claim that there are two different processes by which they do this. The first one is "the abrogation or denial of the privilege of "English" (2002:37) over varieties. In other words, these people reject "the metropolitan power" over the language. The second one is the "appropriation and reconstitution of the language of the centre, the process of capturing and remoulding the language to new usages" (2002:37), i.e. using language to mark "a separation from the site of colonial privilege." In other words, abrogation refers to the rejection of normative forms of the colonizer's language versus the non-standard, dialectal varieties of the colonies while appropriation refers to the adaptation of the colonizer's language in postcolonial writing.

Thus, many post-colonial literary texts speak of voices silenced, margin and centre. The periphery uses language as the medium to have a voice. As Ashcroft (2002:38) points out: "Language is adopted as a tool and utilized in various ways to express widely differing cultural experiences." He states that, in light of this, Post colonial literature "is always written out of the tension between the abrogation of the received English which speaks from the centre, and the act of appropriation which brings it under the influence of a vernacular tongue, the complex of speech habits which characterize the local language, or even the evolving and distinguishing local English of a monolingual society trying to establish its link with place."

According to Tyson (1999:285), "a discourse is a social language created by particular cultural conditions at a particular time and place, and it expresses a particular way of understanding human experience." In addition, discourse has to do with "the role of language as a vehicle of ideology."

Therefore, language becomes an instrument where two clear-cut positions are portrayed: the dominant position and the periphery. While the oppressor dominates through language, the victim opposes by using their own varieties.

While the Empire focused on perpetuating itself and used language as the perfect medium for achieving this goal, all variants were marginalized and considered "bad" languages. Moreover, according to Widdowson (1999:90), post-colonial literatures created "a discourse which returned a voice to the unvoiced." Thus, these literatures became the voice of the silenced and the language used was not the vernacular but the stepmother tongue, i.e. English, the language acquired when they were subjected. The language used reflected how the enslaved depended on their masters and how they succeeded in building, according to Tyson (1999:294), "a coherent system of resistance through the creation of their own coded forms of communication, the establishment of their own communal ties..."

As Skinner claims in *"The Stepmother Tongue"* (1998:4), "the colonial experience is seen as the common denominator of all post-colonial discourse." And while most writers choose to write in the mother tongue, others have "consciously chosen, accepted, modified, subverted, and even rejected or abandoned the English language." They choose to write in the *stepmother tongue* in order to express "narratives of resistance to the language". (Skinner:11). Language, in Tiffin (1995:96), became the medium to "offer 'fields' (Lee 1977:32-33) of counter-discursive strategies to the dominant discourse." In other words, it served as a tool to offer resistance to the Empire. Ashcroft claims (302) that "Meaning and understanding exist outside the mind, within the engagement of speakers using the language. Understanding is not a function of what goes on in the *mind* at all, but a location of the word in the *message event*—that point at which the language, the writer and reader coincide to produce the meaning." In *The Empire Writes Back* (43), Ashcroft also claims that "the English language becomes a tool with which a "world" can be textually constructed." In Morrison's *A Mercy*, this is the world of the enslaved, the conquered and the colonized.

Analysis

Some critics claim that "remembering" plays a key role in Morrison's work as it is best thought of as "re-membering", that is, the putting together or creative reconstruction of two sections of the past that have been fractured in the hope of their working together to form a unified history.

On the other hand, according to Beaulieu (2003:206-207), "Memory is a powerful force in Morrison's novels. Its power comes from its ability to shape experience [...] Morrison uses memory as a main narrative structure in her novels. Through memory, Morrison can reconstruct those voices of oral history which are absent and/or silenced in written versions of history." In other words, she resorts to the deliberate act of memory as a way to hand down tradition as she believes that "knowledge of the past, gained through memory, is a necessary basis for constructing the future." (Beaulieu: 206). It is through memory that she can bring the past and the present together so that by learning about the horrors of slavery, finally readers and therefore, society, can move on and envision a free future.

She herself, in *The Site of Memory* (99), mentions that "the act of imagination is bound up with memory." She goes on to compare writers to the flooding of a river. She states that when rivers are straightened to make room for houses, sometimes these rivers flood the places where the river used to be. She believes that "*Floods* is the word they use, but in fact it is not flooding; it is remembering where we were, what valley we ran through, [...] It is emotional memory—what the nerves and the skin remember as well as how it appeared. And a rush of imagination is our *flooding*".

A Mercy, published in 2008 and set in America in 1690, focuses on its main character, Florens, who is a literate slave born in America of an African mother and who, in an act of mercy, is surrendered by her own mother. Morrison's skillful art provides the reader with a multi-voiced narrative in which the twelve chapters alternate between Florens' first-person leading black narrative and the other characters' third-person points of view. These voices combine to create a narrative that allows the reader to "hear" their history/story. As Lister states (2009:18): "Morrison structures her novels not only to enact a character's psychological conditioning but also to recreate a particular feeling or experience in the mind of the reader." Moreover, Beaulieu (2003:239-240-244) argues that "Her [Morrison's] use of narrative voice in her novels has several effects on the reader. First of all, the narrative voices are lyrical storytellers, and their narratives replicate the African oral storytelling tradition of the griot." In addition, "the multiplicity of narrator represents the sense of community", that is, this allows Morrison's voices to be credible and to replicate "the complexity and polyvocality of African American culture itself" and finally, "the reader is involved in the creation of meaning in the text." She recreates "her story" to make up for the loss of Black oral tradition and in order to achieve this, her narrative is focused on memory whose power, Beaulieu (2003: 206) states: "comes from its ability to shape experience [...]. Morrison maintains that, through memory, we keep in touch with our ancestors."

Therefore, for Morrison, *A Mercy* becomes an argument for telling her story through multiple voices as the story is reconstructed from fragments of memory. According to Beaulieu (2003:23), "Morrison's point is that we must cobble together our story of the past from multiple accounts. [...] Readers must piece

together the story themselves, weighing evidence and constructing events." As a result, readers must actively participate in the experience to interpret the author's message.

From the very beginning of the story, we know that Florens is resorting to memory.

...that night I see a minha mãe standing hand in hand with her little boy, my shoes jamming the pocket of her apron. (3)

I sort them [signs] and try to recall, yet I know I am missing much. [...] Let me start with what I know for certain. (4)

I will see your mouth and trail my fingers down. You will rest your chin in my hair again while I breathe into your shoulder in and out, in and out. (5)

Beaulieu posits (2003:20) that "Morrison's novels collectively can be seen as a project of historical remembrance and recovery. They depict the intermingling of the past and the present in what Morrison terms "re-memory", a nod to the African belief that present and past are united, not separate." Thus, Morrison uses the word "re-memory" to mean the act of remembering a memory which is "revisited" either physically or mentally to challenge past historical narratives in order to include the "ever-present traumas of slavery". In *A Mercy*, Florens' language allows the reader to discover that literacy is by no means a right or the key to freedom. She's trapped by her memories and her telling. Therefore, she is not only a storyteller but "a rememberer".

Since your leaving with no goodbye, summer passes, then autumn, and with the waning of winter the sickness comes back. Not like before with Sorrow but now with Sir. (36)

Even when the woman steals my cloak and shoes and I am freezing on the boat no tears come. (69)

When Sir's gate is done and you are away so long, I walk sometimes to search you. (69)

Standing there are a man, three women and a little girl who reminds me of myself when my mother sends me away. (111)

This happens twice before. The first time it is me peering around my mother's dress hoping for her hand that is only for her little boy. The second time it is a pointing screaming little girl hiding behind her mother and clinging to her skirts. Both times are full of danger and I am expelled. (136)

It is three months since I run from you and I never before see leaves make this much blood and brass. (158)

Sometimes the tip of the nail skates away and the forming of words is disorderly. Reverend Father never likes that. He raps our fingers and makes us do it over. (158)

I am remembering what you tell me from long ago when Sir is not dead. (160)

My arms ache but I have need to tell you this. I cannot tell it to anyone but you. I am near the door and at the closing now. What will I do with my nights when the telling stops? Dreaming will not come again. Sudden I am remembering. You won't read my telling. You read the world but not the letters of talk. (160)

In addition, Florens is not only “remembering and telling” her story but “writing’ as an act of catharsis in order to purge her guilt and “revisit” her life experience. Every night, she writes on the floor and walls of a room in the master’s mansion “until the lamp burns down” (Morrison:158) . She does so to liberate herself as she cannot afford to forget, that is, “dis-remember” her experience.

Let me start with what I know for certain. (4)

Confession we tell not write as I am doing now. I forget almost all of it until now. I like talk. (6)

If you are live or ever you heal you will have to bend down to read my telling, crawl perhaps in a few places. I apologize for the discomfort. (158)

I stop telling [writing] only when the lamp burns down. Then I sleep among my words. The telling goes on without dream and when I wake it takes time to pull away, leave this room and do chores. (158)

She [Sorrow] wants me to go [escape] with her but I have a thing to finish here. (159)

There is no more room in this room. These words cover the floor. From now you will stand to hear me. The walls make trouble because lamplight is too small to see by. I am holding light in one hand and carving letters with the other. My arms ache but I have need to tell you this. (160)

As Babb (2011:159) posits “Narrative space must be made for those voices that once talked to and for themselves but have been muted by the historical record.” In other words, Florens is healing herself by means of her own retelling, she physically needs more space to retell her story and Morrison helps her to remember the emotional and spiritual traumatic experience she has gone through. This is a crucial moment in the novel as Florens is running a big risk: she knows she can get punished for what she is doing.

She [Mistress] does not know I am here every night else she will whip me too as she believes her piety demands. (159)

Florens knows slaves do not have any right to speak, let alone write. Despite this, she is choosing her words with great care.

If you never read this, no one will. These careful words, closed up and wide open, will talk to themselves. Round and round, side to side, bottom to top, top to bottom all across the room. Or. Or perhaps no. Perhaps these words need the air that is out in the world. Need to fly up then fall, fall like ash over acres of primrose and mallow. (161)

Despite being marginally educated, Florens' literacy allows her to read and write. And she tells the reader from the beginning.

Once every seven days we learn to read and write. (6)

I am lettered. (6)

Lina also reminds them about her condition.

Already Florens could read, write. (61)

Florens remembers when the Reverend Father taught her to read and write once every seven days. She resorted to memory in order to learn to read and write and she describes this process:

He has two books and a slate. We have sticks to draw through sand, pebbles to shape words on smooth flat rock. When the letters are memory we make whole words.[...] very quickly I can write from memory the Nicene Creed including all of the commas. (6)

She can read the letters, the language but she cannot read the real world like the blacksmith, her love, does. As when she recalls the moment he talked to her about his ancestors. Morrison is focusing here on the idea of history and tradition. Shaping metal (what the blacksmith does and his ancestors have done) is an ancestral skill. The value of tradition and culture is at its peak when she writes:

You are telling me about the making of iron things. How happy you are to find easy ore so close to the surface of the earth. The glory of shaping metal. Your father doing it and his father before him back and back for a thousand years. And you know the ancestors approve when two owls appear at the very instant you say their names so you understand they are showing themselves to bless you. (68)

Tyson (2006: 366) posits that "In opposition to the notion of the 'universality' of all 'great' literature, many writers in the Black Arts Movement argued that African American literature has its own unique qualities, its own politics and poetics, that cannot be fully explained by or contained within the larger framework of European American literature. Some theorists believe that this uniqueness derives from the African American oral tradition of storytelling, folklore, and oral history which has its roots in African culture and, according to some critics, relates to an essential, or inborn, "blackness," a way of thinking, feeling, and creating shared by all peoples of African descent." That is to say, these writers resort to "Black language." According to Holmes (1999:59) "African American history is replete with individuals, from Frederick Douglass to Malcolm X, who saw the appropriation of mainstream literacy as one of the most effective means of articulating one's cultural values and defending oneself against the dominant culture". He argues that that for black voices to be heard and made most effective, the writer must "use blackness" (1999:53). Therefore, it is through appropriation and abrogation of language that the enslaved can overcome the silence that has left them without a voice and thus challenge the white language supremacy.

Furthermore, Morrison, as part of the Black Arts Movement, uses language in order to represent the storytelling voice of the enslaved so that the reader can "hear it". In an interview with Lacour and Schappell, Morrison states: "The difficulty for me in writing—among the difficulties—is to write language that can work

quietly on a page for a reader who doesn't hear anything. Now for that, one has to work very carefully with what is in between the words. What is not said. Which is measure, which is rhythm, and so on. So it is what you don't write that frequently gives what you do write its power." She goes on to say: "By trying to alter language, simply to free it up, not to repress it or confine it but to open it up." It is in *A Mercy* that she manipulates language to embody Florens' reality and through the strings of words, allows the reader to "hear" Florens. Her language bears the weight of the African experience and at the same time she comes up with a "new English" to suit her voice.

Who lives in the wilderness between this farm and you and will they help me or harm me? (4)

This be the death we have come here to die. (108)

How long will it take will he be there will she get lost will someone assault her will she return will he and is it already too late? (100)

Her face softens and she nods saying, orphan, step in. (107)

One woman speaks saying I have never seen any human this black. I have says another, this one is as black as others I have seen. She is Afric. (111)

Lina is wanting to tell me, remind me that she early warns me about you. (160)

It is clear that Morrison's choices of language help her to capture in writing African American speech and storytelling patterns. She is using everyday language and she rescues the voice of the silenced. In her interview with Sedge Thomson (2008), she stated: "African-Americans need literature now when they may not have needed it before because we had the songs and the music and the dance and the storytelling." In other words, through Florens' language she captures the spirit of storytelling and I strongly believe that she does so in order to draw the reader's attention. The reader is invited to hear the music of Florens' language and witness Florens' resistance. In the same interview she expressed: "My job is to make the language so alive and so beautiful, honestly, that the reader and myself can bear it." What's more, Beaulieu (2003: 240) posits that "Morrison has stated repeatedly that her objective is to present a narrative voice that seems to be speaking to the reader, and she is highly conscious of using techniques that create this storytelling effect." Therefore, the language of her novel is both appropriate and significant to the revelation of Florens' character and to the story that Morrison is trying to tell us. She manages to overcome the silence, bring power to Florens' voice and give voice to her experiences. As when Florens says:

She [Mistress] wants you here as much as I do. For her it is to save her life. For me it is to have one. (37)

I think if you wake and see me seeing you I will die. I run away not knowing then you are seeing me seeing you. (38)

In the beginning when I come to this room I am certain the telling will give me the tears I never have. (158)

I know the claws of the feathered thing did break out on you because I cannot stop them wanting to tear you open the way you tear me. (160)

Moreover, Lina is the character who keeps Florens' storytelling alive.

They had memorable nights, lying together, when Florens listened in rigid delight to Lina's stories. Stories of wicked men who chopped off the heads of devoted wives, of cardinals who carried the souls of good children to a place where time itself was a baby. Especially called for were stories of mothers fighting to save their children from wolves and natural disasters.(61)

We learn that Florens listened repeatedly to a story of the eagle mother which is introduced by Lina and this reinforces the oral tradition present in the story.

One day, ran the story, an eagle laid her eggs in a nest far above and far beyond the snakes and paws that hunted them.[...] She is fierce, protecting her borning young. But one thing she cannot defend against: the evil thoughts of man. [...] One day a traveller climbs a mountain nearby. [...] But the traveller, under attack, raises his stick and strikes her wing with all his strength. Screaming she falls and falls. [...] Screaming, screaming she is carried away by wind instead of wing. Then Florens would whisper, "Where is she now?" "Still falling," Lina would answer, "she is falling forever." Florens barely breathes. "And the eggs?" she asks. "They hatch alone," says Lina. "Do they live?" Florens' whispering is urgent. "We have," says Lina. (62-63)

Beaulieu (2003:208) posits that "Morrison's narrative approach to memory [...] allows the novel to go back and forth between the past and the present, and blurs the distinction between them." Throughout *A Mercy*, Florens remembers her experience and she provides a vivid description by the choice of words and tense. In order to achieve this, Morrison manipulates a pendular movement between the past and the narrative present which allows Florens to provide the reader with her personal, interior view.

The beginning begins with the shoes. When a child I am never able to abide being barefoot and always beg for shoes. (4)

From the day you disappear I dream and plot. (4)

Before this place I spend my days picking okra and sweeping tobacco sheds, my nights on the floor of the cookhouse with a minha mãe. (4-5)

Sudden looking at him I am remembering the dog's profile rising from Widow Ealing's kettle. (139)

I am remembering what you tell me form long ago when Sir is not dead. (160)

Morrison's use of the present tense instead of the past tense could be analysed as her position against the canon since English generally requires the use of simple past tense when resorting to memory and flashbacks.

Morrison justifies this by saying in an NPR interview that : “(of Florens) ...and I wanted her voice... that would cut into the other voices so she’s first person, first person and present tense to give her the immediacy...”

For example, on recalling her argument with her love, the blacksmith, Florens writes:

I am first to get the knocking away. The back of your hand strikes my face. I fall and curl up on the floor. (140)

And when remembering an incident between her Mistress and Sorrow she scribbles:

She turns to Sorrow and slaps her face more, saying Fool. (68)

The main focus here is the now and here. She is remembering but at the same time she is going through the experience all over again. As Culler points out (1997:98) “They [narratives] expose the predicaments of the oppressed, in stories that invite readers, through identification, to see certain situations as intolerable.” Morrison skillfully engages the reader in Florens’ story. By making Florens remember events so vividly, Morrison entices the reader and captures them: they can feel what Florens and the other characters are going through, the pain and all the suffering and they feel easily identified.

In addition, Florens appropriates standard English grammar and diction and in the first paragraph she starts her story in a very enigmatic way. In the first two lines she uses the pronoun “you” that inevitably includes the reader. Although once we have read the novel we know she’s addressing her lover, we, readers, could also think that her confession could be addressed to us. She is involving us, intriguing us, making us feel that what we are going to read is a different type of telling, a different American narrative.

Don’t be afraid. My telling can’t hurt you. (4)

She becomes a unique narrator because she can read and write and she is unique among slaves who were forbidden literacy. By means of the abrogation and appropriation of English and her need to remember, to re-memory her painful past to overcome it, she is able to convey the spirit of her story. *A Mercy* serves to acknowledge the stories on the margins, in the periphery. Through Florens’ storytelling we, readers, come to understand Morrison’s version of history, her-story.

It is through her telling that Morrison copes with “writing back to the centre” and therefore, memory plays a key role in her novel.

When the letters are memory we make whole words. (6)

Very quickly I can write from memory the Nicene Creed including all of the commas. (6)

Mistress makes me memorize the way to get to you. (39)

I don’t know the feeling of or what it means, free and not free. But I have a memory. (69)

According to Ashcroft (2002:37), “Abrogation is a refusal of the categories of the imperial culture, its aesthetic, its illusory standard of normative or “correct” usage, and its assumption of a traditional and fixed meaning, “inscribed” in the words. It is a vital moment in the de-colonizing of the language and the

writing of "English", but without the process of appropriation the moment of abrogation may not extend beyond a reversal of the assumptions of privilege, the "normal", and correct inscription, all of which can be simply taken over and maintained by the new usage." In other words, the two concepts of abrogation and appropriation are intertwined and one depends on the other. So, appropriation cannot take place if there is no abrogation first. Appropriation has to do with using the "alien" language, in this case "received English", in order to convey the spirit of one's own language and culture. This is the language that Florens, in Skinner's words (1998:11) "laboriously learned rather than painlessly acquired" when enslaved. In other words, her "stepmother" tongue.

Ashcroft (2002:38) posits that "Appropriation is the process by which the language is taken and made to 'bear the burden' of one's own cultural experience, or, as Raja Rao puts it, to 'convey in a language that is not one's own the spirit that is one's own (Rao 1938:vii)." Morrison's experiment with African American language in order to challenge the Western way of telling stories is carried out to perfection in *A Mercy*. Her literature speaks of exile and diaspora. As Skinner (1998:18) argues: this is the "New Literatures in New Worlds". And he goes on to say: "In view of the traumatic experience of slavery, however, with segregation on ethnic lines and the historical suppression of African languages, it seems ironic to speak of English unreservedly as a mother tongue." He even goes as far as to say that "...for a Toni Morrison, [...] English might symbolically be seen as an alien one." Morrison skilfully transforms "their language" (The English language) into hers (Florens' language). She "plays" with language as she manipulates Florens' to convey her story in English words. She disregards syntax, punctuation, grammar and vocabulary in order to provide Florens with a "Black language" that will help her to portray her character and reflect oral tradition. In other words, Morrison makes Florens fight against the elevation of the language of the coloniser whose language is strange to her.

At first when I am brought here I don't talk any word. All of what I hear is different from what words mean to a minha mãe and me. Lina's words say nothing I know. Nor Mistress's. (6)

I don't know how to read that. (41)

They talk words I don't know and laugh. (102)

I don't understand her meaning. (108)

What is your meaning? I am a slave because Sir trades for me. (141)

Ashcroft (2002:50) posits that "it is in the practice of post-colonial writing [...] that the abrogation of authenticity and essence most often takes place." According to this, post-colonial writing abrogates the canon and therefore the privilege of "White English" by using an appropriated language "that signifies difference while employing a sameness which allows it to be understood." (2002:50). In post-colonial literature, language is the practice which is determined by social conditions and experience. Thus, the characters in *A Mercy*, especially Florens, reconstruct language. Florens goes to the extreme of producing her own idiolect, that is, "the linguistic system of an individual speaker." (Skinner: 337)

Confession we tell not write as I am doing now. (6)

I am a little scare of this looseness. Is that how free feels? I don't like it. I don't want to be free of you because I am live only with you. (70)

Widow Ealing stops and does not say more for a while and then she says we will know comes the morning. (109)

The knowing is theirs, the truth is mine, truth is God's, then what mortal can judge me, you talk like a Spaniard, listen, please listen, be still lest He hear you, He will not abandon me, nor will I, yet you bloodied my flesh, how many times do you have to hear it demons do not bleed. (109)

As Ashcroft et al argue “this reconstruction occurs in two ways: on the one hand, regional English varieties may introduce words which become familiar to all english-speakers, and on the other, the varieties themselves produce national and regional peculiarities which distinguish them from other forms of english.” (2002:39)

I watch too long. Am careless. (38)

Hours we stand then sit roadside. (38)

Can I go more, I wonder. Should I. (41)

Night is thick no stars anyplace but sudden the moon moves. (67)

I want it am dying for it but I cannot move. (102)

I am shock. (103)

Wearing them I could cross a stony riverbed. Move quickly through forests and down hills of nettles. (157)

I am never hearing how they once talk and laugh together while tending garden. (160)

It is here that Florens' language shows its hypnotic poetic rhythm. Using the repetition of words or phrases, a sort of jazzlike repetition which is distinctive of oral tales, she creates a musical language that imitates speech. Again, Morrison is reinforcing the black oral tradition by creating “an aural text in a printed form” (Beaulieu 2003:229). Rigney states (1991:7) that Morrison claims that in her novels she moves “beyond language, even while working through it, to incorporate significance beyond the denotation of words, to render experience and emotion, for example, as musicians do.” McKay (1988:1) claims that Morrison says that she wishes to accomplish “something that has probably only been fully expressed in music. . . . Writing novels is a way to encompass this—this something.” Throughout her work, Morrison uses narrative forms to express the African American marginalized oral tradition and culture. Through language she is not only conveying her message but also handing down culture, passing down literature by word of mouth. As a result, Florens' language perfectly depicts Morrison's belief that “African American feminine language is musical.” (Beaulieu 2003:239)

You know. I know you know. (3)

You will rest your chin in my hair again while I breathe into your shoulder in and out, in and out. (5)

He tells Mistress to hurry hurry never mind the spring rain pouring down for days. (37)

Quiet, quiet six drop down, the men catching the women in their arms. (40)

Creatures come out of caves wondering what it means. Mine. Mine. Mine. (62)

Screaming, screaming she is carried away by wind instead of wing. (62)

One pokes his fingers in his mouth, in out, in out. (102)

One of the others says baa baa baa like a goat kid and they all laugh and slap their legs. (103)

Quiet. Quiet. No one must know but Lina does. (103)

Like a dog, she says. Like a dog. (105)

I am not wondering this. Not then, not ever. (105)

I say please. I say I am alone. (106)

Silence. Silence. Then back and forth they talk. (109)

She points to the little girl shaking and moaning by her side. Hear her. Hear her. (111)

The little girl is back, not sobbing now but saying it scares me it scares me. (113)

The Widow follows him down the path pleading, pleading. (113)

Never never without you. (136)

I dream a dream that dreams back at me. (137)

He screams screams then faints. (140)

You shout the word—mind, mind, mind—over and over and then you laugh... (141)

... they [Scully and Willard] emerged. Slowly, slowly. Then raced. (148)

The tongs are there, close by. Close by. I am swinging and swinging hard. (158)

And even the introduction of Latinisms or foreign words helps to depict the reality Florens and the other characters went through.

...that night I see a minha mãe standing hand in hand with her little boy... (3)

Senhor D'Ortega is expecting you. (16)

Calme, mes petits. Calme. (47)

I was negrita. (165)

By introducing foreign words and expressions such as: "Senhor": Portuguese for Sir, "Minha mãe": Portuguese for *my mother*, "Tua mãe": Portuguese for *your mother*, "Calme, mes petits": French for *Calm down, my little ones*, "Negrita": Spanish for *little black one*, Morrison manages to involve the reader in understanding the characters' experience and reality as difference is inscribed by the use of untranslated words. According to Ashcroft (2002:52), these words "signify a certain cultural experience which they cannot hope to reproduce but whose difference is validated by the new situation." In other words, their use emphasizes the cross-cultural character of the narrative. Morrison manipulates language and flavours it with some foreign words and expressions. The main stress is on difference and cultural remoteness, that is, this resource also helps to reinforce the difference between the culture of the oppressed and that of the oppressor. The focus is on the importance of discourse in interpreting cultural concepts and so the "stepmother" tongue is adapted to convey the story and especially the characters' feelings. When Florens states:

My mother, a minha mãe, is frowning, is angry at what she says are my prettify ways. [...] lets me wear the throwaway shoes from Senhora's house. (4)

All of what I hear is different from what words mean to a minha mãe and me. Lina's words say nothing I know. Nor Mistress's. (6)

Not the outside dark we share, a minha mãe and me, but the inside one we don't. (115)

See? You are correct. A minha mãe too. I am become wilderness but I am also Florens. In full. Unforgiven. Unforgiving. No ruth, my love. None. Hear me? Slave. Free. I last. (161)

She is providing the reader with the knowledge of the culture where she is interacting. The reader knows she has a mother and a mistress, and this already signals what she is experiencing as a black slave. Her language becomes direct and is not "filtered" and the reader is able to follow her stream of consciousness, her internal monologue. As when she says:

I know you cannot steal me nor wedding me. (105)

With the letter I belong and am lawful. Without it I am a weak calf abandon by the herd...but a darkness I am born with, outside, yes, but inside as well and the inside dark is small, feathered and toothy. (115)

And when I see you and fall into you I know I am live. Sudden it is not like before when I am always in fright. I am not afraid of anything now. The sun's going leaves darkness behind and the dark is me. Is we. Is my home. (115)

I am nothing to you. You say I am wilderness. I am. (157)

Florens' ungrammatical sentences also challenge the canon. At this point, it's worthwhile pointing out that Florens' disregard for punctuation also helps to achieve this.

Who lives in the wilderness between this farm and you and will they help me or harm me? (5)

Before you know I am in the world I am already kill by you. (38)
I can never not have you have me. (137)

From the examples above, it is clear that Morrison is narrating from the margins. Skinner quotes poet Edward Kamau Brathwaite (1998:162): "It was in language that the slave was perhaps most successfully imprisoned by his master, and it was in his (mis-) use of it that he perhaps most effectively rebelled." Florens' thoughts and feelings are more important than the form of language. She has abrogated and appropriated English in order to convey her feelings and resist. Not surprisingly, Morrison wants the reader to understand and embrace those who were denied a voice in order to discover all the marginalized voices that are embedded in the fabric of *A Mercy* and its language.

In Ruas, Morrison hopes to inspire: "I want to [...] make a truly aural novel, in which there are so many places and spaces for the reader to work and participate."

According to Lister (2009:18), "In all of her novels, Morrison aims to involve the reader by recreating the effects of oral transmission: the narrative itself must evoke the impression that the reader can *feel* the narrator"...And this is precisely what she achieves in *A Mercy*. Florens and all the other characters are retelling a story and its language reflects how vivid the experience is. The reader can easily identify Florens' storytelling through her variety as Morrison uses it to challenge the historical account. Thus the story becomes believable and unquestionable since we believe that "the fact is that the stories look as though they come from people who are not even authors. No author tells these stories."

In other words, Morrison wants the reader to appreciate the other side of things and "co-create" with her. As Beaulieu (2003:23) points out: "Repeatedly over the years, in essays and interviews, she [Morrison] has explained that she writes for a participatory reader." And she goes on to say (240) that "The texts of all of Morrison's novels are 'writerly' (according to Roland Barthes's distinction) rather than 'readerly', in that they involve the reader in the creation of meaning." This is because the reader plays a key role in Morrison's creative process so that they can fully experience the story. As she posits in the foreword to *Beloved* (2005:XII): "I wanted the reader to be kidnapped, thrown ruthlessly into an alien environment as the first step into a shared experience with the book's population—just as the characters were snatched from one place to another, from any place to any other, without preparation or defense." Thanks to this, she successfully takes readers by storm as she uses language to illuminate them in order to understand how language can shape reality.

As far as violence is concerned, despite the fact that the reader knows that oppression had to do with physical, psychological, mental and spiritual imprisonment, readers do not expect the blacksmith to be violent. Lina tells us that Florens was "*crippled with workship of him [the blacksmith]*" (63) and that she felt "*a bleating desire beyond sense, without conscience.*" (60). And she anticipates "*The only one who foresaw the disruption, the shattering a free black man [the blacksmith] would cause [to Florens].*" (61) Surprisingly, language can be as violent as the physical exertion of force:

You say you will hire someone to take me to her [Rebecca]. Away from you. Each word that follows cuts.
-Why are you killing me I ask you.
-I want you to go...
-Why? Why?

-Because you are a slave.
 -Sir makes me that.
 -You have become one. [a slave]
 -I am adoring you.
 -And a slave to that too.
 -You alone own me.
 -Own yourself, woman, and leave us be.
 ...You put me in misery.
 You step back saying get away from me. (141)

Florens is denigrated by the man she loves and his words stab her soul as he accuses her of being "a slave by choice". (141)

Next, violence takes on a physical level and Morrison depicts the peak of Florens' suffering:

You knock me away shouting what are you doing? (140)

*Why do you knock me away without certainty of what is true?
 (140)*

*No word of sorrow for knocking me off my feet. No tender fingers
 to touch where you hurt me. (140)*

Then Florens goes back to the eagle mother's story and defends herself. During her fight with the blacksmith she says:

*Are you meaning I am nothing to you? That I have no
 consequence in your world? My face absent in blue water you
 find only to crush it? Now I am living the dying inside. No. Not
 again. Not ever. Feathers lifting. I unfold. The claws scratch and
 scratch until the hammer is in my hand. (142)*

I bare my teeth to bite you, to tear you open. (157)

She has become the eagle and is protecting herself from violence. Readers can quickly relate this to the eagle's story and understand she is about to hit him. This image is so powerful that it reflects the real power of Florens' language. She makes the reader "fill in" the missing gaps and participate in the reconstruction of the story. In this way, she is also stressing the value of her storytelling and reinforcing the importance of the oral tradition of storytelling. This is a critical moment in the story, the point of no return from where Florens will fly. Now she is able to start writing her catharsis and the reader learns that all her memories, all her telling, all her writing is addressed to her loved one, the blacksmith. He is the one she addresses from the very beginning of her story, not the reader.

*Seeing you stagger and bleed I run. [...] I walk the day. I walk
 the night. The feathers close. For now. [...] If you are live or ever
 you heal you will have to bend down to read my telling, crawl
 perhaps in a few places. (158)*

As far as language is concerned, in a conversation between Toni Morrison and Thomas LeClair (1981), she said that restoring the language that black people spoke to its original power calls for a language that

is rich but not ornate. Regarding the reader she explains; "I stand with the reader, hold his hand and tell him a very simple story about complicated people." The turning point cited above allows the reader to see all the images that are intertwined and as a matter of fact, it comes as a shock to discover Florens' truth and at the same time this exerts a magnetic power towards her storytelling. Not surprisingly, as Lister (2009:117) points out: "In *A Mercy*, Morrison again solicits the agency of the reader by developing narrative lines in increments and withholding the elaboration of the most pivotal moments." At this point the novel becomes unputdownable and the reader becomes a witness to the truth.

It is in the final chapter of the novel that readers learn that the incident of "giving Florens away" by her mother was an act of mercy to protect her from violence. Her own mother addresses Florens and reveals her secret because:

To be female in this place is to be an open wound that cannot heal. (163)

And urges her to understand her:

It was not a miracle. Bestowed by God. It was a mercy. Oh Florens. My love. Hear a tua mãe. (167)

Ironically, this misinterpretation of her mother's act as Florens sees it as a rejection will haunt her along her life.

Is that what my mother knows? Why she chooses me to live without? (115)

Even the title of the novel, *A Mercy*, calls the readers' immediate attention. Florens's mother, an African slave, gives her up in order to save her. Irony is reinforced here as Florens never gets to read her mother's letter (the final chapter) and interprets the act of mercy as an act of abandonment. Along her journey to her love, she remembers that incident:

Take the girl, she says, my daughter, she says. Me. Me. (7)

Even through her writing Florens is trying to communicate with her own mother as she remembers the moment when the Anglo-Dutch settler Jacob Vaark (her master) acquires her to work on his farm. In a way her mother haunts her dreams but this communication fails.

I will keep one sadness. That all this time I cannot know what my mother is telling me. Nor can she know what I am wanting to tell her. (161)

On a personal note, I wanted to analyse Morrison's choice when deciding on the title of the novel. According to City Year, an education-focused nonprofit organization, the indigenous story popularized by Morrison's in her acceptance speech for the Nobel Prize in Literature talks of a bird called Agape, Greek word for selfless, spiritual love for humanity. Morrison is a devoted follower of the Agape Mission Church so I tried to find, from a religious point of view, what the term "mercy" means.

I came across the Agape Mission Church website where I discovered that this church is made up of a worshipping body of believers who have focused on the term and its use.

“Our desire is to rediscover and dig deeper into everything about mercy – where it originated, how it was used historically, and how it has continued to be utilized in the present times. As we go through the study of this word, may we see it in a different light, and be able to benefit and receive from the richness of what means to live in mercy today.”

According to them, in general terms, the term “mercy” as a noun can be defined as “an action shown toward someone whom, or something where it is within, or subject to, one’s power to punish or harm.” What’s more, from an etymological point of view, it comes from Old French “mercit, merci” (9c.) meaning “reward, gift; kindness, grace, pity”. From Latin the original word *merx* means “merchandise, goods, or wares.” In Modern English, words related to mercy are: compassion, clemency, pardon, grace, forbearance, forgiveness, leniency, benevolence, and charity. Surprisingly, Florens is traded as merchandise to close a debt and at the same time her master accepts her as an act of compassion. Her own mother recalls:

Because I saw the tall man see you as a human child, not pieces of eight. I knelt before him. Hoping for a miracle. He said yes. (166)

Morrison makes it very clear that this act of mercy was not related to anything to do with religion but that Vaark showed compassion towards Florens and her mother and offered them protection, a sort of grace against the harsh treatment and abuse that awaited her if she stayed with her mother on D’Ortega’s plantation.

It was not a miracle. Bestowed by God. It was a mercy. Offered by a human [Vaark]. (167)

Vaark could realize Florens’ mother’s suffering and having lost four children of his own, “three dead infants in a row, followed by the accidental death of Patrician, their five-year-old...” (Morrison:21), he thought his wife would be happy to have Florens on their plantation.

But thinking also, perhaps Rebekka would welcome a child around the place. This one here, swimming in horrible shoes, appeared to be about the same age as Patrician...” (26)

In addition, Vaark doesn’t wish to traffic in slavery as he considers “it’s a degraded business” (Morrison:31). When he is faced with the decision of taking slaves, in a way, he feels sorry for them as he recalls how he had been rejected by his own father and “rescued” by the will of an uncle who left him 120 acres of farmland in Maryland, Virginia. This incident marked him and thus he started acquiring “orphans”, preferably women, in his effort to rescue them because he believed that:

Even if bartered, given away, apprenticed, sold, swapped, seduced, tricked for food, labored for shelter or stolen, they were less doomed under adult control. (32)

Thus Florens' acquisition "could be seen as rescue" (Morrison:34) as Morrison argues:

From his [Vaark's] own childhood he knew there was no good place in the world for waifs and whelps other than the generosity of strangers. (32)

After being rescued, Florens desperately needs to be able to read the world to find a place, her place. We understand and read of her inability to do this when she misreads her mother's action of giving her in part payment for a bad debt.

Sir has a clever way of getting without giving. I know it is true because I see it forever and ever. Me watching, my mother listening, her baby boy on her hip. Senhor is not paying the whole amount he owes to Sir. Sir saying he will take instead the woman and the girl, not the baby boy and the debt is gone. A minha mãe begs no. her baby boy is still at her breast. Take the girl, she says, my daughter, she says. Me. Me. (7)

At this point, she can remember this incident but cannot fully understand it. Her suffering does not allow her to understand this, so she is worried and scared.

But I have a worry. [...] because mothers nursing greedy babies scare me. I know how their eyes [their mothers'] go when they choose. How they raise them to look at me hard, saying something I cannot hear. Saying something important to me, but holding the little boy's hand. (8)

She is going back, remembering that moment and living it all over again. And language fails her. She cannot hear it because it is violent.

Finally, she will have to overcome the silence, find material in language in order to destroy it. She will have to confront the trauma of her past to move forward into the future.

Conclusion

In this paper I have shown how Toni Morrison manages “to write back to the Empire” by subverting the text and how through the appropriation and abrogation of Florens’ language, she has succeeded in exposing the difference while at the same time a type of homogeneity so that the reader will find the language familiar. In other words, by means of a canonical counter-discourse, she has been able to expose the margins versus the centre, the oppression and the colonizer’s control over language. Through Florens’ stepmother tongue, she has shown resistance to the Empire and has presented us with the vernacular voice which has allowed her to decry oppression and destroy silence. What’s more, she has tempered the exclusivity of “their” language (Standard English) with “our” language (Black English Vernacular). She has taken up Florens, challenged the canon and conveyed the black spirit within her story. She has successfully broken the silence and shown the scars of slavery by unveiling Florens’ suffering to make her voice sound authentic, fresh and stirring.

In *A Mercy*, co-creation of meaning is achieved as Morrison has devoted herself to the creation of the artistic text while the reader is invited to co-create the aesthetics of that text. While presenting the textual segments to the reader, she has meticulously centered on Florens’ musical narrative voice and unique language and then continued with the introduction of multiple storytellers and voices in new clearly distinguished chapters inviting the reader to be participant and collaborative in putting the puzzle together and finding the missing link. In addition, Morrison’s voices speak to the reader as if they were there. She does not spoon-feed them, she becomes a type of “spokeswoman” rather than a writer as she makes Florens resonate with a difference. Therefore, the reader falls under Florens’ spell and she will not stop remembering and retelling her story until it is heard. Morrison provides Florens with a voice in order to remember her past, denounce her reality and pave her way into the future. Furthermore, Morrison’s oral storytelling has allowed her to keep memory alive while at the same time Florens’ untold story has been allowed to emerge allowing the reader to re-construct Florens’ story by “hearing” her account. Through Florens, Morrison has achieved her narrative goal. She has invited readers to actively participate in the interpretive experience and has moved outside the dominant white literary system.

As far as memory is concerned, Morrison has unquestionably resorted to re-memory allowing Florens to share the trauma of slavery. Her memories become collective so that the reader, who has never experienced the terror of slavery, can easily understand Florens’ past reality. Morrison has skillfully shared the African American tradition based on her own personal recollections and those of others. Memory has played a central role in her writing of *A Mercy* as she manages to bring to the surface the repressed memory of slavery.

Morrison, as an African-American writer, has set about challenging the canon and has successfully spoken about the unspeakable. In addition, Morrison’s intentionally subversive use of language has provided her discourse with its own original power and oral quality. She has combined memory, language and story not only to uncover the slave experience but also to make it accessible to a contemporary critical reader and invite them to join in Florens’ journey to love and freedom.

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