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## Introduction: Reading *A Mercy*

- 1 Within a week of Barack H. Obama's election as President of the United States in 2008, Toni Morrison published the novel *A Mercy*.<sup>1</sup> Set in Virginia and Maryland in the late 17<sup>th</sup> century, *A Mercy* takes its readers back to North American colonial beginnings as it tells the story of the Black enslaved girl Florens, who is the 'property' of the Anglo-Dutch farmer, moneylender, and trader Jacob Vaark. Ever since its publication, the archive of academic texts on this historical novel continues to grow. A significant portion of the novel's rich pool of critical readings situates itself within an environment of 21<sup>st</sup> century 'post-racial' political discourses, in which Obama's ascent to the White House is commonly read as a redemptive watershed in America's racial politics and thus serves as proof that US civil society has finally overcome its histories and its legacies of slavery. Obama and then-current politics, in other words, have become 'ubiquitous presences' in many readings of the novel (Cantiello 2011: 165). This article seeks to push against such 'post-racial' assessments of *A Mercy*.
- 2 Within the colonial landscapes of *A Mercy*, Florens arrives at the Vaark farm as the currency in a partial debt settlement between Vaark and the Portuguese slave and

tobacco trader Senhor D'Ortega, who is unable to repay Vaark in any other way than with human flesh after one of his tobacco/slave ships, including the enslaved human cargo on board the ship, has sunk (Morrison 2008: 14–5). Only at the end of the novel will we as readers learn that Florens was given to Jacob Vaark in her mother's stead and that her mother, the *minha mãe*, 'offered' Florens to Vaark in an attempt to protect her daughter from her master Senhor D'Ortega's sexual (ab)use of her, hoping that her new master will spare her daughter. The novel's narrative time spans a period of roughly eight years, from 1682 when Florens first arrives at the Vaark farm and is 'maybe seven or eight' years old, to 1690 when Florens is sixteen years old (Morrison 2008: 3); it frequently shifts between the fictional present in Florens's textual fragments and the fictional past in the narratives of the other characters. Florens's first-person text is frequently cut through by a third-person narrator who 'provides the back-stories for Florens [...] and the other characters who live or work on Jacob Vaark's burgeoning Virginia estate', which results in a strongly fragmented text which the reader is required to piece together on various levels (Jennings 2009: 646).

- 3 In revisiting colonial Virginia, *A Mercy* creates a complex 'character-scape' composed of a group of settler-farmers, indentured servants, Native American servants, and both enslaved and free African and African-descended people, who attempt to negotiate their respective individual freedom, their servitude, and their enslavement in the dangerous environment of the 'New World.' More often than not, popular 'post-racial' assessments of *A Mercy* take the characters' respective attempts at navigating the world around them as evidence that they are participants in a complex pattern of cross-racial alliance and solidarity. In this way, such readings go on to assert that the novel's representation of colonial Virginia needs to be understood 'as a look back at the past that is meant to tell us something about the future' (Cantiello 2011: 165). 'Post-racial' critical assessments of *A Mercy* typically also follow established historical narratives stressing colonial Virginia's relative racial fluidity and indeterminacy. These are commonly based on the widespread assertion that the transition to institutionalized slavery in 17<sup>th</sup>-century Virginia was 'slow, and free black men and women gained some autonomy and manoeuvrability over the course of the first fifty years of colonial settlement' (Morgan 2018: 3). These facts have led many historians to chart colonial Virginia as a place where an egalitarian future could have been foretold (Morgan 2018). Black feminist scholarship has complicated such widespread historical evaluations. That is, Black feminist thinkers and historians have fundamentally changed the ways in which we understand how Black women's interiority was violently bound to the (emerging) capitalist market and the institution of slavery (e.g. Hartman 1997 and 2016; Sharpe 2016), as well as how the accumulation and proliferation of the master's private property and economic increase was tethered to inheritable slave-status as enshrined in colonial legislation in Virginia and beyond. If examined from the perspective of enslaved African and African-descended women's experiences, as Black feminist scholars have shown, racial lines in colonial Virginia need to be understood as in fact far from fluid. As Jennifer Morgan (2018: 2) has it, enslaved Black women's 'maternal possibilities became a crucial vehicle by which racial meaning was concretized—and it did so long before legislators indexed such possibilities into law'.
- 4 In what follows, I build on the ground-breaking insights into the inextricable connections between race, reproduction, slavery, and property generated by Black feminist scholarship on the histories and 'afterlives' (Hartman) of Atlantic slavery. In contrast to critics and reviewers who have charted *A Mercy*'s representation of colonial

Virginia as a place and a time ‘when the conflation of race and slavery was in its infancy’ (Jennings 2009: 645), I argue that *A Mercy* precisely establishes Atlantic chattel slavery and its sexual economies as the novel’s explicit frame of reference and signification.<sup>2</sup> At the centre of this literary and narrative inquiry are the enslaved women characters and, specifically, the under-researched character of the *minha mãe*. I suggest that the *minha mãe* fragment raises questions about the narrativization of the reproductive violence and gratuitous violence that characterized Atlantic slavery, and that it does so through its engagement with the African American slave narrative tradition and its ethos of liberation. In many ways, what follows also needs to be understood as an attempt at positioning (my reading of) Morrison’s novel within a broader critical context of recent Black Studies theorizing, in which questions concerning narrative’s ability to account at a deeper level for the social death of the enslaved have taken centre stage.<sup>3</sup> As I will elaborate below, *A Mercy*’s narrative form does not abandon the reader ‘to a more baffled, cut-off, foreclosed position with regard to the slave past’, as Stephen Best (2012: 472) has argued prominently. Rather, *A Mercy*’s form not only puts that past at its narrative and imaginative centre but it also becomes the way in which the novel engages with questions concerning the narrativization of social death. Over the coming pages, my reading of *A Mercy* will focus on the *minha mãe* fragment and will follow its form, thereby necessarily reproducing some of the text’s own repetitions. In a first step, I will venture to situate the character of the *minha mãe* within the literary genre of the African American slave narrative. In a second step, I then move towards arguing that the *minha mãe*, while drawing on this tradition for its significance and at the same time allegorizing it, in fact moves to challenge its narrative premises invested in the promise of liberatory transformation.

## Situating the *Minha Mãe*

- 5 *A Mercy* tells the story of the slave girl Florens, who lives on a New World farm with a group of women, all of whom her master Jacob Vaark has put together to live, to give birth, and to serve on his estate: Rebekka, whom Vaark has shipped to his part of the New World from England to become his wife; a Native American servant called Lina, whom Vaark buys from a group of Presbyterians; and Sorrow/Twin, a shipwrecked Black girl whom Vaark does not buy but ‘accepts’ from a family of sawyers (Morrison 2008: 49). In addition, two white indentured servants, Willard Bond and Scully, also populate the novel’s narrative orbit. Vaark regularly makes use of their services even though they serve and belong to the household of a neighbouring farm. In addition a blacksmith, whom one of the other characters describes as a ‘free African man’ (Morrison 2008: 43), also appears on the Vaark farm in the course of the novel, when Vaark commissions him to forge the gate to a new house that he is building. *A Mercy* relates Florens’s errand to fetch the blacksmith, who is ordered to help cure her mistress Rebekka of the ‘pox’ (Morrison 2008: 37). Rebekka contracts the disease from her husband Jacob, who dies of it at the beginning of the novel, leaving the women on his farm to fend for themselves. It seems that only the blacksmith will be able to help Rebekka survive. The text also suggests that her servants and slaves Lina, Sorrow, and Florens stand a chance of staying, living, and serving on the Vaark farm *only* if Rebekka recovers from the disease (Morrison 2008: 57).

- 6 Apart from Florens's auto-diegetic fragments, the character of the *minha mãe* also takes control of the text in a first-person account. And while Florens frequently addresses her mother in her own textual fragments, she is in fact unable to hear what the *minha mãe* is trying to tell her in *A Mercy*'s final chapter, which frames the novel as a whole. In my view, the *minha mãe* is the only character in the novel who brings Atlantic chattel slavery to the plot of *A Mercy*, in that she literally embodies the large-scale 'propertization' (Broeck 2018) of human beings fuelled by the Middle Passage (Spillers 1987: 72). In my copy of the book, the fragment adds up to four pages in total. In these pages, the *minha mãe* addresses a 'you' who appears to be her daughter Florens and, by extension, the reader. She tries to explain why she offered Florens in place of herself to Jacob Vaark as the currency in his debt settlement with her master, and relates to both Florens and the reader how she became a slave on Jublio, her master Senhor D'Ortega's tobacco plantation in colonial Maryland. Here is what one learns about her: as a survivor of a long-standing and violent feud between 'the king of we families and the king of others' (Morrison 2008: 161), the *minha mãe* is taken captive and, together with many others, brought to the coast: 'We increase in number or we decrease in number until maybe seven times ten or ten times ten of we are driven into a holding pen' (Morrison 2008: 161–2). Shipped to Barbados by 'whitened men' (ibid.), she is sold to Senhor D'Ortega at a Barbadian slave market and then brought to his plantation in the Chesapeake area. On the D'Ortega plantation, the *minha mãe* is immediately used by her master to reproduce new slave property (Morrison 2008: 163–4). In this context, it also is important to note that the *minha mãe* is the only major character who does not have a proper name in *A Mercy*. *Minha mãe* comes from the Portuguese and translates roughly as 'my mother'. I read this as an explicit reference to the global dimensions of the transatlantic slave trade and specifically to the role of the Portuguese triangular trade between the African West coasts and South America and Brazil, which between 1560 and 1850 was invariably 'the largest destination for slaves in the Americas' (Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database).
- 7 Readers and reviewers generally tend to discuss the character of the *minha mãe* only briefly, and in the context of their respective readings of Florens, and in relation to themes such as mother-daughter relationships, mother-loss, abandonment, and trauma. Put another way, what one is able to read about the *minha mãe* in this discursive archive are few words about a character 'most palpably present in a dispatch addressed to her estranged daughter that closes the novel' (Best 2012: 468), as well as a few words about this character's 'maternal sacrifice' (Jennings 2009: 646). This critical tendency comes with another problem: while critical discourse on the novel, on the one hand, often reads *A Mercy*, like its predecessor *Beloved*, into the genre of the neo-slave narrative (e.g. Nehl 2016), critics and reviewers, on the other hand, have neglected to comment on how the fragment of the *minha mãe* invokes the literary tradition of the African American slave narrative. For example, *A Mercy* draws heavily for significance on Olaudah Equiano's famous 1789 slave narrative, in which he tells his readers about his Middle Passage and his fear that the white crew 'with horrible looks, red faces, and loose hair' of the slave ship he was forced to board would eat him (Equiano 2004: 206). In the novel, Equiano's words are echoed when the *minha mãe* relates her Middle Passage to Barbados:

We increase in number or we decrease in number until maybe seven times ten or ten times ten of we are driven into a holding pen. There we see men we believe are ill or dead. We soon learn they are neither. Their skin was confusing. The men

guarding we and selling we are black. [...] They assure we that the whitened men do not want to eat we. (Morrison 2008: 161–162)

- 8 The next section will examine how the *minha mãe* fragment also specifically invokes and engages with the paradigmatic women-authored slave narratives by Mary Prince and Harriet Jacobs.

## Slave Narrative Traditions in *A Mercy*: Summoning Mary Prince and Harriet Jacob

- 9 In her widely circulated and cited 1987 essay ‘The Site of Memory’, which was first published in the same year as her Pulitzer Prize-winning novel *Beloved*, Toni Morrison comments on the genre of the African American slave narrative and on what she considers her role as a novelist to be when engaging with such narratives. To briefly recall, slave narratives were autobiographical narratives about the emancipation of the formerly enslaved and, as such, they generally were ‘stories of spiritual [and] bodily captivity and liberation’ (Gould 2007: 14). As a ‘generic field’, slave narratives first emerged ‘during the 1770s and the 1780s’ (Gould 2007: 11). They were written in the first person and would bear a preface attesting to the authenticity of the subject matter as narrated, which usually would include a foreword by a white amanuensis who testified to the author’s credibility and ‘assure[d] the reader how little editing was needed’ (Morrison & Denard 2008: 68–69). In the essay, Morrison reminds her readers that ‘whatever the level of eloquence of the form, popular taste discouraged the writers from dwelling too long or too carefully on the more sordid details of their experience’, including the sexual and reproductive violence that many enslaved women experienced routinely, which were often encoded in or ‘veiled’ by the specific literary conventions of the genre (Morrison & Denard 2008: 69–70). For Morrison’s own literary project, which is interested in precisely the formerly enslaveds’ unwritten interior lives, this means that she has to rely on her own imagination to represent enslaved women’s experiences of violence. As she goes on to tell us: ‘My job becomes how to rip that veil drawn over “proceedings too terrible to relate”. [...] Only the act of the imagination can help me’ (Morrison & Denard 2008: 70–71). Morrison’s comments on ‘the American slaves’ autobiographical narratives’ (Morrison & Denard 2008: 67) and the role that the contemporary novelist’s imagination plays in the context of attempting to represent aesthetically what the genre of the slave narrative does not make explicit—the enslaveds’ ‘interior life’—help me situate my reading of the *minha mãe* as a text that explicitly discusses both the reproductive and the racialized hierarchies of Atlantic slavery. Again, I suggest that the text of the *minha mãe* invokes and allegorizes the slave narratives authored by Mary Prince and Harriet Prince, creating intertextual moments with them. In their respective narratives, Prince and Jacob follow the literary conventions of the slave narrative as a genre in that they more or less implicitly draw attention not only to the sexual subjection by their master but also to how property regimes would rupture recognized and vertical kinship relations for the enslaved.
- 10 Here, it is important to recall the ground-breaking work Black feminists have done in addressing the ways in which concepts of property, kinship, reproduction and family have historically been enmeshed with enslavement, the market, and racial capitalism from the colonial beginnings in North America to what would in the 18<sup>th</sup> century

become the United States of America. Ever since Angela Davis put slavery on the agenda of Black feminist theorizing at the beginning of the 1970s (Davis 1971), Black feminist thinkers have examined, and continue to interrogate, the sexualized and racialized landscapes of the institution of slavery, and their legacies in the present. What they continue to show us is how the Middle Passage resituated Black women's reproductive capacity within the marketplace, creating inextricable connections between race, reproduction and property. These connections were elaborated by the law, which mapped new meanings of status and made explicit assumptions about the connections between birth and race. The paradigmatic intellectual and historical work of Hortense Spillers and Jennifer Morgan, which I would like to discuss briefly in what follows, is particularly instructive for the purposes of this paper.

- 11 In her seminal 1987 essay 'Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book', Spillers focuses critical attention on questions of gender and family relations under slavery. She argues that the conditions of the Middle Passage and of Atlantic slavery position the captives uniquely in the world, situating them as 'neither female, nor male, as both subjects are taken into "account" as *quantities*' (Spillers 1987: 72). Under these conditions of the cultural 'unmaking' of millions of men, women, and children, the enslaved are forced to enter into a status of '*being for the captor*' (Spillers 1987: 67). Their bodies become 'the "flesh", that zero degree of social conceptualization', that traders and slave owners will both regard and use as tradable, fungible, and collectible possessions (*ibid.*). In the context of nascent racial capitalism in the New World, the status of the enslaved as their master's usable 'flesh' has important implications with respect to notions of family formation. For the enslaved, Spillers explains, vertical "kinship" loses meaning, *since it can be invaded at any given and arbitrary moment by the property relations*' (Spillers 1987: 74). Morgan, in turn, reminds us that '[women's] lives under slavery in the Americas always included the possibilities of their wombs. Whether laboring among sugar cane, coffee bushes, or rice swamps, the cost-benefit calculations of colonial slaveowners included the speculative value of a reproducing labor force' (Morgan 2004: 3). In her cutting-edge historical research on colonial Virginia, Morgan investigates the connections between human reproduction, lineage, and the law that the histories of sexuality during Atlantic slavery engendered, and thus draws attention to the role that colonial legislation played in the making and institutionalization of slavery and its practices. Using the example of the 1662 *Partus Sequitur Ventrem* Act, which means literally 'offspring follows belly,' Morgan demonstrates that this law would codify a human being's status of existence in the colony as either free or enslaved according to the status of the mother. In this way, the *Partus* act not only 'locked enslaved women into a productive relationship whereby everything that a body could do was harnessed to the capital accumulation of another' it also detailed that 'some women's children became indelibly marked with the inevitability of enslavement, [while] other women's children became inevitably free' (Morgan 2018: 12–13, 17). As Morgan argues, the law thus becomes the 'first *explicit* English articulation of hereditary slavery' (Morgan 2015: 158, *emphasis added*), giving shape to practices already well-established and accepted within the New World plantation economies.
- 12 In *A Mercy*, we encounter these notions from the very first paragraph of the *minha mãe* fragment, which I quote here at some length:
- Neither one will want your brother. I know their tastes. Breasts provide the pleasure more than simpler things. Yours are rising too soon and are becoming

irritated by the cloth covering your little girl chest. And they see and I see them see. No good follows even if I offered you to one of the boys in the quarter. Figo. You remember him. He was the gentle one with the horses and played with you in the yard. I saved the rinds for him and sweet bread to take to the others. Bess, his mother, knew my mind and did not disagree. [...] There was no protection. None. [...] It was as though you were hurrying up your breasts and hurrying also the lips of an old married couple. (Morrison 2008: 160)

- 13 In the very first line of this passage, in which the *minha mãe* addresses her daughter Florens, the reader not only learns that the *minha mãe* is subjected to sexual violence but that this violence is inflicted upon her by at least two people. The *minha mãe* ‘knows their tastes’ and she knows that these people ‘will not want your brother’. At the end of the paragraph, we learn that the people mentioned earlier on are in fact ‘an old married couple’. In turn, this means that both her master and her mistress make use of this enslaved woman for their sexual pleasures. These lines also suggest that other enslaved women share similar experiences, as illustrated by the sentence ‘Bess knew my mind and did not disagree’. A few lines further on, we read: ‘When the tall man with yellow hair [Vaark] came to dine, I saw that he hated the food and I saw things in his eyes that said he did not trust Senhor, Senhora or their sons’ (Morrison 2008: 161). It is here—specifically in the close semantic proximity between ‘Senhor, Senhora’ and ‘or their sons,’ which suggests that the sons, too, will become masters who will use their enslaved female property for their profit and their pleasures—that the text continues to address the ‘sexual violence and reproduction characteristic of enslaved women’s experience’ (Hartman 2016: 167).
- 14 In 1831, Mary Prince’s slave narrative entitled *The History of Mary Prince, a West Indian Slave. Related by Herself* was issued as the first autobiographical account of a formerly enslaved Black woman to be published in England. Prince was born in Bermuda to an enslaved family of African-descent. After her escape from slavery, she lived in London. In her narrative, Prince tells the reader how, as a little girl, she was sold at a slave auction when her master needed to raise money for his wedding. She describes how she is being examined by potential buyers attending the auction and how she ‘fetched a great sum for so young a slave’. Right after the sale, Prince is separated from her siblings, who are sold to different owners, and from her mother. We read:
- At length the vendue master [...] took me by the hand, and led me out into the middle of the street, and [...] exposed me to the view of those who attended the vendue. I was soon surrounded by strange men, who examined and handled me in the same manner that a butcher would a calf or a lamb he was about to purchase, and who talked about my shape and size in like words [...] I was then put up to sale. [...] When the sale was over [...] one went one way, one another, and our poor mammy went home with nothing. (Prince 1831: 3–4)
- 15 Thirty years later, in 1861, Harriet Jacobs would publish her slave narrative *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl. Written by Herself*. In it, Jacobs tells the reader how she attempts to escape not only enslavement but also her master’s intended sexual use of her. She tells the reader how she does this by hiding in a crawl space above a storeroom in her grandmother’s house for seven years before finally fleeing to the North. In a chapter entitled ‘A Loophole of Retreat’, Jacobs describes her hiding place as follows:
- A small shed had been added to my grandmother's house years ago. Some boards were laid across the joists at the top, and between these boards and the roof was a very small garret [...] only nine feet long, and seven wide. The highest part was three feet high, and sloped down abruptly to the loose board floor. There was no



admission for either light or air. [...] To this hole I was conveyed as soon as I entered the house. The air was stifling; the darkness total. (Jacobs 2001: 95–96)

- 16 With Prince's and Jacobs' narratives, the *minha mãe* shares a first-person voice and narrative perspective. While this first-person narrative perspective is certainly not an exclusive generic feature of the slave narrative tradition, the fact that the textual fragment of the *minha mãe* uses it might suggest that *A Mercy* plays along with readers' assumptions of reading certain signals in the text almost by default as a first-person slave narrative. Arguably, this happens within a complicated narrative window that cuts across various temporal dimensions that span the reader's present, the narrative time of *A Mercy*, the historical time of the novel's 17<sup>th</sup>-century setting, in addition to the time of the fashioning and publication of Prince and Jacob's narratives, which is the 19<sup>th</sup> century. It is against this complex temporal tension that *A Mercy* revisits and allegorizes particular tropes/themes of these narratives. It places slavery's grammar of property—which codified reproduction in economic terms, and vertical kinship relations as being subject to those deemed to be free—as the issue which is centre-stage in the texts of both Prince and Jacobs. This can be illustrated along the following lines.
- 17 In many ways, Jacobs' crawl space—as the space in which Jacobs seeks refuge from the sexual violence intended/attempted by her master, which includes the reproduction of slave property—needs to be understood to encapsulate the very material reality of Morgan's observation quoted above, and her argument that the lives of African and African-descended enslaved women 'always included the possibilities of their wombs.' In *A Mercy*, the reader encounters Jacobs' crawl space twice: It first appears in Florens's last textual fragment, in which she carves words into the wooden walls of an abandoned and unfinished mansion, which her master started building but was never able to finish due to his premature death. The words read: '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' (Morrison 2008: 156, emphasis added). Jacobs' 'loophole of retreat' (Jacobs 2001: 95) thus first becomes a room in which Florens's 'careful words, closed up and wide open, will talk to themselves', a room in which Florens is 'near the door and at the closing' while the 'you' she addresses 'will stand to hear me' (Morrison 2008: 158–9). Jacobs' 'small den' above her grandmother's storeroom, a space where she crawls rather than stands, here becomes a space crawling with words, a space in which the blacksmith as well as her readers (the 'you') will need to 'crawl perhaps in a few places.' In the *minha mãe* fragment, the text takes up the image of the crawl space and of 'crawling in a few places' for the second time. It does so at the very end of the *mina mãe*'s words where she explains how she hoped for 'the tall man' to accept her daughter in her stead in order to settle D'Ortega's debt. As she explains: 'I knelt before him [...] I stayed on my knees. In the dust where my heart will remain each night and every day until you understand what I know and long to tell you'"(Morrison 2008: 164–5). Florens's crawling here becomes the *minha mãe*'s kneeling in the dust, which becomes *A Mercy*'s very own metaphorical crawl space, if you will.
- 18 The scene quoted above from Mary Prince's narrative describes how her family was ripped apart at a slave auction, and thus echoes Spillers' arguments that kinship loses meaning for the enslaved because slavery's calculus of property can destroy any recognized vertical kinship formations at any given moment (Spillers 1987: 74). In *A Mercy* we encounter this through the *minha mãe*'s account of the moment when Senhor D'Ortega uses Florens to pay off the debt he owes Jacob Vaark:

I heard their voices and gathered you and your brother to stand in their eyes. One chance, I thought. [...] You stood there in those shoes and the tall man laughed and said he would take me to close the debt. I knew Senhor would not allow it. I said you. Take you, my daughter (Morrison 2008: 164).

- 19 These lines suggest that the *minha mãe*, who is highly aware of her master's sexual interest in her daughter, as we know from very first paragraph of her section in *A Mercy*, offers Florens to Vaark in a desperate attempt to protect her from her master/mistress/their sons, hoping that her daughter will be better off at a different plantation or household. And it is this knowledge of the world, the novel suggests, that the *minha mãe* seeks to pass on to her daughter. Her very last words attest to this: 'Oh Florens. My love. Hear a tua mãe' (Morrison 2008: 165). It is with these words, which are an inflection of the previously used construction of 'the *mina mãe*' that now signifies 'your mother'/'*tua mãe*,' that both the *minha mãe*'s text and the novel itself end.

## "There is no protection": Reading the *Minha Mãe* Post-Slavery

- 20 So far, I have tried to show how the text of the *minha mãe* brings slavery's racial and sexual economies to *A Mercy*'s diegetic frame by invoking and revisiting African American women-authored slave narratives. In this section, I expand on this line of argument by suggesting that the fragment of the *minha mãe*, while relying on particular features of the slave narrative tradition, in fact also challenges the generic script of these narratives, which are strongly invested in an ethos of liberation. Unlike the protagonists of the women-authored slave narratives examined in the previous section, that is, *minha mãe* does not gain freedom at the end of her text. My contention is that her fragment therefore needs to be read as a challenge to the slave narrative script and its narrative gestures to liberation. In order to understand how the *minha mãe* fragment poses this challenge and before returning to my reading of this character, I need to briefly engage with the work by Black thinkers and intellectuals, who have increasingly turned to questions concerning the possibility of the narrativization of slavery and/as social death in recent years. In particular, I here refer to the paradigmatic theoretical work done by thinkers like Saidiya V. Hartman and Frank B. Wilderson, III. In their own ways, Hartman and Wilderson's 'post-slavery' trajectories interrogate the lasting effects of Atlantic slavery as that which continues to structure and define Black existence in the United States.<sup>4</sup> And it is in this context of dismantling white Western modernity's structural and epistemic histories and legacies of slavery and racial subjection that they develop their respective inquiries into narrative.
- 21 The theoretical and autobiographical body of work produced by Wilderson uniquely offers a set of questions that probe into narrative's ability to account for and emplot the violence that 'wounds and positions' the enslaved (Wilderson 2015: 134). Wilderson offers these questions as one of the key proponents of the expanding theoretical trajectory of Afropessimism. Thinking through the ways in which 'anti-black fantasies attain objective value in the political and economic life of society and in the psychic life of culture as well' (Sexton 2016), Afropessimism makes the forms and functions of the gratuitous violence of slavery/social death its central analytical objective. In this way, it puts forth a paradigmatic analysis of the power relations of antiblackness that structure civil society. In this context, Afropessimism conceptualizes Blackness as a

paradigmatic structural position (not an identity) coterminous with Slaveness, as coterminous with social death, and, as such, as being structurally positioned outside of the realm of civil society (e.g. Wilderson 2020). It is here also that Wilderson turns to examining narrative as a structure that is unable to account for the social death of the Slave (Wilderson 2015). He argues that ‘narrative strategies that try to account for the violence of Black life’ will inevitably fail to achieve what they set out to do because they lack the ‘requisite explanatory power to make sense of violent context and performances that are prelogical and, as such, beyond the grasp of narration’ (Wilderson 2015: 134). From an Afropessimist perspective, then, narrative constitutes that which is within the purview of the Human who is not subjected to the violence of social death and thus given a promise of narrative transformation, while Blackness is structured by the absence of such a promise of a capacity for change made to those who are structurally cast as Human members of civil society (Wilderson 2015).

- 22 In ‘Venus in Two Acts’, Hartman discusses the connections between the archive of slavery, the writing of history, and the ‘impossibility of discovering anything about [the dead] that hasn’t already been stated’ (Hartman 2008: 1). At the centre of the essay is an enslaved Black girl who was murdered aboard the slave ship *Recovery* at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century and who merely ‘appears in the archive of slavery as a *dead girl* named in a legal indictment against a slave ship captain tried for the murder of two Negro girls’ (*ibid.*). Hartman goes on to explain that we ‘only know what can be extrapolated from an analysis of the ledger or borrowed from the world of her captors and masters and applied to her’ (Hartman 2008: 2). What Hartman addresses in this essay is the difficulty of creating a narrative from the hegemonic archive of Atlantic slavery that will account for and embody the dead girl and that, at the same time, does not pretend to ‘provide closure where there is none’ (Hartman 2008: 3, 8). The grief and the pain about lives lost and the longing to tell their stories so as to rescue them from oblivion, in other words, pushes Hartman to continuously grapple with the problematic task of how to create a narrative that tells ‘an impossible story [while amplifying] the impossibility of its telling’ (Hartman 2008: 11).
- 23 In *A Mercy*, we can recognize these theoretical concerns most explicitly within the form of the *minha mãe*’s text. First, this brings us back to the previous section of the paper and my discussion of the ways in which the *minha mãe* draws the reader’s attention to the paradigmatic slave narratives by Prince and Jacobs. As I suggested, her kneeling down in front of Jacob Vaark to offer her daughter Florens to him can be understood as a desperate attempt to protect her daughter from her current master. Expanding on this, it might also represent a moment within the narrative in which there seems to be some kind of a notion of a different, perhaps even better future, for her daughter. With Wilderson and Hartman’s arguments in mind, however, it appears that this desire on the part of the *minha mãe*, and by extension of the novel, is disrupted by the fact that the *minha mãe* will forever continue to kneel in the dust, trying to explain to Florens why she gave her daughter away to Jacob Vaark. Towards the end of her section, we read: ‘I stayed on my knees. In the dust where my heart will remain each night and every day until you understand what I know and long to tell you’ (Morrison 2008: 165). Shortly thereafter, the novel ends with this mother’s plea to ‘hear a tua mãe.’ These words in fact refer the reader back to the very beginning of *A Mercy*, which opens with Florens’ first person text. The novel’s circular form thus suggests that the *minha mãe*’s words will remain where they are. Her message to her daughter will continue to hover both within and beyond the textual orbit of *A Mercy*, and Florens will continue *not* to

hear what her mother wants to tell her. The novel's form thus ultimately seems to suggest that the *minha mãe's* text, unlike the above narratives by Prince and Jacob, lacks narrative resolution in the sense that neither the *minha mãe* nor her daughter, for that matter, will gain freedom at the end of the text. Instead, the *minha mãe* will forever attempt to explain her actions to her daughter, endlessly kneeling in the dust and rendering any desire for or notion of a better future both fleeting and fugitive.

- 24 Second, this brings us back to the very first paragraph of the *minha mãe's* text, with which I began my close reading, suggesting that it crucially establishes, as one of the novel's main sites of inquiry, the sexual and reproductive violence to which enslaved women were routinely subjected. Within this paragraph, we encounter the statement 'There was no protection. None' (Morrison 2008: 161). The key phrase 'There was no protection' is proleptic in that it prepares the reader for what the text will describe as the 'breaking in' of the *minha mãe*, Bess, and another—unnamed—enslaved woman over the coming pages (Morrison 2008: 161, 163–4). It also is proleptic because it internally structures the *minha mãe* fragment as a whole. Subsequently, it will appear three more times over the course of the section's four pages, albeit in the following modified versions: 'There was no protection and nothing in the catechism to tell them no'; 'There is no protection. To be female in this place is to be an open wound that cannot heal. Even if scars form, the festering is ever below'; and 'There is no protection but there is difference' (Morrison 2008: 160–1, 164). In these variations, the text switches not only from past tense to present tense, thus indicating the ongoing danger/subjugation/subjectation that enslaved women were exposed to at all times, including that of the reader. With each and every repetition, the text also provides more and more information about what it is that there is no protection against, namely the sexual subjection by the *minha mãe's* catholic master/mistress: 'There was no protection and nothing in the catechism to tell them no' (Morrison 2008: 160–1). In between this second and the third reiteration/variation of the statement, the *minha mãe* tries to explain that she 'hoped if we could learn letters somehow someday you [Florens] could make your way' and that she 'tried to tell Reverend Father' (Morrison 2008: 161), who secretly teaches her, Florens, and Florens's brother to read and write (Morrison 2008: 4). However, Reverend Father does not seem to understand what the *minha mãe* is trying to tell him: that for enslaved girls and women, there was no protection against sexual and other violence. And that when Jacob Vaark arrives at Senhor D'Ortega's plantation, she sees 'things in his eyes that said he did not trust Senhor, Senhora or their sons. [...] He never looked at me the way Senhor does. He did not want' (Morrison 2008: 161). It is here also, in the context of the third reiteration of the phrase, that the *minha mãe* begins to tell the 'you' (Florens/the reader) about her Middle Passage to the New World; her arrival on Barbados; and her being sold to Senhor D'Ortega and subsequently transported to his tobacco plantation on the southern North American mainland, where she is forced to work in D'Ortega's household (Morrison 2008: 161–4). With this reiteration—'There is no protection. To be female in this place is to be an open wound that cannot heal. Even if scars form, the festering is ever below' (Morrison 2008: 161)—the text, now in the present tense, addresses the '*reproductive calculus* of the institution [more generally. Once again, the text alerts the reader to the fact that] work of sex and procreation was the chief motor for reproducing the material, social, and symbolic relations of slavery' (Hartman 2016: 169, emphasis added). Finally, the fourth reiteration of the phrase—'There is no protection but there is difference' (Morrison 2008: 164)—is situated in the second of the last three paragraphs of the novel. Here the

*minha mãe* describes and explains how when Jacob Vaark came to the D'Ortega plantation to settle the debt between himself and Senhor, she knew that there was only 'one chance' to save her girl child from the D'Ortegas's making use of her for their sexual pleasures (Morrison 2008: 165). The *minha mãe* then goes on to explain how she 'knelt before him. Hoping for a miracle' (*ibid.*). With the words that follow, the text again switches to the present tense as it draws attention to the idea that the *minha mãe's* words will continuously be spoken again and anew within the novel's diegesis—words that will never reach their addressee Florens and which haunt (in Avery F. Gordon's sense) every reading of the book.<sup>5</sup> As a structuring device, then, the repeated use of the above phrase ruptures any notion of a coherent narrative progression as they repeatedly cut through the *minha mãe's* text. With Wilderson, the *minha's mãe's* status as a socially dead slave creates the 'absence of a promise of narrative transformation' in her text and makes for the continuous reiteration of the notion that there was/is no protection for her and her children, particularly her daughter.

## Conclusion: On Telling Impossible Stories Or, Fashioning Anti-Narrative

- 25 Reading the *minha mãe* fragment in conversation with Mary Prince's and Harriet Jacob's respective narratives, we can see how in the intertextual moments created by the juxtaposition of these texts *A Mercy* invokes as well as allegorizes the generic scripts of these slave narrative. As I have argued, the *minha mãe's* text thus brings questions about the sexual economies under slavery to *A Mercy's* New World colonial scene, showing how 'giving away'/'offering' her child into the hands of a complete stranger/new master appears as the only escape from the sexual subjection of her master and his household. Unlike in the narratives of Jacobs and Prince, however, the *minha mãe* will not escape into freedom: she does not succeed like Jacobs in running away from her master, and she will not save her children from slavery either. Rather, the *minha mãe* will stay in her metaphorical 'crawl space,' will continue to kneel in the dust at the end of the novel as well as beyond its immediate frame. The *minha mãe's* text also speaks to the hegemonic archive of Atlantic enslavement and addresses issues concerning those who are not represented in it, those who are eliminated or erased from this archive. With the text and the character of the *minha mãe*, *A Mercy* mourns the nameless girls and women whom Hartman speaks of, mourns those who came to the New World on board the slave ships (if they made it so far), so that the complex connections between the violence of the archive and the violence of the sexual economies of Atlantic slavery become visible. Whereas Prince's and Jacob's texts are constructed as narratives of the liberation and emancipation of the (formerly) enslaved, I suggested that the *minha mãe* fragment decidedly does not venture to become such a narrative. By way of the fragment's open-ended form and positioning at the end of the novel, which connects back to its beginning and thus infinitely continues *A Mercy's* circular telling, the *minha mãe* both ruptures and changes the redemptive arcs of liberation that characterize these slave narratives. Hers is not the narrative of the creation/making of a free or freed subject; her section in *A Mercy* questions narrative form and its ability to account for the enslaved by way of its intertextual allegorizing of the slave narrative script. Instead, the *minha mãe* scripts social death.

26 *A Mercy's* equivocations purposefully leave the reader with the text's refusal to create a redemptive narrative arc of stasis and change for the *minha mãe* and in this way, it echoes Hartman's question of how to tell stories/narratives that are, by definition, impossible to relate. In 'Venus', Hartman reminds her readers of another kind of absence generated both by and within the archive of Atlantic slavery. As part of her deep engagement with the notion of whether social death can be narrativized in relation both to the archive of Atlantic slavery and to the impossibility of writing Atlantic history from the perspective of the enslaved, Hartman observes: 'There is not one extant autobiographical narrative of a female captive who survived the Middle Passage' (Hartman 2008: 3). In conclusion, Toni Morrison's novel *A Mercy*, may indeed be considered to both create and become a fictional representation of an 'autobiographical narrative of a female captive who survived the Middle Passage'. And by pushing post-slavery thinking's fundamental critique of narrative as a Human structure in this way, *A Mercy's* powerful combination of theoretical critique and narrative form may perhaps best be understood as fashioning what I call *Black anti-narrative*—the critical practice of telling the 'impossible stories' of social death.

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## NOTES

1. This article comes from the last chapter of my PhD dissertation project submitted to the University of Bremen in Germany in 2020. I'd like to thank the anonymous peer reviewers and editors of this journal for their invaluable feedback.
2. I borrow the term and concept of slavery's 'sexual economies' from the work of Adrienne Davis. Davis describes the 'interplay of sex and markets' and the law on the New World plantation as a 'sexual political economy' (Davis 2002: 105).
3. For someone who, like me, is positioned both within and by Whiteness, this kind of engagement necessarily comes with a persistent kind of tension or set of contradictions. While I hope to think and write from a position of being aware of the notion that 'whiteness is a real category, that has been historically produced and that has real consequences' (Adusei-Poku 2018: 44)—a position confronted and challenged by Black (feminist) thinkers, novelists, and philosophers of colour—this project inevitably runs the risk of being 'ambushed' by white power formations (Yancy qtd. in Applebaum 2018: 18) and thus of becoming a '[project] of critique [. . .] complicit with what [it] attempts to disrupt', including the reproduction of epistemic violence (Applebaum 2018: 3).
4. I borrow the term 'post-slavery' from Christina Sharpe, who writes: '[While] all modern subjects are post-slavery subjects fully constituted by the discursive codes of slavery and post-slavery, post-slavery subjectivity is largely borne by and readable on the (New World) black subject' (Sharpe 2010: 3).
5. In *Ghostly Matters* (2008), Gordon thinks about haunting as 'one way in which abusive systems of power make themselves known and their impacts felt in everyday life' (xvi). For Gordon, haunting 'is not the same as being exploited, traumatized, or oppressed, although it usually involves these experiences or is produced by them. What's distinctive about haunting is that it is an animated state in which a repressed or unresolved social violence is making itself known, sometimes very directly, sometimes more obliquely' (xvi).

## ABSTRACTS

The article examines Toni Morrison's historical novel *A Mercy* for the ways in which it interrogates the intricate connections between slavery, self-making, private property, and narrative. The rich pool of critical readings of *A Mercy* often situates itself within an environment of 21<sup>st</sup>- century 'post-racial' discourse, not least since it was published one week after Barack Obama was elected as President of the USA in 2008. The article pushes against such readings by means of an examination of the character of the enslaved mother *minha mãe*. By showing how this character revisits the African American slave narrative tradition, and by reading the *minha mãe* in line with the groundbreaking work of Black feminist scholars on the entanglements between slavery, property, and reproduction, my close reading of the *minha mãe* text establishes Atlantic slavery's sexual economies as the novel's explicit frame of reference and signification.



My reading of *A Mercy* is also an attempt at positioning the novel within a broader critical context of recent Black Studies theorizing, in which questions concerning narrative's ability to account for the social death of the enslaved on a deeper level have taken centre stage. My reading situates itself within African American studies, Black feminist thinking, and Early American studies.

First, I situate the *minha mãe* and her textual fragment in *A Mercy* against the novel's critical reception and the prominent tendency to read this character only in tandem with the novel's other characters—and not as a character that needs to be examined in its own right.

Second, I juxtapose the *minha mãe* fragment with the tradition of the women-authored African American slave narratives. I suggest that the textual fragment of the *minha mãe* invokes and allegorizes the slave narratives authored by Mary Prince and Harriet Jacobs, creating intertextual moments with them. In their respective narratives, Prince and Jacob follow the literary conventions of the slave narrative as a genre in that they more or less implicitly draw attention not only to the sexual subjection by their master but also to how the regimes of property ruptured recognized kinship relations for the enslaved. The character of the *minha mãe* takes up these concerns raised by Prince's and Jacobs' narratives and brings them to the novel's fictional representation of colonial Virginia.

Third, the article expands on this argument by suggesting that the fragment of the *minha mãe*, while relying on particular features of the slave narrative tradition, in fact also challenges the generic structure of these narratives, which are strongly invested in an ethos of liberation. Unlike the protagonists of the above mentioned women-authored slave narratives, the *minha mãe* does not gain freedom at the end of her text. Her fragment, as I suggest, therefore needs to be read as a challenge to the slave narrative script and its narrative gestures to liberation.

In conclusion, the article enters its close reading of the *minha mãe* into conversation with recent Black Studies theoretical trajectories stressing the varied ways in which the 'afterlife' (Hartman) of New World slavery continues to structure Black existence in the U.S., and their inquiry into whether narrative can account for the enslaved. Finally, I suggest that *A Mercy* takes up these theoretical concerns with the *minha mãe* and argue that her textual fragment in the novel amplifies them through its non-resolution.

Cet article examine le roman historique de Toni Morrison intitulé *Un Don* et la façon dont y sont questionnés les liens complexes entre esclavage, construction individuelle, propriété privée et récit. Les nombreuses lectures critiques de ce roman s'inscrivent souvent dans le cadre du discours « post-racial » du XXI<sup>e</sup> siècle, d'autant qu'il a été publié une semaine après l'élection de Barack Obama à la présidence des États-Unis en 2008. L'article va à l'encontre de ces lectures en examinant le personnage de la *minha mãe*, la mère esclave. En montrant comment ce personnage revisite la tradition du récit d'esclave afro-américain, et en interprétant la figure de la *minha mãe* en lien avec le travail novateur des intellectuelles féministes noires sur les enchevêtrements entre esclavage, propriété et reproduction, ma lecture approfondie du texte de la *minha mãe* établit les économies sexuelles de l'esclavage atlantique comme cadre de référence et de sens explicite du roman. Ma lecture d'*Un Don* vise aussi à placer le roman dans le contexte critique plus large des études afro-américaines, qui accordent une importance capitale à la capacité du récit à rendre compte, à un niveau plus profond, de la mort sociale des esclaves. Ma lecture se situe au cœur des études afro-américaines, de la pensée féministe noire et des études sur les débuts de l'Amérique.

D'abord, je situe l'extrait de la *minha mãe* dans *Un Don* comme allant à l'encontre de l'accueil critique qu'a reçu le roman et de la tendance dominante à n'interpréter ce personnage qu'en tandem avec les autres personnages du roman – plutôt qu'en tant que personnage devant être étudié à part entière.

Ensuite, je juxtapose l'extrait de la *minha mãe* avec la tradition des récits de femmes esclaves afro-

américaines. Je suggère que l'extrait de la *minha mãe* invoque et allégorise les récits d'esclaves de Mary Prince et d'Harriet Jacobs, créant ainsi une intertextualité avec ceux-ci. Dans leurs récits respectifs, Prince et Jacobs suivent les conventions littéraires du récit d'esclave en tant que genre, attirant l'attention de façon plus ou moins explicite, non seulement sur la sujétion sexuelle exercée par les maîtres, mais aussi sur la manière dont les régimes de propriété brisaient les liens de parenté reconnus entre esclaves. Le personnage de la *minha mãe* s'empare de ces questions, soulevées par les récits de Prince et de Jacobs, et les transcrit dans la représentation fictive de la colonie de Virginie au sein du roman.

Troisièmement, l'article développe l'argument suggérant que l'extrait de la *minha mãe*, bien que s'appuyant sur des caractéristiques spécifiques au récit d'esclave traditionnel, remet finalement en cause la structure générique de ces récits, fortement engagés dans un esprit de libération. Contrairement aux personnages des récits de femmes esclaves évoqués précédemment, la *minha mãe* ne gagne pas sa liberté à la fin du texte. Son texte, comme je le suggère, doit donc être lu comme une remise en question du récit d'esclave et son récit est un geste de libération.

En conclusion, l'article fait dialoguer une lecture approfondie du personnage de la *minha mãe* avec les trajectoires théoriques récentes des études afro-américaines en insistant sur les diverses manières dont « l'au-delà » (suivant l'expression d'Hartman) des nouveaux esclavages continue de structurer la vie des Noirs aux États-Unis et sur leur tentative destinée à comprendre si un récit peut témoigner de l'esclavage. Enfin, je suggère qu'*Un Don* traite de ces questions théoriques avec la *minha mãe* et je soutiens que cet extrait dans le roman les amplifie car elles demeurent non résolues.

Este artículo examina la novela histórica de Toni Morrison, *Una bendición*, y la manera en que se cuestionan en ella los vínculos complejos entre esclavitud, construcción individual, propiedad privada y relato. Las numerosas lecturas críticas de esta novela se inscriben a menudo en el marco del discurso "posracial" del siglo XXI, en particular porque fue publicada una semana después de que Barack Obama fue elegido presidente de Estados Unidos en 2008. El artículo va en contra de estas lecturas y examina el personaje de la *minha mãe*, la madre esclava. Mostrando cómo este personaje revisita la tradición del relato de esclavo afroestadounidense, e interpretando la figura de la *minha mãe* en relación al trabajo innovador de intelectuales feministas negras sobre el entramado entre esclavitud, propiedad y reproducción, mi lectura exhaustiva del texto de la *minha mãe* establece las economías sexuales de la esclavitud atlántica como marco de referencia y de sentido explícito de la novela. Mi lectura de *Una bendición* apunta también a situar la novela dentro del contexto crítico más amplio de los estudios afroestadounidenses que dan una importancia capital a la capacidad del relato de dar cuenta, en un nivel más profundo, de la muerte social de los esclavos. Mi lectura se sitúa en el corazón de los estudios afroestadounidenses, del pensamiento feminista negro y de los estudios sobre el periodo temprano en Norteamérica.

En primer lugar, situó el fragmento de la *minha mãe* en *Una Bendición* yendo en contra de la recepción crítica que tuvo la novela y de la tendencia dominante a no interpretar este personaje más que en tándem con los otros personajes de la novela, y no como personaje que debe estudiarse en sí mismo.

Luego yuxtapongo el fragmento de la *minha mãe* con la tradición de los relatos de mujeres esclavas afroestadounidenses. Sugiero que el fragmento de la *minha mãe* invoca y alegoriza los relatos de esclavos de Mary Prince y de Harriet Jacobs, creando así una intertextualidad con ellos. En sus respectivos relatos, Prince y Jacobs siguen las convenciones literarias del relato de esclavo en tanto género, llamando la atención de manera más o menos explícita no sólo sobre la sujeción sexual ejercida por los amos, sino también sobre la manera en que los regímenes de propiedad rompen los lazos de parentesco reconocidos entre esclavos. El personaje de la *minha mãe* se apropia de estas cuestiones, planteadas en los relatos de Prince y de Jacobs, y los transcribe en la

representación ficticia de la colonia de Virginia dentro de la novela.

En tercer lugar, el artículo desarrolla el argumento, y sugiere que, si bien el fragmento de la *minha mãe* se apoya en características específicas del relato de esclavo tradicional, no deja de cuestionar la estructura genérica de estos relatos, sumamente comprometidos con un espíritu de liberación. Contrariamente a los relatos de mujeres esclavas evocados anteriormente, la *minha mãe* no obtiene su libertad al final del texto. Su fragmento, tal como sugiero, debe leerse como un cuestionamiento del relato de esclavo y su relato es un gesto de liberación.

En conclusión, en el artículo dialogan una lectura exhaustiva del personaje de la *minha mãe* con las trayectorias teóricas recientes de los estudios afroestadounidenses, insistiendo en las diferentes maneras en que la “vida póstuma” (según la expresión de Hartman) de las nuevas esclavitudes continúa estructurando la vida de los negros en Estados Unidos, y en sus intentos de comprender si un relato puede dar testimonio de la esclavitud. Por último, sugiero que *Una bendición* trata sobre estos asuntos teóricos con la *minha mãe* y sostengo que este fragmento en la novela los amplifica, pues quedan sin resolver.

Este artigo examina o romance histórico de Toni Morrison, intitulado *Um Dom*, e a maneira como questiona as relações complexas entre escravidão, construção individual, propriedade privada e narrativa. As numerosas leituras críticas deste romance inscrevem-se muitas vezes no quadro de um discurso « pós-racial » do século XXI, até porque foi publicado uma semana depois da eleição de Barack Obama a presidência dos Estados Unidos em 2008.

O artigo confronta estas leituras examinando a personagem de *minha mãe*, a mãe escrava. Ao mostrar como esta personagem revisita a tradição da narrativa de escravo afro-americano, e ao interpretar a figura de *minha mãe* em relação com o trabalho inovador das intelectuais feministas negras sobre o entrelaçamento entre escravidão, propriedade e reprodução, a minha leitura aprofundada do texto de *minha mãe* fundamenta as economias sexuais da escravidão atlântica como quadro de referência e de sentido explícito do romance.

A minha leitura de *Um Dom* pretende também colocar o romance no contexto crítico mais amplo dos estudos afro-americanos, que dão uma grande importância à capacidade da narrativa em dar conta, a um nível mais profundo, da morte social dos escravos. A minha leitura situa-se no cerne dos estudos afro-americanos, do pensamento feminista negro e dos estudos sobre os princípios da América.

Primeiro, considero o trecho de *minha mãe* em *Um Dom* a distância do acolhimento crítico que recebeu o romance e da tendência dominante de interpretar esta personagem em conjunto com as outras personagens do romance — e não como uma personagem devendo ser estudada a parte. A seguir, situo o trecho de *minha mãe* na tradição das narrativas de mulheres escravas afro-americanas. Sugiro que o trecho de *minha mãe* invoca e alegoriza as narrativas de escravos de Mary Prince e Harriet Jacobs, criando assim uma intertextualidade com elas. Nas suas narrativas respectivas, Prince e Jacobs seguem as convenções literárias das narrativas de escravo enquanto gênero, enfocando de modo mais ou menos explícito a sujeição sexual exercida pelos senhores, mas também a maneira como os regimes de propriedade quebravam os laços familiares conhecidos entre escravos. A personagem de *minha mãe* trata estas questões, levantadas pelas narrativas de Prince e Jacobs, e as transcreve na representação fictícia da colônia de Virgínia no seio do romance.

Em terceiro lugar, o artigo desenvolve o argumento sugerindo que o trecho de *minha mãe*, embora apoiando-se sobre características específicas da narrativa de escravo tradicional, põe finalmente em causa a estrutura genérica destas narrativas, fortemente envolvidas num espírito de libertação. Ao contrário das personagens das narrativas de mulheres escravas evocadas antes, *minha mãe* não ganha a sua liberdade ao final do texto. Seu texto, como sugiro, deve ser lido como um questionamento da narrativa de escravo, e sua narrativa como um gesto de libertação.

Em conclusão, o artigo faz dialogar uma leitura aprofundada da personagem de *minha mãe* com as

trajetórias teóricas recentes dos estudos afro-americanos, insistindo sobre as diferentes maneiras como « o além » (segundo a expressão de Hartman) das novas escravidões continua estruturando a vida dos Negros nos Estados Unidos, e sobre sua tentativa para entender como uma narrativa pode testemunhar a escravidão. Finalmente, sugiro que *Um Dom* trata estas questões teóricas com *minha mãe* e defendo que este trecho no romance as amplifica ao ficar irresolutas.

## INDEX

**Keywords:** A Mercy, narrative, post-slavery Black theorizing, self-making, property, gender, slavery, Toni Morrison

**Palabras claves:** Una bendición, relato, teorización negra post-esclavitud, construcción individual, propiedad, género, esclavitud, Toni Morrison

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**Mots-clés:** Un Don, récit, théorisation noire post-esclavage, construction individuelle, propriété, genre, esclavage, Toni Morrison

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