CHAPTER 4

CRITIQUING CONTEMPORARY ISSUES

Set in the American Civil Rights era that corresponds to the period 1930-1990, Morrison's *Love* complicates both African-American and American history by uncovering the vexing interrelationship of black identity and history, a concern that has been foregrounded in her historical trilogy comprising *Beloved*, *Jazz*, and *Paradise*. The novel is loudly political and critiques the American Civil Rights Movement by articulating certain harsh truths about it. Like her trilogy, the novelist critically reinvestigates the traumatic history of African-Americans and reformulates some of the vital issues that intrude on African-American interests within American politics, significantly also departing from the normative, glamorous and exuberant discourses of the Civil Rights movement. Morrison admits in “The Charlie Rose Show” that through highlighting the complex family history of a successful Jim Crow-era black entrepreneur Bill Cosey, the novel exposes a rare side of the American Civil Rights movement that had a devastating impact on the successful pre-World War II black community (Web).

In an interview, Morrison firmly states: "I don't think this generation knows at all what was going on in 1947 as far as Civil Rights are concerned. They think it all began in the 60s. It's interesting to me to re-examine that period – 50s, 60s, and 70s era" (Denard13). In a similar line of thought, in another interview with Jessica Jernigan, Morrison admits that the novel deals with the "impact [of] the Civil-Rights movement ... on the people who lived through it, [and] how they dealt with the complex questions the civil-rights movement raised." She emphasizes further that the transition from segregation to integration "was much more complicated, more deeply
interesting than the popular history of the civil rights movement" (Jernigan, "A Love Story from Toni Morrison"). In a way, one would observe that against the backdrop of the Civil Rights era, Morrison’s *Love* not only shares its legacies with the present generation, but also attempts to reexamine it in "a new way" so that the readers "would not be left with the simple notion that there was some agitation, some pain, and then, pow, everybody moved into whatever neighborhoods they wanted to and there was more access into the corridors of power, there was more money, you know, better jobs, etc" (Morrison and West 20). Many critics felt that the author’s revisionist exercise in this work must not be misunderstood and that the text is not an expression of Morrison’s nostalgia for either the era of segregation or, her cavalier attitude toward the accomplishments of the Civil Rights ideology. Instead, one must relate the novel as a testimony to the novelist's uncompromising commitment with the often unacknowledged ills of the movement. In an interview, Morrison herself clarifies her fictional vision: "It's not about the Civil Rights movement not being a good idea" but "just that there was a price" (Langer “Star Power”). Just like the way she offers a serious critique of the prevailing Black Nationalist discourses of Black Power that emerged in the mid-1960s in *The Bluest Eye*, she compellingly engages with the loss or reduction of the Civil Rights project through presenting the demise of Bill Cosey’s personal paradise in the wake of integration in *Love*.

Peter Applebombe assesses the Civil Rights era and underscores the "mixed blessings" of the southern blacks "who won a measure of integration into a white world at the expense of some of the enduring and nurturing institutions of the old black one" (7). Glenn Eskew, likewise, reviews the circumstances of transformation during the sixties and emphatically states: "Clearly the Civil Rights movement failed to solve the problems experienced by many black people. The movement ... gained
access for a few while never challenging the structure of the system" (331).

Considering all these debates on the Civil Rights movement and of the ideologies it imbricates, Morrison's Love is a timely intervention that throws light upon the movement’s impact not only on the social and economic implications for African-Americans but also the impact of the changing landscape of race relations in that era.

The Jim Crow protocols, emerging out of the Black Codes (1865-1866), legalized segregation denied Civil Rights for the blacks for well over eighty years (1866-1953). It could be understood that the period encompasses Reconstruction, Post-Reconstruction, Harlem and Post-Harlem and in order to counter this legalized segregation, the African Americans developed autonomous structures for sustaining their socio-cultural life such as restaurants, hotels, movie houses, banks, and theaters. In the novel, Cosey's hotel and resort could be seen as one such entrepreneurial undertaking that benefited from segregation and this is illustrated when the narrator says, in the 1930s, when the "whole country began to live on Relief" (102) Cosey acquired a "broke-down 'whites only' club" (102) and transformed it into the "best-known vacation spot for colored folk at the East Coast" (6). Flaunting the motto "the best good time this side of the law" (33), Cosey's resort was a haven where affluent black vacationers "swayed under the stars" (34), played whist and reveled in the vintage music of the age. If Cosey with his lavish hospitality attracted the guests, then L with her cuisine simply charmed them. So overwhelmed were the guests by the charismatic Cosey and the astounding magnificence of the resort that they hardly bothered about "disturbances in the service or [the occasional] drowning accidents" (33) on the beach. Much of the success also depended on May, Cosey's daughter-in-law and as L puts it: "The two of us [May and herself] were like the back of a clock. Mr. Cosey was its face telling you the time was now" (103). Morrison further claim
this exclusive black clientele "did not have to be wary or concerned about white people – [but] could just enjoy [themselves]" (Jernigan Web). One could say that the fictional Southern resort in this text has a definitive correlation with the actual black owned resorts, which, according to the author are emblematic of: "all the very successful, profitable black businesses that existed during periods of segregation" (Jernigan Web).

*Love* reiterates some of the concerns included in Morrison’s previous novels – female friendship, the haunting of the past, race and class politics and the need for redemption. The novel opens in the 1990s and it introduces us to Bill Cosey’s family and the people that surrounded him in his Hotel and the Resort before, during and after the Civil Rights movement. Set on the East coast of the United States, as some reviewers have pointed out, *Love* moves from the heyday to the collapse of Cosey’s business after the end of segregation. The narrative unfolds against the backdrop of the class differences within the African American community and the social changes brought about by the Civil Rights movement, among which were the disappearance of many Black schools, businesses, resorts and hotels. Despite the social advancement such movement represented for African Americans in the United States, the lost of a part of African American life seems to be the source for Morrison to create an arresting artwork exploring the intriguing legacies of slavery, racism, and also the Civil Rights movement that demonstrate the temporality of history. Speaking about the context of the novel, Morrison emphasizes that the: “period … has been reduced to a very simple story. Rosa Parks, Martin Luther King. Everybody jumped on the train, hard work, some battles; it all came out fine … a story of progress” (Morrison and Rose “The Charlie Rose Show”). Such a viewpoint aptly reflects upon the author’s ambition to explore some of the attendant losses of the period in this work.
Bill Cosey’s lingering presence and its significance in the lives of the major characters in the novel is representative of a larger social and political picture in the 1960s America. While the novel is a family history on a microscopic level, it is also an imagined history recounting the residual side effects of the conflicting spaces of the past on a macroscopic scale. The author admits in various interviews that the Civil Rights or the Black Nationalist Movement could just not magically erase the pain of loss suffered by the African Americans for many years. So a glamorizing rhetorical representation of this time period in history through a reductionist take on it seems to be not an option for the author and as such, in this work, she highlights upon some of the cracks and holes that still remain in the edifice of history and this is seen in the characterization of the major characters in the text who have relocated themselves in America but are still responding to the haunting presence of the conflicting spaces of the past. It could be concluded that the novel forcefully compels a re-examination of the social history of the Civil Rights era through its powerful representation of the intergenerational conflicts through Bill Cosey’s world. Absorbed in the most disruptive and unstable decade of the 1960s, Morrison’s work articulates the turbulent impact of this transitional era on the black middle class. In "Unspeakable Things Unspoken: The Afro-American Presence in American Literature", Morrison admits that the Civil Rights movement was "a great social upheaval in the life of black people" (218) with "real and important "consequences (Morrison and West 20), but through her illustration of the collapse of the Cosey family, she also allegorizes "what may be lost [to African-Americans] when the Civil Rights struggle was won" (Thomas Rev.). Morrison reads Cosey's downfall as an elegy to the passing of an era, therefore complicating the fight for Civil Rights as "a challenge of communal definition and cultural identity" (Schur 28). Carefully uncovering the ideological shift
from integration and Black Nationalism to group antagonism and bourgeois nationalism through the life stories of May, Christine and Heed, Morrison mocks at the ideological devolution of the late Civil Rights movement. One could thus say that *Love* firmly extends a statement on "the cost of desegregation and integration" on "the black community's vitality that historically sustained its ... families in the worst of times" (Foster 77) and not only does the text question and deconstruct the conventional glorifying rhetoric of the Civil Rights movement, but it also allows one to re-evaluate the ills of the movement from a black perspective.

In “Playing in the Dark”, Toni Morrison looked back to the founding of America and observed: “What was distinctive in the New World was, first of all, its claim to freedom, and second, the presence of the unfree within the heart of the democratic experiment” (48). To a large extent, Morrison’s novels bear this sentiment that ideals of economic and political liberty were dependent on brutal enslavement. In her essays and novels, she has pursued the argument that “the history and literature of America were predicated on the exclusion of the black part of its population, that the myths of nation-building contained an explicit or an unspoken ‘us’ and ‘them’” (Adams “Return of the Visionary”). Her ninth novel *A Mercy*, in some ways could be seen as a prequel to Morrison’s most comprehensive expression of those ideas in *Beloved*. Set at a time just before the earliest parts of *Beloved*, when the slave trade was still in its infancy and before bonded labor became a principal foundation of American wealth and that grotesque idea was just forming in the marketplace, *A Mercy* reveals the Americas in the 1680s, constituting of virulent religious and class divisions, oppression and prejudice were rife, providing the fertile soil in which slavery and race hatred were planted and took root. As a reviewer puts it, *A Mercy* is not just about life in America in 1680s, it is much more. It is about pain and sorrow, about trauma, about
violence inflicted upon people in the New World that attracted divergent races to it. The violence rooted in the clash of cultures can be seen in a society that is at the pre-formative stage (Jha Rev.).

In one of the articles published by the Chicago Tribune, Toni Morrison discusses racism and emphasizes the notion that when she started writing A Mercy, she looked at the idea of innocence and says, "If nobody starts out that way (racist)," Morrison alleged:

What about a nation? We seem in this country to combine the idea of slavery and race, but that isn't true. Look at Greece and the Mayans . . . I wanted to look at a moment when people came here running from something terrible, . . . Religion was bloody and this was a time when people held onto their beliefs with ferocity because of the culture they came from. (Courtney, “Toni Morrison discusses racism and "A Mercy" during a keynote speech”)

The novel not only locates as Susan Neal Mayberry notes, the transformation of Old World serfdom in the New World but it also focuses on nation building as Morrison confronts America’s foundational myths (166). Morrison maintains that she wanted to tell the other story about the development of racism in the United States and she claims to have been looking for a period “before racism was inextricably related to slavery . . . before a race hierarchy was established legally and later culturally in the states” (Brophy-Warren “A Writer’s Vote”). By selecting the remote setting, Morrison investigates an unpopular aspect of American history and examines the complicated workings of the “slave society” in the early colonial America.

Hugely influenced by the history book White Cargo: The Forgotten History of Britain’s White Slaves in America by Don Jordan and Michael Walsh, Toni
Morrison’s *A Mercy* departs from all her previous novels in uncovering a non-racial side of the history of slavery in the early colonial times in America. Through an intense representation of early American settlers in the novel, Morrison undeniably “seeks to remove race from slavery” (Li 115) and she confronts in a television interview that the only difference between African slaves and European or British slaves was that the latter could run away and melt into the population, but if they were black they were noticeable. Deirdre Donahue, writing in the *USA Today*, describes that "in this work, the author is examining slavery through the "prism of power, not race (Rev.).By populating her narrative with a range of characters who, on a variety of grounds are deprived of personal liberty, Morrison further claims “separating indentured servants from slaves, legally, and giving indentured servants a kind of power that slaves did not have was much, much later the hierarchy of race between black and white had not existed” (Lebowitz “Coversation”).

*A Mercy* transports the reader further back to the seventeenth century and examines a time, as she admits , when “what we now call America was fluid, ad hoc” and when “owing the labor of people was a constant in the world so that was not the unusual thing. The unusual thing was coupling it with racism, which came much, much later” (Lynn Neary “National Public Radio book tour”). The novel comprises of a series of interwoven stories concerning an eclectic type of extended family owned by John Vaark, an Anglo-Dutch settler and his household can be described as multicultural but powerless living in the wilds of Virginia. Rebecca, his wife is white who has come from the merciless London slums. She is actually a part of the exchange against the supplies that Jacob made to her father (72). The other members of the household include two unfree white male indentured servants, Willard and Scully, Lina, a Native American survivor whose tribe was wiped out by smallpox,
Sorrow, a half-mad orphaned girl of unspecified ethnicity, and an African American slave girl, Florens.

Based on her study of American colonial history, Morrison learned that race became a meaningful category of social identity primarily after the “Bacon’s Rebellion, an uprising that occurred in Virginia in 1676” (Li 115). In the novel, one sees that upon his arrival in North America, Jacob Vaark, an enterprising Anglo-Dutch has no illusion about where he has come to: “1682 and Virginia was still a mess” (9) and “Half-a-dozen years ago, an army of blacks, natives, whites, mulattoes - freedmen, slaves and indentured - had waged war against the local gentry led by members of that very class” (8). This failed “people's war” that has come to be known as Bacon’s Rebellion, produced a thicket of new laws that not only hardened the racial caste as a way of controlling the colony’s marginalized people but were also gradually to shape the nation’s history. As one observes Jacob Vaark reflects upon the stringent laws enacted to discourage alliances across racial and class divides:

By eliminating manumission, gatherings, travel and bearing arms for black people only; by granting license to any white to kill any black for any reason; by compensating owners for a slave’s maiming or death, they separated and protected all whites from all others forever. Any social ease between gentry and laborers, forged before and during that rebellion, crumbled beneath a hammer wielded in the interests of the gentry’s profits (10).

The novel sensitively exposes the pattern in which, if increasing the enslaved black population enabled planters to reduce an armed white labor force and resolve volatile white class tensions, a by-product was the creation of a biracial society. Unsuccessful at eliminating Native Americans from Virginia, the laws helped to convert multiracial European thralldom into black American slavery (Mayberry 167).
In an influential article, “Origins of the southern labor system”, Oscar and Mary F. Handlin stated that laws against runaways, interclass marriage, and the like gradually came to be more strictly applied to black servants/slaves than to white servants. Slavery thereby, became tied to color, locking blacks in colonial North America’s lowest socioeconomic class (211). In the late seventeenth century, as the slave population increased, further legislation widened the gap between the races and African Americans, by 1700 had ceased to be people and had become property.

Morrison develops her narrative lines in the novel in her familiar manner, giving one chapter by turns to each competing voice, seldom letting her characters directly rub up against one another, collapsing time frames, trapping each of them in their biographies. She carefully fashions something that lives powerfully as “an invented oral history and that seems to demand to be taken as a parable, but one whose meaning - which lives in the territory of harshness and sacrifice - is constantly undermined or elusive” (Adams Rev.). The novel is multi-vocal, as we are told the stories of individual characters by means of a third person limited narration, having access to their thought and fears and strategically indicts the account of “What had initially started off really well as a new society with slave in no time transformed itself into a “slave society” of the New Americas” (Foner 61). It is Florens, who speaks for herself in first person and her mother in the final section. The colonial America that Morrison depicts here is not “a land hungry for freedom, but a land that is jittery and repressive, fixated on profit and punitive by instinct. Fate and economics bring the characters together, and hold them together only for as long as it takes to recognize common victimhood” (Rokosz-Piezko82).

Although some historians would argue against being more noticeable as the sole quality constituting the difference in the situation of white and non-white
indentured servants, Morrison justifies her point by populating her narrative with a variety of characters that are deprived of personal liberty on a variety of grounds. One would clearly notice that Jacob Vaark’s extended family could be a subtle metaphor for representing colonial America – a house – that benefitted the most from slavery. Vaark’s family is built based upon fault lines wherein, each member of it was bartered in a benign manner and each of the women seems locked inside her own head, and inside her own fate. All of them are slaves in different ways – Rebekka, shipped over from England, had to choose between the prospects of “servant, prostitute or wife, and though horrible stories were told about each of those careers, the last one seemed the safest” (75-76); Lina has witnessed a fall from the Eden of her childhood - her tribe was wiped out by a plague - and she clings to “the Mistress” (56) as the only stability in her broken world. Sorrow changes her name over the course of the novel after she gives birth to a child and becomes “Complete” (132). Florens, meanwhile, swaps from one kind of slavery for another when she becomes infatuated with the blacksmith who comes to the estate, a freed slave from New Amsterdam, who wants nothing of her submission.

At another level of analysis, the world that Morrison portrays here is symbolic of the real clash of cultures that took place in the New World that promised wealth and prosperity no matter the ethics and morality involved in acquiring wealth in a lawless world. Everything could be bought and sold in this world, despite the threat of natural or man-made annihilation and the agenda of all the interacting actors was not merely wealth - Europeans sailed to this land in hopes of either prosperity or escape; Natives suffered an apocalypse; Slaves from Africa and Europe were at the mercy of their turbulent fate transported across the wild seas. In short, all of them from diverse lands were consigned to the common melting pot that was cruel and merciless.
In an interview conducted by Michele Norris around the time of the novel’s appearance, Morrison frankly mentions the fact that she tried to refer to slavery as a universal phenomenon. Many white people are descendants of slaves. It suggests an attempt to create a usable past, a potential common ground, by describing a time period before scientific notions of racial difference based on which slavery was justified was established (“Toni Morrison Finds A Mercy in Servitude”). Some critics would call A Mercy a softer version of Beloved and emphasize that while in Beloved, “skin color and slavery are inextricably linked,” in A Mercy, Morrison’s indictment of slavery in 1680s America shows “a color-blind” and not yet rigid, the peculiar institution it would become in due course (Donahue “Slavery of a different sort toils in Toni Morrison’s A Mercy.”). Morrison also admits, she was interested in, not what the clerics were doing or the merchants or even the armies, but what the people who sort of seemed to her to never appear in the history (Norris “Toni Morrison Finds A Mercy in Servitude”). Morrison infuses her narrative with voices that represent a time in early colonial America inhabited by a black free man like the blacksmith in the novel whom Lina finds arrogant. This is evident when she reflects her fear-stricken thoughts:

Learning from Mistress that he was a free man doubled her anxiety. He had rights, then, and privileges, like Sir. He could marry; own things, travel, sell his own labor. . . . he removed his hat once more, then did something Lina had never seen an African do: he looked directly at Mistress… never blinking those eyes slanted and yellow as a man’s (43).

Indeed the return to the origins of what would eventually become the eastern seaboard of the North Atlantic U.S. also “unmaps” the rosy myths of the foundations of the country, in which the “Europs,” far from “civilizing” the untamed continent, bring death, disease, and destruction to the indigenous peoples who maintained a
much more harmonious relationship of man to nature (52). In spite of the fact that on his journey to Maryland Jacob Vaark acknowledges native ownership of all the land (10), he pointedly notes the king’s dominion, as a “privately owned country,” which nevertheless allowed trade to foreign markets, and which was “[g]ood for planters, better for merchants, best for brokers” like himself (11), a fact that allows him to swallow his squeamishness over trading and lending to the papists. Jacob may have principles, but those are easily compromised when there is a profit to be made, an apt metaphor for the whole economic system of the future United States from its very beginnings.

While he travels to Maryland to claim a debt from a tobacco plantation owner, a Señor D’Ortega, Jacob Vaark dwells upon the realization that his farm is not as profitable as he had hoped. On his arrival at the plantation, it is clear to him that D’Ortega is not giving his money and he reluctantly receives what’s owing to him in the form of a little girl, Florens. Whereas Vaark shows a little amount of mercy by accepting Florens’s mother’s wish, nevertheless, Florens's life is passed from the cruelties of Ortega's plantation to the relative ease of Vaark's farm. Adding to the irresolution in Vaark's mind, the transaction has exacted another price and Vaark returns with a burning desire to build a big house as that of Ortega. At an inn, he falls into conversation with another man, who sets out for him the flavor of the new economics and introduces him to the prospect of the future that is hidden in sugar, in molasses, in rum. There is “‘No loss of investment. None Ever. No crop failure. No wiped-out beaver or fox. No war to interfere. Crop plentiful, eternal. Slave workers, same. Buyers eager. Product, heavenly.... Each and every month five times the investment. For certain ’”(29). It is evident in the novel that Vaark is tempted by the invisible hand of this new market: “And there was a profound difference between the
intimacy of slave bodies at Jublio and a remote labor force in Barbados. Right?
Right, he thought, looking at a sky vulgar with stars” (33). Many critics felt that this particular moment in the text is suggestive of the crucial turn of event wherein, Vaark’s last acts of investing in the Barbados plantations is representative of America’s defining decision in its history by determining that the engine of capitalism in the New World would be slave labor in distant lands.

In an article “What Lay Beneath the Names”: The Language and Landscapes of *A Mercy*” by Marc C. Conne, it has been emphatically suggested that Morrison gives the name “Jacob Vaark” a portentous importance, for it is a name that carries an “immense burden of meaning” (153) and further notes that like the biblical Jacob, Morrison’s Jacob, is a figure of countless parts, described by Genesis commentator William Kass as “a man of many turns and many ways, the biblical counterpart of Odysseus” (405). Like the narrator says: “a deposit if the man signed a note: Jacob Vaark” (10). Morrison’s Jacob of *A Mercy* befits the biblical role of the Jacob with great precision and is a worker or a maker and his last name also adds up to such a reading since, “Vaark” in Old English means “work” with the interesting implications of something that is done to attain salvation. In other words, Jacob Vaark’s characterization in the text could be associated with “the anti-Puritanical emphasis on attaining grace through works, a tendency that feeds into the Protestant work ethic that so fueled America from its early colonial days to the present” (Conne 153). Such a reading allows us to look at Morrison’s creation of Jacob Vaark, a representative man who embodies both the blessings and the curses of the American Adam.
As Jacob Vaark moves through the landscape, it is seen that it only takes meaningful form only in relation to himself:

Despite the long sail in three vessels down three different bodies of water, and now the hard ride over Lenape trail, he took delight in the journey. Breathing the air of a world so new, almost alarming in rawness and temptation, never failed to invigorate him. Once beyond the warm gold of the bay, he saw forests untouched since Noah, shorelines beautiful enough to bring tears, wild food for the taking …. Now here he was, a ratty orphan become landowner, making a place out of no place, a temperate living from a raw life. (12)

It is indeed ironical that Morrison begins the narrative with a liberal display of Jacob’s ethos of conquest and domination of the landscape, but the author abandons Jacob’s dream of dominion, and the rest of the book concentrates largely on the female voices of nondomination that yearns for harmony with the land. The remainder of the book traces Florens’s journey, which literally maps and contrasts markedly with Jacob’s journey. While Jacob’s journey outlines a loud assertion of a male language of dominion onto the land, Florens moves into and through a landscape where “dominion does not exist, and the only language available to her is a female language that does not wish to dominate, but only to find the way” (Conne 155). Seeking the blacksmith, Florens begins her journey on a wagon with two other women, who are “certain their years of debt are over but the master says no” (39-40).

As pointed earlier, Morrison has admitted that her interest in this novel was in a period before racism was inextricably related to slavery. …this period before a race hierarchy was established legally and later culturally …. My book is pre-racial in that it happens before it became institutionalized (Brophy-Warren “A Writer’s Vote”). The portrait of America presented by the author highlights among other things, that it
is, precisely the product of a range of human enslavement, and this is illustrated when Florens travels through a string of sites of the have-nots, in short, those who have no place in this world and who make no mark upon its map among the historical ciphers by and upon whom America was built: indentured servants, people who are the property of others, the poor and the dispossessed and never-possessed. Consequently, this litany of the preterite, as Conne rightly points out, results in anew mapping of which will become America, revealing a thicker concept of slavery than Morrison has ever presented (156).

With an almost biblical imaginative power on display, Morrison reminds us of the fundamental sin of self-sufficiency and the prideful assertion that one is self-created that haunts so much of her writing. To point here, most of her memorable characters one after another, realize their dependency on larger communities, for instance: the importance of ancestors for Son in *Tar Baby*, Milkman in *Song of Solomon*; community as seen in *Beloved* for Sethe and Denver; companions like Joe and Violet in *Jazz*; a larger concept of God as in Deacon in *Paradise*; or a greater sense of commitment that goes beyond one’s own desires as seen in Romen in *Love*. Morrison emphatically pushes against the popular American motif of self-reliance.

In Rebekka’s characterization, Morrison offers a most extended foray into the consciousness of a white woman (Conne 160). The significant part of Rebekka’s narrative is her journey by ship from England to America, in which she travelled, “packed like cod between decks” in the “dark space below next to the animal shells” (79) with a band of cast-off women aboard a ship called the *Angelus*. This part of the novel reminds one of the functioning of other Morrisonian female communities such as the Convent in *Paradise*, “these exiled, thrown-away women”—prostitutes, thieves, women “sent away in disgrace” (80) — give Rebekka the courage to complete
the arduous journey. Their voyage shows us that African slaves and European women put up with a certain sympathy in their fates, and that each is sent into a kind of slavery, and that “slavery in America is more multivalent than history has supposed it to be” (Coone 160). However, temporarily, the women create a communion moment, sharing wine and stale biscuits during their crossing, and at this moment they are, free from the twin dominators of men and land, and safe in the arms of the sea which is neither male nor land:

Wretched as was the space they crouched in, it was nevertheless blank where a past did not haunt nor a future beckon. Women of and for men, in those few moments they were neither. And when finally the lamp died, swaddling them in black, for a long time, oblivious to the footsteps above them, or the lowing behind them, they did not stir. For them, unable to see the sky, time became simply the running sea, unmarked, eternal and of no matter. (83)

However, as an enslaved person who can claim dominion over nothing, not even herself, the author also suggests that just like the reader, Florens has no map to follow through this world and her only clues to place and direction available to her, are remembered words from her mistress Rebekka and the language spoken to her by the land itself. As evident in the text, Rebekka has made Florens “memorize the way.” Florens journeys first with the wagon, then takes “the Abenaki trail which I will know by the sapling bent into the earth with one sprout growing skyward” (37-38). This sapling signifies Florens’s own situation because it is only through successfully completing her journey that Florens, grounded into the earth with, but stretching into the sky, could seek freedom. When all the other travelers make their escape, Florens also flees: “I go west into the trees. Everything I want is west.” But she becomes confused, since she is not yet able to read the land “Hard as I try I lose the road;” she
then laments the signals the land sends her, “I don’t know how to read that” (39). She misses the guiding words that another woman could provide and she admits “I need Lena to say how to shelter in wilderness” (40). Through Florens’s journey, Morrison not only outlines the difficulty of navigating the wilderness without dominating it, but at the same time, as Florens seeks the language that will guide her to the blacksmith, so too Morrison herself, seems to be seeking for an alternative language to “harmoniously inhabit and traverse the landscape itself” (Conne 156).

Morrison departs midway from accounting on Florens’s journey and the narrative shifts to explore Lena, the Native American girl whose village was wiped out by smallpox and who was subsequently sheltered and named by “the Presbyterians,” and then abandoned by them and acquired by Jacob. One finds that Morrison’s works consistently contain Native American characters and culture and they are often valorized by her. As, for instance, we can remember Sixo in Beloved, Consuela and the Algonquian girls in Paradise and in this work, Lina’s values can be associated to express the author’s contempt for the culture of domination by the “Europes” who:

Neither fled nor died out. … They would come with languages that sounded like dog bark; with a childish hunger for animal fur. They would forever fence land, ship whole trees tp faraway countries, take any woman for quick pleasure, ruin soil, befoul sacred places and worship a dull, unimaginative god. They let their hogs browse the ocean shore turning it into dunes of sand where nothing green can ever grow again. Cut loose from the earth’s soul, they insisted on purchase of its soil, and like all orphans they were insatiable. It was their destiny to chew up the world and spit out horribleness that would destroy all primary peoples. (52)
The little community functions until Jacob’s death. Lina admits “As long as Sir was alive it was easy to veil the truth: that they were not a family—not even a like-minded group. They were orphans, each and all” (57). This death of the master leaves the women entirely vulnerable and leads the “extended family” to disintegrate. As long as he lives, that entity functions, despite the obvious discrepancies. The wilderness, against which the first settlers led their struggle, turns out to be less hostile and cruel than the “approaching civilization with its eighty-two norms and regulations, religious arguments, violent uprisings and eventual exclusion of every non-white” (Rokosz-Piezko 82-83). Florens admits the vulnerability of their situation after Vaark dies “Mistress has cured but she is not well. Her heart is infidel. All smiles are gone. Each time she returns from the meetinghouse her eyes are nowhere and have no inside. Like the eyes of the women who examine me behind the closet door, Mistress’ eyes only look out and what she is seeing is not to her liking” (157).

The novel also explores the crucial point in American history in which racial categories were only beginning to emerge. This is illustrated when Florens’ mother expresses: “It was there I learned how I was not a person from my country, nor from my families. I was negrita. Everything language, dress, gods, dance, habits, decoration, song—all of it cooked together in the color of my skin. So it was as a black that I was purchased by Senhor, taken out of the cane and shipped north to his tobacco plants” (163). As Li states “Florens’ mother is thus irrevocably marked by her blackness. The sign of her bondage becomes an inescapable inheritance for her two children (117). The gradual appearance of racial categories in defining slavery alters, alienates and marginalizes lives of major characters in the novel. Gradually, when the notion of racism was adopted to justify the smooth running of the institution of slavery, all that was becoming predominant was the increasing sense of dislocation
non-white slaves felt and also a growing sense of feeling more rooted amidst disrootedness.

As one of the minor characters in the novel Downes says: “They ship in more. Like firewood, what burns to ash is refueled. And don’t forget, there are births. The place is a stew of mulattoes, creoles, zambos, lobos, chinos, coyotes.” (28) The slave society we find here slowly started cradling notions guided by racial prejudices and ways of “othering” based on which individuals were fit to be reduced into mere objects based on skin colors that gradually became a predominant marker of a person’s entitlement to become a slave. The objectification process could be seen when, after the conflagration had wiped away Lina’s village:

... she was taken to live among kindly Presbyterians. ... They named her Messalina, just in case, but shortened it to Lina to signal a silver of hope. Afraid of once more losing shelter, terrified of being alone in the world without family, Lina acknowledged her status as heathen and let herself be purified by these worthies. She learned that bathing naked in the river was a sin; that plucking cherries from a tree burdened with them was theft; that to eat corn mush with one’s fingers was perverse (46).

In another episode, Florens admits that something precious is leaving her and she is a thing apart and emphasizes:

With the letter I belong and am lawful. Without it I am weak calf abandon by the herd, a turtle without shell, a minion with no telltale signs but darkness I am born with, outside, yes, but inside as well and the inside dark is small, feathered and toothy. ... The sun’s going leaves darkness behind and the dark is me. Is we. Is my home (113).
The height of dehumanizing an individual is reflected when she states:

… they tell to take off my clothes. Without touching they tell me what to do. To show them my teeth, my tongue. … They look under my arms, between my legs. They circle me, lean down to inspect my feet. Naked under their examination. I watch for what is in their eyes. No hate is there or scare or disgust but they are looking at me my body across distances without recognition. (111)

Things change as the narrative progresses and what initially was a society with slaves turned into a hub in which black slaves and normally white indentured servants were beginning to be separated on racial grounds, putting the indentured servants above the slaves. As Morrison says "The function of racism is dysfunction," and added, "It is a route to power, but that power is not yours” (Crowder “Toni Morrison discusses racism and "A Mercy" during keynote speech”). One notices that even Scully and Willard change ever since Mistress handed the shillings in return for their services in the farm. Willard claims “The shillings she offered was the first money they had ever been paid, raising their work from duty to dedication, from pity to profit.” (142) By distancing themselves from those who were non-white, both of them ensured to please their mistress and consequently, “watched the disaffection Mistress spread”, in an attempt to please her and “When she beat Sorrow, had Lina’s hammock taken down, advertised the sale of Florens, he cringed inside but said nothing.” (153)

Morrison’s A Mercy is the repository of a wealth of information that enhance our understanding of the emotional life of people in the chaotic world, of Christian practices, faith and belief, of the world of native Americans and their social world, of how Christian and tribal religion take care of sick, of the larger social forces that shape human destiny, of what it meant to be African, Native American and women
during those days, of the condition of being orphaned. Against the backdrop of the late seventeenth century colonial America, in which, the country’s reliance on slavery as an economic engine was just beginning to develop, the author asserts that slavery was pre-racial, a time before the terrible transformation irreversibly linked slavery to skin-color or race. A Mercy is indeed a richly-layered text, multi-encrusted in its meanings and possibilities, in terms of its intense critical import that mined upon sites embedded with the genealogy of slavery and racism.

Hence it could be concluded that in her later novels Love and A Mercy, Toni Morison focuses comparatively more on situating the African American communal self in the contemporary American multi-cultural context. However, this does not indicate a complete shift away from the contexts which characterized the earlier novels: for example - the experiences of freedom, dislocation and slavery and its meaning and relevance today for an African American remain primary context for both Love and A Mercy respectively.