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The influence of the “Africanist presence” on American identity formation

How are ethnic identities constructed, maintained, and transformed through the ascription of an Africanist presence?

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Abstract

In this thesis, I will explore the influence of Toni Morrison's concept of the "Africanist presence" on American identity formation. I will use Morrison's own approach in *Playing in the Dark* to expose a fabricated Africanist presence, to uncover oppression, subjugation and exclusion in her own novel *A Mercy* (2009) and in James Baldwin's short story "Going to Meet the Man" (1965). I will also demonstrate how the racial division between "whiteness" and "blackness" happened as a consequence of the American dream and the belief in American exceptionalism. Through a detailed character analysis of the novel and short story, I will uncover how the Africanist presence serves as a foil to the American exceptionalist and how American identity is self-reflexive of this Africanist personae.

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Introduction

In this thesis, I will explore Toni Morrison's main arguments in *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the literary Imagination* (1993) and demonstrate how an individual's identity formation happens in the subliminal space between the perceived concepts of the black and white race. I use the term "perceived concept of race" because of Stephen Cornell and Douglas Hartmann's explanation of the definition of race; "despite the lack of biological basis for the conception of distinct human races, race still wields monumental power as a social category" (Cornell & Hartmann, 1998, s. 23). They define race as;

a human group defined by itself or others as distinct by virtue of perceived common physical characteristics that are held to be inherent. A race is a group of human beings socially defined on the basis of physical characteristics. Determining which characteristics constitute the race – the selection of markers and therefore the construction of the racial category itself – is a choice human beings make. Neither markers nor categories are determined by any biological factors (...) Races, like ethnic groups, are not established by some set of natural forces but are products of human perception and classification. They are social constructs. (Cornell & Hartmann, 1998, ss. 23-24)

By investigating American literature, *A Mercy* (2009) by Toni Morrison and "Going to Meet the Man" (1965) by James Baldwin, I will explore how the categorisation of people as a particular "race" leads to the act of ostracism, "Othering", exclusion and dehumanisation. In *Playing in the Dark*, Morrison argues that identity formation happens on account of something one is *not*, exemplified when the white coloniser's identity emerges as free only in comparison to the *not* free, captive black slave. My main goal in this thesis, however, is to build upon Morrison's theory, and I aim to uncover how race becomes a socially constructed phenomenon in the literary texts and demonstrate that identity formation happens due to a feeling of belonging *or* exclusion that arises because of the act of ascription from others. The foundation for this goal is based upon Cornell and Hartmann's explanation that racial identity typically originates by assignment from others, based on perceived physical differences (Cornell & Hartmann, 1998, s. 35). They claim that the significance of race, the constructed boundary between groups, the idea of "us" and "them", and the intense, internal aspects of group solidarity, the subjective "feeling of belonging" that is often associated with group

membership, has been pivotal for American identity formation (Cornell & Hartmann, 1998, s. 26/52). In their view, most racial categories are a contrastive construction, assigned to “others” because race has been first and foremost a way of fabricating boundaries and making clear that “they” are not “us” (Cornell & Hartmann, 1998, s. 27). Cornell and Hartmann argue that the identity that others assign to us can be a powerful force in shaping our own self-concepts and feeling of belonging. Ascription creates the significance of the difference that becomes enough to separate the categories, but identity formation happens when the category becomes a part of the individual’s self-concept (Cornell & Hartmann, 1998, s. 30).

I will attempt to demonstrate how each literary character undergoes an identity formation when they engage in formative racial encounters that make this ascription of significance to create fabricated boundaries. It is this ascription from others, the fabrication of “us” and “them”, and the resulting feeling of exclusion or belonging elicited from such a fabrication that I aim to explore, and I will argue that these themes are very relevant for Morrison’s concept of the “Africanist presence” that she considers in *Playing in the Dark*. She defines the fabricated Africanist presence as something decidedly not American but decidedly other (Morrison, 1993, s. 48) implemented in white literature to show how the white race is superior. Morrison claims that historically white authors often inserted an Africanist presence either consciously or unconsciously to show how white identity was superior in comparison to black identity. I will execute an analysis of the main literary characters in *A Mercy* and Jesse, the protagonist in “Going to Meet the Man”, to demonstrate how each of their identity formations happens in accordance with the ascription by others or to others. I will endeavour to uncover how each of them develops their identity through belonging to or exclusion from the white or black race and how they inevitably base their selfhood on what they are *not*. Moreover, I will consequently expose how American identity formation and the classification of races may be intricately intertwined with American exceptionalism and demonstrate how this may have been the instigator of the racial divisions of society in early America. My research question is, therefore, as follows;

How are ethnic identities constructed, maintained, and transformed through the ascription of an Africanist presence?

I will ascertain this information by applying Morrison’s method as a tool in her own work in *A Mercy* and in “Going to Meet the Man” to uncover any forms of subjugation to see how this affects the literary characters’ identity formation. Morrison’s approach can be described as “investigat[ing] the ways in which a nonwhite, Africanist presence and personae have been

constructed – invented in the United States, and (of) the literary uses this fabricated presence has served” (Morrison, 1993, s. 90). Scilicet, my approach will be to read and uncover racial dynamics between the lines and discover how power relations affect social dynamics. As Morrison contends, such an analysis will show how the representation and appropriation of an Africanist presence will provide opportunities to contemplate limitation, suffering, rebellion, fate and destiny (Morrison, 1993, s. 53). I will attempt to explore the validity of Morrison’s claims about identity formation by analysing the social divisions that are present in the primary texts and how the literary characters experience exclusion, discrimination, disadvantage, specific aspirations and identities based upon the colour of their skin. I will explore if there is a “language that can powerfully evoke and enforce hidden signs of racial superiority, cultural hegemony, and ‘dismissive othering’ of people and language” (Morrison, 1993, s. 10).

Arguably, the primary texts I have chosen help elucidate identity creation in both black and white races and how this relationship is interdependent. Morrison’s argument in *Playing in the Dark* about the self-reflexive nature of encounters with Africanism will be methodically investigated by reading between the lines in both texts. Because Morrison and Baldwin are African American themselves and have stated that they are both conscious of this constructed Africanist presence in American literature (Morrison in *Playing in the Dark* (1993) and Baldwin in his interview *The Negro in American Culture* (1961)), I find it interesting to see how they *intentionally* utilise the Africanist presence to limn out the invention and implications of whiteness in their own literary works. It is also compelling to find out how they depict this identity formation through both a white *and* a black perspective through their literary characters. Whereas *A Mercy* does not cover Africanism specifically bound up with masculinity, “Going to Meet the Man” does, so in my opinion, putting the two stories in dialogue with one another broadens the scope of the concept of the Africanist presence. Combined, they show how the constructs of whiteness and blackness are a continual social play with binaries and how this binarism is intricately related to American exceptionalism. Furthermore, their literary works entail central themes in postcolonial theory, such as identity, marginalisation, belonging, exclusion and assimilation. I will discuss the formative encounters at the intersection of subject and history, which can be interpreted as constitutive rather than merely reflective for identity formation. My thesis will thus be an exploration of determining experiences that operate within the limiting constructs of race and how it affects the individual. Consequently, I will rely heavily on Morrison’s arguments in *Playing in the Dark* and her concept of the Africanist presence, cultural and post-colonial

theorist Homi Bhabha's theory of "third space", "hybridity" and "mimicry", and Frantz Fanon's concept of "the white gaze" and the eradication of African culture by colonisation throughout the thesis.

American exceptionalism and the American dream

An essential factor for understanding identity formation in American history is unmasking the tradition of Othering and exclusion, and one of the reasons for it may be due to the sentiment of American exceptionalism. Donald Klein and Hisham M. Amin state that American exceptionalism can be explained by the constructed white hegemony that was established by the Europeans due to the fact that they believed in their own moral and intellectual superiority over Africans and indigenous people. This perception of superiority enabled the slave trade, and the African's status as captives became a determining factor in the reinforcement and perpetuation of the hierarchal racial structure of American society. For the American exceptionalists, the African identity was associated with ignorance, wildness and savagery. African culture was, through their eyes, viewed as foreign and inferior (Klein & Amin, 1994, s. 660). Justine Baillie states that for the American exceptionalist white male settler, the unmapped territory represented an unexplored and open space, ready to be conquered and exploited. The inhabitants were deemed less than human and indistinguishable from the unmapped space's flora and fauna – also to be conquered and owned. Baillie argues that "such an anthropocentric viewpoint alongside hierarchies of classification and taxonomy, provides the justification for imperialist expansion" (Baillie, 2013, s. 191). Turner also emphasises the historical importance of the frontier when it comes to American exceptionalism because the expansion of land created a connection between geography and character. The exceptionalist's sense of success and identity fulfilment was bound to the expansion of land. Because it was fundamentally masculinist, the American self was restored by domination over primitive peoples and the land itself (Turner in Duquette, 2013, s. 474). This idea was closely linked to "Manifest Destiny", a concept that was coined in 1845 and entailed the conviction that white Americans had a divine destiny and a right of Westward Expansion to settle and tame the wilderness (including its people) of the entire North American continent (Heidler, 2021). Morrison also foregrounds in *Playing in the Dark* that American exceptionalism was consistently white and male and that literature perpetuated this notion "[white literature was] a succinct portrait of the process by which the American as new, white, and male was constituted" (Morrison, 1993, s. 43). Throughout canonical

literature, the use of “he” as a universal pronoun helped maintain masculinity as a privileged social position (Jakubowicz & Perchard, 2017, s. 41). I will, therefore, from this point on, ascribe the figure of the American exceptionalist with a male pronoun based upon Turner and Morrison’s argument because the American exceptionalist was habitually a white male and assumed a superior position.

The maintenance of this superior position was closely connected to the pursuit of the American dream. The American dream entailed the possibility of self-determination, prosperity, freedom from the rigid class constraints seen in other cultures, and the opportunity to worship and speak freely without punishment (Duquette, 2013, s. 473). The myth was that anyone, no matter how unprivileged, could achieve upward social mobility and personal happiness (Jakubowicz & Perchard, 2017, s. 75). Throughout the romance genre of literature, Klein explains that the portrayal of people of colour signified the opposite of the American dream. The paradox was that African life, on the other hand, consisted of failure, powerlessness and exploitation in complete contrast (Klein & Amin, 1994, s. 661). As critics Donald Pease and William Spanos substantiate, the belief that the American nation had an exceptional identity shaped this American imagination described in romance. Thus, American exceptionalism can be argued to be one of the most important concepts underlying modern theories of American cultural identity (Madsen in Strehle, 2013, s. 109).

Playing in the Dark and The Africanist presence.

In Morrison’s book *Playing in the Dark*, one of her main arguments is that “whiteness” defines itself through “blackness” and vice versa. Blackness is frequently depicted as “Otherness” in classical American literature (Morrison, 1993). One might say that the most contemporary focus of her article is the exploration of the construction of white identity. She depicts a relatively pristine outlook on racial identity formation because she casts light on the representation of both races and depicts how each defines the other. Morrison highlights the fact that the whole concept of Americanness as white was born “through a self-reflexive contemplation of fabricated, mythological Africanism” (Morrison, 1993, s. 47). She emphasises the possibility that the very concept of identity develops in the interval between white and black and demonstrates that the two are entirely interconnected when concerning racial identity formation. She argues that it is paramount to be aware of this interplay because blackness and whiteness are both dependent on each other and correspond to each other. Noticing the interplay between them is a crucial factor in understanding racial identity

formation. Traditionally, the focus has been on the oppressed African body, but Morrison proposes that one should explore the formative properties in the liminal space between the perception of races. Morrison argues that what is “equally valuable is a serious intellectual effort to see what racial ideology does to the mind, imagination and behaviour of masters” (Morrison, 1993, s. 13). Thus, in *Playing in the Dark*, she endeavours to expose how whiteness was constructed in relation to the presence of something she terms the “Africanist presence”; “What became transparent were the self-evident ways that Americans choose to talk about themselves through and within a sometimes allegorical, sometimes metaphorical, but always choked representation of an Africanist presence” (Morrison, 1993, s. 17). The distinguishing features of the un-American were their unfree slave status – and their colour (Morrison, 1993, s. 48). To accentuate American freedom, the creation of the “Africanist presence” – something decidedly not American but decidedly Other took place (Morrison, 1993, s. 48).

Morrison contends that the foundation of “‘Americanness’ cannot be separate from and unaccountable to the Africanist presence” (Morrison, 1993, s. 5). This means that the Africanist presence is crucial to the white sense of Americanness, and the fabrication of it in literature occurs to mediate its feeling. She claims, “Through the expedient of demonizing and reifying the range of color on a palette, American Africanism makes it possible to say and not say, to inscribe and erase, to escape and engage, to act out and act on, historicize and render timeless. It provides a way of contemplating chaos and civilization, desire and fear, and a mechanism for testing the problems and blessings of freedom” (Morrison, 1993, s. 7). Morrison contends that exploring these factors of opposites may be of paramount importance for understanding the role of blackness in the formation of American identity, “As a writer reading, I came to realize the obvious: the subject of the dream is the dreamer. The fabrication of an Africanist persona is reflexive; an extraordinary meditation on the self; a powerful exploration of the fears and desires that reside in the writerly conscious” (Morrison, 1993, s. 17). She argues that by reading through canonical American literature, it became evident that the ideals that applied to white people were based upon something that was unattainable for black people. Where white people were subjected to the American dream, freedom, democracy and equality, the African American people suffered oppression, bondage and political disempowerment. Morrison reiterates that the white hegemony of early America became possible because the American exceptionalist believed himself morally and intellectually superior to the African. This created the basis for the slave trade and reinforced the view of the African as an ignorant Other and a savage without civility. Africanism became

the opposite side of the American dream and demonstrated the binary oppositions of black versus white, good versus evil, moral versus immoral, civilized versus savage, and chosen versus unchosen. Africanism became the tool for this polarity. “Black bondage and the myths of black inferiority and savagery allowed white America to indulge in its own defining myths – viewing itself as free civilized, and innocent” (Jakubowicz & Perchard, 2017, s. 5). The very concept of “American freedom” is the polar opposite of black slavery. The enslaved black person historically stood as a symbol of the subjugated, silenced, and dehumanised object compared to the free, exceptionalist American pursuing the American dream in the land of opportunity. These opportunities were chartered only for the white people but were only made possible because of the black people, “that freedom was bought with enslavement, that prosperity was bought with poverty, that life for some was bought with death for others – in short, that white was defined by what it was not – black” (Rice, 1996, s. 51). Morrison argues, “The concept of freedom did not emerge in a vacuum. Nothing highlighted freedom – if it did not in fact create it – like slavery” (Morrison, 1993, s. 38). By paying attention to these oppositions, one can expose the way white American identity is connected to restricting constructs of the African American persona and that it emerges based upon this. Morrison states that the formation of white American national identity has been greatly affected by the negative associations projected upon the Africanist persona in canonical literature (Jakubowicz & Perchard, 2017, ss. 73-74). According to Morrison;

The slave population, it could be and was assumed, othered itself up as surrogate selves for meditation on problems of human freedom, its lure and its elusiveness. This black population was available for meditations on terror – the terror of European outcasts, their dread of failure, powerlessness, Nature without limits, natal loneliness, internal aggression, evil, sin, greed. In other words, this slave population was understood to have offered itself up for reflections on human freedom in terms other than the abstractions of human potential and the rights of man. (Morrison, 1993, s. 37-38)

Furthermore, the role of the Africanist presence and the condition that it symbolises serves as a foil to the white American and functions as something the white individuals can define themselves in contrast to. Morrison emphasises the significance of not only uncovering an Africanist presence in canonical literature but how the illusion of whiteness is described in contrast to it and consequently how ethnic identities are developed because of each other and

even in opposition to one another. Morrison claims that this is highly significant when it comes to the romance genre in literature;

Romance, an exploration of anxiety imported from the shadows of European culture, made possible the sometimes safe and other times risky embrace of quite specific, understandably human, fears: American's fear of being outcast, of failing, of powerlessness; their fear of boundarylessness, of Nature unbridled and crouched for attack; their fear of the absence of so-called civilization; their fear of loneliness, of aggression both external and internal. In short, the terror of human freedom – the thing they coveted most of all. (Morrison, 1993, s. 36-37)

Morrison claims that uncovering stereotypical portrayals of race awards an awareness of both historical and contemporary power dynamics and racial disparities in American society. She claims that white Americans' identities have emerged through *not* being black; "For in that construction of blackness and enslavement could be found not only the not-free but also, with the dramatic polarity created with skin color, the projection of the not-me. The result was a playground for the imagination. What rose up out of the collective needs to allay internal fears and to rationalize external exploitation was an American Africanism – a fabricated brew of darkness, otherness, alarm, and desire that is uniquely American" (Morrison, 1993, s. 38). As Morrison once said in an interview about her other novel *Paradise* (1997), wherever there is a "chosen" people like as in American exceptionalism, there is also a backside of the chosen that seems to be dependent on the exclusion of other people (Morrison in Strehle, p. 112). Therefore, it is evident that Morrison posits that the white American identity formation was intricately dependent and connected to the Africanist presence that could function as the *not* chosen. She asserts that white American identity construction was only made possible in opposition to the Africanist presence.

Homi Bhabha, "mimicry of man", "hybridity", and the theory of "third space."

Morrison's focus on racial identity formation, power structures and racial divisions is something that may be considered highly relevant to Homi Bhabha's concept of "mimicry", "hybridity", and his theory of "third space". In his article *On Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of colonial discourse* (1983/1994), Bhabha explains how cultural ambivalence becomes dramatised in what he terms "mimicry". In a society of cultural differences and

unequal power relations, colonised groups inevitably end up mimicking their colonisers by appropriating their master's language, educational systems and government structures. Bhabha argues that this mimicry of the colonisers may show the colonized's prevarication and uncertainty in the colonisers. He suggests that when the colonisers gaze in the mirror of the colonised's mimicry, their perception of the image becomes "almost the same, but not quite". This coalescence of repetition and difference can shift power and thus threaten the colonisers' sense of their own superiority. Bhabha claims that the act of mimicry can inevitably threaten their sense of racial privilege when they begin to recognise that the act is also "Almost the same but not white". Because if the signifiers become different enough from what they are supposed to signify, mimicry develops into mockery. When the surveillant gaze of the coloniser then sees this displacement and ironic compromise of his own gaze turned back to him, it alienates the coloniser from the confidence of his own credence. Therefore he claims that colonised people's mimicry of the colonisers destabilises colonialism itself (Bhabha, 1983/1994, s. 668). Bhabha contends that;

Mimicry emerges as the representation of a difference that is itself a process of disavowal. Mimicry is, thus, the sign of a double articulation; a complex strategy of reform, regulation, and discipline, which "appropriates" the Other as it visualizes power. Mimicry is also the sign of the inappropriate, however, a difference or recalcitrance which coheres the dominant strategic function of colonial power, intensifies surveillance, and poses an imminent threat to both "normalized" knowledges and disciplinary powers. It is from this area between mimicry and mockery, where the reforming, civilizing mission is threatened by the displacing gaze of its disciplinary double, that my instances of colonial imitation come. What they all share is a discursive process by which the excess or slippage produced by the ambivalence of mimicry (almost the same but not quite) does not merely "rupture" the discourse but becomes transformed into an uncertainty which fixes the colonial subject as a "partial" presence. (Bhabha, 1983/1994, s. 669)

The concept of Bhabha's mimicry is highly relevant for many of the literary characters in *A Mercy* and "Going to Meet the Man" because it helps to concretise the framework of the power relations and racial divisions in the narratives, ultimately leading to their identity formation. Bhabha's theory of "hybridity" and "The third space" is also relevant for all of the characters because it is presumably in this third space, Bhabha's space of cultural

ambivalence of two opposing cultures, that their identity formation takes place. Bhabha's third space can be claimed to resemble Morrison's liminal space between races. According to Bhabha, the third space represents the interval between merging cultures, "which gives rise to something different, something new and unrecognisable, a new area of negotiation of meaning and representation" (Bhabha in Darder, 1995, s. 13). This space is an aperture that gives the opportunity for new cultural identity formation because it facilitates continual development. According to Hoogvelt, Bhabha's concept of third space becomes "celebrated and privileged as a kind of superior cultural intelligence owing to the advantage of in-betweenness, the straddling of two cultures and the consequent ability to negotiate the difference" (Hoogvelt, 1997, s. 158). Thus, this liminal third space becomes a metaphorical representation where disparate cultural paradigms interchange to develop a hybrid state of existing through a "mutual and mutable" (Bhabha in Hoogvelt, 1997) transformation. These unfixed margins between subjects are where the disruption and displacement of hegemonic structures take place, where the limiting boundaries of culture and identity collide, which results in a transfiguration of "translation and negotiation" that Bhabha calls "hybridity" (Bhabha in Hoogvelt, 1997).

Frantz Fanon and the eradication of African culture

Bhabha's theory of "third space" is a significant aspect that one may claim is closely related to Frantz Fanon's arguments in *On National Culture* (1963) because one can claim that Fanon foregrounds what creates the framework for Bhabha's concept of the third space. According to Fanon, the colonisers amassed the entire African population into a "stockpile of savages" and "Niggers" (Fanon, 1963). He claims that colonialism disregards cultural nuances and perceives the "Nigger" as a savage, not an Angolan or a Nigerian, but a generic "Nigger". "The colonist believed that the vast continent was a den of savages, infested with superstitions and fanaticism, destined to be despised, cursed by God, a land of cannibals, a land of 'niggers'" (Fanon, 1963, s. 627). According to Fanon, the colonisers made the colonised believe they were inferior and savages with no history, culture or civilisation. The coalescence and generalisation of different peoples and cultures in this way removed any cultural specificity and geopolitical ethnicity and facilitated the perpetuation and conservation of racial hegemony (based solely upon skin colour) (Fanon, 1963, s. 627). He states that the ultimate goal of the colonisers was to indoctrinate the indigenous population into thinking that they were saving them from darkness. They made them believe that if the colonist were to abandon them and leave them to themselves, they would inevitably regress into barbarism,

degradation, and bestiality (Fanon, 1963, s. 630). Fanon illustrates a “colonial mother that protects its child from itself, from its ego, its physiology, its biology, and its ontological misfortune” (Fanon, 1963, s. 630). Thus, the coloniser aspired to make the colonised internalise this perception of the inferiority of their own culture, accept the unreality of their nation and realise “the disorganized, half-finished nature of their own biological makeup” (Fanon, 1963, s. 639) to be able to dominate and own them.

Fanon argues, “The sweeping, levelling nature of colonial domination was quick to dislocate in spectacular fashion the cultural life of a conquered people. The denial of a national reality, the new legal system imposed by the occupying power, the marginalization of the indigenous population and their customs by colonial society, expropriation, and the systematic enslavement of men and women, all contributed to this cultural obliteration” (Fanon, 1963, s. 639). Colonisation was the equivalent to the eradication of other cultures. Fanon explains that the black man only considered himself a “Negro” under white domination. This racialisation of thought resulted from the Europeans who always placed white culture in opposition to noncultures (Fanon, 1963, s. 630). The white colonists placed all “Negroes” in the same basket so that inevitably their only common denominator became that whatever their background, as long as they had black skin, they defined themselves in relation to the whites – in opposition, as a “Nigger” (Fanon, 1963, s. 632). One can argue that this definition of oneself in opposition to the other race resonates with Morrison’s arguments in *Playing in the Dark*.

Susan Strehle and American exceptionalism as the reason for racial hierarchy

This binary opposition between races is an important factor in Susan Strehle’s article “*I Am a Thing Apart*”: *Toni Morrison, A Mercy and American Exceptionalism* (2013). She particularly draws attention to the exclusion of one race in opposition to the “chosen” race. Strehle points to the fact that if one considers that American exceptionalism entails the idea that a chosen people and their God are white and chosen because of this single attribute, one can expose a racist bias that operates under the pretence of piety. Strehle argues that this assumption of white as chosen is racist to its core and camouflages prejudice under the guise of religious practice (Strehle, 2013, s. 112). Strehle claims that one can uncover the influence of American exceptionalism when Morrison in *A Mercy* demonstrates how social divisiveness originated in the New World and how it was detrimental to the American community. The exceptionalist myth of the “chosen” people is dependent on the ruthless exploitation of the Others of society, and the historical references in *A Mercy* (such as Bacon’s rebellion) make

the reader link history and fiction to become aware of this fact (Strehle, 2013). One might say that “Going to Meet the Man” functions as an extension of this argument as it is set at a later time but with the same deep-rooted racial divisions based upon white superiority. Hence, one can argue that white hegemony was generated because of the myth of American exceptionalism, and the consequence was the creation of hierarchical structures based upon race, gender, religion, and class. I intend to explore these factors further through a detailed character analysis.

Literary character analysis

A Mercy, by Toni Morrison

Morrison’s narrative technique in *A Mercy* oscillates between slave girl Florens’s present tense, first-person narrative and the limited third-person perspective of the other literary characters. The other focalizers include Jacob’s and Rebekka’s (the white settlers), (Messa)Lina’s, their Native American unpaid servant, Sorrow’s, a slave (with an undetermined race), Florens’s mother, and Scully’s and Willard’s, the white indentured servants on the Vaark farm. Debatably each of the characters functions as protagonists, even though the first-person narration is mediated through Florens’s voice. This literary technique creates a multi-perspective, three-dimensional structure where the reader is privy to each of the literary characters’ thoughts, history, experiences and how they differ in views. By this oscillation between focalizers, Morrison demonstrates that different actions and impressions can happen simultaneously, without the literary characters necessarily knowing about the concurrence of events. The sum of their stories creates an intertwined account, and the reader becomes aware of the different aspirations and limitations each of the characters encounters. Susan Schreiner argues that because Morrison focuses on exploring divisions in the novel, like those of between white and black, elect and preterit; she exposes how binary separations emerge out of the myth of an exceptional destiny to shape American society. As Morrison writes in *Playing in the Dark*, “Africanism is the vehicle by which the American self knows itself as not enslaved, but free; not repulsive, but desirable; not helpless, but licensed and powerful; not history-less, but historical; not damned, but innocent; not a blind accident of evolution, but a progressive fulfilment of destiny” (Morrison, 1993, s. 52). I will demonstrate how each literary character shapes their identities in accordance with this. Through a character analysis of Jacob, the virtuous American Adam, the Janus-faced Rebekka, Lina, the user of master’s tools, Florens who is sundered, the untragic mulatto Sorrow, and the marginal

characters of Florens's mother, Peter Downes and Jublio D'Ortega, I will demonstrate how these characters form their identity through either belonging to or being excluded from the white or black race. I will show how their identity formation happens in opposition to each other's races in concurrence with Morrison's arguments about identity formation in *Playing in the Dark*. I contend that Morrison's aim is to demonstrate that the concept of race is socially constructed because there is no objective, biological basis for "race" (Jakubowicz & Perchard, 2017, s. 67), and that the idea of identity boils down to a subjective identification that is based upon the ascription to others or from others.

Because *A Mercy* is set in 1690, we may read the narrative as a precursor to "Manifest Destiny", the conviction that Americans had a divine right and destiny of Westward expansion, to settle on and tame the wilderness and its people of the entire North American continent (Heidler, 2021). Thus, *A Mercy* gives a perspective on the American nation's very formation. Morrison elucidates how binary separations transpire out of the myth of an exceptional destiny to shape a racist American society is paramount for realising how the literary characters form their identity throughout the novel (Strehle, 2013).

Marginal characters of *A Mercy*

Although the marginal characters of *A Mercy*, Florens's mother, Peter Downes and slave-owner Jublio D'Ortega do not have a major impact on the narrative, they help depict the racial divisions of society and create a framework for grasping the binary oppositions that were constructed for the sole cause of economic prosperity. Cornell and Hartmann state that;

Slavery brought Africans into a society in which race was a fundamental dimension of social organization. The fundamental determinant of which category an individual was assigned to was race. The terms of everyday conversation minimized intragroup differences and emphasized the racial divide: Negro, colored, or Black on the one hand, White on the other. The terms were value laden. Race distinguished not only among persons but also among statuses: One race was held to be inferior, by culture or biology or both, to the other. These terms reinforced in language and perception the racial organization of society. (Cornell & Hartmann, 1998, s. 105)

This social fabrication of a binary opposition between the white and black races ossified racial boundaries and entrenched the rigid stratification system of antebellum America. By Morrison's depiction of the marginal characters of *A Mercy*, the reader hears both sides of the

story (victim and malefactor) of the triangular trade and the Middle Passage, and the characters help illustrate society's formation at the intersection of subject and history. Downes and D'Ortega's white ideology and perpetuation of hegemony and oppression become constitutive for the production of both their own *white* identities and their subordinates' *black* identities. One can argue that the marginal characters help elucidate the binaries of colonialism, the very extreme definition of white as opposed to black. Florens's mother becomes especially relevant to Morrison's concept of the Africanist presence because she bears witness to how detrimental the white ideology was.

The white ideology and exceptionalism that spawns a feeling of gross entitlement shines through when D'Ortega and his wife act as though slave labour is the equivalent of doing God's work; "They both spoke of the gravity, the unique responsibility, this untamed world offered them; its unbreakable connection to God's work and the difficulties they endured on His behalf" (Morrison, 2009, s. 16). Jublio D'Ortega's devaluing of African lives also shows the assumption of his own superiority;

Disaster had struck (...)D'Ortega's ship had been anchored a mile from shore for a month waiting for a vessel, due any day, to replenish what he had lost. A third of his cargo had died of ship fever. Fined five thousand pounds of tobacco... for throwing their bodies too close to the bay; forced to scoop up the corpses (...) (they used pikes and nets... a purchase which itself cost two pounds, six) (...) He'd had to pile them in two drays (six shillings), cart them out to low land where saltweed and alligators would finish the work. (Morrison, 2009, s. 14)

Ironically, the "disaster" represented does not entail the many human deaths but rather the economic deprivation D'Ortega experiences when his "cargo" has perished and the penalties he must pay for the inhumane disposal of their bodies, and the costs involved in then getting rid of them. The enslaved people are described as objects, subhuman, and debased to animal fodder. D'Ortega assumes an exceptional status as a slave owner. Through this passage, it is evident that he is an oppressor, placing black lives at the very bottom of the social stratification system of society. The slaves are "replenished" when they die, their dispensable and disposable condition indicates their low worth in early American society.

The dispensable condition of the black body is also illustrated through the character of Peter Downes's discourse when he nonchalantly describes the mass deaths occurring in Barbados; "All is plentiful and ripe except life. That is scarce and short. Six months, eighteen

and --- He waved goodbye fingers.” Jacob answers that there must be chaos, but Downes reassures, ““Not at all. (...) They ship in more, Like firewood, what burns to ash is refuelled. And don’t forget, there are births. The place is a stew of mulattoes, creoles, zambos, mestizos, lobos, chinos, coyotes’ He touched his thumb as he listed the types being produced in Barbados (...) ‘Crop is plentiful, eternal. Slave workers, same’” (Morrison, 2009, s .28-29). The capitalist importance of slave labour comes clearly across in this passage. Michael Banton argues that this subordinate position of blacks in America did not necessarily spring from differences in the biological nature of blacks and whites but rather from political, economic, and social causes (Banton, 1977). The description in the passage gives connotations to a factory of humans, a synchronous mass production of “types” (instead of human beings) by birth and mass death. Equating human beings with firewood demonstrates the gross exploitation of human lives. The term “stew of” various ethnicities resonates with Fanon’s explanation of the colonisers labelling the entire African population as a “stockpile of savages” and “niggers” in his article *On National Culture* (1963). The coalescence of native people in this way removed any cultural specificity and geopolitical ethnicity and helped perpetuate and maintain racial hegemony (based solely on skin colour) (Fanon, 1963). Fanon argues that;

Colonialism, little troubled by nuances, has always claimed that the “nigger” was a savage, not an Angolan or a Nigerian, but a “nigger”. For colonialism, this vast continent was a den of savages, infested with superstitions and fanaticism, destined to be despised, cursed by God, a land of cannibals, a land of “niggers”. Colonialism’s condemnation is continental in scale. Colonialism’s claim that the precolonial period was akin to a darkness of the human soul refers to the entire continent of Africa. (Fanon, 1963, s. 630)

As reiterated by Fanon, “The sweeping, levelling nature of colonial domination was quick to dislocate in spectacular fashion the cultural life of a conquered people. The denial of a national reality, the new legal system imposed by the occupying power, the marginalization of the indigenous population and their customs by colonial society, expropriation, and the systematic enslavement of men and women, all contributed to this cultural obliteration” (Fanon, 1963, s. 639) The coloniser’s aim to eradicate other cultures is elucidated by the term “stew” in the passage. Cornell and Hartmann explain that slaveholders attempted to eradicate

African culture and disperse ethnic groups who spoke the same language by mixing them up because they were afraid of insurrection and revolt (Cornell & Hartmann, 1998, s. 104).

The eradication of African culture is also demonstrated through the focalisation of Florens's mother when she learns from her oppressors that she is termed "Negrita"; "It was there [in America] 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 (Morrison, 2009, s. 163). Florens's mother's experience here resonates with Fanon's depiction of the black experience when faced with the white coloniser: "The black [wo]man, who has never felt as much a "Negro" as [s]he has under white domination. The major responsibility for this racialization of thought and how it is applied, lies with the Europeans who always place white culture in opposition to noncultures" (Fanon, 1963, s. 630). The whites put all "Negroes" in the same basket; their only common denominator was that wherever they came from, as long as they had black skin, they defined themselves in relation to the whites – in opposition" (Fanon, 1963, s. 632).

Morten Hansen argues that this racial commodification, subsuming and repressing all characteristics under the concept of black skin that Florens's mother here experiences does not happen when she is captured, traded or transported by the European slavers, but only when she sets foot on American soil. He argues, therefore, that this experience represents a particularly American one because reducing it to an explanation as an interpellation of African bodies into an already established European racial order would not be sufficient. The transformation of individuals to a generic category of "Negrita" or "Nigger" becomes a distinction of the New World, crafted by Europeans for the purpose of erasing all markers of identity and connection (Hansen, 2018, s. 219).

Through the depiction of racial binary oppositions in the above passages from *A Mercy*, the framework of early America's racial divisions becomes evident. The accounts of the slave owners and Florens's mother show how the Africanist presence helps give the white slave owners a superior status, corroborating Morrison's theory in *Playing in the Dark* about how white identity is self-reflexive in comparison with the unfree, uncivilised, dehumanised enslaved person.

Sorrow, the untragic mulatto

One of the seemingly marginal characters in *A Mercy* is the mixed-race girl Sorrow. It is my contention, however, that her role in the narrative is not marginal but rather of pivotal importance because her very existence may represent W.E.B. Du Bois's concept of "double consciousness" and one may argue that she constitutes Morrison's effort to alter the stereotypical representation of "The tragic mulatto". The Cambridge Dictionary defines a mulatto as "a person who has one black parent and one white parent or is of mixed black and white origin" (Cambridge Dictionary, 2022). The tragic mulatto (or mulatta) has stereotypically been defined as a biracial woman in white American literature who experiences great difficulty with her identity in society because she is neither black nor white, leading her to a tragic ending – often death or suicide. Her racial duality makes her an outsider in society and causes her sorrow and tragic outcomes. Considering Morrison's argument in *Playing in the Dark* that individuals identify themselves either through being *not* white or *not* black, Morrison inserts Sorrow in the story as something in-between that illustrates the difficulty of such a binary definition in society. Although her race is never defined as either black or white, she is the daughter of a ship's captain who presumably serves the triangular trade, indicating that he is probably white. Her ambiguous hair, which resembles the texture of wool, becomes an indicator that she herself is not white. Anna Marie Christiansen claims that because Morrison constructs Africanist subjectivity as the focal point of her literary texts, the colour line becomes a space of creativity in which a new identity is formed from cultural fragmentation. This argument resonates with Bhabha's theory of third space. Thus, when Morrison inserts mulatto characters (like Sorrow), she disperses the colour line. In this way, she re-invents and disrupts the stereotyped tragic mulatto in the works of canonical white nineteenth-century literature (Christiansen, 2007, s. 76). Dana A. Williams contends that by obscuring the colour line in this way, Morrison manages to critique American identity construction and is able to demonstrate how both blackness and whiteness are products of social construction and not fixed biological categories (Williams, 2007, s. 182).

Maria del Mar Gallego- Duran argues that the mulatto is caught between two opposing worlds - black and white – and because of this, the mulatto never reaches a satisfactory conclusion (Gallego-Durán, 2011, s. 123). Hazel Carby argues that the insertion of the mulatto trope enables the exploration in fiction of relations that were socially ascribed. The mulatto figure can be viewed as a narrative device of mediation, allowing a fictional exploration of the relation between the races while offering an imaginary expression of the

relation between the races (Carby in Gallego-Durán s.122). Thus, one might say that Morrison, through the character of Sorrow, shows how racial relations are socially ascribed. Christiansen explains that historically, the mulatto was scientifically, socially and culturally determined as an outsider whose difference voided any ability; she had to identify fully with one group or another. This dilemma usually led to tragedy (Christiansen, 2007, s. 78). The tragic mulatto stereotype implies, therefore, that mulattoes occupy the margins of two worlds, belonging to neither, excluded by both (Pilgrim, 2012). It can be assumed that Morrison inverts this stereotype through Sorrow. Although she is depicted throughout the story as tragic and apathetic because she behaves “with placid indifference”, an outsider of the Vaark community and has even been named “Sorrow” by her previous owner, she becomes the character that seems to have the happiest ending of all the literary characters. Arguably, her displacement in the world and being trapped between races is the cause of her psychological issues and split personality causing her to be somewhat disconnected from the real world. Being in the interstice between white and black makes her invent a second personality called “Twin”, which turns her into the materialisation of Du Bois’s concept of “Negro double consciousness”. Du Bois’s notion of Negro double-consciousness is defined as: “this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness – an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body” (Du Bois in Christiansen, 2007, s. 38). The concept of “double consciousness” depicts the divided self and lack of subjectivity of a black person’s experience in America (Christensen, 2007, p.75). One can presume that Sorrow invents this second personality because she feels psychologically divided and lacks subjectivity, mirroring Du Bois’s concept of double consciousness. According to Christiansen, this is in accordance with the tragic mulatto stereotype because it is usually constructed as both a racial and psychological outsider (Christiansen, 2007, s.85). One can argue that Sorrow fits the tragic description because Morrison situates her at the intersection of overlapping discrimination. She is of the female gender, has an undetermined race (“mongrelized”), is an orphan without roots (“never lived on land”), and she is an ostracised outsider even in the imagined community of the Vaark farm (“with anyone to talk to”). The community can be interpreted as a system of fictive kin because Lina has seemingly adopted Florens as her own daughter. Gutman explains that the tradition of fictive kin was common in African American slave communities, where efforts were made to provide families for those children who had lost parents to the market mechanisms of slavery (Gutman in Cornell & Hartmann, 1998, s. 215).

Sorrow is evidently excluded from this forged family and endures social divisions that resemble the ostracising structure of society outside of the farm.

Nira Yuval-Davis contends that social divisions like Sorrow here experiences can be defined in the way people experience inclusion and exclusion, discrimination and disadvantage, based upon specific aspirations and identities. Social divisions of this type not only define how individuals view themselves and their communities but they become the origin of prejudice. Differences among varying categories of people are used for the construction of boundaries regarding the inclusion or exclusion of people and differentiation between self and Other (Yuval-Davis in Schreiner, 2019, p. 40). Based on this definition of social division, it is evident that Sorrow experiences exclusion at the Vaark farm based on attributes that are ascribed to her by others. It becomes apparent that she feels excluded, endures different forms of oppression and is considered Other by the other characters. One example of this is when Lina excludes Sorrow by not saying “good morning”. It is conceivable that Lina even gives Sorrow an “oppositional gaze” (Hooks, 1992, s. 272) when Sorrow asks what to do when she is pregnant “Lina simply stared at her and, hoisting the basket on her hip, walked away” (Morrison, 2009, s. 121). By staring and not replying to her despair, it may be argued that Lina thinks of Sorrow as subhuman, and it reads as a display of power dynamics.

C. A. Davi explains that race hatred, in Sartrean terms, can be viewed as allying oneself “to the third so as to look at the Other who is then transformed into our object” (Davi in Heinze, 1993, s. 21). One can argue that this is what Lina is doing through her gaze in this scene. Fanon exemplifies the shame that the object of the gaze suffers in this instance because the gaze produces a doubleness of experience. He explains that the “black object’s” feeling of inferiority that “comes into being through the other” and describes an experience of being seen as an object of contempt. He states that being viewed through the shaming gaze of whites, they are deemed “Negroes” who are savages, brutes and illiterates (Fanon in Bouson, 2000, s. 14). One can assume that this is how Lina views Sorrow through the way their relationship is depicted throughout the novel. Although there is no white and black binary definition between them, the gazing at Sorrow as an object is evident, and one gets the impression that there is a caste system on the Vaark farm. One may argue that this is Morrison’s covert way of showing that race is a socially constructed phenomenon and showing that the concept of race is not a simplistic black-and-white issue. Sorrow’s passage, “Mistress and Lina both had small, straight noses; Mistress’ skin was like the whites of eggs, Lina’s like the brown of their shells” (Morrison, 2009, s. 119), shows that she is very aware of

skin colour and similarities of the coherent “in-group”, and is aware that her own hair can be viewed as “threatening” because it is racially ambiguous - making her into an Other. Her hair becomes a signifier for her race, her Otherness. Snead claims that one of the characteristics of racial division is marking or supplying physically significant (usually visual) characteristics with internal value equivalents (Snead in Morrison, 1993, s. 67), like this example of threatening hair. The innate object of hair cannot be threatening in itself, so it is ascribed an internal value that is assumed to be an attribute of the owner. Morrison argues in *Playing in the Dark* that “color coding and other physical traits [of the Africanist presence] become metonyms” (Morrison, 1993, s. 68) which Sorrow’s hair here evidently becomes.

Sorrow has experienced sexual abuse on many accounts, as she has been pregnant more than once “she [Sorrow] is once more with child” (Morrison, 2009, s. 6). After the birth of her first child, Lina sends it down the river claiming it was dead at birth. However, there is ambiguity if the baby was actually dead or alive, focalised through Sorrow; “Although Sorrow thought she saw her own newborn yawn, Lina wrapped it in a piece of sacking and set it a-sail in the widest part of the stream” (Morrison, 2009, s. 121) and “it took years for Sorrow’s steady thoughts of her baby breathing water under Lina’s palm to recede” (Morrison, 2009, s. 121). Arguably there is also some ambiguity about who the father of the baby is; “Father still not clear and Sorrow does not say” (Morrison, 2009, s. 6). Sorrow states in her story that she has experienced sexual abuse from the sawyer’s sons mediated by an act she describes as “a silent submission” to the “the goings that took place behind the stack of clapboard, both brothers attending” (Morrison, 2009, s. 117). Lina’s passage, “Sir made the girl sleep by the fireplace all seasons. A comfort Lina was suspicious of but did not envy even in bad weather” (Morrison, 2009, s. 52), may point to the fact that Sorrow had a sexual relationship with Jacob. Florens’s passage about the baby; “Lina believes it is Sir’s. Says she has her reason for thinking so. When I ask what reason she says he is a man” (Morrison, 2009, s. 6) is also indicative of this theory and also illustrates Lina’s perception of Jacob as an American exceptionalist male that *takes* what he wants, including sexual pleasure. Liz Bowen explains that Lina believes in omens and reduces Sorrow’s baby to the same extractable metaphorical material as its “bad luck” mother. Because omens are perceived as something other than human, they experience metaphorical subordination. Bowen explains that the tradition of chronic infanticide of disabled children, believed to be bad omens, was a superstitious act that dates back to antiquity. She argues that Lina evokes this tradition when she sends the baby down the river to drown (Bowen, 2021, s. 535). Sorrow’s different aesthetics (such as racially ambiguous hair) and visible disability (talking to herself through

Twin) may be why Lina views her as a bad omen and ascribes her the status as an Other. Lina's passage "Sorrow was pregnant and soon there would be another virgin birth and, perhaps, unfortunately, this one would not die" (Morrison, 2009, s. 54) shows that Sorrow keeps her sexual affairs hidden from Lina (by the ironic term "virgin birth") and that Lina does indeed hope that her children will die (accentuated by the word "unfortunately"). Although a sexual affair between Sorrow and Jacob is never stated directly in the text and can only be interpreted as a hypothetical iceberg theory in true Morrison style (Crichlow, 1995), it would place Sorrow firmly in the definition of tragic. According to the historian J. C. Furnas, in many slave markets, mulattoes had a higher economic value because they functioned as sexual objects (Furnas in Pilgrim, 2000, s. 149). He claims that because some slave owners found dark skin vulgar and repulsive, the mulatto approximated the white ideal of female attractiveness. All slaves of any race or gender could be victims of rape, but the mulatto afforded the slave owner the opportunity to rape, with impunity, a woman who was physically close in looks to white but legally black in ownership. Furnas clarifies that a greater likelihood of being raped was certainly not an indication of favoured status, and one can argue that in *A Mercy* it gives Sorrow an even lower status because Lina thinks of her as a bad omen partly because she is "always an easy harvest" (Morrison, 2009, s. 43).

Arguably, the character of Sorrow seems to move beyond the tragic mulatto stereotype because she searches for self-definition and self-expression. Christiansen explains that in nineteenth-century representations of the tragic mulatto, the character's fate is predictable – the vulnerability of colour usually results in death, often suicide, or at the very least, being sold down the river. Morrison inverts this stereotype and connects *new* life to the river, where tragedy is turned to hope (Christiansen, 2007, s. 78), and the ending is unfurled. Sorrow *becoming* "Complete" shows resilience to an oppressive binary society. Christiansen claims that Morrison revises the history of the tragic mulatto, and through her unique narrative technique, transforms a figure of despair into one of hope and change. Sorrow ends up making her own community by having a child; because she does not fit in anywhere and is excluded, she creates her own belonging. In this way, Morrison situates the possibilities for a mulatto identity within a traditionally binary black and white society (Christiansen, 2007, s. 95). The non-tragic ending can be viewed as a subversion of the stereotypical demise of the tragic mulatto.

This subversion of the stereotypical tragic mulatto is relevant to Morrison's argument in *Playing in the Dark* about identity formation taking place in the liminal space between races because through Sorrow, Morrison demonstrates that mixed-race characters cannot be

defined by the binary categories of black and white. Christian argues that Morrison's untragic mulattoes have pivotal positions within her novels because she demonstrates that they are, in fact, in control of their own identity formation and have the power to affect those around them in the process – for example, in the way Sorrow can be viewed as an inspiration for Florens when she plans to escape. Morrison's mixed-race characters become significant because they must re-imagine what identity means within each community before re-defining themselves. Thus, just like Soaphead Church, Golden Gray and Pat Best (Morrison's other mulattoes), Sorrow experiences an identity crisis based on her hybrid mulatto identity, taking cues from the dominant discourses about racial construction (such as her “unbelievable and slightly threatening hair”), but then transforms herself despite of it. Rather than fulfil the tragic mulatto stereotype, Morrison makes Sorrow form her own version of selfhood. She becomes an autonomous figure who breaks from the past to determine her future (Christiansen, 2007, s. 77). In this way, Kobena Mercer claims that Morrison's novels, in a unique way, interpret and deconstruct the past in order to create the possibility of being able to construct and re-imagine the future. Her novels advocate not just memory but also re-memory, as roots are being used to find routes out of the prison-house of marginality (Mercer in Madden, 1995, s. 38).

The fact that Sorrow has been raised as a boy on a ship and remembers little about her heritage and background makes her a traditional diasporic unmoored character with severed roots. Paul Gilroy and John McLeod argue that the water imagery, like her childhood at seas, may be read as a reference to migration and diaspora. They claim that aquatic metaphors such as this can be interpreted as a symbol of restlessness, hybridity in diaspora or as a negative view of migration, associating the water symbolism with dangerous floods, waves, and rivers of blood (Gilroy and McLeod in Zapata, 2015). One may say that Morrison accentuates the hybridity in the aquatic metaphor of the river in Sorrow's narrative because not only does Sorrow give birth to her child by the river, but she herself also experiences a rebirth exemplifying the diasporic hybridity. Sorrow experiences the cultural ambivalence of the black and white race in collision and consequently forms what Bhabha terms a cultural hybrid identity (Bhabha in Hoogvelt, 1997). One may argue that the water washes the past away as her focus becomes the future. Morrison, in effect, re-figures the stereotype of the tragic mulatto by portraying Sorrow's transformation in a positive light. By renaming herself and taking control of her own subjectivity in her plan of escape, she is reconfigured from tragic to untragic and creates a space to have a future in America. Morrison consequently writes life instead of death. After Sorrow has given birth to her baby, she transforms her identity, restores her agency and gains subjectivity by renaming herself “Complete” and plans her

escape from slavery. Her psychological disorder and split personality seem to disappear as a consequence of this rebirth and identity reformation. Christiansen claims that Morrison, like in this example, repeatedly revises the stereotype of the tragic mulatto found in nineteenth-century American literature in many of her novels (Christiansen, 2007, s. 74). She claims that the mulatto in Morrison's work distends the dominant stereotype of the tragic mulatto as she re-imagines mixed-race identity, moving beyond the static representations in earlier American literary texts. Morrison depicts the mixed-race character as, rather than being static, it is subjected to evolution, and she revises the stereotype and creates a more complex representation (Christiansen, 2007, s. 75). Christiansen's claim resonates with Bhabha's theory of hybridity and third space because arguably, Sorrow becomes this re-imagined identity based upon the collision of cultures that she experiences. Therefore, one can agree that Morrison deconstructs the stereotypic tragic mulatto tradition through refiguring her subjectivity because evidently, Sorrow has a happy ending - however openly it may be interpreted.

Although Sorrow has a happier ending than the other literary characters, one may say that Sorrow is at the very bottom of the caste system at the Vaark farm that reads like a microcosm of an oppressive, racist, patriarchal hierarchy. The stratification system of the farm places the patriarch Jacob at the top of the structure, following his white wife Rebekka, the hard worker Lina, Florens and Sorrow at the very bottom. Thus, it becomes evident that Morrison inverts the stereotypical skin-colour privilege because Sorrow's presumably lighter skin is not enviable as it would be elsewhere in society. Arguably, she experiences double oppression from both worlds of black and white because while she has the same status as a black slave, unfree and bound to servitude, Lina blames her for her own experience of white oppression and excludes her from daily life on the farm seemingly because of her racial features. Therefore, Sorrow evidently occupies the margins of the two worlds of black and white, fitting into neither, accepted by neither, making her excluded and an Other (Pilgrim, 2000). Bowen substantiates this argument that Lina views Sorrow as Other because the demon that Sorrow represents is reminiscent of settler colonialism, the sudden visitor who brings illness and death to those who preceded them. The narrative depicts the loss of Lina's Native American community and family to a disease introduced by the colonisers. For Lina, Sorrow becomes the very symbolic materialisation of this because of her aesthetics (her boils on the neck indicate sickness). Thus, Lina sees Sorrow as a tool for the colonised, spreading her misfortune and illness (Bowen, 2021, s. 535). Sorrow's low position and exclusion on the farm are illustrated in the way Lina mistreats and mistrusts her demonstrated in the passages;

“while making certain that everyone else shared the distrust [about Sorrow] that sparkled in her [Lina’s] own eyes” (Morrison, 2009, s. 123), “corruption [came] so natural to someone like Sorrow” (Morrison, 2009, s. 58) and “Lina hid her disgust with Sorrow” (Morrison, 2009, s. 131). Her exclusion is also demonstrated when Rebekka beats her and wants to give her away; “Sorrow she wants to give away but no one offers to take her” (Morrison, 2009, s. 157). The fact that she cannot be sold but has to be *given away* with no takers illustrates her position at the very bottom of the hierarchy. One can easily imagine that Sorrow’s low status and the exclusion and oppression she endures mirror the social structures of America in the antebellum period.

Lina, utiliser of the master’s tools

Many scholars argue that the character of Lina can be viewed as the epitome of contemporary American identity because of her cultural hybridity and adaptive capabilities in creating new selfhood. One of them is Baillie, who contends that Lina retains elements of Native American practices that she blends with her newfound loyalty to her European master and mistress. Baillie claims that Lina represents hybridity because she is a resilient survivor born out of dislocation, disease, domestic abuse and religious impositions (Baillie, 2013, s. 189-90). Schreiner argues that this hybridity is paramount for Lina to be able to fit into a clan as a way of connecting and creating a belonging to a new culture and heritage. Her reconstruction of a syncretic identity is illustrated in the passage; “Relying on memory and her own resources, she cobbled together neglected rites, merged Europe medicine with native, scripture with lore, and recalled or invented the hidden meaning of things. Found ... a way to be in the world” (Morrison, 2009, s. 46). The passage demonstrates Lina’s endeavours to combine elements of the different cultures in an attempt to create a new hybrid identity that will establish her selfhood and existence in an evolving society (Schreiner, 2019, s. 46). One can claim Lina becomes the very embodiment of Bhabha’s concept of cultural hybridity by the way she creates selfhood with fragments from both the white culture and native American culture. Because the Native Americans in early America either died of disease, slaughter or were displaced, Lina is forced to adapt to her new culture. Arguably, this happens in Bhabha’s concept of third space, in the interval between the merging cultures of the white Presbyterians who take her in and the Native American tradition she is used to. This hybridity “gives rise to something different, something new and unrecognizable, a new area of negotiation of meaning and representation” (Bhabha in Darder, 1995, s. 13). The boundaries of the disparate cultures become fluid, and Lina incorporates traditions from both, resulting in a transfiguration of

“translation and negotiation” (Bhabha in Hoogvelt, 1997) and a new identity in continual development, illustrated in the words “Found... a way to be in the world”. Baillie claims that Lina appears to develop a cosmology of self-invention that is adaptable enough to facilitate her survival as an exile in her own land (Baillie, 2013). Jennifer Terry contends that this hybrid identity formation shows Lina’s capability of combining traditions by reinforcing herself by reassembling different fragments from each culture. She argues that her identity formation, in effect, demonstrates a parable of hybridity, endurance and survival that functions as an opposition to a notion of Manifest Destiny that anticipated and facilitated Native Americans’ extinction as a consequence of Westward Expansion (Terry, 2014, s. 48). Baillie points to the fact that Lina exists in symbiosis with plants and animals, illustrated when she talks to them in a cosmology that does not recognise any hierarchical ordering of species, “becoming one more thing that moved in the natural world” (Baillie, 2013, s. 190). Contrastingly, one can argue that Lina does, though, indeed recognise the hierarchical ordering of humans, depicted through her exclusionary practices at the Vaark farm.

Lina’s exclusionary practices at the Vaark farm seem to imitate white ideology traditions. This imitation of white oppressive tendencies corresponds to what Bhabha calls mimicry of the master and can be viewed as a way of survival and resistance (Bhabha, 1983/1994). When there is cultural ambivalence between two ethnic groups, such as the white culture and Native American culture in Lina’s case, where one culture is supposedly superior to the other (white superior to Native American), the act of mimicry becomes a form of resistance and survival. In this way, Bhabha explains that the power transfers from the coloniser to the colonised, and the colonised regain their subjectivity and power through the act. He states that “mimicry emerges as the representation of a difference that is itself a process of disavowal” (Bhabha, 1983/1994, s. 122). Consequently, the merging of difference (because Lina is not white but acting white) and repetition inevitably jeopardises the colonisers’ view of their own superior hegemonic position (because they befriend her). By employing Bhabha’s theory of mimicry, one may argue that Lina mimics the behaviour of Rebekka and Jacob, her white owners. She repeats the same actions as they do every day, such as tending to the farm, only slightly different – in a superior way. She relies on her collective memory of Native American culture. She seemingly has superior knowledge of farming and cultivating the land and knows that “using alewives as fertilizer (...) [make] his plots of tender vegetables torn up by foragers attracted by the smell” (Morrison, 2009, s. 48) and that the vines kept weeds away. Arguably, one can see that there occurs a powershift through Lina’s mimicry because Jacob and Rebekka become interdependent on her for the

operation of the farm, and she even saves Rebekka's life during a winter storm. She almost obtains equality with her owners because of her human capital (Cornell & Hartmann, 1998, s. 219) and knowledge of land and cultivation. This powershift is exemplified when Rebekka regards Lina as the single friend she has, a friendship exemplified in the passage; "And they sputtered with laughter, like little girls hiding behind the stable loving the danger of their talk" (Morrison, 2009, s. 79).

Lina also mimics her white owners' white ideology through the way she copies their tradition of the hierarchical ordering of people. If we once again interpret the Vaark farm as a microcosm of society in the antebellum period, the white hegemonic structure is in many ways enabled by Lina's character in the way she includes and excludes other characters on the farm. One may contend that Lina seems to have internalised the foundational puritan paradigms she has been forced to abide by. Zhou Quan explains that the Presbyterian's attempt to purify Lina forces her to accept their white standard. Their attempt to convert her from "heathen" to a cultivated human being – from a savage to a civilised being, has forced her to adapt to their ideology for survival. This purification has led to Lina feeling culturally uprooted and results in a fragmented identity (Quan, 2019, s. 565). Lina whispers to the forest of beech, "You and I, this land is our home, but unlike you, I am exile here" (Morrison, 2009, s. 57). This exile coerces her to adapt to the white hegemony to be able to belong. Demonstrated by the way she excludes Sorrow from daily life on the farm, Lina seems to have internalised the racist, discriminatory practices she has been the victim of and suffered from herself. One can contend that it appears that Lina has appropriated the ideas of her captors, who have precluded her from an American identity. She replicates this when she projects the same act of exclusion and ostracism onto Sorrow.

Considering this theory of Lina's internalisation of oppressive values brings Fanon's idea of "whiteness as desire" to mind. He argues that coloured individuals compete with each other in their aspiration for whiteness, which becomes a root of resentment that causes a lack of solidarity between Othered individuals (Fanon, 1986). One may assume that because Lina has grown up in a clan, her yearning to belong to a community again may be the driving force for her doing whatever it takes (thus oppressing Sorrow and being in competition with her for Mistress's attention) to become a member of the new clan, the coherent group of the white settlers. This competitive side of Lina is illustrated in the passage; "Lina had hovered over Patrician, competing with Mistress for the little girl's affection" (Morrison, 2009, s. 59). Audre Lorde's article *The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House* (1984)

becomes relevant when interpreting Lina's character as an oppressing individual. Lorde's argument in the article is that;

As women, we have been taught either to ignore our differences, or to view them as causes for separation and suspicion rather than as forces for change. Without community there is no liberation, only the most vulnerable and temporary armistice between an individual and her oppression. But community must not mean a shedding of our differences, nor the pathetic pretence that these differences do not exist. (...) It is learning how to take our differences and make them strengths. (Lorde, 1984, s. 2)

By applying this argument to the character of Lina, one can claim that she is using differences in the opposite way of what Lorde's argument is about. Lina duplicates the hierarchy of society by using the master's tools of oppression because of Sorrow's aesthetic differences. Through the depiction of Lina's mimicry of her masters and her utilisation of their very tools of oppression based upon appearances, Morrison subverts the concept of hegemonic racial oppression and helps the reader see the social constructedness of race and the arbitrary fabrication of Otherness. Cornell and Hartmann claim that because of this arbitrary designation of boundaries between "us" and "Other", as Lina's behaviour here illustrates, race can be viewed as elastic. They argue that the idea of race depends on the claims that people make about one another or themselves more than on any physical characteristics or genealogical difference (Cornell & Hartmann, 1998, s. 31). Thus, race refers to a group of human beings *socially defined* on the basis of physical characteristics (Cornell & Hartmann, 1998, s. 32). Therefore, when Morrison obscures racial categories by having her non-white literary characters adopt white oppressive tendencies in the way Lina seems to do, she demonstrates that racial divisions are, in fact, a product of social construction. In this way, she also evades the rigid racial categories that are based upon the myth of racial purity. Morrison, in effect, destabilises the very foundation of historical racial divisions.

Jacob, the classic American exceptionalist

Jacob's identity formation in the narrative resonates with Morrison's argument in *Playing in the Dark* about the creation of a national identity as American based upon a shared idea between white settlers. This idea entails that the American exceptionalist is free because he is *not* an enslaved black person. It seems that Morrison creates the fabricated African presence of Florens to show that this presence is a requisite for the American Jacob to be exceptional.

His very defining qualities as predestined, morally superior, innocent, free, and elect are entirely contingent on the black slave being the opposite and inferior to him. From the first encounter with him, Morrison paints the picture of the classic American settler ready to *take* what he feels entitled to, “Breathing the air of a world so new, almost alluring in newness and temptation ... 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” (Morrison, 2009, s. 10). Strehle points out that he has risen from nothing to wealth and thus performed a version of what will become the quintessential American dream (Strehle, 2013, s. 113). Sandra Gustafson and Gordon Hutner observe that Jacob’s arrival in Virginia happens amid “thick, hot gold. Penetrating it was like struggling through a dream” (Morrison, 2009, s. 7). The gold metaphorically blinds him, and the dream may be interpreted as the American dream. This reads like a foreshadowing of the lure of gold that will become the driving factor for his actions and decisions throughout the narrative (Gustafson & Hutner in Strehle, 2013, s. 245). It is paradoxical that he is ignoring the fact that the “untouched” land actually belongs to the Native Americans because he secretly admits it to himself in the passage; “Other than certain natives, to whom it all belonged” (Morrison, 2009, s. 10). Hansen explains that this vivid encounter between man and environment corroborates Fredrick Jackson Turner’s theory of the frontier as the primal (“a world so new) yet perennial (“never failed”) origin of American national character (Turner in Hansen, 2018).

Andrew Fitzmaurice explains that the “emptiness” described in Vaark’s observation brings to mind a law that dates back to the Roman Empire called “*occupatio*” (a law of property), implying legal requirements based upon the rule if something belongs to no one, it then becomes the property of the first man who *takes* it (Fitzmaurice in Hansen, 2018, s. 216). The settlers legitimised this taking by reducing the Native American’s way of life to being devoid of society and denied that they lived in civil societies even if they did. They considered their status in juxtaposition to animals because they lived in harmony with nature instead of exploiting it for economic gain. Fitzmaurice argues that, thus, when Jacob disregards the presence of indigenous peoples, “he is not simply displaying ignorance and unconscious racial bias, but rather actively perpetuating a meticulously crafted deceitful legal argument” (Fitzmaurice in Hansen, 2018, s. 216). Hansen substantiates this and explains that Jacob’s gaze in this scene, when stepping off the ship, should be considered an obtruding one. He claims that rather than viewing it as a symbol of Jacob’s innocence and overwhelmingness, we should interpret it as the “germ of his turn toward unrestricted exploitation of women, indentured servants and people of color, instead of its antithesis ...

His gaze gives us the opportunity to contemplate on the larger history of the making of the New World” (Hansen, 2018, s. 215) and the origin of American exceptionalism.

Florens’s passage demonstrates Jacob’s settler mentality of taking with superior entitlement; “Lina says Sir has a clever way of getting without giving. I know it is true because I see it forever and ever” (Morrison, 2009, s. 5). If one reads between the lines, this implies that Jacob never pays for the work people do for him (neither his female slaves nor the white indentured servants on the farm). Thus, it becomes evident that Jacob is a “*taker*”, taking what he feels entitled to. Even though he completely depends on his slave Lina to cultivate the land on his farm and obtains his fortune through the slave trade (rum industry) in Barbados, he erroneously thinks of himself as a self-made man. This can be viewed as a fitting representation of the accomplishment of the American dream, but it illustrates that it, in fact, was accomplished by being built upon the backs of others. Jacob’s identity forms in accordance with his rise to success, leading him further into moral corruption.

Arguably, one can claim that Jacob represents the humane American Adam (Strehle, 2013, s. 113). His character functions as a representation of how the white settlers viewed themselves as morally superior. His self-delusion may be interpreted as a mirror of America’s perception of itself as exceptionally moral when at the same time turning a blind eye to the iniquitous acts that were occurring to create its founding. Through Jacob, this paradox of the New World is illustrated; the double morals he entertains are excused by his pursuit of the American dream. His desire to pursue it is illustrated in the way he wants a “house of many rooms rising on the hill above the fog” (Morrison, 2009, s. 33). Jacob's desire here reproduces John Winthrop's concept of the “City on a hill” and is central to how America viewed itself as an exceptional and exemplary nation (Dictionary of American History, 2022). Winthorpe’s idea of a “city upon a hill” meant that the whole world would idolize America because they were exceptional and superior. Because of this desire to be exceptional, Jacob justifies his own complicity in the slave trade, and flesh becomes his commodity. Hansen substantiates this reading by claiming that “Vaark’s fantasy [here] echoes John Winthrop’s (and many subsequent American politicians) evocations of Jesus’s phrase ‘City Upon a Hill’ from the Sermon on the Mount – one of the most persistent catch-phrases of American exceptionalism” (Hansen, 2018, s. 222). Hansen also claims that Jacob’s mansion may be viewed as the germination of Manifest Destiny because it functions as the very embodiment of the enclosure and domestication of the American wilderness (including its people) and, as such, the beginnings of the nation-state of the US (Hansen, 2018).

Through Lina's perspective, we can see that economic fortune and the "house on the hill" is the most important thing in Jacob's life. She describes his economic priorities in the passage; "And Sir – she had never seen him in better spirits. Not with the birth of his doomed sons, nor with his pleasure in his daughter, not even with an especially successful business arrangement he bragged about. It was not a sudden change, yet it was a deep one. (...) when he decided to kill the trees and replace them with a profane monument to himself, he was cheerful every waking moment" (Morrison, 2009, s. 42). Debatably, it becomes evident that it is Jacob's meeting with D'Ortega that becomes formative for his American identity. The meeting instigates comparison, avarice and emulousness that become pivotal for his life's mission. Even the joy of his children does not compare to the jubilation of economic prosperity, mirroring the quest for the American dream. Jacob's cutting down trees symbolises the mentality that led to the Westward Expansion of Manifest Destiny. Valerie Babb substantiates this, claiming that Jacob's wasteful felling of trees reflects his gradual moral corruption. Because his house is not a utilitarian edifice to be used by family but rather a symbol of rank, it exposes his greed and settler mentality (Babb, 2011, s. 155). Terry argues that Jacob is thus exposed to be developing into an insatiable, increasingly acquisitive exceptionalist driven by an unforgivable sense of settler entitlement (Terry, 2014, s. 134). This insatiability and need for an exceptional superior status are illustrated in Rebekka's passage; "A new house he was building. Something befitting not a farmer, not even a trader, but a squire." (Morrison, 2009, s. 86).

By possessing these avaricious values, Jacob becomes the very embodiment of the hypocrisy of the time, and through Morrison's depiction of how he seems like just an average Joe and an innocent American Adam, the reader becomes witness to how racial divisions and white hegemony become established through different kinds of oppression and corruption by "everyman". Through the character of Jacob, one can see how the burgeoning acceptance and perpetuation of racism affects even American Adam's identity formation and consequently results in the germination of colonial America. Strehle substantiates this, arguing that American exceptionalism can be claimed to be the reason for Jacob's double standard and what shapes his perception of an American identity. Morrison portrays him first as a sympathetic white northerner who is kind to animals ("Few things angered Jacob more than the brutal handling of domesticated animals") (Morrison, 2009, s. 26), a pre-American who disaffiliates himself from slavery because "flesh was not his commodity" (Morrison, 2009, s. 20). Nevertheless, at the end of the narrative, he believes in his own exceptionalism, possesses a proud and selfish sense of entitlement, and undergoes a moral fall by making exceptions to

his own principles, consequently leading to the ownership of slaves and gaining economic fortune through the slave trade in Barbados (Strehle, 2013).

Quan claims that the moment Jacob departs from D'Ortega can be viewed as the inception of his moral fall (Quan, 2019), but one can presume that it started even earlier than this – when he purchased his first slave Lina, and next when he “mail-ordered” his wife Rebekka, then at last when he accepted Sorrow and Florens as payment for a debt. All these instances indicate an exception from his own morals. However, his meeting with D'Ortega can be viewed as a turn-of-fate moment because his avarice blooms when he compares himself to him; “in spite of himself, [he]envied the house, the gate, the fence” (Morrison, 2009, s. 25). Although Jacob's musings are at first highly sanctimonious; “[Jacob] was determined to prove that his own industry could amass the fortune, the station, D'Ortega claimed without trading his conscience for coin”(Morrison, 2009, s. 26), D'Ortega's material wealth and ostentation become transformative for his identity and makes Jacob become equally immoral. Arguably, Jacob seeks to belong to the coherent white community of white settlers and seeks economic fortune to become equal to them in status. Quan explains that a desire for maximum profit in 17th century America was synonymous with the inexhaustibility of African bodies (Quan, 2019, s. 559), and this desire stems from Jacob's memory of D'Ortega's extravagant lifestyle and superfluous mansion. This all-consuming avarice affects his identity formation, demonstrated to the fullest by his great project of building a mansion of his own (Quan, 2019, s. 560).

One can argue that what makes his moral corruption so iniquitous is that it is done knowingly and seemingly without guilt. He seems to be well aware of what is morally right, but one decision after another leads him further from it. The useless trinket gifts he brings home for Rebekka can be interpreted as a symbol of his moral exceptions because they are purchased with money from slave labour; “It was some time before she noticed how the tales [of his journeys] were fewer and the fits increasing, gifts that were becoming less practical, even whimsical. (...) treasures so useless on a farm” (Morrison, 2009, s. 86). The fact that he omits where the money comes from also shows that he might know that the slave trade is morally wrong; “When finally she [Rebekka] did ask him where this money was coming from, he said ‘New arrangements’ (...) Having seen come and go a glint in his eye as he unpacked these treasures...” (Morrison, 2009, s. 86). The reader learns that Jacob makes exceptions for what is morally right because his quest for prosperity serves a higher purpose than his own morality. The glint in his eye can be read as avarice. Jacob says to Rebekka, “What a man leaves behind is what a man is” (Morrison, 2009, s. 87). This passage

demonstrates that achieving the American dream and obtaining economic fortune (to be able to build a large mansion) is what a man *is*, rather than his morals or how he treats others. Here the connection between masculinity, settler mentality and avariciousness become evident, and it seems that Jacob measures his own worth through the ownership of material goods.

The way Jacob prioritizes economic fortune even though he seems to know better is demonstrated through many examples throughout the narrative. One example is the scene at D'Ortega's plantation, where a double gaze between Jacob and the chattel slaves occurs; "every now and then, when possible, when they thought they were not being evaluated, [he] could see [the slaves'] quick glances (...) judging the men who judged them" (Morrison, 2009, s. 20). This double judgement - D'Ortega and Jacob judging what each individual slave is worth, and the slaves judging their immorality in keeping slaves - shows that Jacob projects his own principles onto the slaves, demonstrating that he, in fact, does think that keeping slaves is immoral – but he does it nonetheless. Babb argues here that "the enslaved's 'quick glances' reveal their self-awareness, and the mutual judging suggests an equality among humans that law and caste conspire to proscribe. Though far from perfect, Vaark represents the possibility of an alternative white maleness that does not take advantage of arbitrarily constructed race and gender privilege. Sadly, the seduction of material wealth subverts this potential" (Babb, 2011, s. 154). Jacob also seems to know better when he opposes D'Ortega's perspective upon his god-given responsibility of slave labour; "nothing transpired in the conversation that had a footing in the real world" (Morrison, 2009, s. 16) showing that he does not agree that slave-labour is an extension of God's work. Another example of knowing better is when he gets a horrific description from Peter Downes of the lawless conditions happening in Barbados and the mass death of African lives due to extremely inhumane conditions; "all is plentiful and ripe except life. That is scarce and short. Six months, eighteen and --- He waved goodbye fingers." (Morrison, 2009, s. 28). Although Jacob views the slave trade as a "degraded business", the promises of quick profit make him invest in the rum industry. His inner emotional turmoil and exceptions from his own morals in investing in the slave trade are illustrated in the passage; "there was a profound difference between the intimacy of slave bodies at Jublio and a remote labor force in Barbados. Right? Right. Looking at a sky vulgar with stars. Clear and Right. The silver that glittered there was not at all unreachable. And that wide swath of cream pouring through the stars was his for the tasting...his dreams were of a grand house of many rooms rising on a hill above the fog" (Morrison, 2009, s. 33). In this passage, one can clearly see that he makes exceptions for his own morals, arguing with his own conscience that remote slavery is *not as bad as* chattel

slavery on your own property. Jacob continuously keeps actively making exceptions for his own moral righteousness in pursuit of the American dream that becomes “reachable” *because* of these very exceptions, inevitably leading him to form his identity based upon his own exceptionalism compared to others.

Strehle argues that Jacob’s moral fall is something that is not caused by accident or ignorance. She claims that he is secure in the virtuousness of his intentions and that he feels comfortable in his moral superiority compared to the slaveholding D’Ortega illustrated in the passage; “[When he builds his own mansion in future, it will be] pure, noble even, because it would not be compromised as Jublio was”(Morrison, 2009, s. 25). She states that because of this corruption, Jacob assumes an exceptional status, and consequently, Morrison’s American Adam purchases his mansion with slave labour (Strehle, 2013, s. 114). Jacob is confident that *he* can make exceptions to his own principles; he buys one slave (Lina) *only* because he needed help on the farm, and she was the “only” one that he had “purchased outright and deliberately,” and he accepts two slaves (Sorrow and Florens) in payment for debts and convinces himself that it was a merciful act (“acquisition of both could be seen as a rescue”) because they were orphans. However, he never grants them their freedom or even views them as autonomous individuals (e.g. never attempts to find out Sorrow’s or Lina’s birth names), and he does not pay them for their labour or let Lina and Florens sleep inside the house like human beings - even when he has many houses ([Florens is] sleeping in the broken sleigh with Lina (...) around our part of the cowshed” (Morrison, 2009, s. 4)). Snead argues that one of the characteristic features of racial divisions is through spatial and conceptual separation in this way (Snead in Morrison, 1993, s. 67). Jacob also makes his slaves call him “Sir”, which indicates that they are his subordinates, perpetuating the social stratification system of society on the farm. These examples demonstrate how Jacob forms his identity as a superior by limiting constructs of his subordinates, substantiating Morrison’s argument in *Playing in the Dark* about how white American identity formation is tightly bound to limiting constructs of the Africanist presence. Jacob limits Florens’s, Sorrow’s and Lina’s agency to facilitate his own superiority. Although it is evident that he actually *owns* slaves, he thinks to himself that “flesh was not his commodity” (Morrison, 2009, s. 20). Strehle claims that he possesses a self-congratulatory liberal belief that he harbours no racist values when he employs a free black artisan and behaves as though the blacksmith is family (Strehle, 2013, s. 114). However, there are other instances in the narrative that demonstrate his appropriation and perpetuation of the racial divisions in society, such as when he views Florens as a lesser being than his own white deceased daughter Patrician; “if she [Florens] got kicked in the head by a mare, the loss

would not rock Rebekka so” (Morrison, 2009, s. 24). By Morrison portraying even such a kind northerner’s moral corruption and perpetuation of racial oppression, she demonstrates how easily the racial divisions, exploitation and oppression of others in society could develop and take root, all due to the American dream of maximum profit and prosperity. In effect, she demonstrates her claims in *Playing in the Dark* through Jacob by showing how the idea of American exceptionalism was influential for identity formation in early America. Jacob’s character demonstrates how “Africanism is inextricable from the definition of Americanness” (Morrison, 1993, s. 65) and how identity formation happens in opposition to the Africanist Other.

Rebekka, the Janus-faced desperate female

Arguably, Rebekka’s identity formation also inevitably forms in opposition to what she is not – a black slave, further substantiating Morrison’s claim in *Playing in the Dark* about identity formation taking place in opposition to what one is *not*. Rebekka starts out as Jacob’s poor mail-order bride from Britain, who is transported on a ship to America. Her low position in society as a poor female is demonstrated in the way she is stored as cargo on the transatlantic voyage; “They were separated from the males (...) and led to a dark space below next to the animal stalls” (Morrison, 2009, s. 79). She is both underneath the males on the ship physically, and through Morrison’s juxtaposition of women and cattle, she demonstrates that females were of lesser value than men in early American society. When she arrives in America, she becomes a white landowner, almost at the very top of the stratification system. One can claim that in this instance, Rebekka’s character becomes a symbol of white social mobility and shows how the American dream was attainable for white people. Morrison argues in *Playing in the Dark* that “The flight from the Old World to the New is generally seen to be a flight from oppression and limitation to freedom and possibility” (Morrison, 1993, s. 34). Because she was originally a poor female in Britain who was then sold as a commodity to a man in America, she has experienced what it is like to be at the very bottom of the hierarchy and have no subjectivity. When she arrived in America, her whiteness and landownership by marriage gave her a superior status to the other slaves on the farm. Morrison explains in *Playing in the Dark* how moving from the Old World to the New World gave power to the white individual; “Power – control of one’s own destiny – would replace the powerlessness felt before the gates of class, caste and cunning persecution. One could move from discipline and punishment to disciplining and punishing, from social ostracism to social rank. One could be released from a useless, binding, repulsive past into a kind of

history-lessness, a blank page waiting to be inscribed” (Morrison, 1993, s. 35). This shift in power and rank because of race is highly relevant to Rebekka’s character. Susmita Roye claims that if poverty and gender marginalize and subjugate Rebekka in the Old World, her whiteness and her husband’s growing prominence and quest for the American dream to obtain wealth automatically empower her in the New World and position her as superior to people of other colours (Roye, 2012, s. 218).

Although life on the Vaark farm is described as content, and Rebekka creates a community with her subordinates (they call her Mistress, indicating a superior position), a turning point occurs when Rebekka becomes a widow. Harris states that “Rebekka undergoes an “insidious” transformation, fuelled by fear and bitterness, and the powerlessness of widowhood” (Harris in Schreiner, 2019, s. 122). Because she has constructed her identity and existence around being a wife, when her husband dies, one can argue that she experiences an identity crisis. She is aware of the disadvantages of her sex and how vulnerable the female gender is without the protection of a patriarch: “without the status or shoulder of a man (...) a widow was in practice illegal” (Morrison, 2009, s. 96). Even though she is white, she is still dependent on marriage to a man to have a superior status in society. Rebekka, as a female, needs to *belong* to a man, indicating women’s vulnerable position in early America; “Tales of his [Jacob’s] journeys excited her, but also intensified her view of a disorderly, threatening world out there, protection from which he alone could provide” (Morrison, 2009, s. 86).

Rebekka’s despondency of losing this protection and, in effect, her belonging makes her seek a new belonging with the Anabaptist community she once held a personal grudge towards because they refused to baptize her first-born child. Her seeking to belong can be viewed as the inception of Rebekka’s moral fall because she severs all familial ties and solidarity with her community on the farm to conform to the Anabaptists' white ideology, racism and religion. She becomes a woman she once thought lowly of; “flat [because] convinced they were innocent and therefore free; safe because churched; tough because still alive. A new people remade in vessels old as time” (Morrison, 2009, s. 90). Rebekka's moral fall is a consequence of the patriarchal society in which she herself is a victim because she is female – and thus powerless without a man. When she was at the top of the social structure, a position only chartered with the protection of a white man; she could allow herself to be a fellow human being and create familial bonds with the slaves on the farm. When this position is removed due to the death of her husband, she becomes desperate for a new belonging, and her social pedestal becomes dependent on racial degradation. Rebekka effectively emulates Morrison’s depiction in *Playing in the Dark* of “the reckless, unabated power of a white

woman gathering identity unto herself from the wholly available and serviceable lives of Africanist others” (Morrison, 1993, s. 25).

Rebekka’s despair compels her to turn her back on her community at the Vaark farm, illustrating that it was, in fact, built on false premises and only functioned because it was a mirror of the social stratification system of a patriarchal, racist society. Without the patriarch at the top of the hierarchy, the structure corrodes. Just like Jacob’s moral fall, Rebekka’s moral fall may also be viewed as extra iniquitous because she has experienced oppression because of her gender and class herself in the Old World. Like Jacob, she should therefore know better regardless of the circumstances. In the passage describing her transatlantic voyage with other females; “Although they had nothing in common with the views of each other, they had everything in common with one thing: the promise and threat of men. Here, they agreed, was where security and risk lay” (Morrison, 2009, s. 96). In this passage, she demonstrates feminist compassion, female unity, and an understanding of the limitations and restrictions that patriarchy entails. In light of this, one can argue that Rebekka makes exceptions for her own conscience by adopting an exceptionalist status and disregarding her solidarity with other women. Strehle substantiates this argument, claiming that Rebekka “betrays her own values, friendships, and commitments in order to achieve the elect safety she has been promised by the exceptionalist narrative. She thinks of Lina in her pox fever as ‘the single friend she had’ (...); yet, to win approval from the Anabaptist congregation for which she has previously expressed contempt, she treats Lina as a slave” (Strehle, 2013, s. 114). Strehle argues that Rebekka’s conversion to piety for the only sake of belonging to a community, in addition to a perception of her own moral superiority, makes her incapable of seeing her own oppressive tendencies (Strehle, 2013).

Rebekka’s perception of her own exceptional status and of being superior because she is white and therefore *not black* is illustrated in the passage; “Now, she thought, there is no one except servants” (Morrison, 2009, s. 97). Her attention to racial signifiers such as hair and skin colour shows that she perpetuates the binary oppositions of society from the moment she comes to America; “[Rebekka] bolted the door at night and would not let the raven-haired girl [Lina] with impossible skin sleep anywhere near” (Morrison, 2009, s. 72-73). However, then after a while, she becomes aware of her misconceptions, indicating that she knows better; “when the first infant was born, Lina handled it so tenderly, with such knowing, that she was ashamed of her early fears and pretended she never had them” (Morrison, 2009, s.73). Her initial prejudice about Lina being a savage because of her Native American origin shows that Rebekka perpetuates the settler mentality of Westward Expansion. Graham Huggan and

Helen Tiffin state that the colonists were Eurocentric and viewed “indigenous cultures as ‘primitive’, less rational, and closer to children, animals and nature” (Huggan & Tiffin in Baillie, 2013, s.190). By Rebekka’s initial fear of Lina, we see her Eurocentric perception when she dehumanizes her and thinks of her as a savage devoid of civilization.

By assuming this Eurocentric exceptional status, she, in effect, “Others” the other members of the farm, setting herself apart from and above them. This perception of superiority becomes an important part of her identity formation when she chooses to become part of the racist Anabaptist community. The Anabaptists are described in the narrative as a very exclusive religious group of white people; “They had even narrower definitions of God’s preferences than her parents. Other than themselves (and those of their kind who agreed), no one was saved. The possibility was open to most, however, except children of Ham. (...) along with a variety of others living willfully in error” (Morrison, 2009, s. 90). Morrison limns her own argument in *Playing in the Dark* here that an Africanist presence functions as “allegorical fodder for the contemplation of Eden, expulsion, and the availability of grace” (Morrison, 1993, s. 66). The passage illustrates the traditional exclusionary practices of the white settlers, something Rebekka originally disliked because it meant that not only did children of Ham (Africans) not enter heaven, but also her own deceased children were excluded because she herself was “willfully living in error” so her children could not be baptized. Strehle claims that the New World’s Presbyterians, Anabaptists and Puritans all had a common denominator; although they disagreed passionately with each other on minor points of theology, each of the congregations believed in an angry God who selected and saved only a few resulting in their exceptional status as “chosen” (Strehle, 2013, s. 112). This shows the exclusionary tradition of American exceptionalism because their divine destiny only appertained to a selected few. Morrison demonstrates that there is even an element of exclusion in their understanding of who can enter heaven. When Rebekka’s dead babies are excluded from heaven because they do not belong to the community and the children of Ham are excluded just because their skin is black, this exposes the extreme exclusionary practices of religion that permeated early American society.

One can argue that Rebekka's adoption of the Anabaptist’s ideology is fully complete when Lina (who is defined as a “praying savage”) must walk with her but wait outside the church. Rebekka physically excludes her from entering the church like the Anabaptists figuratively exclude her from their heaven; “[The Anabaptists] understood ... Levels of sin, in other words, and lesser peoples. Natives and Africans, for instance, had access to grace but not to heaven – a heaven they knew as intimately as they knew their own gardens” (Morrison,

2009, s. 96-97). When Rebekka plans to put Florens up for sale (like she herself once was sold to Jacob), give away Sorrow to *any* taker after beating her, and forces Lina to cut her hair and stop her doing Native American cultural practices, all in order to join the excluding Anabaptists, she too becomes morally corrupted in order to belong to the chosen people. Her complete transformation to the ideology is described through Scully, a white indentured servant; “She was penitent, pure and simple. Which to him meant that underneath her piety was something cold, if not cruel” (Morrison, 2009, s. 151). Just like Jacob, Rebekka makes exceptions for herself, sacrificing her principles and the people closest to her for material advantage in true exceptionalist tradition (Strehle, 2013, p. 115). Her identity, in effect, takes a form that is only possible through racial division and is based on self-reflexiveness as a status of chosen versus a status as a non-chosen.

Florens, she who becomes sundered

Many critics argue that one may read *A Mercy* like a Bildungsroman if one views Florens as the main protagonist and that the story is about her coming of age (e.g. Heinert, Vega-González). Considering Morrison’s experimentation with the genre in her novel *The Bluest eye* (1970), which can be interpreted as a tragic parody of a conventional Bildungsroman, one may also perhaps interpret *A Mercy* as a conversion of the traditional advantageous coming of age narrative. Instead of Florens having happy formative years, one can argue that she, in fact, has a negative development with each formative encounter, leading to her becoming less and less a part of society because of her race. It may be feasible to claim that Florens functions as what Morrison terms in *Playing in the Dark* “[a] black population forced to serve as freedoms polar opposite” (Morrison, 1993, s. 64) because she serves as the surrogate for captivity so that the Vaark’s can surmise freedom. Florens is a classical diaspora character, uprooted from her mother at a young age and ever searching for a new identity with a yearning to belong. Arguably she can be viewed as a representation of Morrison’s theory of identity formation in the liminal space between the binaries of race because she first defines herself in relation to the white Vaarks (belonging to them by being their property). Then she defines herself as the free black man’s property (belonging to him by being “his tree”(Morrison, 2009, s. 59)) and then, at the end of the narrative, she defines herself as something apart from white society – “unbelonging”. Her identity ends up being fragmented and deconstructed. When she belongs to no one, she turns “feral”, illustrated in the passage, “I am a thing apart” (Morrison, 2009, s.113). Strehle argues that this passage is linked to a Puritan assumption that she, as a black individual, is “a thing apart,” a throw-away object without humanity (Strehle, 2013, s. 118).

When Florens says, “I am become wilderness but I am also Florens” (Morrison, 2009, s. 159), it is likely that Florens here *becomes* wilderness, the symbolic materialization of Baillie’s “unmapped space”. To the American exceptionalists, slaves and natives were indistinguishable from the unmapped space’s flora and fauna (Baillie, 2013). Florens’s unbelonging makes her subject be conquered and owned, just like the unnamed wilderness itself. She, too, may be seized through the law of “occupatio”, which states that if something belongs to nobody, then it becomes the property of the first person who *takes* it (Fitzmaurice in Hansen, 2018, s. 216). Her status as “something” instead of “someone” in white society is clearly depicted throughout the narrative. Florens’s vulnerability as unbelonging is further substantiated by the symbolic representation of the racoon that Jacob saves; “as gentle as possible, avoiding the claws and jaws of the frightened animal. Once he succeeded, the racoon limped off, perhaps to the mother forced to abandon it or more likely into other claws” (Morrison 2009, s. 9). If one interprets the racoon as a symbol of Florens, she is also separated from her mother and is saved by Jacob buying and owning her. When he then dies, she is no longer owned, and the sentence “into other claws” indicates the potential foreboding of the untravelled wilderness that lies ahead because freedom also entails danger. The danger is illustrated by “the claws” and may represent the male predators that will potentially capture her because she is now unbelonging and up for grabs, just like the unmapped territory she is surrounded by. Another example of Florens equating wilderness that is ready for the taking is depicted through Lina’s story about the eagle. The story entails a mother eagle that dies while defending her eggs from the American exceptionalist and white settler’s claim of ownership when he shouts “mine, mine, mine” (Morrison, 2009, s. 60). When Florens asks if the eggs hatch and if the fledglings survive, Lina answers, “We have”. The word “we” fuses the fates of the fledglings, Lina, and Florens. They are viewed as unmapped wilderness in the eyes of the American exceptionalist, and the metaphorical story demonstrates their vulnerability of being seized when faced with his possessive hankering.

The instigator for Florens’s inevitable identity deterioration and becoming wilderness occurs at widow Ealing’s home, where the white witch hunters scrutinize her body with an indifferent, ostracizing gaze that leaves her traumatized and nullified as a human being; “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. Swine look at me with more connection when they raise their heads from the trough” (Morrison, 2009, s. 111). This dehumanizing examination makes Florens feel alienated and transforms her self-perception into an Other. Fanon’s quote about being the receiver of the white gaze in *Black*

Skin, White Masks (1952) resonates with how Florens is the receiver of the witch hunters' gaze; "I was indignant; I demanded an explanation. Nothing happened. I burst apart. Now the fragments have been put together again by another self" (Fanon, 1986, s. 109). Just like Fanon's quote, Florens re-identifies herself as a thing apart, as an Other. Strehle argues that the Puritans, through this action, commit a "scopic rape" of the dark-skinned girl out of the conviction that; "[t]he Black Man is among us. This is his minion" (Morrison, 2009, s. 112). They demonize her based on the colour of her skin and by way of association with another black-skinned person. Terry argues that when Florens is faced with her physical racial difference in this way, the villagers react with fear and hostility, associating Florens with animality as well as evil; "I have never seen any human this black" (Morrison, 2009, s. 109). Consequently, Florens recognizes their failure to categorize her as themselves; "I think they have shock that I can talk" (Morrison, 2009, s. 109), and she internalizes the encounter because she learns that her place within society's racial hierarchy naturalizes her proximity to the nonhuman (Terry, 2014, s. 139- 140).

One might say that Florens's identity disintegration and loss of humanity is complete when she, in a dream, can no longer see her own reflection in the turquoise water; "Right away I take fright when I see my face is not there. Where my face should be is nothing. (...) I am not even a shadow there" (Morrison, 2009, s. 136). Stuart Schneiderman claims that Florens does not see her own reflection because the closest approximation in American history to having no face is being black. He points to the importance of issues that elicit pride or shame and the deference- emotion system in the social formation of African American identity (Schneiderman in Bouson, 2000). The collapse of identity Florens experiences here can be claimed to be what Andrew Morrison terms learned cultural shame. He states, "The African American people, often judged by white American society as inferior, have endured the stigma of being different since their history on this continent began. The sense of difference and inferiority imposed by the dominant culture leads to internalization of that judgement by the affected group" (Morrison in Bouson, 2000, s. 12). Thus, Florens internalizes this cultural shame after learning that she is different. The dominant white culture forces her to see herself as they do, and the water with a missing reflection may symbolize their white gaze – it is missing because they do not recognize her. Florens's missing reflection arguably represents W.E.B Du Bois's Double-consciousness of African Americans, "this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity" (Du Bois in Christiansen, 2007, s. 38). Because the witch hunters do not recognize her as a human, she feels fragmented and

identity-less. Fanon describes this white gaze as a feeling of being “dissected under white eyes, the only real eyes and of having his body given back to him sprawled out, distorted” (Fanon in Bouson, 2000, s. 14).

Because Florens internalizes this white perception of herself, she also acts according to their expectations of her. As Strehle points out, in the scene where Florens takes the doll away and pulls Malaik’s arm hard enough to dislocate it, she performs the darkness ascribed to her by the Puritans. She argues that her violent act lives up to the binary assumptions that shape their dehumanizing racism (Strehle, 2013, s. 118). One can therefore argue that Florens experiences a self-fulfilling prophecy where she adopts the actions of a wild animal, brought on by the internalization of the villager’s racism; “The claws scratch and scratch until the hammer is in my hand” (Morrison, 2009, s. 140). When the blacksmith condemns Florens as insentient; “nothing but wilderness. No constraint. No mind” (Morrison, 2009, s. 139), he dehumanizes her by reducing her to just a body, an object with no mind and bereft of civility. Consequently, he is perpetuating American exceptionalism by reducing Florens to a savage and just like Lina; he is also adopting the master’s tools of oppression. Terry argues that his rhetoric can be viewed as a reinforcement of the hierarchy also found in settler conceptions of civility, Manifest Destiny and colonization (Terry, 2014). By making the blacksmith behave in a manner that reflects dominant white ideology and behaviour in this way, Morrison skews racial categories and oppositional binaries and avoids reifying the stereotypes connected to race. One can contend that she also shows that race is socially constructed and that there is no such thing as racial purity (Terry, 2014).

Through this scene with the blacksmith, Florens is cast out and once again made into an Other. The trauma caused by the scopic rape and the villagers’ gaze haunts Florens’s contemplation during her onward journey;

I walk alone except for the eyes that join me on my journey. Eyes that do not recognize me, eyes that examine me for tail, an extra teat (...) Wondering eyes that stare and decide.. if my knees bend backward like the forelegs of a dog (...) I am losing something with every step I take. I can feel the drain. Something precious is leaving me. I am a thing apart. With the letter I belong and am lawful. Without it I am a weak calf abandon by the herd, a turtle without shell, a minion with no telltale signs but a darkness I am born with, outside, yes, but inside as well and the inside dark is small, feathered and toothy. (Morrison, 2009, s. 112-113)

Arguably, the many eyes that follow her on her journey symbolize the omnipresence of the white gaze and the all-pervading perception of the dominant culture. She cannot escape the categorization as an Other, which becomes pivotal for her identity formation. Without the letter stating she is Mistress's property (white property), she is unbelonging and vulnerable to capture. Terry argues that these "wondering eyes" are symbolic of the emerging racial assumptions that will accompany American society as it evolves. Because Florens cannot escape the othering gazes and cannot forget the objectification, she begins to lose her previous sense of self. A "darkness... inside" emerges, which she distinguishes from her skin colour, a biological inheritance, that shows on the outside (Terry, 2014, s. 141). The ostracizing gazes Florens encounters in the forest seem to emulate Fanon's racial gaze. He explains that the object of the gaze feels shame, and the gaze produces a doubleness of experience. The black object's feeling of inferiority "comes into being through the other" and creates an experience of being seen as an object of contempt. He argues that being viewed through the shaming gaze of whites, "Negroes" are perceived as savages, brutes, illiterates" (Fanon in Bouson, 2000, s. 14). Wilfred Samuels and Clenora Hudson-Weems argue that the consequences of internalizing another's perception, as Florens does here, can be detrimental to the sense of self. If the response of the gaze elicits shame, it damages the sense of self because it is a shame of the self. When the individual becomes overpowered by "the Look", they forfeit their being-for-myself and become a being-for-the-other. Thus, transforming into the Other (Samuels & Hudson-Weems in Roye, 2012, s. 216).

This expression of shame and animal attributes of being "feathered and toothy" indicate that Florens has indeed internalized the fears of the Puritans who think she is an animal. They have ascribed the shame she feels, and they speculate if she can; "spring out of the darkness and bite" (Morrison, 2009, s. 113). Florens seems to be highly aware of this dehumanizing process taking its toll on her self-perception and identity, withering away with every step she takes; "it is the withering inside that enslaves and opens the door for what is wild. I know my withering is born in the Widow's closet" (Morrison, 2009, s. 158). Morrison's argument in *Playing in the Dark* is highly relevant to this passage; "Americans fear of being outcast... of Nature unbridled and crouched for attack; their fear of the absence of so-called civilization" (Morrison in Terry, 2014, s. 141) was outworked through a fabricated blackness (Africanism), a presence that Florens here constitutes. Morrison's argument is demonstrated through Florens, she is what the exceptionalist American is *not*, and she is the Africanist presence that becomes his contrast. Florens functions as a foil to the white settler; She makes nature yield to her when she bends a branch to sleep - mirroring the

pioneer, but then she is cast out without civilization. She is unbelonging and an Other, excluded from the community. Strehle substantiates this reading, arguing that through Florens's story, Morrison explores the dilemma of the constructed Other, the non-American, but decidedly something else (Strehle, 2013). Florens's Africanist presence serves as the shadowy exception to the promise of freedom in the exceptionalist nation (Morrison, 1993, s. 48). Strehle argues that through Florens's racist encounters under the pretence of redemptive godliness, the reader sees how poisonous and divisive an impact religious belief has had on American society—especially among those excluded from the elect. Florens pays the costs of exceptionalism and becomes “untouchable” (Strehle, 2013, p.117).

When Florens stops belonging, either to the Vaarks, to the blacksmith, or to humanity, she experiences an identity crisis indicated through the darkness she feels inside. Arguably daughter Jane functions as Florens's mirror. She has also internalized the hatred and the vilification that the village has placed upon her when she smiles and replies that she is a demon “Yes, she says. Oh yes.” (Morrison, 2009, s. 112), adopting the Puritans' assumption about her. Although this passage can also be read ironically, Jane is acting against the will of the villagers and embracing the role of a demon by playing into their view of how a demon would act – helping the escape of another perceived demon. Both girls show that viewing oneself through the dominant culture's lens leads to an internalization of society's ostracizing perception, expediting an identity formation as an Other.

Jennifer Lee Jordan Heinert contends that a conventional Bildungsroman corresponds to the “American Self” and that this reflects the dominant culture's tradition and logic (Heinert, 2009). If one is to apply this theory to *A Mercy* and read Florens's narrative as a story of an unfulfilled identity, Morrison shows us how someone is excluded from having an American identity because she does not ascertain it but rather acts as a surrogate for the opposite of it. This is highly relevant to Morrison's argument in *Playing in the Dark*. Although one can agree that the story may start out as a classic Bildungsroman where Morrison gives Florens agency by making her literate and even baptizing her, one can argue that her development is clearly a negative one and her formative encounters with a racist society are detrimental for her identity formation resulting in a fragmented one as an Other.

“Going to Meet the Man”, by James Baldwin

“Going to Meet the Man” (1965) is a short story that is set in South America at the beginning of the 1960s and is about the 42-year-old sheriff Jesse who participates in racial violence to

hinder racial equality during the white and black conflicts of the Civil Rights Movement of 1950-1960s. Through Jesse's memories, we become witness to his identity formation as a White supremacist. Fitzhugh Brundage states that "Blacks in the South of America often found themselves subject to a regime ready and willing to employ citizen violence as a means to reinforce the steep hierarchy of race and to control discontented Blacks. Many Blacks who challenged or somehow offended the system found themselves facing the fist, the gun barrel, or the lynch mob, a threat that continued to be very real long after slavery had come to an end" (Brundage in Cornell & Hartmann, 1998, s. 185). This regime of citizen violence as a means to reinforce racial hierarchy is depicted throughout the short story. Not only does it become clear that racial violence happens without impunity, but the deep-rooted structural racism of American society becomes exposed when Jesse, *a sheriff* - a person of power who could potentially convert the system, participates in these violent acts, demonstrating how the African American people experienced institutionalized powerlessness.

Jesse, the white supremacist

In *Playing in the Dark*, Morrison writes that Africanism becomes not just an entity to exhibit authority over, but it accounts for its source (Morrison, 1993, s. 80). Morrison is interested in exposing "the impact of racism on those who perpetuate it" (Morrison, 1993, s. 11). She argues that protagonists in literature become who they are by virtue of the power they take away, just like the protagonist Jesse does in "Going to Meet the Man". This assertion of power is demonstrated throughout the short story and becomes formative for Jesse's identity. Sara Taylor argues that Jesse functions as a pawn in a racist social structure, as he demonstrates how integral racism is to the fabric of American society (Taylor, 2008, s. 46). One can argue that he adopts this role as a pawn to be able to belong to the coherent group of white supremacists.

Arguably, Jesse's unfulfilled identity is a consequence of racial fear. This fear becomes formative for his identity formation in a deleterious way. One can argue that his life's goal appears to be the preservation of "whiteness", and he views black skin as a threat to the racial purity of society, illustrated in the passage; "You lucky we pump some white blood into you every once in a while – your women" (Baldwin, 1965, s. 235). His misconception of the superiority of white blood emulates the American exceptionalist myth about superior white bloodlines. This concept was based on pseudoscience (Cornell & Hartmann, 1998, s. 22). Guillaume Aubert explains that this faith entailed a belief in a natural superiority of one race over another, that moral virtues and physical attributes transferred via heritage, and that

pure white blood succeeded from one generation to the next. This false perception of the superiority of bloodlines was famously called “the idea of race” by the historian Arlette Jouanna and is an important belief in white ideology (Aubert, 2004, s. 443). Morrison argues in *Playing in the Dark* that this preoccupation with blood can be viewed as demonstrating fetishization. She claims that; “This [blood] is especially useful in evoking erotic fears or desires and establishing fixed and major difference where difference does not exist (...) Blood, for example, is a pervasive fetish: black blood, white blood, the purity of blood, the purity of white female sexuality, the pollution of African blood and sex. Fetishization is a strategy often used to assert the categorical absolutism of civilization and savagery” (Morrison, 1993, s. 68). Through this preoccupation with the purity of white blood, Jesse demonstrates his perception of his own superiority as white and a desire for racial purification. James Snead argues that one of the characteristic figures of racial division is “The fear of merging, or loss of identity through synergistic union with the other, leads to the wish to use racial purification as a separating strategy against difference” (Snead in Morrison, 1993, s. 67). It becomes clear that Jesse’s fear of merging with the black-skinned and losing his white identity is a theme that pervades the short story.

One can argue that the birth of Jesse’s fetishization happens when he is an eight-year-old child when he attends a white supremacist ritual in the form of a lynching of a black man. The scene is mediated as one of Jesse’s traumatic memories as a child. This event may be interpreted as formative for his identity and can be viewed as a crossroads in his life because it forces him to adopt a life of racial hatred. The collective ritual of this barbaric event introduces him to white supremacy and teaches him what it entails to be a “white man”, emphasising the masculinity in white American exceptionalism. At first, the victim of the lynching is described as a man; “he was a big man, a bigger man than his father, and black as an African jungle cat, and naked” (Baldwin, 1965, s. 246). The juxtaposition of the man and a black animal shows his dehumanized position in society through Jesse’s eyes. When his genitalia is removed, Jesse terms him an “It”; “One of his father’s friends reached up and in his hands he held a knife: and Jesse wished that he had been that man. ... It seemed fully conscious now, as though the fire had burned out terror and pain... In the cradle of one white hand, the nigger’s privates seemed as remote as meat being weighed in the scales; but seemed heavier too, much heavier” (Baldwin, 1965, s. 247).

It seems that it is the collective hate towards this man that transforms him into an “it” and that white society debases him into an object. However, one can also argue that the fluidity of Jesse’s memory and his present self leads to this oscillation between the term

“man” and “it”. When he was a child, his innocence made him view the victim as a man, but his contemporary self with limitless racial hatred terms the man an “it”. Therefore, arguably this ascription of the term “it” to the Africanist presence signifies the identity formation that Jesse has gone through when becoming a White supremacist. The viewing of a castration thus becomes a formative encounter for Jesse’s identity because it leads him down a path of white supremacy, formulating the way he will view black people for the rest of his life, foreshadowed by the way he remembers wishing that he was the man holding the knife. The weighing of testicles emulates the estimation of the value of slaves as livestock prior to auction and functions as a metaphor for the white man having complete control over the black body. Louis H. Pratt explains that the myth of the male “Negro’s” sexuality and the great fear of it involved the belief that a black man secretly desired white flesh and would take any opportunity to violate the pure white flower of womanhood. The black male genitalia, therefore, became the symbolic embodiment of the myth of black sexual superiority, and the white determination to destroy it was to stop the violation of white womanhood (Pratt, 1978, s. 48). This myth of superior genitalia is illustrated through Jesse’s memory of lynched man’s “privates”; “huge, huge, much bigger than his father’s, flaccid, hairless, the largest thing he had ever seen till then, and the blackest” (Baldwin, 1965, s. 248). Taylor contends that the following act of castration symbolizes that black masculinity is utterly under the control and influence of the paradigm of white patriarchy because the white man tangibly controls the black man’s sexuality and masculinity. By combining the private image of testicles in such a public setting, Baldwin links the private and public spheres as well as race and sexuality (Taylor, 2008, s. 46).

The observers of the lynching are happy and relieved when the man is dead after they have collectively caused his death by mutilation; “Then the crowd rushed forward, tearing at the body with their hands, with knives, with rocks, with stones, howling and cursing” (Baldwin, 1965, s.248). Jesse is exposed to the binary oppositions of the event, both love for the whiteness and hate for the blackness; “[he] loved his father more than he had ever loved him” (Baldwin, 1965, s. 248). One can argue that the contrast between the hate that they have for the black man and the love they have for each other as a white community strengthens the boundaries of their fabricated union and their sense of belonging, perpetuating the oppositional binaries to fit their white ideology.

Williams argues that the description of a ritualistic lynching as a trivial family outing shows just how dehumanized the black body was in American society (Williams, 2007, s. 188). The way Jesse feels that; “his father had carried him through a mighty test, had revealed

to him a great secret which would be the key to his life forever” (Baldwin, 1965, s. 248) depicts a turn of fate moment because he adopts the white ideology and systemic racism of society that become pivotal for his identity formation. Williamson argues that lynchings were a playground for the reinscription of ideologies of exceptionalism and manhood. The ideologies were often appropriated rather than authentic and existed as real categories only in terms of binarism (Williamson, 2007, s.188-89). The evident collective acceptance of the lynching helps create a framework for grasping the features and mechanisms that upheld white supremacy in America. It demonstrates how the illusion of whiteness as something superior became collectively constructed and maintained.

This precariousness of white supremacist ideology and the way it is appropriated rather than authentic is demonstrated throughout the short story. The scene where Jesse remembers driving to the lynching with his mother and father in the car, and “[t]hey were looking at something he could not see” (Baldwin, 1965, s. 244) may be read as an indication of this precariousness. The way Jesse’s father repeats the word; “I reckon” five times at the end of the story may also indicate that even he, a veteran white supremacist, is uncertain of the righteousness of white violent actions. Arguably, the word “reckon” questions the whole concept of white ideology because “to reckon” is the equivalent of “to suppose”, indicating that the ideology is based upon a myth. If this tradition of violent acts is based upon an assumption, a myth, like the word “reckon” indicates, the precariousness of white ideology then becomes exposed. Because the father seems uncertain and never says what he reckons, one may argue that this creates ambiguity about the foundations of white supremacy. This uncertainty is also illustrated in the passage; “[Jesse] he was a good man, a God fearing man, he had tried to do his duty all his life” (Baldwin, 1965, s. 230) and “he was just supposed to do his job” (Baldwin, 1965, s. 231) and “They were singing and I was supposed to make them stop” (Baldwin, 1965, s. 232). The words “tried to” and “supposed to” indicate that Jesse is influenced by something other than himself, seemingly something uncertain and abstract – like a myth. Morrison’s argument in *Playing in the Dark* about an identity based upon unity through a shared idea of what they were *not* (oppressed black people) is likely relevant here because it would account for the unstable foundation for Jesse’s identity formation. It becomes evident that Jesse feels obligated to carry out systemic racism, like his forefathers before him, because he is “supposed to” in order to belong to his kind, that is, the white race. One can argue that the personification of Jim Crow laws (“Big Jim C”) also indicates that Jesse feels obligated to execute acts that are ascribed to him by society. This notion of Jesse

acting like he is supposed to according to tradition and that his actions are not his own also comes across in the passage:

Men much older than he, who had been responsible for law and order much longer than he, were now much quieter than they had been, and the tone of their jokes (...) had changed. These men were his models, they had been friends to his father, and they had taught him what it meant to be a man. He looked to them for courage now. It wasn't that he didn't know what he was doing was right – he knew that, nobody had to tell him that; it was only that he missed the ease of the former years. (Baldwin, 1965, s. 236)

Taylor argues that white males in this paradigm must violently exert power over the black male body in order to inhabit the space of the “true white man” (Taylor, 2008, s. 56). One may argue that it seems like Jesse is trying to convince himself by claiming to know that what he was doing was right because he is, in fact, *following tradition*. Although he performs many unspeakable racist acts demonstrating his power position as a white man (like sexual acts with arrested black women, selling inferior things to the unsuspecting black community, and violence against seemingly peaceful singing demonstrators), one can argue that there is ambivalence and feeling of ambiguity of something unspoken throughout the story. Such as the ambiguity about why the man has been sentenced to be lynched and the way Jesse contemplates this; “What did he do? Jesse wondered. What did the man do? What did he do? – but he could not ask his father” (Baldwin, 1965, s. 247). This passage may indicate that Jesse is supposed to just accept the systemic racism in society without question because there is a collective agreement that the black body *should be* oppressed. Jesse's contemplation illustrates that there is no room to question it, perhaps because then the ideology would implode due to its unstable foundation. Consequently, he must follow orders and do what he is “supposed to” in order to maintain the status quo.

He also must do what he is supposed to when it comes to his black childhood friend Otis. Arguably, Otis's innocence can be interpreted as a symbol of black innocence when met with white oppression. When young Jesse tells his father in an accusing way; “But Otis didn't do nothing!” and his father replies; “Otis can't do nothing (...) We just want to make sure Otis don't do nothing” (Baldwin, 1965, s. 240) we are exposed to the ideology behind white supremacy, that the black body is supposed to be oppressed from a young age so that it does “nothing” to challenge white superiority and never will. Jesse is now forced to hate Otis

instead of loving him, because of his difference in skin colour. Pratt explains that “this apprehensiveness, which is basic to segregation and to the American way of life, is based on the triumph of right, as defined exclusively within the white context. Those who have different physical appearances, or who are motivated by different ideological persuasions become threats to the Established Order, and therefore they must be destroyed” (Pratt, 1978, s. 45-47). When Jesse’s father says; “And you tell him [Otis] what your Daddy said, you hear?” and Jesse replies, “Yes sir” (Baldwin, 1965, s. 240), one may view this as a rite of passage, where Jesse accepts to perpetuate white supremacy, defend the status-quo like he is “supposed to”, and, in effect, becomes a hostage for upholding the continuance of white supremacy at a very young age. The scene demonstrates the ideology of white supremacy’s heritability. James Comer states that between 1882 and 1955, more than 3000 people of colour were lynched, and over 4700 died in mob action. He claims that the motives for such violence were mixed, but the underlying purpose seemed to be to maintain white privilege (Comer in Bouson, 2000, s. 13). Jesse’s mere witnessing of the lynching ascribes him the burden of sustaining white racial domination.

This effort to protect white racial domination permeates the story. Baldwin comments on the protection of white supremacy in his essay *Stranger in the Village* (1953): “The idea of white supremacy rests simply on the fact that white men are the creators of civilization (...) and are therefore civilizations' guardians and defenders. Thus, it was impossible for Americans to accept the black man as one of themselves, for to do so was to jeopardize their status as white men” (Baldwin in King & Scott, 2006, s. 233). Baldwin here emphasises the connection between white ideology, civilization and masculinity. It is evident that Jesse also assumes this fact of the white creation of civility, illustrated in the passage; “They [black people] were animals, they were no better than animals, what could be done with people like that? Here they had been in a civilized country for years and they still lived like animals” (Baldwin, 1965, s. 231). His juxtaposing of black people and animals in this passage shows how he perpetuates the idea of people of colour being savages, brutes and “niggers”, emulating the belief of an American exceptionalist, coinciding with Fanon’s arguments in his article *On national culture* (1963). Jesse feels like he is at war on a mission to save civility, and his discourse resembles battle language; “They were soldiers fighting a war, but their relationship to each other was that of accomplices in a crime. They all had to keep their mouths shut” (Baldwin, 1965, s. 238-239) and “while here they were, out-numbered, fighting to save the civilized world” (Baldwin, 1965, s. 238). It becomes clear that Jesse views himself as the defender of civilization, racial purity and whiteness.

Like Jublio D'Ortega, Jesse also seems misguided about how executing racial oppression is doing the work of God: "He tried to be a good person and treat everybody right: it wasn't his fault if the niggers had taken it into their heads to fight against God and go against the rules laid down in the Bible for everyone to read! Any preacher would tell you that. He was only doing his duty: Protecting white people from the niggers and the niggers from themselves" (Baldwin, 1965, s. 235-236). In uniform with American exceptionalism and the chosen race, he assumes a superior status and performs racism under the guise of piety. Here too, the systemic racism Jesse is ascribed to execute is clearly illustrated through the words, "rules laid down in the Bible". Just like an American exceptionalist, he believes that he is saving black people from their own barbarity, and it becomes evident that he thinks of himself as what Fanon constitutes as the "colonial mother", saving the colonised (the black people) from themselves (Fanon, 1963); "They would thank him when this was over. In that way they had, the best of them, not quite looking him in the eye, (...) We surely thanks you, Mr. Jesse" (Baldwin, 1965, s. 236). The look he desires from the black individual is a subjugated look, a look that demonstrates that he is of the superior race, a look resembling that of a slave looking at its master. Bell Hooks explains that the politics of slavery and racialized power relations were such that the slaves were denied their right to look or gaze. Jesse wishes to continue this strategy of domination where people of colour assume a posture of subordination and have the courtesy to give the white individual a look indicating subjugation. Historically, black men in America were murdered and lynched for looking at white womanhood and were always subject to control and punishment by the overseeing omniscient white gaze (Hooks, 1992, s. 272). This protection of the female gender from the black gaze is illustrated when the father says to the mother, "When that nigger looks at you, he's going to swear he threw his life away for nothing" (Baldwin, 1965, s. 244).

Another example of the significance of a gaze is in the scene where the double gaze between Jesse and the little boy occurs. One can argue that the boy's gaze becomes the symbolic materialization of Bhabha's theory about mimicry as a site of resistance (Bhabha, 1983/1994):

He watched the boy; the boy watched him. The boy certainly wasn't more than ten. *White man.* (...) The expression on the boy's face did not change. The sun beat down on them both, still and silent; he had the feeling that he had been caught up in a nightmare, a nightmare dreamed as a child. It had that feeling – everything familiar, without undergoing any other change, had been subtly and hideously displaced: the

trees, the sun, the patches of grass in the yard, the leaning porch and the weary porch steps and the card-board in the windows and the black hole of the door which looked like the entrance to a cave, and the eyes of the pickaninny, all were charged with malevolence. *White man*. (Baldwin, 1965, s. 234)

The look the little boy gives Jesse may be interpreted as an “oppositional gaze”. This can be interpreted as a look that Bell Hooks describes as something black children were punished for giving to their parents, a hard, intense direct look that is interpreted as confrontational, a gesture of resistance and a challenge to authority. She argues that even in the worst circumstances of domination, the power in looking and manipulation of one’s own gaze in the face of structures of domination that would contain it gives the possibility of agency (Hooks, 1992, s. 270). In this scene, the binary oppositions of white and black create a cultural ambivalence, where the white culture is supposedly superior to the other (resembling colonisation). Arguably the boy’s act of mimicry becomes evident through his oppositional gaze. The boy shows a form of resistance and survival in the way that he (emulating the colonised) needs to engage in mimicry to adjust to his oppressor (Jesse, emulating the coloniser). Through this mimicry, Bhabha argues that the power transfers from the coloniser to the colonised, and the colonised regains his subjectivity and power through the act. The boy functions as a “resisting spectator” (Diawari in Hooks, 1992, s. 271). Bhabha states that; “mimicry emerges as the representation of a difference that is itself a process of disavowal” (Bhabha, 1983/1994, s. 122). In this instance, it is evident that there occurs a power shift because it elicits fear in Jesse; “he felt an icy fear rise in him” (Baldwin, 1965, s. 235). When the boy calls him “White Man” to set himself apart from him, he creates a binary opposition between them and, in effect, parodies how Jesse would call him a black boy, accentuating racial distinctions to assert a racial division. It is like he is subverting the dominant power structure and executing a transference of power, transforming it from white to black. Loewen explains that long after the end of slavery, “Blacks were expected to be deferential to Whites, and Whites to be patronizing and condescending to Blacks. This system both signified and reinforced in relentless daily experience a racial boundary” (Loewen in Cornell & Hartmann, 187). The boy subverts this power structure by imitating Jesse. The boy, in effect, mimics the power play of the white oppressor and takes advantage of this moment of rupture to resist identification by the white gaze by inverting its meaning. The black child ends up becoming the owner of the power of looking. Pratt argues that the fear elicited in Jesse is a morbid, uncontrollable fear of all individuals (even children) who dare to challenge the white power

structure (Pratt, 1978). These fears are connected to the construction and maintenance of white membership and white supremacy.

The boy's mimicry here challenges the conviction of white dominance because it can never be exactly the same because it is not white, thus challenging Jesse's understanding of his own racial superiority. Jesse describes the setting as something familiar, only subtly displaced and full of malevolence, as though he is describing this mimicry of "almost the same but not" (Bhabha, 1983/1994). One can argue that this is something Jesse has feared all his life, that people of colour would stand up to the oppression of white supremacy, consequently making him feel that his hegemonic position in society is in danger. A resistance that will inevitably lead to the demise of the white ideology. Therman O'Daniel argues that when Jesse is made aware of the presence of a "New Negro" who will foster the same traditional love-hate scheme (giving the familiar feeling), but the love or respect formerly designated for him (the white race) has suddenly turned to hate (disrespect), the scene becomes a resemblance to a nightmare (O'Daniel, 1977, s. 175).

The end scene of the short story portrays how Jesse's fetishization of blackness becomes complete, and in effect, Baldwin limns how intricately intertwined sexuality, masculinity, power, and racism are for the protagonist. Like the way his father is dependent on *taking* power by executing racist violence in order to be able to perform sexually (such as after the lynching), so does Jesse. This coupling of sex and violence seems to be a hereditary tradition within white ideology. He experiences impotence without thinking of asserting dominance over the black body. When Jesse's thoughts return from the memory of the grotesque lynching, he finds that his erection is in place. He then tells his wife, "Come on, sugar, I'm going to do you like a nigger, just like a nigger, come on sugar, and love me just like you'd love a nigger" (Baldwin, 1965, s. 249). Jesse perpetuates the myth of the black man's sexuality by indicating that his wife would "love a nigger". Arguably by role-playing "a nigger" and through this reversion of roles, he feels in control of the black man's sexuality. Fanon argues, "For the majority of white men the Negro represents the sexual instinct (in its raw state). The Negro is the incarnation of a genital potency beyond all moralities and prohibitions" (Fanon, 1986, s. 177). In other words, the myth of black masculinity and sexuality entailed the idea that the black man possessed genital superiority without the limitations of morality and social restrictions. Thus, Jesse wants to personify this primal sexual instinct, and in effect, the role-play may indicate that he reverses Bhabha's theory of mimicry in a perverse way; by mimicking the black man, he shifts power back because he becomes the very embodiment of the black body and consequently possesses the black

sexuality that he has been conditioned to fear. Morrison emphasises the forbiddenness connected to black sexuality in *Playing in the Dark*; “Its voluptuous illegality is enforced by the associations constantly made between darkness and desire, darkness and irrationality, darkness and the thrill of evil” (Morrison, 1993, s. 87). She contends that the “Africanist presence serves as a marker and vehicle for illegal sexuality” (Morrison, 1993, s. 52). Thus, one can argue that Jesse imagines that he is an “African persona to articulate and imaginatively act out the forbidden in American culture” (Morrison, 1993, s. 66). Taylor argues that Jesse, in this role-play, experiences that the hypersexualized black masculinity white patriarchy has created to dominate is slipping away. By role-playing, he revives the domination and desperately tries to embody the black man’s identity in order to preserve it, and in effect, also preserves his own identity that is completely dependent on the control of the black man’s identity. He claims that “the racist sheriff ultimately become[s] the denigrated hypersexualized black masculinity that the white patriarchal system has created, thus underscoring racist white masculinity's dependence upon its construction of black masculinity for its own being” (Taylor, 2008, s. 58).

After his conversion to white supremacy through observing a lynching, Jesse can only obtain sexual pleasure and an erection through either the imagined or real racial mutilation of the black body, indicated by the way he gets an erection every time he dominates power or thinks about dominating power over a black body. The repetitive intrusion of racially violent thoughts during the sex act is illustrated in the passage, “He thought of the morning as he labored (...) he thought of morning as he labored harder than he ever had before” (Baldwin, 1965, s. 249). The memory of the racial violence of the morning entails the prodding of a black man with a cattle prodder until the victim screamed, wet himself and lay lifeless on the prison floor. By repeating the thought about “the morning”, it becomes evident that Jesse cannot perform sexually without thinking of this racial violence. The lynched man and the lifeless black body on the prison floor are symbolically in bed with him during the sexual act because they are in his thoughts. This demonstrates how the urge to conquer and dominate is so intricately intertwined with white supremacist masculinity and how American exceptionalism even pervaded and vitiated sexuality. Roger Whitlow substantiates this interpretation, claiming that “Jesse (...) cannot know complete sexual gratification which is not accompanied by either the fantasy or the reality of racial torture or mutilation” (Whitlow in Taylor, 2008, s. 56). Taylor explains that the successful execution of white masculinity (analogous to getting an erection) in a racist social structure is contingent on the denigration and destruction of black masculinity, which in effect, becomes a self-perpetuating and

recursive structure (Taylor, 2008, s. 56). Steven Weisenburger argues that the end of the short story accentuates how pathological spectacles of sexualized violence, maintained through Jesse's personal memory but enhanced by cultural memory (through the collective experience of the lynching), mediates the power needed to reproduce and perpetuate white supremacy (Weisenburger, 2002, s. 6). This need for power, control and violence against the Africanist presence becomes pivotal for Jesse's identity formation resulting in him having an unfulfilled identity as a white supremacist.

Conclusion

Arguably, similar to Williams's claims about Morrison's novel *Paradise*, the same arguments appertain to *A Mercy* and "Going to Meet the Man" (Williams, 2007, s. 194). Both narratives expose the act of Othering while they at the same time critique America's rejection of those the nation deemed degenerate. They rebuke America's exceptionalist faith in its own speciality as morally superior and socially responsible. Williams argues that Morrison's critique of American exceptionalism is not simply about America's failure to live up to its ideal of exceptionalism and its promises (to Native and African Americans alike), but her critique is also about its very misguided belief in the complete idea of exceptionalism (Williams, 2007, s.195). It seems evident that this misguided belief of exceptionalism is also clearly demonstrated through Jesse in "Going to Meet the Man".

Morrison's re-imagining of history in *A Mercy* shows how each character entertains race and racism perceptible in early America. Through a misconception of exceptionalism, a utilization of "the master's tools", and through the transformation from a tragic to an untragic mulatto each of the characters finds a way to *be* in the New World. Morrison uniquely demonstrates how the invention of racial divisions and oppression became the foundation for obtaining the American dream and who was restricted from it in order to serve as the unlucky foil. Arguably Morrison's depiction of identity formation and creation of selfhood within a racially divided society gives a new outlook on the intertwined story of binary oppositions in America and shows how even "average Joe" could condone, validate and perpetuate oppression and exclusion. She portrays how the characters living within this white hegemony are impacted by exclusion and belonging and form their identities correspondingly to the racial stratification system that is developing in society. The narratives of the characters evince how their identity formation happens in accordance with the formation of racial division in early America, a fictive depiction that corroborates Morrison's own arguments in

Playing in the Dark. “Going to Meet the Man” also shows how identity formation happens in accordance with racial divisions in America, and one may claim that the narrative functions as a segue from *A Mercy* because even though the story is set at a much later date, it depicts that the maintenance and perpetuation of binary oppositions between races, white supremacy and American exceptionalism are deep-rooted in American society and closely intertwined with *white* American identity.

By utilization of Morrison’s own method in the two stories, one can argue that it becomes evident that white identity is indeed self-reflexive of the Africanist presence demonstrated by each of the literary character analyses. The narratives of Jacob, Rebekka and Jesse, exemplify the identity formation of someone who assumes a superior position, but their social pedestal is evidently completely dependent on racial degradation. The way they are portrayed as average people readily participating in such oppression elucidates how even “everyman” ascribes negative attributes to others to generate a society of binary oppositions, where the fabrication of an Othered Africanist presence is paramount for facilitating their own sense of exceptionalism. The narratives of Florens and Sorrow show the opposite side of racial degradation and depict how detrimental ostracism, oppression and exclusion are to an individual’s identity formation. Their exclusion from their oppressors converts them into a subjugated Africanist presence, a surrogate for all the attributes that are considered the opposite of the American dream. The character of Lina, on the other hand, demonstrates how racial binaries are socially constructed because she is both oppressed herself but also mimics the oppressor – completely dismantling the colour line. On close analysis, it becomes evident that both Morrison and Baldwin demonstrate how ethnic identities are constructed, maintained, and transformed through each of the literary characters’ formative encounters with a fabricated Africanist presence or being ascribed the role of the Africanist presence. Their identity formation is realized through either their ascription of the attributes of an Africanist presence *to* others or by being ascribed the attributes of an Africanist presence *from* others. Through each of the characters’ racial encounters, it becomes evident that the white hegemony of society enables the white colonists and supremacists to form their own identity and superior status *because of* these ascribed negative attributes to the Africanist presence and its necessitated subjugated position. The character analyses suggest that identity formation does seem to happen in opposition to each other; each perception of race is used to define the other, just as Morrison claims in *Playing in the Dark*. This suggests that Morrison’s method is an important tool for uncovering inequality that has been foundational for American identity formation.

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