

Reconstructing the Gendered and Racialized Geography in Morrison's *A Mercy*-A Geocritical Reading

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Abstract

Instead of reading Toni Morrison's *A Mercy* as an American origins narrative, this article contends that this novel can be understood as a Black feminist geographical text in which its protagonists reconstruct the gendered and racialized geographies through processes of real-and-imaginative re-spatialization. Drawing upon feminist geographies, primarily Katherine McKittrick's insights on Black feminist geography in *Demonic Grounds*, we examined how geographies of domination delimit the formation of characters' identity and subjectivity, and how their respatializing the colonial house produces alternative spatial imaginaries. In doing so, the present article demonstrates that in the face of geographical domination—one that positions African Americans as “out of place” or “in places,”—Black women writers unsettle colonial spatial logics and forge more liberated forms of identity. In foregrounding such creative, imaginative, and embodied spatial strategies, we reveal Morrison's sustained engagement with a Black feminist geographical tradition and highlight the centrality of Black feminist geographical thinking to reimagining space, subjectivity, and freedom.

Keywords: Toni Morrison, Katherine McKittrick, identity, spatiality, geocriticism

1. Introduction

In 2019, members of the Oakland-based *Moms 4 Housing* occupied a vacant house in Oakland, California, and respatialized it into a Black home. This spatial intervention resonates with themes in contemporary African American literature, particularly in Nobel Laureate Toni Morrison's *A Mercy* (2008). A critique of dominant geographies and the re-imagination of Black feminist spatialities have long been central themes of Morrison's writing (Guo & Omar 2024; 2026). Morrison has asserted that all her books start out with questions that unsettle or intrigue her, and the question that triggered her to write *A Mercy* (2008) concerns place: “What can we know about a place before the people who populated it were racialized?” (Williams, 2024, p. 101). The novel traces back to pre-racial America, where slavery and racism were not institutionalized. The major spaces closely related to the Black female characters, Florens, her mother, and Sorrow, are the ship, the auction blocks, Jacob's three houses, and the road, through which Morrison renders the gradual production of geographies of domination of racialized and gendered space and the expansion of the slavery enterprise. Therefore, the novel fabricates a new world that was already poisoned from its beginning through the construction of Jacob's three houses and early American landscapes. This narrative exposes the imposition of patriarchal and colonial ideology on the “wilderness,” taming the untamed and putting in order the disorders in the hierarchy of race, gender, and class. Jacob's three houses represent three distinct modes of production and serve as epitomes of the early American space, reflecting the evolution of the nation and spatial restructuring in the intersection between racism, sexism, and classism. Herman Beavers (2018) notes that the building of Jacob's house shows how a topophrenic site, once defined by a deep emotional connection to a physical place, becomes a vacant space (p. 164). Given the fact that Jacob inherited the place from an unknown uncle and that there are not any bloodlines to inherit this grand mansion, Morrison renders Jacob's imperialist “making of the New World (Hansen, 2018, p. 215) ineffective and futile, which is further contested by Sorrow's and Florens's spatial transgression of “counter-world-making” (p. 223).

Despite the ontological significance of spatiality for the novel, it didn't garner sufficient attention in current scholarship on the novel, which tends to read it as an American national narrative, concerning the formation of hybrid, heterogeneous and diasporic identities of multiple racial groups in the early stage of the nation. What remains under-explored is how racism and sexism are embedded into physical space, forming geographical domination that shapes Black girls' identities. Meanwhile, existing scholarships have not recognized the significance of Black women's imaginative respatialization or their efforts at spatial reclamation to sustain their subjectivity and humanity. Therefore, drawing primarily on McKittrick's insights while incorporating other relevant geocritical perspectives, this paper adopts a geocritical reading that pays particular attention to place, mapping, and spatial relations. It analyses the formation of dominant geographies of gendered and racialized space, their constraints on Black women's identity and subjectivity, and how Black women's respatialization of the colonial house disrupts these geographies of domination and becomes a source of empowerment.

2. Literature Review

As *A Mercy* traces back to pre-racial America and constitutes a narration of the origins of the nation, critical attention mainly focuses on national/ethnic/diasporic identity (Babb, 2011; Zhou, 2019; Kim, 2020; Li, 2023) in relation to American exceptionalism and the foundational myth. Valerie Babb reads *A Mercy* as “an American origins narrative” in which Morrison uses much of the language of the “grand myth” to rewrite it by giving voices to marginalized groups and presenting an expansive version of the pre-national world. Babb’s discussion of the heterogeneity of American national identity is also echoed by Kwangsoon Kim, who argues that Morrison not only redefines American identity as quintessentially hybrid through her metaphorical return to pre-racial America but also inspects the necessary conditions for America to become a truly post-racial/post-racist nation. Qianqian Li analyses the four modes of the diasporic experiences of four female characters and concludes that Morrison expands the meaning of diaspora and connects the institutionalization of racism with European Americans’ diasporic mentality (p. 335). This scholarly focus on hybrid, heterogeneous and diasporic identities connects multiple racial groups to the country’s origins, situating *A Mercy* within the broader framework of the American national narrative.

Several disparate studies have also explored the relationship between specific spaces and identity. Majda Atieh and Susan Deeb (2014) read *A Mercy* as an African American road narrative and research the racial and gendered geography of fear with Massey’s gendered space and psychogeography. Their analysis reveals that the road is a gendered space that instils fear in women and restricts their mobility. They also demonstrate how a Black female traveler overcomes fear through female solidarity and communal empowerment, ultimately transforming the male-constructed road into a space of security and healing (pp. 155–56). Manuela López Ramírez (2015) concentrates on the gothic haunted house as a powerful metaphor from a female perspective. By expounding how the haunted house expresses African Americans’ personal, familial, social, historical, and cultural trauma and how it serves as a means for women to recover agency and reclaim themselves, Ramírez reveals the link between fragmented personal and familial identities with the Gothic dwelling, and points out that “the Gothic haunted dwelling. . . becomes a powerful metaphor for the ethnic Female Self and her transgressive counter-narrative” (p. 111). Morten Hansen (2018) tries to bridge the distance between the historical setting of this novel and the present by analyzing the connection between Florens and the global political space today. By comparing Jacob’s and Florens’s encounters with the American landscape, Hansen argues that Florens’s identification with the wilderness will help us see “something beyond self-effacement and objectification,” and “points us to the ways in which her unique experience echoes (or foreshadows) both the subject and space of globalization” (p. 221). Gabriella Friedman approaches Morrisonian wilderness on fictional and metafictional levels and argues against interpreting Florens’s identification with wilderness as empowering. Zhou Quan and Zou Li (2020) also employ psychogeography to analyze the agency and vitality in the inanimate things in natural and human landscapes and reveal the vitality of spaces constituting the characters’ psyches.

There is no denying that the existing scholarship has, to varying degrees, offered valuable insights into questions of identity and the relationship between space and subject formation in *A Mercy*, illuminating forms of spatial agency and resistance within the novel. However, these studies often focus on specific sites—such as the haunted house or the wilderness, or the plantation—rather than considering the wider spectrum of Black women’s spatial experiences, ranging from their native homelands and the Middle Passage to colonial households and frontier landscapes to see how racism and sexism are embedded into physical space, forming geographical domination that shapes Black women’s identities. Consequently, the collective and imaginative respatialization enacted by Black women characters across these interconnected spaces remained under-examined in current scholarship. Therefore, we intend to revisit the spatial forms, Black women’s identities, and their resistance from a Black feminist geographical lens to reveal Black women’s cartographical struggles that resonate with *Moms 4 Housing* movement.

3. Conceptual Framework: Black Feminist Geography and Respatialization

Black feminist geography emerges from Black women’s efforts to articulate their intersectional spatial experience within the discipline of geography. A key contribution is the work of Katherine McKittrick, who brings together Black feminist thought, critical geography, and critical race theory to challenge dominant geographical knowledge. In *Demonic Grounds* (2006), McKittrick examines the spatial logics of racial domination, which she terms as geographies of domination, alongside Black women’s cartographical struggle to produce alternative spatial knowledge. Her analysis of Harriet Jacobs’ *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* illustrates how the garret where Jacob is hiding serves as a paradoxical space that incorporates both the terror and transparency of slave spaces (2006, pp. 39–41). She further argues that Linda Brent, the narrative persona adopted by Jacobs in the text, respatializes the garret, thereby accentuating Gillian Rose’s concept of paradoxical space and reveals how geographies of domination are alterable. By demonstrating Brent’s subject position as both “inside and outside, captive and free” (p. 42) and the garret as both captive and liberating, McKittrick reveals the parallel existence of geographical domination and Black women’s geographies. Her work therefore foregrounds both a critique of Western geographical domination and the agency of Black communities in understanding, producing, and reimagining their space and place in the Americas.

McKittrick contends that if practices of subjugation are acts of spatializing Black women’s place and identity, then their resistance is also “intermingled with place-based critiques, or, respatializations” (p. xix). That is, Black women can wield spatial power to respatialize and alter the meaning of existing geographic arrangements, critique its ideologies, and imaginatively supersede its obstacles through their negotiation, experience, knowledge, and different senses of place. Black women’s spatial resistance is linked to their imagination and thinking differently and creatively about space, which turns the geographies of domination into “space of the subject” (p. 6) that fosters liberation and empowerment. This imaginative and creative respatializing and appropriating space is key to surviving daily incursions, “to

assert their sense of place, questions of ‘race,’ or race/class/gender/sexuality” (p. xviii), and to “manipulate and recast the meanings” (p. xvii) of geographies of domination. In Harriet Jacobs’ case, she transforms the meaning of the garret into a liberating location, which provides her with multiple subject positions, both inside and outside, captive and free (p. 42). Therefore, Black women have the agency to “continually make, remake, and articulate geography across practices of domination” (p. 48). McKittrick even suggests that just by “saying” or naming the geography, Black women are criticizing its dominating ideologies. Her analysis suggests that Black women, while being shaped by geographic domination, can disrupt it with challenging spatial practices, reflecting the simultaneity of Black women’s subordination and resistance in geography. She further illustrates that the othered can imaginatively break and gain new ground instead of being defined and limited. Hence, McKittrick’s Black feminist geographical thought provides a valuable theoretical framework for exploring the formation of dominant geography and Black women’s cartographic resistance.

4. Analysis

4.1 Early American Landscape and Black Women’s Identity

In *Demonic Grounds*, McKittrick (2006) explores the spatial dimension of transatlantic slavery and how it impacts on Black women’s identities. She writes:

Most obviously, the geographies of transatlantic slavery were geographies of black dispossession and white supremacy, which assumed racial inferiority and justified enslavement. Geographies such as the slave ship, the slave auction block, slave coffles, and the plantation, are just some of the sites that spatialized domination under bondage. In particular, the ties between ownership and blackness rendered the black body a commodity, a site of embodied property, through ideological and economic exchanges. For black women, this legacy of captivity and ownership illustrates how bodily geography can be. Ownership of black women during transatlantic slavery was a spatialized, gendered, often public, violence; the black female body was viewed as a naturally submissive, sexually available, public, reproductive technology. . . Geographically, in the most crude sense, the body is territorialized—it is publicly and financially claimed, owned, and controlled by an outsider. Territorialization marks and names the scale of the body, turning ideas that justify bondage into corporeal evidence of racial difference.

Once the racial-sexual body is territorialized, it is marked as decipherable and knowable—as subordinate, inhuman, rape-able, deviant, procreative, placeless. . . Objectified black female sexualities represent the logical outcome of a spatial process that is bound up in geographical discourses, such as territory, body/land possession, and public property. (pp. 44–45)

Various geographical locations such as slave ships, auction blocks, and plantations symbolize domination and bondage for Black women. McKittrick reveals the libidinal mechanics of slavery, i.e. slave master’s sexual license to exploit Black female body as “a naturally submissive, sexually available, public, reproductive technology.” Geographies of domination equals Blackness as “dispossession,” “enslavement,” “commodity,” and “a site of embodied property.” By analyzing the link between *minha mãe*, Florens, and their identities, we could portray the intricate relationship between identity and spaces during the transatlantic slavery and early settlement period in the New Continent.

Minha Mãe’s statement “To be female in this place is to be an open wound that cannot heal” effectively captures the interplay between the space of plantation and Black women’s spatial experiences within the setting (Morrison, 2008, p. 191). It is an interrogation of pain, Black women’s perpetual vulnerability as “open wound,” as shaped by history and place. This statement is an existential reckoning from *mãe*, Florens’s mother, whose narration forms the last chapter of this novel. Within seven pages, she recounts her life story from the African continent via slave ship to Barbados and then to the plantation in Maryland, and how her identity transforms from a person into mere Blackness. By using the pronoun ‘we’ instead of ‘I’ or ‘us,’ *minha mãe* asserts her agency, subjectivity, and humanity in the face of geographical domination, and this also links to African Americans’ collective memory of slavery, their experience of displacement, dehumanization, dispossession, and commodification.

Minha mãe is captivated when her tribe loses in the conflict with other tribes in Africa. After being rendered homeless and captive, *minha mãe* and her people are “moved four times, each time more trading, more culling, more dying” (Morrison, 2008, p. 192). Blacks collude with white people in selling *minha mãe* and her people into slavery. By putting them in holding pens, slave traders gradually dehumanize and animalize them. By dividing them and placing them in canoes, slave traders attempt to dismantle their collective power as ‘we’ and control them. “The house that floats on the sea” represents the traumatic experience of African people in slave ships and contrasts sharply with white woman Rebekka’s ship experience. For Rebekka, the ship is a “wretched” space she crouches in and toward which she has mixed feelings, as shown by juxtaposition of phrases like “sickened by it and desperate for it. Mesmerized and bored by the look of it. . . don’t hurtle me. No, Move, move, excite me” (pp. 85–86). Despite her mixed feeling, “it was nevertheless blank where a past did not haunt nor a future beckon. Women of and for men, in those few moments they were neither,” while “time became simply the running sea, unmarked, eternal and of no matter” (p. 100). For Rebekka, the ship becomes a utopia, where sisterhood helps her defy the gendered role assigned, where she could shake off the constrictions of gendered space back home, and where this fluid space helps with “blotting out. . . what they fled and what might await them” (p. 100). In contrast, *minha mãe*’s spatial experience reveals the topophobic aspect of the ship, as it is related to African Americans’ traumatic past in the Middle Passage. Although the cargo holding the slaves is as small a place as Rebekka’s place in the ship, this tight space brings no future except misery, so numerous people attempt suicide through various means: “we jumped [into the sea],” “[r]efusing to eat,” “[s]trangling we throat,” and “[o]ffering we bodies to the sharks” (pp. 192–193). *Minha mãe* herself mourns and feels puzzled by the failure of her attempted death. McKittrick contends that the slave ship is “a site of violent

subjugation” that “contributes to the *process* of social concealment and dehumanization,” “a container hiding his displacement,” “a location through which a moving technology can create differential and contextual histories” (McKittrick, 2006, p. xii). By paralleling Rebekka’s Sea voyage with *minha mãe*’s middle passage, Morrison highlights the slave ship as the racial-sexual space and its dehumanizing of Africans.

As one of the “sites that spatialized domination under bondage” (McKittrick, 2006, p. 44), the slave ship gradually erases its captives’ humanity and their sense of place. This erasure is completed in the central sites of plantations and its attendant geographies (for example, the auction block, the colonial house, the slave quarters). McKittrick points out that the “plantation evidences an uneven colonial-racial economy that . . . legalized black servitude while simultaneously sanctioning black placelessness and constraint” (McKittrick, 2011, p. 948). Achille Mbembe (2019) observes that “the slave condition results from a triple loss: loss of a ‘home,’ loss of rights over one’s body, and loss of political status. This triple loss is identical with absolute domination, natal alienation, and social death (expulsion from humanity altogether)” (pp. 74–75). *Minha mãe* is transported to two plantations, first to a cane plantation in Barbados and then north to a tobacco plantation in Maryland. Plantation, as a form of geographical domination, requires Black dispossession and Black people’s productive and reproductive labor to sustain. Her spatial experience in plantations shows two transformations in her identity. First, her humanity and identity are erased, except for her Blackness. *Minha mãe* recounts the epiphany she reaches on the auction block:

I was burning sweat in cane only a short time when they took me away to sit on a platform in the sun. It was there I learned how I was not a person from my country, nor from my families. I was negrita. Everything. Language, dress, gods, dance, habits, decoration, song—all of it cooked together in the color of my skin. So it was as a black that I was purchased by Senhor, taken out of the cane and shipped north to his tobacco plants. (Morrison, 2008, p. 194)

In plantations and its attendant geographies, Africans are stripped of their individuality, humanity, and cultural and national identities. *Minha mãe* is reduced to only her racial categorization of Blackness, a “negrita,” “a soulless animal, a curse” (p. 195). The metaphorical use of the phrase “cooked together” suggests *mãe*’s transformation from a person of multiple identifying characteristics into only Blackness and her “transforming [her] from human being to property” (Beavers, 2018, p. 174).

Moreover, ownership of Black women as property also leads to “a spatialized, gendered, often public, violence” and their bodies being viewed as “a naturally submissive, sexually available, public, reproduction technology” (McKittrick 2006, p. 44). As “the body is territorialized—it is publicly and financially claimed, owned, and controlled by an outsider” (p. 44), this racial-sexual body is “marked as decipherable and knowable—as subordinate, inhuman, rape-able, deviant, procreative, placeless” (p. 45). This libidinal mechanism of plantation works on *minha mãe* as she is raped and gives birth to two children:

I don’t know who is your father. It was too dark to see any of them. They came at night and took we three including Bess to a curing shed. Shadows of men sat on barrels, then stood. They said they were told to break we in. There is no protection. To be female in this place is to be an open wound that cannot heal. Even if scars form, the festering is ever below. (Morrison, 2008, p. 191)

The phrase “break we in” has a connotation of intruding into a space by force or illegally. This expression reveals how Black women’s bodies are seen as a space for white masters to colonize. Black women’s bodyspace thus becomes an open space, an open wound, which reveals the sexual license and libidinal mechanism of plantation, where “[g]eographic conquest and expansion is extended to the reproductive and sexually available body” (McKittrick, 2006, p. 45) and where “the space between the legs” is used to repopulate the New World space. The burning pain Sorrow feels outside between her legs resonates with *minha mãe*’s calling Black feminine vulnerability in the place as “an open wound that cannot heal,” and “the festering is ever below.”

Florens is the protagonist of *A Mercy*, whose narration takes up half of the story and sets the novel in motion. As the daughter of a slave woman, Florens inherits the triple loss of absolute domination, natal alienation, and expulsion from humanity (Mbembe, 2019, p. 75) and her body being territorialized by outsiders. *Minha mãe* pleads with Jacob to take Florens away, “[h]oping for a miracle” to make a difference in Florens’s life, when perceiving her doomed tragic fate because “[y]ou caught Senhor’s eye,” and the humanity in Jacob because “the tall man see you as a human child, not pieces of eight” (Morrison, 2008, p. 195). “Abandoned” by her mother, Florens is shipped to the upstate Virginia. Her spatial experience mainly includes the auction block, the ship, the northern plantation, and the road in search of a free Black man.

For Florens, the auction block or slave quarters in Maryland constitutes a site of trauma, or natal alienation, where she is forced to separate with her mother and brother. As “a site of public racial-sexual domination and measurable documentation” (McKittrick, 2006, p. 66), auction block is used for the auction and sale of slaves, depended on the marketable qualities of slaves as valuable and desirable commodities. *Minha mãe* recounts her auction block experience:

One by one we were made to jump high, to bend over, to open our mouths. The children were best at this. Like grass trampled by elephants, they sprang up to try life again. They had stopped weeping long ago. Now, eyes wide, they tried to please, to show their ability and therefore their living worth. (Morrison, 2008, pp. 193–194)

This slave block as experienced and witnessed by Florens and her mother shows that slaves need to show their marketable qualities to survive in plantation, which also explains Florens’s tendency to please others and her eagerness for approval, as in “[h]owever slight, any kindness shown her she munched like a rabbit” (p. 113).

After she is accepted by Jacob as partial payment for the debt, Florens is arranged to be shipped from Maryland to northern plantation. For Florens, the ship is a space for displacement, as for her mother. Florens's experience of displacement could be illustrated in the paragraph:

When I arrive here I believe it is the place he warns against. The freezing in hell that comes before the everlasting fire where sinners bubble and singe forever. But the ice comes first, he says. And when I see knives of it hanging from the houses and trees and feel the white air burn my face I am certain the fire is coming. (pp. 8–9)

This paragraph uses defamiliarization to describe Florens's first encounter with the North. She compares the chilling winter (with ice, icicles hanging from the eaves, and the exhaled white breath) to the freezing in hell, a state of suffering and punishment. Her embodied spatial experience in Jacob's farm shows her sense of displacement and spatial anxieties; as Martin Heidegger states, "[i]n anxiety one feels 'uncanny' [*unheimlich*]," with uncanniness also meaning "not being at home" (qtd in Tally, 2019, p. 21). The *unheimlich* fear engendered in Florens forms another factor influencing her identity, as revealed in her loss of speech. In her confession, Florens recalls her love of talk and her temporary loss of speech after displacement:

I like talk. Lina talk, stone talk, even Sorrow talk. Best of all is your talk. At first when I am brought here I don't talk any word. All of what I hear is different from what words mean to a minha mãe and me. Lina's words say nothing I know. Nor Mistress's. Slowly a little talk is in my mouth and not on stone. (Morrison, 2008, p. 7)

When Florens is new to Jacob's farm, she develops a form of traumatic aphasia, a loss of speech and ability to understand others' speech. Ann Stoler (2011) defines *aphasia* as "a dismembering, a difficulty speaking, a difficulty generating a vocabulary that associates appropriate words and concepts with appropriate things," a colonial aphasia (p. 125). Alex Gapud (2020) suggests that colonial aphasia "works through a dual process of displacement that is both literal (that is, spatial. . . and temporal. . .) and also figurative" (p. 335). Florens's aphasia is part of her response to the topophrenic anxiety she feels in her displacement to the Northern plantation, as she says, "All of what I hear is different from what words mean to a minha mãe and me." At first, people on Jacob's farm assume that "she was a mute or deaf" (Morrison, 2008, p. 85). However, her aphasia gradually heals and "a little talk is in my mouth" after Lina made her some proper shoes. This healing also indicates that her aphasia is also a traumatic response to being abandoned by her mother, as Lina's motherly action of making shoes partially amends her loss of motherly love. Besides, shoes are the connection of our body with the land, and hence the healing of her aphasia after being given a pair of shoes can also be interpreted as a healing of her sense of displacement and the finding of a sense of belonging to the land.

Apart from auction block and Jacob's farm, the road through which Florens seek her lover the blacksmith "presents both a racial and gendered geography of fear" (Atieh and Deeb, 2014, p. 164). Florens's sexual and racial body makes her experience more topophrenic anxieties on the road under the male or/and racial gaze. In the light of gendered space, Atieh and Deeb contend that "[g]endered identity contributes to the shaping of spaces and our movement in these spaces as they construct our ways of behaving and thinking" (p. 158). Florens's embodied experience of the road/wilderness as a masculine space is indicated in the sexual harassment she suffers when the driver "stays his hand hard and long on my back parts. I feel shame" (Morrison, 2008, p. 45), and the topophrenic fear she feels of the threat of being raped and attacks from wild animals. Majda Atieh and Susan Deeb rightly point out that "A *Mercy* highlights fear as indigenous to this male-regulated zone but exclusively projected toward women who are supposedly considered as not able to endure or even respond to unexpected road encounters" (p. 155). Florens's embodied experience of the road as constructed to be a racialized space is mainly through laws that restrict the movement of Black people without license from whites. Her awareness of this reaches a climax when she comes to realize that:

With the letter [Rebekka's authorization 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, 2008, p. 135)

The restricted mobility of Black women makes the road a racialized space, where the presence of Black people is illegal, and warrants abuse, harms, and dangers. This racialized road, on the way round, accentuates Florens's Black identity from outside to inside.

Florens's embodied experience on the journey also reveals the othering gaze she undergoes as a Black woman in Widow Ealing's house and on the road after. Her perception of Widow Ealing's house as darker—"The dark in here is greater than the cowshed, thicker than the forest" (Morrison, 2008, p. 128)—proves to be prophetic, as it is in Widow Ealing's closet that she is "stripped, dehumanized, and objectified—differentiated" (Strehle, 2013, p. 118), and deemed as "the Black Man's minion." Florens is forced to take off clothes to undergo inspection as if of a different species, including showing her teeth, tongue, palm, under-arms, feet and between her legs. This experience resonates with her mother's experience on the auction block, linking the two locations as racialized geographies. Meanwhile, this "scopic rape" (p. 118) also recalls her mother's experience of being raped and her comment that "[t]o be female in this place is to be an open wound". This experience transforms the closet into a racialized and gendered geography that accentuate her racial identity and awareness, as Bukhari notes, "It was during her inspection by the Magistrate at Widow Ealing's house that Bhabha's indicated process of identity formation in the 'third space' initiates" (2016, p. 543). Conversely, this new awareness of her racial identity "contributes to the shaping of spaces" by changing her "movement in these spaces" and "ways of behaving and thinking," as indicated in this paragraph:

I walk alone except for the eyes that join me on my journey. Eyes that do not recognize me, eyes that examine me for a tail, an extra teat, a man's whip between my legs. Wondering eyes that stare and decide if my navel is in the right place if my knees bend

backward like the forelegs of a dog. They want to see if my tongue is split like a snake's or if my teeth are filing to points to chew them up. To know if I can spring out of the darkness and bite. Inside I am shrinking. I climb the streambed under watching trees and know I am not the same. I am losing something with every step I take. I can feel the drain. Something precious is leaving me. I am a thing apart. (Morrison, 2008, p. 135)

After the inquisition or “scopic rape” in Widow Ealing's closet, Florens experiences the landscapes and spaces differently because of her acquisition of a raced identity. Her raced identity makes her hyper-sensitive to the racial gaze around and changes her relationship with the natural world by heightening her topophrenic anxiety. When she first begins the journey, she is in a positive relationship with her surroundings as she tries to navigate the wilderness with her knowledge and mental map, but after the inquisition and acquisition, the natural environment reveals uncanny characteristics, such as the “watching trees.” Her awareness of the gazes of both humans and inhuman objects in her environment changes her identity. Florens recalls Lina's words: “We never shape the world she says. The World shapes us” (Morrison, 2008, p. 83). Florens's story illustrates the dynamic relationship between space and identity: as the world shapes her identity, her identity, in turn, influences her perception of the world. This interplay reveals how geographical domination accentuates racial and gendered identities, ultimately fracturing the relationship between land and humans.

To sum up, in this patriarchal and colonial power dynamics, Black women are relegated to prescribed roles and space, and their identities defined by subservience to men. The colonial house functions predominantly as a gendered space during Jacob's lifetime, wherein female characters are confined to the domestic space. Following his death, the racial dimensions of the house become increasingly salient, transforming it into a space imbued with racialized and colonial connotations. This transition is evidenced by the shifting spatial dynamics experienced by Sorrow, Lina, and Florens. After her husband's death, Rebekka assumes the role of a real “Mistress,” exercising authority and power in the household. She assigns sleeping quarters for Florens, Lina, and Sorrow in the cowshed or storeroom, thereby delineating their social status and roles within the colonial mansion. This spatial allocation externalizes her authority, imposing servitude and objectification on Native Americans, Black, and ambiguously raced Americans, positioning them to work alongside tools and cattle. Through such spatial division and allocation, Rebekka reinforces her authority and objectifies people from other races by naturalizing the association between identity and space. This resonates with Gill Valentine's argument concerning the identity formation of a particular place. In “Theorizing and Researching Intersectionality: A Challenge for Feminist Geography*” (2007), Valentine concludes:

The identity of particular spaces—the home, the school, the workplace, or a community space such as a Deaf club—are in turn produced and stabilized through the repetition of the intersectional identities of the dominant groups that occupy them. . . such that particular groups claim the right to these spaces. When individual identities are ‘done’ differently in particular temporal moments they rub up against, and so expose, these dominant spatial orderings that define who is in place/out of place, who belongs and who does not. (p. 19)

By exercising authority to define who should be in place/out of place and forbid anyone to enter the new house, Rebekka reinforces her colonizer identity and solidifies the house's identity as a colonial mansion. Hence, the identity of the third house and Rebekka's identity exhibit a mutually constitutive relationship. This spatial hierarchy materializes the subjugation of Black and Native women in the early American landscape, symbolically stripping them of subjectivity and agency and further racializing the house as a site of domination for women from other races.

4.2 Florens and Sorrow in *A Mercy*—Respatializing the Colonial House

Feminist geographers argue that transforming the oppressive site into a “paradoxical space” is an effective resistance against geographies of domination (McKittrick, 2006, pp. 37–44; pp. 144–146). In particular, McKittrick highlights how geographies of domination can be reshaped into usable paradoxical spaces through Black women's spatial practices of imaginative superseding. Through her analysis of Harriet Jacob's spatial practice of respatializing the garret, McKittrick establishes that Black women's resistance is “intermingled with place-based critiques, or, respatializations” (p. xix). Black women can wield spatial power to respatialize and alter the meaning of existing geographic arrangements, critique its ideologies, and imaginatively supersede its obstacles through their negotiation, experience, knowledge, and different senses of place. Their spatial resistance is linked to their imagination and thinking differently and creatively about space, thus transforming the geographies of domination into “space of the subject” and “a grammar of liberation” (p. 6; p. xxiii).

In *A Mercy*, both Sorrow's and Florens's disobedient spatial acts of entering the forbidden house serve to respatialize the colonial house in distinct ways, forming a blatant or clandestine challenge to Rebekka's dominance. Despite the prohibition, Sorrow prioritizes her baby girl's well-being by seeking shelter in the colonial house during the cold rains. Her maternal instinct respatializes the spatial meaning of the house physically through a form of embodied practice: rather than merely accepting the structure as a “symbol of rank,” Sorrow treats it as a space of protection and survival. In this sense, her act of entry is not merely a moment of desperation but a pragmatic reappropriation of colonial space, in which the logic of care temporarily overrides the spatial codes of authority and ownership that regulate plantation life. By physically occupying the forbidden interior, Sorrow exposes the instability of spatial boundaries that seek to discipline enslaved and marginalized bodies.

While Sorrow's overt transgression constitutes a direct challenge to the prohibition, Florens's attempt to move discreetly to avoid being found out and punished represents a more covert act of defiance. The contrast between them reveals two distinct modes of spatial transgression: while Sorrow's spatial resistance operates through embodied trespass and immediate survival, Florens's respatialization takes shape through discursive and imaginative reinterpretation of space. Their acts can thus be interpreted as a means to “resist[s] the

colonial spatiality” (Tabur, 2017, p. 89), a way of “asserting her subjectivity” (Bellamy, 2013, p. 24), or as Herman Beavers submits, as contributing to “an alternative political imaginary in which black women’s writerly voices deform the dominant imaginary from within” (p. 185).

Sorrow’s and Florens’s entering the prohibited space highlight the simultaneous existence of Black women’s geographies alongside geographical domination. By repurposing the colonial house for protection, care, or clandestine movement, their actions transform Jacob’s third house into a tangible counterspace. This transformation demonstrates that Black women’s lived spaces are not solely passively experienced. Instead, through everyday practices and embodied acts, marginalized subjects possess the agency to redefine, reshape, and imbue the space with alternative meanings, thus creating “counterspace,” spaces of resistance through their actions and social practices, unsettling the dominant spatial hierarchies. In *Demonic Grounds*, McKittrick observes:

What is striking here, and very useful in terms of black women’s geographies, is that the poetics of landscape are not derived from the desire for socioeconomic possession. Nor are they derived from a unitary vantage point. Indeed, Glissant suggests that there are different sets of geographic tools available, which are anchored, primarily, in nonlinearity, contradictory histories, dispossession, and an ‘infinite variety’ of landscapes. The claim to place should not be naturally followed by material ownership and black repossession but rather by a grammar of liberation, through which ethical *human*-geographies can be recognized and expressed. (2006, p. xxiii)

McKittrick highlights two critical deviations in Black women’s geographies from dominant geography: firstly, they lack the inclination towards material and socioeconomic possession and ownership of space; and secondly, they do not stem from a singular and unitary perspective but are rooted in nonlinearity, contradictory and different histories, spatial relations, and landscapes. McKittrick’s notion challenges conventional geography by eschewing physical/material claims to space and instead advocating a different approach and “a grammar of liberation,” prioritizing ethical considerations in shaping human geographies. Florens’s and Sorrow’s spatial acts challenge the existing spatial arrangements and foster a liberating geographical expression.

Unlike Sorrow’s physical trespass, Florens’s reappropriation of the house operates more discursively by “claiming his house for her words and her story” (Sundman, 2022, p. 115), and culturally as “a subversive cultural memory for African female slaves embedded within the colonialist’s monument to White male culture” (Zhou, 2019, p. 562). Her inscribing story onto the material space with her nails constitutes a spatial counter-narrative, transforming Jacob’s intended monument into a Black female narrative space, effectively turning the house into “quite literally, the house of fiction” (Duvall, 2013, p. 28). Unlike the concept of “material ownership and black repossession,” Florens’s narrative repossession of space embodies “a grammar of liberation,” as exemplified in the following excerpt:

There is no more room in this room. These words cover the floor. From now you will stand to hear me. The walls make trouble because lamplight is too small to see by. I am holding light in one hand and carving letters with the other. My arms ache but I have need to tell you this. I cannot tell it to anyone but you. I am near the door and at the closing now. What will I do with my nights when the telling stops? Dreaming will not come again. Sudden I am remembering. You won’t read my telling. You read the world but not the letters of talk. You don’t know how to. Maybe one day you will learn. If so, come to this farm again, part the snakes in the gate you made, enter this big, awing house, climb the stairs and come inside this talking room in daylight. If you never read this, no one will. These careful words, closed up and wide open, will talk to themselves. Round and round, side to side, bottom to top, top to bottom all across the room. Or. Or perhaps no. Perhaps these words need the air that is out in the world. Need to fly up then fall, fall like ash over acres of primrose and mallow. Over a turquoise lake, beyond the eternal hemlocks, through clouds cut by rainbow and flavor the soil of the earth. Lina will help. She finds horror in this house and much as she needs to be Mistress’ need I know she loves fire more. (Morrison, 2008, pp.188–89)

This paragraph presents the tension between the limited physical space and the boundless transformative potentials of words, as well as between restricted space, body posture, and an unrestricted desire for self-expression. Despite the constraints of limited wall space, physical discomfort, and the ache in her arm, Florens’s determination and urgency to convey her story remain resolute. Despite the likelihood that her lover, the blacksmith, may never be able to read the story due to illiteracy, Florens believes in the agency of words to transcend confined space by “talk[ing] to themselves. Round and round, side to side, bottom to top, top to bottom all across the room.” Beyond mere circulation by themselves, she envisions another potential dissemination of her words to the external world, likening it to ashes and the act of flying, as she hints at the potential destruction of the house with Lina’s “find[ing] horror in this house” and her “love fire more.” Once these words find “the air that is out in the world,” they will “fly up then fall, fall like ash over acres of primrose and mallow. Over a turquoise lake, beyond the eternal hemlocks, through clouds cut by rainbow and flavor the soil of the earth.” The imagery of “acres of primrose and mallow” conjures up the rejuvenation of life in the vast wilderness in spring, the “turquoise lake” summons up a sense of depth, and “the eternal hemlocks” evokes a sense of permanence. The use of the prepositions “up then fall,” “over,” and “beyond” conveys an immense magnitude. This portrayal, rich with natural imagery, underscores the breadth, depth, and enduring impact of the dispersal of words in reshaping the space.

Moreover, Morrison links colonial history with Black women’s herstory by using the exact phrases used when Lina is telling stories figuratively about how a European traveler took land from Indians. While the European focuses on material ownership of the land, people from other races emphasize a covert one by owning the land through inscribing narrative on the material land, which “wed language and landscape, words and world” (Conner, 2013, p. 163). Through this “fusion of word and place” (Sundman, 2022, p. 141), Florens’s story

constitutes half of the narration of the whole book, transforming the colonial house into a narrative space, a talking room, and a paradoxical space, which symbolizes both her subordination and servitude as a racial-sexual body and her subjectivity and growing awareness in reconstructing her self-identity as an African American girl.

Every night, Florens clandestinely inhabits the house without Rebekka's detection. She holds a lamplight to etch letters with her nails on the floor and wall of the new house. Ironically, her transgressive spatial act is misinterpreted by two other white indentured laborers, Scully and Willard, who perceive it as the ghosting of Jacob:

Jacob Vaark climbed out of his grave to visit his beautiful house.

'As well he should,' said Willard.

'I sure would,' answered Scully.

It was still the grandest house in the whole region and why not spend eternity there? When they first noticed the shadow, Scully, not sure it was truly Vaark, thought they should creep closer. Willard, on the other hand, knowledgeable about spirits, warned him of the consequences of disturbing the risen dead. Night after night they watched, until they convinced themselves that no one other than Jacob Vaark would spend haunting time there: it had no previous tenants and the Mistress forbade anyone to enter. Both men respected, if they did not understand, her reasoning. (Morrison, 2008, pp. 168–69)

Scully and Willard perceive the candlelight Florens uses while inscribing her narrative on the wall as Jacob's ghostly blaze. Meanwhile, they construe her slow movement to carve words from window to window, from room to room, as Jacob's haunting and lingering desire to spend eternity in the house. This misinterpretation ironically magnifies the significance of Florens's spatial endeavor to articulate Black females' stories on American soil. Moreover, it underscores that white people's possession of space and Black women's imaginative appropriation of space happen concurrently, illustrating the house as simultaneously the site of domination and liberation for Black women. Consequently, Florens's spatial act transforms the house into a usable paradoxical space, akin to Harriet Jacob's appropriation of the garret, as discussed by McKittrick in *Demonic Grounds*.

By juxtaposing two different spatial strategies for respatializing the colonial space, Morrison elevates the significance of a "word and landscape" approach. While Sorrow is found and punished for her spatial transgression, Florens's spatial act is interpreted as Jacob's haunting, imbuing it with greater lingering psychological and symbolic weight. It is "invisible" but strongly felt. Morrison conveys the power of Black women's writing to respatialize America's colonial landscape, imbuing it with Black memory and haunting mainstream historical narratives with Black herstory; it "imprints the colonialist monument with an African stamp and disintegrates the claimed legitimacy of the evil slavery" (Zhou, 2019, p. 564). In "Choosing the Margin as Space of Radical Openness" (1989), bell hooks articulates the significance of this appropriation and utilization of space through literary practices as "political acts"; as she observes, "Spaces can be real and imagined. Spaces can tell stories and unfold histories. Spaces can be interrupted, appropriated, and transformed through artistic and literary practice" (p. 23). The significance of this narrative appropriation of space is amplified drastically by Morrison's decision to change the material on which Florens writes from a ledger to the walls and doors of the colonial house. This inscription onto physical space not only underscores the significance of storytelling but also amplifies the impact of Florens's spatial act and transgression, which joins writing and place, language and landscape, word and world, ultimately "contribut[ing] greatly to an externalized spatial construction of Florens's subjectivity" (Zhou, 2019, p. 562) and "inspir[ing] Florens to embrace her identity" (p. 563), "coming into her own sovereignty" (Hansen, 2018, p. 223), and leading to her spiritual freedom: "I am become wilderness but I am also Florens. In full. Unforgiven. Unforgiving. No ruth, my love. None. Hear me? Slave. Free. I last" (Morrison, 2008, p. 189).

5. Conclusion

This article has examined how dominant geographies are gradually constructed for Black women in *A Mercy* and demonstrated how its protagonists imaginatively respatialized geographical dominations into the "space of the subject". Although such spatial acts largely operate at an ideological level and do not materially transform physical space, they nonetheless provide a crucial avenue through which Black women reclaim subjectivities and identities. These subaltern spatial strategies may thus be understood as "real responses to real spatial inequalities" that enable Black women "to critique the boundaries of transatlantic slavery, rewrite national narratives, respatialize feminism, and develop new pathways across traditional geographic arrangements" (McKittrick, 2006, p. xxiii). Seen in this light, the respatializations enacted by Black women in Morrison's works anticipate and resonate with the spatial resistance and struggle embodied in the *Moms 4 Housing* movement. Together, they demonstrate that in the face of geographical domination rooted in Black dispossession, deprivation, and dehumanization, marginalized Black communities have continuously challenged dominant colonial spatial logics in order to assert their right to space. Such struggles provide an affirming ground on which more liberated forms of identity may be forged.

By foregrounding these creative, imaginative, and embodied spatial strategies, this article highlights the centrality of Black feminist geographical thinking to reimagining space, subjectivity, and freedom. In doing so, it contributes to Black feminist geography by demonstrating how literary texts can function as critical sites for reexamining spatial inequality and resistance, while also revealing Morrison's sustained engagement with a broader Black feminist geographical tradition.

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Author contributions

Dr. Lifeng Guo and Dr. Noritah Omar were responsible for the study design and drafting of the manuscript. Dr. Arbaayah Ali Termizi and Dr. Hasyimah Mohd Amin reviewed the manuscript and provided comments for revision. All authors read and approved the final version of the manuscript.

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