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Abstract: The epilogue of Toni Morrison's *A Mercy* (2008) is narrated by the teenage character-narrator Florens' mother. Though addressed to her daughter, the mother's words are heard/read only by the reader, who is left with the (merciful?) gift of understanding and reinterpreting the very act that is at the center of the novel. The picture (s)he shapes, the "telling" (s)he hears (161), are conditioned by Florens' narration – the affective lens through which "the world" (161) and the narrative are to be read. The reader's legitimacy is recognized and rewarded at the very end of *A Mercy*. Indeed, the mother's account, conjured up by Florens, is staged as an imaginary reconciliation, arising from the reading itself, as well as from the reader's affective, aesthetic desire for such reconciliation.

Keywords: Morrison, reading, writing, slavery

Author: Emmanuelle Andrès is an Associate Professor at the University of La Rochelle, France, where she teaches North-American culture and civilization, as well as translation. She wrote her PhD dissertation on Toni Morrison's fiction from *The Bluest Eye* to *A Mercy* (*Entre Sacrifice et Sacré: l'écriture de Toni Morrison*, 2009). She is the co-editor of a book on Gloria Naylor's writing (*Writing In-between Apocalypse and Redemption*, 2010) and has published several articles on Toni Morrison's novels, especially on how the main themes explored by Morrison reflect upon her writing.

Reading/Writing “the most wretched business”: Toni Morrison’s *A Mercy*

Emmanuelle Andrés

It was not a miracle. Bestowed by God. It was a mercy. Offered by a human. I stayed on my knees. In the dust where my heart will remain each night and every day until you understand what I long to tell you: to be given dominion over another is a hard thing; to wrest dominion over another is a wrong thing; to give dominion of yourself to another is a wicked thing. – Toni Morrison¹

The epilogue of Toni Morrison’s *A Mercy* (2008) is narrated by the teenage character-narrator Florens’s mother. Though addressed to her daughter, the mother’s words are heard/read only by the reader, in an ultimate twist of dramatic irony.² The reader is left with the (merciful?) gift of understanding the very act that is at the center of the novel. Encapsulated in a larger reflection on bondage,³ the mother’s words hold the promise of shedding final light on the genesis of the novel: the selling into slavery of six-year-old Florens. However, the apparent circularity of the book going back to its own genesis just before its ending, the mother’s testimony which cannot be heard by the daughter to whom it is addressed, are the blatant reminders of a scene and an act which, as in *Beloved*, cannot be ‘pinned down.’

In this paper I will be focusing on the founding scene in *A Mercy*, examining how the various accounts of the scene bear upon the reading and the writing of the book. Indeed, the mother’s narrative at the end of *A Mercy* puts into question the interpretation the reader has had from the beginning: the traumatic, sacrificial scene the reader has been led to imagine, making Florens the victim of her mother’s abandonment, is retold, in a chapter that is set as an epilogue conjured up by the daughter’s words. However, beyond the explanation the reader receives for the mother’s act—and for the title of the book—the ending of *A Mercy* offers another kind of epiphany. Set in a reconciliation mode, the last two chapters of the book make the reader understand the actual *mercy* the book is about in a

different way. Indeed, calling upon the reader's imagination and 'reading,'⁴ the writing of the "wretched business" (26) opens up an aesthetic space for poetic expression and reconciliation, at the very heart of the reading-writing experience.

The Beginning Begins with the Loss of the Mother

You can think what I tell you is a confession, if you like, but one full of curiosities familiar only in dreams and during those moments when a dog's profile plays in the steam of a kettle. [...]. Stranger things happen all the time. You know. I know you know. One question is who is responsible? Another is can you read? (3)

The 'first beginning' of *A Mercy* draws the reader into the story – by making the reader believe he or she is the "you" Florens addresses – and muses on the very texture of fiction.⁵ The reader is but forced to reread the first page to find the reference he or she may well have skipped: "If a pea hen refuses to brood I read it quickly and, sure enough, that night I see a minha mãe standing hand in hand with her little boy, my shoes jamming the pocket of her apron" (3). The static picture of the mother and her little boy standing hand in hand is the visual subtext of what is largely, in the little girl's psyche, an abandoning act. That image, conveying her exclusion from her mother's sphere, is the real starting point of Florens' narration: the tangible, converging point it always goes back to and the elusive, vanishing point it flows into.⁶ As Cathy Caruth explains, trauma "describes an overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events in which the response to the event occurs in the often *delayed, uncontrolled repetitive appearance of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena*" (11; emphasis mine).

There are indeed many examples of such "hallucinations" and "intrusive phenomena" in *A Mercy*.⁷ However, what makes Florens' narration so peculiar is that it is at a crossroads between traumatic reference and the 'reading of signs,' whether literal or imaginary. It is this very in-between in the narration itself that, paradoxically, makes it possible to tell/write the unspeakable. Since no referential limits are imposed, there is no 'stopping the telling,' even or especially when confronting pain.⁸ It is also what makes Florens' narration so powerful to read. Indeed, the first allusion to the original scene is not only a poignant picture that elicits the reader's affect; it remains tied to the reading of tangible and imaginary signs,⁹ thus diverting the reader's attention away from the words to fathom and experience the image.

After such an introductory lapse into the story, the genesis of *A Mercy* is directly tackled by the unexpected reference to the child's shoes: "The

beginning begins with the shoes" (4). The polyptoton ("beginning," "begin"¹⁰) not only makes for a sound transcription of painful meaning but it uses the same diverting strategy discussed above: the narration points to itself by the alliteration of harsh-sounding and <g> consonants. Replicating the workings of traumatic memory, both image and sound pervade the writing on the page and preclude linear narration from the very beginning of *A Mercy*:

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

As in a silent movie, the deeply visual rendering of the original scene somehow makes up for the words that cannot be heard and enhances its impression upon the reader who can only rely on what he or she sees. Structuring the sentence, the connector "but" encompasses the split experienced by Florens and felt by the reader. The words we read thus visually tell us about the trauma Florens is undergoing. The character of Florens is built upon this deep inherent 'lack.' As Andrea O'Reilly contends in her book *Toni Morrison and Motherhood*:

Whether it is expressed as resistance against racism's dehumanization of her children or resistance against the mother's own oppression in the patriarchal institution of motherhood, nurturance is viewed as essential for the empowerment of children. (34)

Though Florens was already a little girl (and thus nurtured) when she was torn away from her mother, her traumatic loss has dug a hole in her heart and psyche which she strives to fill, first with her surrogate mother Lina, then with the blacksmith's love. From the very first pages the language of *A Mercy* appeals to the reader's affect and imaginary, as the little girl's stubborn obsession with shoes (her "vice for shoes," in her mother's words, 162) becomes the poignant reminder of a child's simple joy that was.

The scene is no less visual and impressionistic as it is retold through Jacob's point of view:

Just then the little girl stepped from behind the mother. On her feet was a pair of way-too-big woman's shoes. Perhaps it was that feeling of license, a newly recovered recklessness along with the sight of those little legs rising like two bramble sticks from the bashed and broken shoes, that made him laugh. A loud, chest-heaving laugh at the comedy, the hopeless irritation, of

the visit. His laughter had not subsided when the woman cradling the small boy on her hip came forward. Her voice was barely above a whisper but there was no mistaking its urgency. "Please, Senhor. Not me. Take her. Take my daughter." (26)

As the tension felt by the character (and by the reader)—after a painful negotiation with d'Ortega—is somehow relieved by Jacob's laughter, comedy soon lapses into tragedy as the woman walks up to Jacob (whose point of view we readers rely on at this stage) and literally draws herself out of the comic tableau. The tragic nature of the scene is foreshadowed by the mother's tone of voice, before her speech act is heard and understood by Jacob: "Take my daughter."¹¹ In the space between Jacob's suspended laughter and the mother's words lies the meaning of a scene which cannot be 'pinned down.' The sentence, with its very long apposition,¹² has blown out of itself past the climax of the scene; it dies down and closes on itself, like Jacob's laughter: "His laugh creaking to a close, he shook his head, thinking, God help me if this is not the most wretched business" (26).

The first two accounts of the separation scene in *A Mercy* thus compose a picture in the reader's mind that not only conditions the reading, but also, as is most often the case in Morrison's work, the writing itself. Marc Conner's insightful analysis of aesthetic development in Toni Morrison's work until the trilogy can be productively pursued in *A Mercy*. His argument, according to which Morrison's aesthetics have gone from the sublime to the beautiful and her main topic has switched from failed attempts at community to community reconciliation and love, can be taken one step further. The book is, to a large extent, still about speaking and depicting the unspeakable; in *A Mercy* the aesthetic representation of the unspeakable takes various shapes—at times a composite picture, at times a verbal occurrence "stripped to its underwear."¹³ It is up to the reader to piece together the visual, mental and verbal fragments (and possibly reshuffle them at the very end) of a "wretched business" transaction through the affective agency of Florens' narration. As Wolfgang Iser maintains:

The process of image-building begins with the schemata of the text, which are aspects of a totality that the reader himself must assemble; in assembling it, he will occupy the position set out for him, and so create a sequence of images that eventually results in his constituting the meaning of the text. (141)

The Company We Keep: Reading Florens' Narrative

When asked about the writing of the founding scene, Morrison said she wanted to "stress the sacrifice" in it (Morrison, "Interview"). The two accounts, at the beginning of *A Mercy*, of the transaction scene in which the mother and the daughter are separated confirm the sacrificial interpretation. In fact, in the case of *A Mercy*, the reader's sacrificial reading of the original scene—i.e. interpreting the scene as a sacrifice as opposed to a merciful act—is not only conditioned by the two early accounts but also by the former reading of *Beloved*. The "wretched business" (26) of separating mothers and children has already been addressed by Toni Morrison in *Beloved*. As in *Beloved*, the surge of traumatic memory plays and replays the sacrificial event as the text strives to utter the unspeakable. The sacrificial scene in *Beloved* is circled around as it can never be "pinned down"¹⁴ by Sethe while in *A Mercy* the transaction invades Florens' fictional and narrative development; it becomes the haunting script upon which Florens has to define herself and tell-write her story.

The story we read is thus conditioned by the original scene we are made to feel and imagine through the prism of the young character-narrator's affect and through Jacob's point of view. Florens' narration further conditions our reading and "fulfillment" of her "letters of talk" (160). As Iser contends:

In literary works [...], the message is transmitted in two ways, in that the reader 'receives' it by composing it. [...] Practically every discernible structure in fiction has (this) two-sidedness: it is verbal and affective. The verbal aspect guides the reaction and prevents it from being arbitrary; the affective aspect is the fulfillment of that which has been pre-structured by the language of the text. (21)

In fact the reader's ability to read is questioned at the very beginning of the book: "Another (question) is can you read?" (Morrison, *A Mercy* 3). As in *Beloved* (and in the other two books of Morrison's trilogy, *Jazz* and *Paradise*), the reader is "snatched" into the story. Morrison described such "snatching" when commenting on the *in-medias-res* beginning of *Beloved*:

(The) *in medias res* opening I am so committed to is here excessively demanding. It is abrupt, and should appear so. No native informant here. The reader is snatched, yanked, thrown into an environment completely foreign, and I want it as the first stroke of the shared experience that might be possible between the reader and the novel's population. Snatched just as the slaves were from one place to another, from any place to another, without preparation and without defence. No lobby, no door, no entrance—a

gangplank, perhaps (but a very short one). (“Unspeakable Things Unspoken” 32)

The possibility or impossibility of a shared experience between the reader and Florens is indeed very present in *A Mercy* from the very beginning. The reader is confronted with a peculiar “lobby.” His/her ability to read, questioned at the very beginning, is immediately linked to the ability to read signs; it thus loses its literal meaning and takes the reader away from his/her reading role while challenging his/her ability to read the world. The “snatching” that occurs is conditioned by direct address (“you”) and involvement, not in the story at first, but in the broadened outlook encompassed by Florens’ narration. The crucial question of reader response and participation, directly addressed in *Jazz*,¹⁵ is carried one step further in *A Mercy*.¹⁶

Most of the novel is narrated by the teenage girl through what she refers to as her “letters of talk” (160). Indeed, throughout *A Mercy*, Florens’ aural, incantatory language is embedded in the act of writing itself, penetrating the novel’s form and content. Whereas the dreamy, interiorized nature of Florens’ narration is largely due to the two losses affecting her life—the loss of her mother and that of her lover—any first reading is likely to focus on the very texture of her words and/or the way they are assembled. Entering Florens’ own peculiar referential sphere entails doing away with expected frames and sequences. Her timeless use of the present to signify both past and present tends to erase the timeline. Indeed, the coincidence of various events that happen at different times makes for a synchronicity that gives an urgency to the reading itself—as in the following excerpt, where a set of poignant associations is urged upon the reader:

[...] you turn your head. My eyes follow where you look. [...] This happens twice before. The first time it is me peering around my mother’s dress hoping for her hand that is only for her little boy. The second time it is a pointing screaming little girl hiding behind her mother and clinging to her skirts. Both times are full of danger and I am expel. (135–136)

In Florens’ narration, “all of it is now” (Morrison, *Beloved* 210).¹⁷ Mentioning events from the past re-enacts those events, making Florens’ narrative so dynamic.¹⁸

Also, her own peculiar way of appropriating states or emotions (“I have need” [158], “I have shock” [7]) calls such attention to the states or feelings themselves that they cannot be dismissed as mere possible remnants of her mother tongue. It both distances her from the object while establishing a relation to it: “I have no consequence in your world” (142),

as opposed to "I am of no consequence in your world," emphasizes the deprivation Florens feels and enhances the effect of the sentence upon the reader.¹⁹ Florens' narration often epitomizes the character's search for bearings that are always already lost. From the very start it requires a willingness, on the part of the reader, to read in another way. Throughout the novel, her "letters of talk" (160), based on an often literal reading of the world and a meandering narration, are—not unlike *Beloved's* language and song—the company we keep.

There is Magic in Reading/Writing:²⁰ A Mercy's Final Choral Songs

Only once the reader has been initiated to Florens's "letters of talk" can he or she hear the mother's words. Only then do we understand that Florens's language is, quite literally, her mother's tongue. As the mother's words allow us to piece together the original "mercy" (167), her language finds an echo in her daughter's words and vice versa. The analogy between the two narrations is explicit from the very start—in the way they play with transitivity and subjectivity or in the way they abide by (or return to) the present, especially when uttering the unspeakable:

When the canoe heeled, some of we jumped, others were pulled under and we did not see their blood swirl until we alive ones were retrieved and placed under guard. We are put into the house that floats on the sea and we saw for the first time rats and it was hard to figure out how to die. [...] Unreason rules here. Who lives who dies? Who could tell in that moaning and bellowing in the dark, in the awfulness? (164)

The paratactic juxtaposition of life and death ("Who lives who dies"), the coinage of the word "unreason," the periphrasis used to refer to the slave ship ("the house that floats on the sea"): all such lexical and syntactic strategies find an echo in the daughter's narrative.²¹ This language refers to an in-betweenness: to both a foreign tongue and, literally, a mother tongue akin to what Kristeva, discussing Mallarmé, describes as semiotic language—a female language that is both enigmatic and musical and cannot be reduced to its mere verbal expression.²²

Even though mother love and mother tongue cannot be retrieved by the orphan girl, with both the daughter's and the mother's voices Morrison invents a language that gives license to words and images, hereby freeing language from its codes, as it does in *Beloved*. Florens' incantatory language, as *Beloved's*, remains unclaimed. As such, it is the antithesis of "dominion" (167). It claims itself as she literally inscribes her "letters of talk" (160) on the walls and floor of a room in Jacob's mansion.²³ Realizing

there will be no soothing through telling, Florens inscribes her “letters of talk” for their own sake, night and day, and there is no getting away from them:

There is no 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 when the telling stops? (158)

Despite the writer-teller’s anguish about what to do when the telling stops, despite Florens’s sudden awareness that the blacksmith cannot read, her “letters of talk” remain as testimonies (in the reader’s hands). It is such writerly awareness on the part of the narrator that gives poetic license to her “letters of talk.” As Florens makes it clear, there is nothing to do if there is nothing to tell. Though they certainly remind the reader of the reflection on the act of reading at the very end of *Jazz*, Florens’s words are no longer about “making or remaking” the book.²⁴ What is at stake is poetic self-expression:

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 and fall, fall like ash over acres of primrose and mallow. Over a turquoise lake, beyond the eternal hemlocks, through clouds cut by rainbow and flavour the soil of the earth. (161)

As a counterpoint to the narrator’s very first words in *A Mercy*, Florens’s final words can now directly penetrate the reader’s imagination; no threshold is now needed. The freeing of poetic expression suddenly turns the end of the book into the “mercy” (167) the reader has expected all along. Florens’s last words can now be addressed to her mother:

I will keep one sadness. That all this time I cannot know what my mother is telling me. Nor can she know what I am wanting to tell her. Mãe, you can have pleasure now because the soles of my feet are hard as cypress. (161)

As Florens’s final words conjure up the mother’s voice, they coincide with a most important development in her character. Indeed, the return of the mother at the end of *A Mercy* comes right after the girl has come into being, acknowledging who she is: “I am become wilderness but I am also Florens. In full. Unforgiven. Unforgiving. No ruth, my love. None. Hear

me? Slave. Free. I last" (161). Such self-affirmation comes right after she has written her story. A shift from the expected words "Free at last" (words conveyed in spirituals) to "Free. I last" thus associates writerly permanence to the character's self-affirmation. The story that has been told is the perennial subsoil of who she now is. Florens's very last words, addressed to her mother, go back to the shoes which mark the beginning of her narrative. The beginning begins with the shoes and the end ends with the hard soles of her feet on which she has learned to stand with no shoes on. Not only is the reader privy to the symbolic relevance of the shoes; the reference also 'wraps' the narrative, thus turning the mother's last words into an epilogue.

The mother's narrative at the end of *A Mercy* – the last 'gift' to the reader – is a logical outcome of the legitimacy acquired by the reader in his/her involvement with Florens's story. Going along with Iser's theory of aesthetic response, according to which "the aesthetic (pole) is the realization accomplished by the reader" (21) – while the artistic pole is the author's text – we can read the ultimate epiphany at the end of *A Mercy* from an aesthetic perspective. The very fact that reconciliation is diverted away from Florens onto the reader gives him/her a special role to play in the writing and in the composite picture of the "wretched business" (s)he has come to make.

The last two 'chapters' of *A Mercy* offer a choral dialogue between the daughter and the mother,²⁵ finally reunited through the reader's agency. The continuity between the two narrations fills the "empty spaces" (Iser 220) which arise from the cancellation of the reader's expectations.²⁶ However, it also downplays the 'revolution' in the reader's understanding, switching attention away from the narrative itself onto the reading-writing experience. In fact, the final chapter narrated by the mother, conjured up by Florens, is called upon by the reader – by the reader's desire for reunion and reconciliation.²⁷ It also clearly serves an aesthetic purpose. As Morrison once put it in an interview: "Beauty, love [...] actually, I think, all the time that I write, I'm writing about love or its absence. Although I don't start out that way" (qtd. in Tate 40). Filled with love, the mother's appeal at the very end of *A Mercy* finally adds the one essential element to the composite picture the reader has shaped all along: "Oh Florens. My love. Hear a tua mãe." (Morrison, *A Mercy* 167)

Beyond the 'explanation' they provide for the reader, the mother's words not only reestablish the love that has been lost; indeed, they confirm, at the very end of the book, the redemptive power of letters: "I hoped if we could learn letters somehow someday you could make your way" (163). While *A Mercy's* main character has definitely 'made her way,' *A Mercy's* main narrator has made her way into the reader's affect

and freed his/her imagination, giving him/her the keys to see-feel the art behind the letters, and make space for the letters for the sake of (vital) art:

There is no 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. (160)

Whether it is about making ink, as in *Beloved*, or about writing on stone, or ultimately about inscribing “letters of talk” all over the silent room of the dead, Morrison’s multifaceted letter takes her work beyond the “wretched business” she has addressed onto the ultimate “mercy” we have come to share. Engaging and staging a conversation with the reader through ‘flaring,’ ‘falling’ words is what Toni Morrison ultimately does in *A Mercy*, addressing a familiar “you” whose imagination is bound to reproduce that same movement, while the young female narrator’s “letters of talk” penetrate the reader’s imagination.

Notes

- 1 Morrison, *A Mercy* 167.
- 2 Dramatic irony is thus defined in the Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory: “When the audience understands the implication and meaning of a situation on stage, or what is being said, but the characters do not. Common in tragedy and comedy” (Cuddon 237). The notion of dramatic irony is faithful to the narrative rendering of a deeply theatrical scene.
- 3 The mother’s words regarding “dominion” (167) refer not only to institutional slavery. Behind the cover of the refrain-like, sermon-like generic occurrence lies another meaning. Indeed, to the reader, who has read Florens’ narrative all along, her words emphasize the stakes and consequences of personal dominion as well as the larger, communal effects of early enslavement practices—thus addressing the personal and symbolic enslavement Florens grapples with. Like Hagar in Morrison’s *Song of Solomon*, Florens has fallen into the trap of “anaconda love” (137).
- 4 I am here referring to the two types of ‘reading’ Florens talks about in *A Mercy*: reading the world and reading the “letters of talk” (160).
- 5 While the association of the first-person confessional mode to the material of dreams and images directly calls upon the reader’s imagination, Florens—the fictional subject stemming from the writer’s imagination—implicitly draws attention to the very material of fiction.
- 6 Florens’ narration in *A Mercy* has a meandering nature reminiscent of dreams

and traumatic memory; it is often her 'pure,' literal, unprocessed language that makes it more tangible to the reader. The elusiveness of her narration is perhaps best exemplified in the lake episode, where Florens finds herself looking, in vain, for her own reflection—her mind exploring, in the process, the real and the imaginary, the natural and the poetic:

"I dream a dream that dreams back at me. I am on my knees in soft grass with white clover breaking through. There is a sweet smell and I lean close to get to it. But the perfume goes away. I notice I am at the edge of a lake. The blue of it is more than sky, more than any blue I know. [...] I am loving it so, I can't stop. I want to put my face deep there. I want to. What is making me hesitate, making me not get the beautiful blue of what I want? I make me go nearer, lean over, clutching the grass for balance. Grass is glossy, long and wet. Right away I take fright when I see my face is not there. Where my face should be is nothing. I put a finger in and watch the water circle. I put my mouth close enough to drink or kiss but I am not even a shadow there. Where is it hiding? Why is it? Soon Daughter Jane is kneeling next to me. She too looks in the water. Oh, Precious, don't fret, she is saying, you will find it. Where I ask, where is my face, but she is no longer beside me." (Morrison, *A Mercy* 138; emphasis mine)

- ⁷ Florens' reading of the pea hen refusing to brood is one such example. In *A Mercy*, a lot of "signs" (4), learnt from Lina and adapted by Florens, belong to the natural world—and perhaps more specifically to the animal world: to mention but a few, the boneless bears in the valley (5), a stag (69-70), the "feathered thing" (140, 142; this "sign" was already present in *Beloved*).
- ⁸ In fact, as Elaine Scarry explains in *The Body in Pain: the Making and Unmaking of the World*, psychological pain is expressible, contrary to physical pain which resists and even destroys language (4, 47).
- ⁹ As such, the first page of *A Mercy* wavers, quite literally, between fictional distance and emotional commitment.
- ¹⁰ This polyptoton echoes a passage from *Paradise*: "they began to begin" (265).
- ¹¹ We may look at Florens' mother's words as a speech act, for she perpetrates the act by enunciating it.
- ¹² I am referring here to the following grammatical apposition: "a newly recovered recklessness along with the sight of those little legs rising like two bramble sticks from the bashed and broken shoes."
- ¹³ The expression is used to describe the final surge of language at the end of *Love*—when reconciliation is finally reached between the two women protagonists: "Language, when finally it comes, has the vigor of a felon pardoned after twenty-one years on hold. Sudden, raw, stripped to its underwear" (184).
- ¹⁴ The use of the word "pin down" in my article is a direct reference to Toni Morrison's *Beloved*: when Sethe walks around in circles trying to explain to Paul D why she murdered her own child, the painful realization of the utter impossibility to account accurately for such an act is expressed by the narrator through the same productive word (163).

- ¹⁵ I am here referring to the narrator's much-written-about apostrophe to the reader at the end of Morrison's *Jazz*:
- "That I have loved only you, surrendered my whole self reckless to you and nobody else. That I want you to love me back and show it to me. That I love the way you hold me, how close you let me be to you. I like your fingers on and on, lifting, turning. I have watched your face for a long time now, and missed your eyes when you went away from me. Talking to you and hearing you answer – that's the kick.*
- "But I can't say that aloud; I can't tell anyone that I have been waiting for this all my life and that being chosen to wait is the reason I can. If I were able I'd say it. Say make me, remake me. You are free to do it and I am free to let you because look, look. Look where your hands are. Now."* (229)
- ¹⁶ Reader response and participation are particularly dear to Toni Morrison. As she once put it in an interview: "We (you, the reader and I, the author) come together to make this book, to feel this experience" (qtd. in Tate 164).
- ¹⁷ There is, however, a strong counterpoint to such a feeling of time erasure in *A Mercy* with the historical account of New World settlement and the personal stories of Jacob and Rebekka (who cannot get away from history).
- ¹⁸ Timeline coincidence is further enhanced by the disappearance of grammatical markers such as past participles, or suffixes, as in the following sentence: "sudden the moon moves" (Morrison, *A Mercy* 67).
- ¹⁹ I fully agree with the following comment by Wolfgang Iser: "If the reader and the literary text are partners in a process of communication, and if what is communicated is to be of any value, our prime concern will no longer be the *meaning* of that text but its *effect*" (54, emphasis in original).
- ²⁰ The words used in Florens' mother's final appeal to her daughter are: "What I know is there is magic in learning" (163). According to Florens' mother, the other "mercy" is thus the ability to write.
- ²¹ To mention but a few echoes, the oxymoron used by Florens to convey her feeling after losing the blacksmith's love: "I am living the dying inside" (142); or the self-evident, much needed coinage of the word "unlove" (7) at the very beginning of the book ("Priests are unlove here", 7).
- ²² "Indifférent, énigmatique et féminin, cet espace sous-jacent à l'écrit est rythmique, déchaîné, irréductible à sa traduction verbale intelligible; il est musical, antérieur au juger" (Kristeva 29).
- ²³ The notion of the "talking room" echoes Henry Gates Jr.'s famous trope of the "talking book" which emphasizes the inscription of black people's voices in the written word (130-131).
- ²⁴ I am here referring to the end of Toni Morrison's *Jazz* (229).
- ²⁵ Morrison already experimented with the literary device of choral voices in *Beloved*.
- ²⁶ Speaking of Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*, Wolfgang Iser explains that "the cancellation of one's expectations results in empty spaces between the accounts, because the imaginable connections do not establish the awaited continuity, but in fact constantly disrupt it" (220). I argue that through the

continuity we feel between the daughter and the mother, the opposite actually happens in *A Mercy*.

²⁷ This is indeed what Morrison refers to as the reader's "longing":

"My mode of writing is sublimely didactic in the sense that I can only warn by taking something away. [...] At the end of every book there is epiphany, discovery, somebody has learned something that they never would otherwise. But that's the only way I can say, that's the only message, that's the only way I can reveal the message, and it gives my books a melancholy cast, because it's more important to make a reader long for something to work and to watch it fall apart, so that he will know what, why and how and what the dangers are, more important than to show him how they all solved their problems. (qtd. in Koenen 74)

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