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## Toni Morrison's *A Mercy* and the Counterwriting of Negative Communities: A Postnational Novel

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MFS Modern Fiction Studies, Volume 58, Number 4, Winter 2012, pp. 723-746  
(Article)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press  
DOI: [10.1353/mfs.2012.0068](https://doi.org/10.1353/mfs.2012.0068)



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**TONI MORRISON'S A MERCY AND  
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**Mina Karavanta**

There is not a great deal in fiction, although there's a great deal in history, about what this continent was really like in the seventeenth century, *before* the United States, really *before* there were many colonies, when it was still ad hoc, when every country was laying claim, when there was the Swedish nation and the Dutch empire as well as the Spanish, the French, etc. And during that scramble, *anything* could have been shaped, *anything* could have come out of it. What was there *before*, that was truly fascinating to me." (emphasis added)

—Toni Morrison, "Toni Morrison talking about her book *A Mercy*"

If anything I do, in the way of writing novels (or whatever I write) isn't about the village or the community or about you, then it is not about anything. I am not interested in indulging myself in some private, closed exercise of my imagination that fulfills only the obligation of my personal dreams—which is to say yes, the work must be political. It must have that as its

thrust. That's a pejorative term in critical circles now: if a work of art has any political influence in it, somehow it's tainted. My feeling is just the opposite: if it has none, it is tainted.

—Toni Morrison, *What Moves at the Margin*

What is there before the time of the nation, at the very beginnings of transatlantic modernity? How does the contemporary novel—that reconfigures the prenational time, and the events, multitudes, and communities that mark it—imagine, narrate, and represent the stories and histories that underlie the remains of the time before the nation and its discourses? How does it attend to the haunting presence of this "before" in a global and transnational present that can neither be adequately represented nor historicized from the viewpoint of a single history, story, or voice? In an interview about *A Mercy*, Toni Morrison explains how her interest in the "before"—the period before the time of the American nation, when the New World was still "ad hoc" and claimed by competing imperialisms—motivated her research into the history of the early seventeenth century. She was particularly interested in, among the immigrants from Europe, the "felons, prostitutes and children" who chose transportation over imprisonment and thrust themselves into the danger of being "on the sea for months" to save themselves from the devastating effects of expropriation and land enclosures in Europe ("Toni Morrison Talking").

This labor force of expropriated constituencies, indentured laborers, and slaves from Africa constituted the intercultural, multi-ethnic, and multilingual multitude that set foot in the New World. Despite their different origins, these migrants were bounded by similar conditions of servitude and bondage long before they were divided into the white Christians and the naturally depraved Africans by the policies and institutions of racism. Set in 1690, Morrison's *A Mercy* counterwrites the history of a negative community<sup>1</sup> forged by the "constellation" ("Toni Morrison Talking") of constituencies of different and often oppositional cultural, ethnic, religious, and racial origins thrust together into the New World by the forces of modernity, namely, colonization, the slave trade, and capitalism. These propertyless, expropriated, and enslaved constituencies were deracinated from their homelands and dispersed in a New World that became the habitat of a multitude that also included native populations, frontiersmen, landed gentry, and slave plantation bourgeoisie. Their oppositional but also "overlapping" narratives, their different but "intertwined histories" (Said, *Culture* 18–19), constituted the essence of these communities. National histories, documents, and discourses have either repressed or interpreted these communities as part of the genesis of the national community, thus casting their alterity into oblivion. The stories of

these communities form a countermemory to the national community and its imaginings; they symbolically represent the histories that the discourses of American exceptionalism have either omitted or repressed as a negative ontology: the radical alterity of the inferior others of racial, class, ethnic, religious, and gender identities against which the national subject is constructed.

In this essay, I demonstrate how *A Mercy* counterwrites a negative community forged on affiliations, affects, and interdependencies as much as conflict, contradiction, and inequalities. This community of expropriated men, women, and children, "orphans, each and all" (Morrison 59), remains on the edges of the national imaginary and betrays another history of community in modernity, not yet bound or enchanted by the myth of the national community as a "deep, horizontal comradeship" (Anderson 7) of filiation and kinship ties. By attending to the narration of this negative community in *A Mercy*, Morrison further develops her "literary archaeology" (Tally 81) of community as a concept that bespeaks other events that underlie or are repressed by the facts official history represents as the origins of the nation and its memory. *A Mercy* demonstrates Morrison's sustained preoccupation with the history and stories of communities formed counter to the dominant imaginary and discourses of community.<sup>2</sup> She questions the exceptional politics of the national community that operates at the expense of the marginalized. By excavating their remains in history, her texts, journey "to a site to see what remains were left" (Tally 81). But they also "reconstruct the world that these remains imply," and thus reinvent the work of creolizing these diasporic communities manifested in the repressed music, storytelling practices, folktales, narratives, and aesthetics. Her reinvention of these overlooked elements form a countermemory to the dominant national politics and discourses and generate heterogeneous voices and narratives that reinvigorate the novel and the nation's historical and literary discourses.

At a time when the nation is being transformed by transnational capitalism, globalization, and the rise of transcultural and intercultural communities spreading within and across the borders of various nations,<sup>3</sup> Morrison's preoccupation with what lies before the United States—namely, with what lies before the nation and before the facts that are represented as its origins—contributes to the development of the postnational novel. The postnational novel draws on historiographic metafiction, which "accepts this philosophical realist view of the past [the past did exist—independently of our capacity to know it]" but does not restrict itself to the "anti-realist" tendency of postmodern narratives that "suggests that, however true that independence may be, nevertheless the past exists *for us—now—only*

as traces on and in the present" (Hutcheon 69). Instead, the postnational novel is a form of counterwriting that relates these traces to the history that the narrated stories symptomatically reveal by attempting an imaginary restoration of their context before its accommodation in the dominant discourses of national history. Rather than being antirealist or only parodic, the postnational novel blurs the distance between the discovery of the events and their invention as facts not only to problematize the distinction between discovery and invention as historiographic metafiction has done, but also, and more importantly, to articulate the event before it is translated into fact by national discourses. The postnational novel thus writes counter to the act of forgetting involved in the invention of fact. To this end, I argue that *A Mercy* counterwrites prenational time in a transnational age and, hence, contributes to the formation of a postnational imaginary that can inspire its readers to envision the affirmative possibilities of the contemporary negative communities formed by the current economic and political forms of expropriation, exile, and migration. The postnational imaginary is a new cartography of images forged by narrative that reconstellates the facts that make up modernity. It retells them from the perspective of the "overlapping territories" and "intertwined histories" (Said, *Culture* 3) of modernity, and can play a crucial role in the need to invent a living together post the mandates, restrictions, and failures of the national community—specially in the way it has been formed within the context of neoliberalism and the transnational capitalist order.

### "Living Inside History": *Theatrum Litterarum*<sup>4</sup>

A politics of "living inside history" rests upon a political that . . . takes us away from the current preoccupations of liberal politics, which swirls around issues of political authority, political obligation, consent and procedural justice. It eschews arguments about failed states. A "politics of living inside history" calls for us to think anew to pose the hard questions that arise from the practices not only of those who have conquered the world but also those who have been conquered.

—Anthony Bogues, "Politics, Nation and PostColony"

Repetition *and* first time: this is perhaps the question of the event as question of the ghost. *What* is a ghost? What is the *effectivity* or the *presence* of a specter, that is, of what seems to remain as ineffective, virtual, insubstantial as a

simulacrum? [...] Staging for the end of history. Let us call it a *hauntology*.

—Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx*

"Don't be afraid. My telling can't hurt you," Florens tells the reader in the opening pages of *A Mercy* (3). A daughter of slavery—saved from plantation life by an act of mercy her unnamed mother asks of Jacob, a merchant who takes her away in exchange for a debt—Florens writes her story in the first person. She is thus staged as the mock historian whose specter returns to present her archive, a collection of the stories that make up the history of her community. She asks the reader not to be afraid of her "telling," despite her haunting presence—"I promise to lie quietly in the dark—weeping perhaps or occasionally seeing the blood once more"—and the ominous nature of this writing, "full of curiosities familiar only in dreams and during those moments when a dog's profile plays in the steam of a kettle" (3). Florens suddenly emerges from the dark—her spectral silhouette a material manifestation of the inapparent—to summon up the images of "curiosities familiar only in dreams" (3) that will awaken her reader to the "stranger things" that "happen all the time everywhere," things that have been silenced and repressed. The phantasmic and ghostly matter of her stories of yore will symptomatically reveal the unreal in the real, the past in the present. Florens does not return to write the history of the origin, the true beginning of the story, but rather to make herself present and show how she, albeit expropriated and enslaved, has always lived "inside history" through a story told in her own words. Mockingly, she says that her "beginning begins with the shoes" (4), the memory of cravings and desires that she still has, notwithstanding her utter deprivation of basic needs as a plantation slave.

But what kind of beginning is this that summons the specter of this mock historian that Florens represents? A meticulous archaeologist of counter-memories, who excavates the "stranger things" and reveals them in the everyday, Florens affiliates the economies of two kinds of archaeology: Morrison's "literary archaeology" (Tally 81), which is attentive to the mythopoetic restoration of the historical ruins of the slave trade and the slave plantation; and Michel Foucault's archaeology which, following Friedrich Nietzsche's deconstruction of monumental history, "oppose[s] itself to the search for 'origins'" (Foucault, *Language* 140). Florens emerges from the dark as a specter/mock historian who "laugh[s] at the solemnities of the origin" (143) and, hence, questions history as a "timeless and essential secret" that has no origin or "essence," but the "fabrication" of an essence "in a piecemeal fashion from other forms" (142). Fou-

cault's counter-historical archaeology is symptomatically manifested in the counterwriting of "literary archaeology" (Tally 81) that Florens performs in *A Mercy*. Their archaeologies are both structurally and politically affiliated: Morrison's "literary archaeology" that attends to the "before" and the early beginnings of modernity, that is, slavery, colonization, and capitalism, resonates with Nietzsche's roaring laughter at the three modes of history that finally monumentalize the origin as the event of history in the late nineteenth century. Foucault's "archaeological description" represents "an abandonment of the history of ideas, a systematic rejection of its postulates and procedures" (Foucault, *Archaeology* 138). But if Nietzsche's attempt "to effect nothing short of a total and absolute metahistorical transformation of history, overlooks the doubleness of history, whereby it operates both as curse and as a blessing" (Radhakrishnan, *History* 49), and if Foucault's archaeology remains faithful to "discourse . . . as a monument" (Foucault, *Archaeology* 139), then Morrison effects a counterwriting that challenges the "ancient proliferation of errors" that the promise of the origins "posits" (Foucault, *Language* 143). By presencing the absence Morrison generates new narratives, untold and unwritten accounts that emplot the past—a form of counterwriting that brings to presence the "dissension of other things" (Foucault 142). In other words, "the disparity" that lies in the "beginning of things" and speaks the presence and forced absence of other ontologies, to invoke Derrida's important analysis of hauntology and the specter, rather than the "inviolable identity of their origin." The specter, a "frequency of a certain visibility," the "visibility of the invisible" (Derrida, *Specters* 125), recasts the history of the lives forced into invisibility and repeats their stories. But each repetition is a first-time event: no telling of something forced into invisibility can fully restore it and bring it back to life. The specter is a presencing of what remains and the embodiment of the promise of these remains: the resistant ontological and political matter of these other lives that any dominant ontology and politics cannot fully exorcise nor expel but is rather doomed to conjure. "To haunt does not mean to be present" (202) but to gesture at the invisible beginnings of presence—"Everything begins before it begins" (202)—that any dominant ontology and politics wants to forget by accommodating, a "movement of exorcism" (202) and, at the same time, a "conjunction" (202).

In Morrison's *A Mercy*, the haunting of "disparity" and "dissension" opens with the staging of the specter's narration. Living "inside history" (Bogues 4) and returning as a specter to write it, Florens invites her readers to exit the comfort zone of a "totalizing history" that cannot "be constructed from these interested, selective, and fragmentary accounts" and "acknowledge" the "interventionist role

of the interpreters, the queerly interested labor of historical revision, and the impossibility of reconstituting the past free from the disfigurements of present concerns" (Hartman, *Scenes* 11). Instead, she invites her readers to attend to her "telling," which takes the form of what Radhakrishnan calls "a subtle counter mnemonic negotiation with the past in which the past as a hex becomes enabling whereas the past as a promise remains under suspicion and is ruthlessly interrogated" (*History* 49). In Florens's writing, the hex is the memory that "begins with the shoes": a memory of slavery and expropriation, a memory of her desire to mark her body as different from its subjection to commodification, a memory of her mother and the subsequent loss of her mother, and a memory of the community she forms with the other orphans she meets on Jacob's land. Florens and her mother are singled out as the only characters whose telling is in the first person; this distinction does not privilege them at the expense of the other voices and their histories, but rather marks the space from where they emerge and from where the specter of Florens returns to write her history and make the disappeared appear, the forgotten remembered, and the estranged speak the unfamiliar language ("stranger things") of familiarity: "You know. I know you know" (3). This speaking emerges from what, in *Lose Your Mother*, Saidiya Hartman's calls a "mortuary," a depthless archive of bodies, which "allows for a last glimpse of persons about to disappear into the slave hold" (17). The loss of one's mother signifies this "disappearance" that renders the slave a perpetual "stranger" and wanderer: "Torn from kin and community, exiled from one's country, dishonored and violated, the slave defines the position of the outsider. She is the perpetual outcast, the coerced migrant, the foreigner, the shamefaced child in the lineage" (5).

Florens returns from this "mortuary" (Hartman 17) to present its rich archive: Its enabling possibility is the question of responsibility she asks—"One question is who is responsible?"—the responsibility one bears in knowing and forgetting to remember this past and the other events it speaks to, the "stranger things" that "happen all the time everywhere" (Morrison 3). By connecting her memory with the memory of others, the history of the beginnings of the African diaspora with the history of other communities, Florens not only bears witness to her history, the history of the Black Atlantic and the African diaspora, but also counterwrites this history as part of the "transnational and intercultural" modernity (Gilroy 15) that affiliates "contrapuntal" (Said, *Culture* 66–67) narratives of expropriation to confess—"You can think what I tell you a confession" (Morrison 3)—that is, to bear witness to non-beginnings: beginnings that are shared in "disparity" and "dissension." This specter, in other words, has not come in peace.



### **The Orphans of Modernity: Expropriation and the Event of Negative Community**

Half a dozen years ago an army of blacks, natives, whites, mulattoes—freedmen, slaves and indentured—had waged war against local gentry led by members of that very class. When that "people's war" lost its hopes to the hangman, the work it had done—which included the slaughter of opposing tribes and running the Carolinas off their land—spawned a thicket of new laws authorizing chaos in defense of order. By eliminating manumission, gatherings, travel and bearing arms for black people only; by granting license to any white to kill any black for any reason; by compensating owners for a slave's maiming or death, they separated and protected all whites from all other forever. Any social ease between gentry and laborers, forged before and during the rebelling, crumbled beneath a hammer wielded in the interest of the gentry's profits. In Jacob Vaark's view, these were lawless laws encouraging cruelty in exchange for common cause, if not common virtue.

—Morrison, *A Mercy*

In 1682, the timeframe of Morrison's negative community and one of the events Florens's counterwriting unearths, Virginia "was still a mess" (11): a territory populated by a heterogeneous multitude, the majority of which had no rights over the land, no other shared origin but that of expropriation and deracination, and no more profound interest than that of survival and, for those who could, profit. This is only ten years after Bacon's Rebellion (1676), when a group of African slaves and indentured laborers led by Nathaniel Bacon, a representative of the landed gentry, joined forces to overthrow Virginia's Governor, William Berkeley. Their fight, initially over land, against both the plantation bourgeoisie and the Native Americans who had signed contracts with them, became a fight of the bond laborers over "freedom from chattel servitude that held the key to liberation of the colony from the misery that proceeded from oligarchic rule and a monocultural economy" (Allen, *Racial Oppression in Anglo-America* 212).<sup>5</sup> The event also marks a "key moment of racial crystallization in the New World," when race "became the 'primary organizing principle' . . . of human difference in the late seventeenth century" (Cantiello 170).

*A Mercy* affords space to a constellation of characters and their stories that emerge from within this history and the contrapuntal

relation between Florens, an African daughter of Angola origins, and Jacob Vaark, a white man of Dutch origins. Jacob's enterprise, which initially is to master the wilderness, and then to amass wealth to build a mansion, entangles Florens's destiny when he answers her mother's plea to save her from D'Ortega's slave plantation. In exchange for D'Ortega's debt, Jacob is persuaded by Florens's mother to take her; and this act of mercy spins off the making of a community that will be formed by different lives rendered precarious by the various conditions of expropriation: colonialism, which is represented by Lina, the Native American woman forced out of her own land; the slave trade, which thrusts Florens, her mother and brother into the slave plantation economy; capitalism regulated by white men like Jacob, the merchant, and D'Ortega, the slave plantation owner, and dependent on orphans like Sorrow, the racially ambiguous girl found shipwrecked off the coast of Virginia, and indentured laborers like Willard and Scully; and the demise of the Old World by the religious wars, plagues and famine from which Rebecca, Jacob's bride, flees. All four of the above historical conditions make up the cartography of the New World and its conquest by the discourses of exceptionalism, namely, racism, sexism, and later on nationalism, which determine and secure the supremacy of the white, Christian man.

Each character of *A Mercy* is not only the object or victim of expropriation but also, as the staging of Florens's writing powerfully suggests, a subject "living inside history" (Bogues 4) that makes history possible for the future. The stories of these ancestors of the American nation also suggest how Atlantic modernity is shaped by the development of diasporic, creole, and multicultural communities, made by constituencies whose oppositional histories became more tightly related in "modern times" and engender a "poetics of relation" (Glissant 26). This poetics, as Glissant suggests in his work, is the prevalent characteristic of the current transnational and global world. In 1682, when the communities Morrison's characters originate from are either dissolved or disrupted by colonization and capitalism, they are thrown together to generate a community of unexpected, unconventional and, at times, violent affiliations, a temperamental and negative community.<sup>6</sup> The negative community's temperamental, errant, and unpredictable character betrays modernity as a "global setting" of "overlapping territories, intertwined histories" (Said, *Culture* 48), as an intercultural and planetary event rather than as a European invention marked as the unique property of the discursive, epistemological and historical site of the West.<sup>7</sup>

Jacob Vaark is "a ratty orphan" who inherits land in the wilderness of the New World and becomes "a landowner, making a place out of no place, a temperate living from raw life" (12). A "misborn

and disowned" orphan (33), who "once prowled the lanes of town and country" (25) to satiate his hunger by "stealing food and cadging gratuities for errands" (32), Jacob inherits land after being signed up by the Company.<sup>8</sup> Upgraded by his sudden inheritance, the once outcast now becomes one of the owners of the land; the formerly expropriated becomes a frontier settler, a merchant in pursuit of profit by trading sugar and coffee in the new world. This land—the home of its native inhabitants but also the refuge of gold diggers, adventurers, colonizers, and immigrants—is Jacob Vaark's property. Jacob's failed efforts to cultivate it but successful enterprises to commodify it demonstrate how this land is a "fluid" commodity with versatile borders and names that change to accommodate new claims (Morrison 13); its competing inhabitants outdo each other while its native inhabitants are being driven out of their land that is commodified by the "Company, Church and monarchy's laws" (12).

The "ratty orphan," who has been expropriated by capitalism and finds it hard to refuse "when called on to rescue an unmoored, unwanted child" (33), forges a community of orphans precisely when he chooses to participate in the slave plantation economy that reproduces a cycle of orphanage, deracination, exile, and slavery. Lina, who is "mystified" by "all Europes" that "terrified," "rescued," and "puzzled" her (44), best exemplifies this cycle of orphanage. Purchased by Jacob as the much-needed commodity of a "hardy female . . . capable in all matters domestic available for exchange of goods or specie" (52), Lina—the only survivor of a Native American community that is extinguished by the measles and incinerated to ashes—transforms her loneliness, anger and hurt into an act of survival. By "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 meanings of things" (48). Lina thus reconfigures her "way to be in the world" by remaking the world itself through her everyday activities that help her reinvent herself. Lina's self-invention is both an act of remembering the life she once had in her native community as well as an act that inspires and enables living without being broken by sorrow for having lost the "majestic plan of life" and its "ceremonies of death, birth and worship" (50). Despite the violent loss of her community and the exponential destruction of Native American life and culture, Lina's acts sustain the history and memory of her destroyed community that affect the present community she is thrown into by the forces of modernity. While tending Jacob's land, she "cawed with birds, chatted with plants, spoke to squirrels, sang to the cow and opened her mouth to rain" (49). These actions represent Lina's attempt to reestablish ties with nature, which she hopes to lure into a synergy with the human presence and work.

To Jacob's "hurricane activity" of labor whose primary aim is to "bring" nature "under control" (49), Lina performs the act of care for nature as the open space, (a topos still refusing to be translated into a conquerable frontier), where each and every being is manifested in the world in all of its distinct and incommensurable differences. This act of care for nature is transformed into acts of care for Rebekka, her mistress, and Florens, whom Lina adopts as her daughter.

What feeds this care is not Lina's amnesia of what Jacob and Rebekka's presence in this land represents. Fully conscious of Jacob and Rebekka's roles as the masters of the people who eventually form this unexpected community and the owners of the land they will transform into property by domesticating the wilderness, she knows that the "Europes" her master and mistress represent "neither fled nor died out" (54). The sachem's prophecy is soon proved wrong as the "Europes" keep coming "with languages that sounded like dog bark; with a childish hunger for animal fur" (54). As a victim of European colonization, Lina knows "they would forever fence land, ship whole trees to faraway countries, take any woman for quick pleasure, ruin soil, befoul sacred places and worship a dull, unimaginative god" (54). However, in Rebekka and Jacob's toil over their land and care for the "distinction between earth and property" (55), Lina sees the possibility of making a living with them that soon develops into a community, albeit precarious and tentative, always destabilized by the master-slave dialectic that unsettles the affiliations and alliances that the members of this community make. Lina's communion with nature (the whims of the weather and the secrets of the land) and growing need to belong enable her to transform her propertyless indentured condition into a gift. Soon after Rebekka's arrival, and despite their initial suspicion of each other, Lina and Rebekka "became friends" not only because of their need to survive but also because of their intuitive understanding that they could survive only by learning to live and share with each other. Hence, they manage to make a community that affords space to all the orphans, including Sorrow and Florens, who are soon to inhabit their land. Despite their differences and occasional acts of malice, Lina and Rebekka cling to each other as the "result of the mute alliance that comes of sharing tasks," (75) a "united front in dismay" (53).

Parallel to the short-lived community that these characters form in the wilderness of colonial America, Morrison's text draws the temporary oceanic community of the merchant and slave ships that carry Rebekka and Florens's unnamed mother across the Atlantic. Not accidentally, the novel opens and closes with the thick history and uncountable stories of the transoceanic trajectories of slaves, expropriated subjects, gold diggers, adventure seekers, runaways,

mariners, castaways, exiles, refugees, and immigrants that inhabit the world of modernity. On board the slave ship, where "to be female . . . is to be an open wound that cannot heal" (163), Florens's mother crosses the ocean, a crossing that echoes Rebekka's voyage on board the *Angelus*, where she forms a temporary affiliation with other "exiled, thrown-away women" (82). Florens's unnamed mother is robbed of her land, her language, and her memories, and is violently thrust into the New World where she learns that she is nothing more than a "negrita," a "black purchased by Senhor," "not a person" (165). Jacob takes Florens in exchange for D'Ortega's debt, what Florens's mother reads as an act of mercy "[o]ffered by a human" (167) in the face of another. Seeing in Jacob's eyes his capacity for humanity that enables him to see Florens as what she is, a "human child" rather than a possession or chattel for labor and reproduction (166), Florens's mother offers her up in the hopes that she will have a different future. In this act of mercy that opens the possibility of a different future for Florens and the diasporic community that her survival will generate,<sup>9</sup> the two oceanic routes that Rebekka and Florens's mother survive make the two histories of the expropriated and the oppressed meet. Thrust into a new world where the old world still rules and reigns, they perform acts of mercy and care that promise the future of diasporic communities forged out of expropriation and violence.

*A Mercy* is set in the age of the loss of the commons and the "obliteration of the communing *habitus*" (Linebaugh and Rediker 43) in England, which were the immediate effect of the enclosure acts that also led to the fight over inhabitancy, the Atlantic commerce, the slave trade, and the slave plantation system. In other words, *A Mercy* is embedded in the history of "expropriation, exploitation, and colonization" (40) that founds modernity and reduces community to the properties of the nation.<sup>10</sup> The communities that are formed outside the rhetoric of the national community leave their traces in the history of the national discourses as incomplete, fragmented, negative communities.<sup>11</sup> Morrison summons the history of modernity as the unevenly and yet shared history of expropriation and fight over inhabitancy.<sup>12</sup> Instead of repeating the history of this loss only, she counterwrites it by inventing the stories and thus alluding to the histories of the constituencies who formed negative communities. The work of these communities is their affective and affiliated relations, which have enabled the survival, resistance, and perseverance of heterogeneous and diasporic constituencies and communities and their countermemory in the present. This is the history not only of Jacob and Rebekka, who isolate their community of orphans from what in 1630 John Winthrop called the "city upon a hill"<sup>13</sup> and what

William V. Spanos characteristically calls "America's exceptionalist 'errand in the wilderness'" (Spanos, *American Exceptionalism* 12), but also, as I have pointed out, of Florens who writes her story, her history of African diaspora, dislocation, and estrangement, on the wall of Jacob's decaying mansion. Unable to identify with the slaves and the other indentured laborers she meets on her way to the blacksmith's house, where she is sent to call for him to cure Rebekka of the pox, she finds herself driven out by her lover—her only chance for a community outside the confines of Jacob and Rebekka's estate. When the blacksmith returns from Rebekka's house, he finds her with Malaik, an orphan child he has adopted, whom she hurts in a fight. Seeing Malaik collapsed on the floor with blood on his mouth, he refuses to listen to her explanations, and calls her a slave whose "head is empty and body is wild" (141), someone who is "nothing but wilderness" with "no constraint," "no mind" (141). Florens knows she is at fault but is traumatized by his immediate assumption that she is the culprit and his knocking her "away without certainty of what is true" (140). Identifying her as ontologically depraved rather than trying to understand her vices as the vices of a human being who has been politically and economically oppressed, the blacksmith, a freed black man, defines Florens, an enslaved black woman, as an absolute negative, a nobody of "no consequence in [his] world" (142), a mere nothing. The blacksmith's inability to forgive Florens reveals not only the rising ideologies of racism but also the persevering historical transmutations of the metaphysical language of racism,<sup>14</sup> well after the abolition of slavery in the "fragile 'as if equal' of liberal discourse" of the Emancipation period (Hartman 116), as Hartman aptly demonstrates in *Scenes of Subjection*. The blacksmith's inability to relate to Florens outside a discourse that relies on the "exclusionary logic" (116) of one's owning oneself ("Own yourself woman and leave us be" (Morrison 141), the blacksmith cries out at Florens) is a prolepsis of how "the texture of freedom," following the abolition of slavery, will be "laden with the vestiges of slavery" (Hartman 116).<sup>15</sup> His cruelty that leaves her with "no words of sorrow" (Morrison 140) for the wounds he has caused her, no mercy for her own suffering, shows Florens that to be free will mean to be forced to lay claim to freedom within the "economy of racial production" and the "confines" of its "truth claims" (Hartman 234) that will present the slave as a lesser human being.

Wrenched from her mother and now deprived of making a community out of love, Florens counterwrites her representation as a nothing on the wall of Jacob's mansion by writing the history of their community that has been dissolved by Jacob's rampant pursuit of profit and destruction. But the writing on the wall betrays another

community: the temporary, albeit life-giving, community of strangers forged out of the risk to care for the other. Indeed, they form a community not out of a shared common or a shared property, for they "were not a family—not even a like-minded group" but "orphans, each and all" (59), but out of a shared debt that becomes transformed, albeit temporarily, into gift. All the members of this community are inscribed by a form of "debt-gift" that connects them despite their radically different backgrounds (Esposito 6). Despite its different context, I draw on Roberto Esposito's definition of community as "what becomes meaningful from the opposition to what is proper" (3).<sup>16</sup> Counter to the definition of community bound with the properties of the nation that identifies community with the social, Esposito defines the common

by what is improper, or even more drastically, by the other; by a voiding [*svuotamento*], be it partial or whole, of property into its negative; by removing what is properly one's own [*depropriazione*] that invests and decenters the proprietary subject, forcing him to take leave [*uscire*] of himself, to alter himself. (7)

The debt is transfigured into gift when Florens is spared to write her history and return as a specter to tell it, or when Daughter Jane saves Florens in the witch hunt by taking the risk of getting her out of Widow Ealing's house before the widow returns with the sheriff and Florens's possible executioners. In other words, each of the characters performs a transcending act of care that transfigures the economic relation (debt) into an affective one (a gift) and the exchange (mercy as reward) into relation (mercy as responsibility). Even if this transfiguration is precarious and cannot fully resist capitalism and its commodification processes, it enables Florens's writing on the wall that survives the loss of the community they all formed in the negative and repeats the acts of community-making not bound by a predefined proper but by a commons shared by heterogeneous others and their risky acts of care and mercy. By writing this history on the wall, Florens liberates herself from her being written as a slave without a mind and leaves the traces of the screeching nail as the remains of the history of this negative community and its enabling potential.

### **The Postnational Novel and the Politics of Repetition: The Counterwriting of Negative Communities.**

Morrison narrates how the demise of this community of relations that for awhile harbors the hope for another kind of being together is

caused by acts of suspicion and hatred due not only to the characters' flaws but, most importantly, to the ways their lives are interpellated by the growing power of the Puritan discourses and the exceptionalist ideologies that underlie the imperial conquest of other peoples and their lands, slavery, and the capitalist exploitation of enslaved and indentured peoples's labor. "Needing no one outside their sufficiency" (Morrison 87), Jacob and Rebekka isolate themselves and their "orphans" (59) from the local hegemony, its religious and political institutions. Their isolation notwithstanding, they fail to protect themselves from the exceptionalist ideology in which the surrounding community of the village is steeped, an ideology that produces acts of hatred and destruction: the witch hunt that threatens Florens's journey to the blacksmith's house; the reaction of the village against Sorrow's racially ambiguous and hybrid appearance<sup>17</sup> and the unlikely company that Rebekka forms with her and her other orphan women; Lina's suspicion of Sorrow and Sorrow's belief that Lina killed her first baby; Florens's resentful treatment of Malaik, whom she sees as a threat to her forming a complete love; the blacksmith's refusal to understand her, let alone forgive her; and finally, Jacob's mastery over the wilderness with the construction of a mansion paid off by the extra profit he makes from his capitalist ventures and the plantation economy that he remotely keeps. All of these acts of hatred and destruction symptomatically reveal how capitalism and colonization disseminate the ideology of exceptionalism and its violent effects. This exceptionalism informs these acts and their constituencies, despite their radically different histories and backgrounds. Empowered by a vicious rhetoric that has always already identified and even produced its threatening outside, its radical others and enemies, the ideology of exceptionalism constantly and even vehemently rejuvenates itself by repeating the exclusive imagining of an identity proper: Christian, white, and imperial. By identifying the other as an exception, the dominant ideology of the nation thus exemplifies itself by representing its structures and discourses as part of an exceptional order. In other words, the individual made an exception by being singled out as the paradigmatic case of the excluded and marginal other founds the national exceptionalist order and its law of inclusion and exclusion that regulates the social, political, and economic life. However, the other in Morrison's novel becomes a symbolic frontier that challenges the "providential/optimistic history" of the exceptionalist order. The frontier, both as an ontologically and a geographical term, remains "perpetually open, even after the farthest western reaches of the continent had been settled and colonized" to "*always already produce crisis and the communal anxiety crisis instigates* not simply to mobilize the national consensus and a flagging patriotism, but also to inject by violence the American body politic with antibiot-



ics against decay" (Spanos 198). Morrison shows how the frontier that shapes America into a nation is not a product of the mastery of the surrounding and overwhelming Puritan discourses over the wilderness and the non-Christian, non-white others, but rather the "uneven" (Radhakrishnan, *Theory* 187) work of the errantly formed communities of affective and affiliated relations that are born out of the turbulent encounters of oppositional cultures. However, the exceptionalist ideology that the Puritans transform through discourse into a politics that founds the emerging American nation disables the future of this temperamental and negative community, despite its constituencies' promising acts of care and love.<sup>18</sup> In the words of Jacob's indentured laborer, Scully, "The family they imagined they had become was false" and not adequate to sharing the present (156). It is false because its members can neither stop the world from spilling over the tight boundaries of their community nor affect the world and transform it in such a manner that the needs of their heterogeneous collectivity will be recognized. In Morrison's words, the members of Jacob and Rebekka's community fail because of the "tension" between their "individuality" and "self-sufficiency" and the "need to belong to something larger than you are" ("Morrison Discusses"): even as they belong to each other, they fail to connect their community with the world where that belonging made of intercultural affiliations could be a transformative, political act.

As unfulfilled as the promise of their community appears to be, their formation of affiliations across ethnic, religious, and cultural differences that the national discourses will for centuries represent as incommensurable and consequently haunt the national imaginary, long after the dissolution of their community. The ruins and ghosts of this community of affiliations represent the ontological and political need of these constituencies and their histories to have a voice, to be present, and to be remembered against the national discourses that propagate the identity proper of the nation: its beginning as a puritan, white, and Christian community. In Rebekka's words, they represent the need "to be recognized not as worthy or worthless, but to be noticed as life-form by the One who made and unmade it. Not a bargain; merely a glow of the miraculous" (91). This is the need of Sorrow to love her baby, a love by which she renames herself Complete, having forever torn herself away from the silent Twin other, whom she had to invent to survive her expropriation. It is also the need for the other's love that Florens tries to satisfy by giving herself completely to the blacksmith, whose loss enables her counterwriting, her countermemory, as well as the need that Lina fulfills by communing with the unseen of nature learning and trying to teach Jacob and Rebekka to live in its name rather than at its expense. Albeit

temporal and short-lived, this community of temperamental affiliations constitutes the before of America's prenatal modernity in which each subject tries to find a "way to be in the world" (48); the affective relations that it relies on and produces are its heritage for the future carried on by the orphans who survive the disintegration of the community and now have to form their own alliances of resistance and survival against Rebekka's withdrawal into the surrounding religious community of the local hegemony. Florens, Lina, and Sorrow, but also Scully and Willard, represent the future of other hybrid and marginal communities that will continue to haunt the national one and require representation and rights.

*A Mercy* counterwrites what Richard Slotkin calls the mythogenesis of the American nation through the narrations of prenatal and early colonial singularities forming negative communities in the margins of the master policies and discourses disseminated by "those who tore violently a nation from the implacable and opulent wilderness" (Slotkin 6). If mythology is "narrative action-paradigm," Morrison's *A Mercy* is an antiparadigmatic narrative that takes the form of a decentering and decentered narrative. Morrison's text does not simply rewrite the history of American national community's origins but also counterwrites the entire tradition of frontier literature that has translated the agony and struggle of the frontiersman to fulfil his Manifest Destiny into the cultural figuration of nation building. She deconstructs the myth of these origins not to replace it with another but to show how "the nation must disremember its deeds of violence and its heterogeneous roots to imagine itself as a homogeneous community" (Behdad 30). The novel's multicentric narration—whose center, or rather beginning, is deferred by the spectral return of the estranged, mock historian, Florens, who also echoes her mother's first person narrative—deconstructs the typological and paradigmatic narrative structure that prevails in the captivity narratives and the sermons of early colonial American literature, the historical and literary context of *A Mercy's* community. By narrating the story of a counternational community of interracial, interethnic, and intercultural features formed not only by economic and political need but also by errancy and transfiguration—the transfiguration of debt into gift—that counters the "Puritans' divinely ordained 'errand into the wilderness' of the 'New World'" (Spanos 147), Morrison's text symptomatically reveals the history of other, forgotten communities and their abandonment by the mythogenetic processes of the American nation.

By narrating the repressed histories of such counternational communities, whose negative and temperamental formations do not serve the national imaginary that underlines the myths and discourses of the nation, Morrison plays a conducive role in the development

of the genre of the postnational novel. I draw on Donald E. Pease's definition of the postnational as the "opening up" of the "gap within national narratives—in between state power and how to make sense of it" ("National Narratives" 8), a praxis that requires the systematic deconstruction of the implication of the global in the neo-colonial and the reconfiguration of the national from the perspective of those constituencies, communities, and discourses that remained in its margins and were silenced or represented as the national order's undesirable alterities. The postnational novel contributes to "postnational narrations [that] have struggled to make visible the incoherence, contingency, and transitoriness of the national narratives and to reveal this paradoxical space" ("National Narratives" 7). This "paradoxical space" is the space of the national imaginary constructed on a series of exclusions, omissions, and forgettings haunted by what Morrison, in *Beloved*, calls the "rememory" (36) of stories "not to pass on" (275), for they are not the single possession of an uninterrupted memory but rather the elliptical and fragmented memories of negative communities of expropriated constituencies whose histories must be imagined and narrated together to tell the story and write the history of their ruins, their specters, their disavowed lives.

*A Mercy* unsettles the "amnesiac nation that disremembers its violent beginnings to fashion itself as a unified imagined community" (Behdad 23) by countering its narratives with the stories and histories that haunt the beginnings of America from the margins. By counterwriting the narratives of the "amnesiac nation," flooding them with the storytelling of other communities and their imaginaries, Morrison's novel emplots the history of this intercultural, "messy" before, when these communities are not yet strictly organized as racial, ethnic, and religious constructions kept separate and controlled within the national narrative. She shows how the narrative of the American nation is constructed on the forgetting of the history of communities of dissenting and disparate elements, and how resistance to this forgetting engenders an alternative way of attending to history: by fearing not to "learn to live *with* ghosts" (Derrida, *Specters* xviii), by fearing not to listen to the specter of a black woman writing history with a nail on the wall, a testimony of bearing witness and an act of giving life in the negative community.

## Notes

1. Maurice Blanchot's *The Unavowable Community* calls for the concept of community to counterwrite it against the history of its formations and breaks in Europe in the twentieth century—fascism, communism,

utopic and nostalgic narratives, and the formation of literary and artistic communities—to attend to the possibilities of forming communities counter to totalitarianism. This manifests the urgency to contemplate community as what Jean-Luc Nancy calls the "unworking" (*désœuvrée*) of community in *The Inoperative Community*: the "unworking" of history as monument, the "unworking" of community as the fulfilment of a union, the "unworking" of community's work as production, creation, accomplishment. The concept of negative community bespeaks the event of negated, omitted, marginalized communities as the event of "those who have no community" (Bataille qtd. in Blanchot 24); this event symptomatically reveals not only the difficulty of some groups to form community because of political oppression but also "the impossibility" of community's "own immanence" (Nancy 15). The fulfilment of community means the exclusion and forgetting of the other that community serves, which marks the end of community as the "unworking" and inaugurates the community of union, "fusion" that represents the "spirit of a people" (Nancy 15).

2. Her most recent novel, *Home*, published in 2012, attests to Morrison's continuous contemplation and development of the poetics and politics of community whose landmarks are *Beloved*, *Jazz*, and *Paradise*.
3. I use the term "intercultural" to refer to the network of "relations" and "shared knowledge" (Glissant 8) that constitute the underpinnings for a community of "affiliations" (Said 60) rather than simply a multicultural community. For an analysis of interculturality as a concept and a methodology, see *Interculturality and Gender*, especially Giovanna Covi's "Intercultural Conversational Methodology" and Joan Anim-Addo's "Tracing Knowledge, Culture and Power."
4. I invoke Foucault's analysis of Deleuze's work on philosophy as the "staging" of "the disjunctive affirmation" of both "the event and the phantasm" (180) in "Theatrum Philosophicum" in *Language, Counter-memory, practice*. In this section, I hope to show how Morrison affirms the specter and the event on the literary stage of her novel, which also refuses to "reconcile" the "furthest reaches of an event with the imaginary density of a phantasm . . . by adding a grain of actual history" (180).
5. For a detailed analysis of the historical and political significance of Bacon's Rebellion, the early forms of servitude and the construction of racism in the early colonial period in North America, see Theodor W. Allen's *The Invention of the White Race*, Volumes I and II. The fear that the rebellion would be reenacted caused the Virginia Assembly to pass a "series of acts" that "did what they could to foster the contempt of the whites for blacks and Indians" (*Racial Oppression* 17). The "deliberately calculated result" was to "align" the "unpropertied European-American" with the exploiters, namely, the planation bourgeoisie (17). See also Sadie V. Hartman's *Scenes of Subjection*, which powerfully elaborates on the "complicity of slavery and freedom" that "troubled, if not elided, any absolute and definite marker between slavery and its aftermath" in the period of emancipation (115).

6. Contingent on the historical and socio-political formations of heterogeneous communities in the global present, and intrinsic to the literary representations of "overlapping territories and intertwined histories" (Said 48), a temperamental community is a transversal and rhizomatic figuration by which to contemplate the political, social, and historical question of community in the present in the various localities where its problematic field arises. This figuration invokes the double way by which any community is embedded in time and space: the prefix "temper-" suggests the register of community in time as both "χρόνος" (chronos), time, and "καιρός" (kairos), opportunity, event. If the former refers to time as the "homogeneous, empty time" (Benjamin 261), the latter refers to "the present of the now" (261) as a present that always already cuts through time as a linear narrative constituted and constituting the event of alterity, of "errantry" (Glissant 15), of "différance" (Derrida, *Margins* 7). As a literary figuration, it invokes the planetary condition of communities of intercultural affiliations bred by the event of "coeval, not alternative modernities that challenged the universalising and homogenizing claims of the West" (Harootunian 106) and the discourses that have proliferated from the theoretical and philosophical articulation of the various "poetics of relation" (Glissant 26) springing from the forced and willed, violent and harmonious co-existence of singularities and cultures. It attends to such communities by describing their traces in the early modern and prenatal past while envisioning their possibilities in the global present. Not accountable to a specific teleology or idea of the universal but steeped in affiliations that are formed in specific localities, the temperamental community reveals the complexity and opacity of certain forms of living-with that symptomatically unconceal the inhabitancy of the planet, not as the habitat of the One but the topos of the Many More Others than the One.
7. See Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's "Planetarity" from *Death of a Discipline* 71–102 and Giovanna Covi's inspiring reading in "La Dividua—A Gendered Figuration for A Planetary Humanism" 274–303.
8. The word "Company" refers to the Virginia Company, which was formed by a "group of English investors in 1606" (Linebaugh and Rediker 15).
9. See Joan Anim-Addo's libretto *Imoinda* and her critical analysis of African Caribbean poetics in *Touching the Body*, which explores the question of survival on the plantation economy from the perspective of this "poetics of relation" that makes up the African Caribbean and African American diasporic communities.
10. In the words of Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker, expropriation "was a long, slow, violent operation" that meant "enclosing arable lands, evicting smallholders, and displacing rural tenants, thus throwing thousands of men and women off the land and denying them access to commons. By the end of the sixteenth century there were twelve times as many propertyless people as there had been a hundred years earlier. In the seventeenth century almost a quarter of the land in England was enclosed" (17).

11. The history of the nation is a very uneven history, as the works of Frantz Fanon (*Black Skin, White Masks* and *The Wretched of the Earth*), Partha Chatterjee (*Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World and Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Post-Colonial Histories*), and Michel-Rolph Trouillot (*Silencing the Past*) on nationalism and the nation best exemplify. But even though the formation of postcolonial nations may radically oppose western nationalisms by giving voice to silenced and oppressed constituencies and their communities, founded on a democratic representation from below, they can also force exclusions and sustain the forgetting of communities that are foreclosed in the margins of the new independent nations, or even remain completely outside their margins (see, for instance, the work of the Subaltern Studies group and Gayatri Spivak's work on the subaltern woman in *Selected Subaltern Studies* and "Can the Subaltern Speak?").
12. Here I draw on Robert P. Marzec's insightful and enlightening analysis of inhabitancy in *An Ecological and Postcolonial Study of Literature*. Marzec's crafty genealogy of the enclosure acts in England between the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and his cartography of their literary representations in literature that spans from Daniel Defoe to Salman Rushdie proffer a postnational reading of inhabitancy, its ontological and political stakes in the present. See especially Chapter Four, "Inhabiting Land in the Age of Empire: Twentieth-Century Literature."
13. See Sacvan Bercovitch's analysis of Winthrop's famous sermon aboard the *Arbella* in the "Ends of Puritan Rhetoric" in *The Rites of Assent*. See as well Susan Howe's reading of the rhetorical violence of Winthrop's discourse in *The Birth-mark*, which aptly demonstrates Bercovitch's argument that "history and rhetoric" are the "two kinds of violence" on which relies the discovery of America, "the modern instance par excellence of how metaphor becomes fact, and fact, metaphor" (71).
14. Orlando Patterson's *Slavery and Social Death* remains a key text in its pre- and trans-modern analysis of the saturation of the social by the institutions slavery and the metaphysical discourses of racism.
15. Cantiello remarks how "a certain concept of the American Adam as white and male is constructed" even though *A Mercy* "actually shows how racism is not yet inextricably linked with slave labor and indentured labor and yet as early on as 1690" (167). She aptly argues that "the blacksmith's fear and rejection of Florens" suggests that "the black and native body is definitely associated with the metaphysical status of the naturally depraved (Willard and Scully are mobile as white men in ways the women are not)" (167).
16. Such is the task in Roberto Esposito's *Communitas: The Origin and Destiny of Community*. Esposito's critical genealogy of community examines the works of Hobbes, Rousseau, Kant, Heidegger, and Boatel to deconstruct the dialectic between community and property that informs the making of community in modernity. By closely ex-

aming the paradoxes of this dialectic as it is variously manifested in these philosophers' works, Esposito intends to symptomatically unconceal another operation of community that underlies and undermines this dialectic. Such an operation and hence formation of community in modernity is informed not by what is "common" and owned as shared property that foregrounds and promises a common present and future but by ruptures and breaks that suggest that the subjects form communities out of the need to live with each other in the form of an "obligation" or a "debt" that cannot be accounted for by a preconditioning and predetermined common (6–7). His analysis is affiliated with the earlier work on community by Nancy and Blanchot, whose work I mention at the beginning of this essay.

17. See Cantiello's analysis of "Morrison's strategic deferral about using race as a defining demarcation of Sorrow" in the context of the pre-racial and post-racial debate (175).
18. Donald E. Pease's *The New American Exceptionalism* is a powerful analysis of the development of the exceptionalist discourses in the current political scene of American imperialism and the ways they sustain the structures of the "state of fantasy" (21).

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