

The Calligraphy of Trees: Towards an Ethics of “Mysreading” in Toni Morrison’s *A Mercy*

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Abstract: In this paper, I argue that Morrison’s marvelously realistic story *A Mercy*, a story which nonetheless has its terrible historical and geographical foundations, invites readers to inhabit and even affirm Florens’s fragmented, demanding, but experientially honest consciousness. Bearing witness to the nature of this consciousness and its creation by and through Western imperialism positions us as readers to enact both a critical hermeneutics and a decolonial ethics. Centrally, Florens’s a-grammatical, non-Eurocentric “mys/misreading” and speaking of her experiences serves as a counter-narrative to a History and an institution (plantation slavery) that have systematically muffled and marred whole peoples. I consider to what extent an “ethics of mysreading” is not only a linguistic but also a spiritual form of liberation from the grammars of violence and the economies of oblivion. I employ comparative, deconstructive, and phenomenological methods to explore what a spiritual form of resistance might look like. The essay is an interdisciplinary, sustained literary analysis and poetico-ethical argument that gestures towards the surprising congress between postcolonial studies and consciousness studies.

Keywords: Morrison, postcolonial, ethics, poetics of oblivion, consciousness, phenomenology, slavery, spirituality, relation

Half of what I say is meaningless; but I say it so that the other half may reach you.

-Kahlil Gibran, Sand and Foam

By taking seriously unconventional and even subversive approaches across disciplinary borders (literary, philosophical, ethical, political, etc.), we can render more inclusive our ways of interpreting cultures and communities that resist homogeneity and historical erasure. In a postcolonial context, for example, we find the need for a crucial hermeneutics such as George B. Handley's *poetics of oblivion* which "recognizes oblivion [in the form of elided peoples and events]—that is, not what is remembered but what is forgotten and therefore unsayable" (Handley 27). In order to evaluate with "greater honesty and humility" (26) the shared historicities of the Caribbean, Central and South America, as well as the U.S. Southern Plantation states, Handley looks to literature's capacity to address history's innumerable absences and silences. Instead of being an epistemology that presumes it can represent a univocal and all-encompassing history of New World colonializations, a poetics of oblivion recognizes the hemispheric traumas that cannot be recuperated, offering "a potentially more ethical way to give representative shape to these elusive historical patterns that link the U.S. South to other regions of slavery" (27). While Handley understands the scholarly desire to separate the enslaved cultures of, say, the U.S. South and the Caribbean nations into discrete historiographies, he argues for the "ethical obligation to learn to read cross-culturally throughout those regions affected by the historical patterns of Plantation America and to commemorate that which was lost in their mutually shared histories" (27). Handley does not necessarily elaborate on what this kind of critical and psychological "commemoration" might look like, but he does see literature's potential to open up an alternative space wherein the political, ethical, and aesthetic include each other's horizons in the hopes of reclaiming, or at least reimagining, the oppressed histories of Western modernity and globalization.

If Handley's "poetics of oblivion" primarily seeks to mourn and account for what cannot be said in each of our sayings—seeks to articulate a sense of those historicities that are lost—then we are left urgently to ask: what kind of social and epistemic framework is needed to positively enunciate or register one's trauma as a new and necessary speech of the world, to speak *after* being silent or silenced? How do we account for the erasures of trauma, even as they try to be brokenly read; as they try to persist in the world of the living, of the persevering?

In light of these questions, we see more intensely the capacity of Toni Morrison's texts to host a plurality of worlds where alternative forms of survival persist; indeed, her stories often acquire and rearrange many identities, temporalities, and spatialities. In particular, through an analysis of the multi-literate responses of the character Florens in Toni Morrison's novel, *A Mercy*, I propose to explore one possible ethical complement to (and continuation of) Handley's poetics of oblivion. I propose that the notion of an indeterminate and inalienable (though not necessarily impervious) process of persevering through cultural and political oblivion (in <https://www.jsrd-humanities.com/>

Handley's provocative sense) has transnational implications. Reading Morrison's *A Mercy* as powerfully correlative of real-life experiences within forced familial separations and migrations, I argue that the process of living with and through a recuperative anguish, if you will, often consists of a deterritorial, polyvocal re-translation (and therefore, transformation) of a people's trauma—a radical if unpredictable co-relating and perceiving that I shall call the *ethics of mysreading*. This ethics cuts both ways: the alternative, sometimes inexplicable perceptions by a story's characters enable us, as readers or critic-citizens, to keep open the polyvalent, and even liberatory, possibilities of traumatic events. Articulating her own sense of the deterritorial and polyvocal nature of communicating global atrocities, Morrison declares, "Language can never 'pin down' slavery, genocide, war. Nor should it yearn for the arrogance to be able to do so" (quoted in Handley 28). Handley's poetics of oblivion speaks to the fact that we can be exiled in language and history, both of which are and continue to be patriarchal by practice. Correlatively, an ethics of mysreading attests to the ways we might "migrate" from and through these exiles in an attempt to recover that primal, even spiritual, endeavor to "mercify" one's life, so to speak—to make fragile, forgiving, and—in the case of Florens's mother— *matriarchal* sense of it. In what follows, I give both the theoretical and phenomenological reasons for regarding the speaking of and against colonialism and gendered violence as a "mysreading," and I draw the connection between mysreading and its spiritual import.

This neologism "mysreading" may prove fruitful in the sense that Florens and her hybrid oral-compositions (her composing of a "talking-house," for example) re-create a 1690s America for us that has been "misread" and egregiously ignored by History. That is, if history and the notions of civilization are written and archived by the winners of conquest, then those people left out of and conquered by formal representation are, in a most basic sense, perceived (literally *read* through one's values and beliefs) and then portrayed and controlled in the most appalling and distorted of ways. Florens's own a-grammatical, non-Eurocentric "misreading" (misreading in the rather straight-forward sense here) and speaking of her experiences might then serve as a counter-narrative to a History and an institution (plantation slavery) that have systematically misread and marred whole peoples. Furthermore, the orthographic adoption of the prefix "mys-" helps to evoke the kind of "reading" of the world that Florens is capable of. The prefix comes from the relation between the Greek words, *mystikos*, meaning "secret, mystic," and *mústēs*, meaning "one who has been initiated." A further nuance was added in the Latin derivation, *myein*, meaning "to close, shut," (*OED*, 2006: 496). Florens's unique expressivity, I argue, operates on the level of both the mystical and the cultural: mystical, because Florens's language is spiritual in nature and "closed" off from (and by) purely rational discourse; and cultural, because her language is nonetheless founded by a trans-continental institution that has "initiated" her and many others into a violent, racialized economy. Methodologically, and as some of my analyses will bear out, the adaptation of "mys-" allows me to hold in tension Florens's (and by extension, the subaltern's or systematically oppressed person's) mode of being which is obscure and singular (*mystikos*), and her mode of being which is transparent and plural—that aspect of her self (whatever we mean when we say "I") that is universally "initiated" in the most foundational sense, in the sense of *mústēs* ("initiated"), which is elaborated in the Latin *initiatio*, meaning "the form or ceremony by which a person meets the world" (*OED* 374). Despite Florens's irreducibly situated trauma, the equally irreducible modes of her communication compel us to ask: what is the nature of that which can witness trauma or hope? What is it that founds or *initiates* the knowing with which our suffering or grace is known? What is it if not consciousness itself, that which is—regardless of time, place, ethnicity or ideology—"the form <https://www.jsrd-humanities.com/>

or ceremony by which a person meets the world”? In other words, a deconstructive yet transversal use of “mys-” allows me to argue for what Florens herself might have to say about the way we actually *experience* the acts of remembering and perceiving.

Finally, this operative use of the prefix “mys-” serves to pivot not only the *postcoloniality* of Florens’s conflicted relationship with institutional power, but also the *interiority* of that postcoloniality—what is indeterminate, ineradicable, and traumatically *sui generis* about the internalization of her encounter with imperialism. Meant to be at once postcolonial and personal, this heuristic finds an alliance with what Paul Gilroy (1993) calls “the processes of cultural mutation and restless (dis)continuity that exceed racial discourse and avoid capture by its agents” (2). As the term suggests, “mysreading” should be used to conceptualize Florens’s subjectivized politics indexically rather than fixedly, to trace and provisionally speak for (*pace* Spivakⁱⁱ) the myriad and intricate filaments of refusal, negotiation, and transformation that have gone largely unrecorded in the lives of transplanted Africans during “New World,” mercantile imperialism.

In this sense, mysreading is the obverse (though not quite opposite) of a poetics of oblivion because it endeavors to co-relate back into the world (hence its ethical outlook) through language and, as such, represents the creative “excess” that can emerge from within oblivion, from within the void of trauma. By “excess,” I mean a socio-symbolic disturbance that necessarily entails a sort of surpassing of an imperialization in that it sets off multiple antagonisms and counter-discourses that “exceed” and surround the initial moment of oppression.ⁱⁱⁱ This movement, of course, is not always liberating, but it is literally *up-lifting* in that it is a passage into another place. As this responsiveness can sometimes take surprising, uncanny, and non-logical forms, it might also be thought of as an excess in being as the *other in oneself* (whether we call that modality queer, or liminal, or unconscious). We will see how Florens actuates this “excess” at the core of our being, an excess of relating to the world that is the obverse of the oblivion that comes from being abandoned by that same world.

I would say a word about how this sensory and decolonial process encompasses spirituality or a spiritual awareness. When engaging with a text, we might say that to demand someone to read in the conventional or correct way effaces the “spirit” of the reader (and the spirit of reading), that indescribable and therefore undismissible consciousness of her or his being from which all relation emerges and to which it returns. In other words, the dimension of our subjectivity that is responsible for the most foundational kind of reading—perceiving and co-creating the world—is left unread and soon rendered unimportant if not non-existent. I suggest the term, “spirit,” which will be central to the notion of mysreading, is neither arbitrary nor abstract, despite appearances; other terms in the history of this conception could have been selected, but their import tends to be either culturally biased, misleading, anthropocentric, or too abstract without attending to an earthly context.^{iv} Deriving an ethics of mysreading from *A Mercy* is an attempt to recuperate that “spirit”—different for each of us, but made universal by its diversity—which allows us to read the world in an “excessive,” non-effaceable, *unoblivious* way. That dimension of our being that can relate “excessively” implies that it is unquantifiable, not bound to reduce reality to binary codes, including the ultimate code of time. If time is the internal reference point by which we unquestionably tend to measure experience, and if we depend predominantly on a personal ego to further limit and separate experience (e.g., *my* time is not *your* time, *this* time is not *that* time), then to break the barrier of the ego is to break the barrier of time. And do we not intuitively say that what affects our “spirit,” or what feels

“spiritual” to us, is *timeless*? To the extent that we can establish a relationship with the timeless in the midst of the time-bound (boundaries which are often determined patriarchally and univocally), we influence our consciousness, which changes our perceptual experience, which changes our subjectivity, which changes our relations, which changes our choices, which changes our ethics.^v If Robert Musil’s injunction that one needs “to live as one reads” (615) has more than a literary appeal, then we must not skim as to what it takes to address the excessive, though never really exhausted, ethical and political relationship between reading and living.

This paper, then, seeks to add to our critical understanding of the stakes, ambivalences, and transformative silences uncovered by an ethical reading of the postcolonial lifeways that persist, and which are elusively but phenomenologically narrated in, Morrison’s *A Mercy*. In creating the ghostly and insistent prose in her novel, Morrison captures the rhythm of longing, its enticements and inertias. Memorially and even communally, a dramatic meditation results in which, paradoxically, it is through accepting the seeming instability and emptiness of life that one draws the strength to live and the reason to act.^{vi} This acceptance, this allowing, perilous though it can be, is inaugurated by mysreading, that synaesthetic, pre-conceptual languaging that endeavors to communicate the co-sentient ground of being from which all oblivion—and mercy—emerge.

I will make a case that *A Mercy* encourages an ethics of mysreading in three sections: in the first, I will trace the primal moment of mysreading between Florens and her mother and how it anchors Florens’s identity, colonized yet daringly equivocal. On the one hand, the initial trauma of their separation reinforces the racialized destructiveness of plantation slavery, the feminization of conquered geographies and peoples, and the commoditized cosmology of Western imperialism. On the other hand, that separation compels Florens to create a form of survivance, almost *ex nihilo* in the aftermath of such trauma. In the second section, I analyze more closely the culminating revelation of Florens’s “talking room,” and how this space could not have existed without Florens’s unique mysreading of and relation to the Others in her world, including the otherness in herself. With the aid of thinkers like Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Jacques Derrida, Édouard Glissant, Ian Baucom, and Frantz Fanon, I do a phenomenological^{vii} reading of *A Mercy* to build a stronger theoretical and inter-disciplinary case for mysreading and the decolonial, even spiritual, awareness it can disclose. Although each of these thinkers theorize the domain of ethics in culturally and historically specific ways, what I see them holding in common is an ineliminable “totality” that, contrary to postmodern suspicion, is paradoxically ethical in that it interrupts and dismantles those discourses and behaviors (in this case, orientalist/otherizing discourse and racial and psychological oppression) which must totalize in their imagined need for security and power; discourses and behaviors which presuppose the reality of a separate and materialist self. Moreover, these ethical thinkers, whose sometimes radical frameworks I seek analytical resilience from, don’t just constate but *perform* a faith in a nontotalizing total self, that ultimate and immovable alterity within ourselves that gives itself to—and is therefore response-abled by (i.e., put into the relation-that-is-responsibility)—the alterity in others.^{viii} This shared, inescapable, and thus “totalizing” alterity, or what Derrida will call (after Levinas) a “transcendence within immanence” or “beyond-within” (*au-delà-dans*), whose experience is full but whose accessibility or communication in language is necessarily partial^{ix} (Derrida 1999: 138), is a “totality” of a different order than the totalities demonstrated by traditional Western humanisms and philosophies because it refers to a beingness that founds and greets—and is founded and greeted by—the multiplicity and diversity of beings within it. If

this beingness is assumed and abbreviated every time we say or think, “I,” it is the I or self that does not exist *over* and *apart from* others, but *with* and *as* them.^x

Lastly, alongside cultural theorists like, Mark Sandy, Laura Doyle, and Françoise Lionnet and Shu-mei Shih, I discuss the ethical role of nature figured in the “wilderness,” and then gesture towards the contributions an ethics of *mysreading* might share with studies of creolization, transnationalism and, alas, our own everyday reading and hearing of voices, real and imagined. To recapitulate, I will argue that while Florens’s misunderstanding of her mother’s act of mercy initiates her trauma and inducts her into a plantation economy, it also inaugurates her capacity for *mysreading*, for engaging a realm of fraught language and a spiritually irreducible, plurivocal or “creolized” self which, together, eventuate a counter-narrative to colonial discourse. In turn, Florens’s *mysreading* expands our own hermeneutic possibilities as “*mysreaders*” to recuperate (and practice making) the polysemous and even compassionate “excesses” that constitute perception itself.

I. Family Matters and Also Materializes: *The Primal Scene of Florens’s “Mysreading”*

While we do not know it at the time we begin reading *A Mercy*, Florens is an orphaned sixteen-year old girl who is doing a “telling” that is not meant to “hurt” (Morrison 3) her addressee, the blacksmith with whom she fell in love. Since Morrison quickly casts us as hearers of Florens’s most striking memories, we cannot help but feel that Florens is addressing us and not just the blacksmith. We hear from Florens that her mother’s owner, D’Ortega, is in debt to the plantation owner Jacob Vaark. Jacob offers to take away Florens’s mother and infant son to settle the debt. The mother intervenes and begs Jacob to only take Florens. By the end of the novel, we learn that, unbeknownst to the eight-year old Florens, her mother foresaw, and with good reason, Florens being sexually violated if she remained in D’Ortega’s household. Thus, the limited yet plangent memory of the separation haunts Florens throughout the novel and constitutes the primal scene of *mysreading*: “Take the girl, she [Florens’s mother] says, my daughter, she says. Me. Me. Sir agrees” (8). Florens’s alternately anguished and tender confrontation with her mother’s decision crosshatches the movement and form of the story. Consequently, Florens exemplifies what Édouard Glissant calls “errantry” or “errance,” that “revelatory wandering” (16), psychic or otherwise, from one’s home place of control. For Glissant, while errantry may result in “erroneous” paths, it more importantly signals and salvages interior freedom. In turn, one comes upon the very freedom to (re-)shape an interior in the first place, that endangered grace in the self out of which one’s own language can be gathered and eventually directed.

Thus, if this familial sundering is the primal scene of unhomeliness or traumatic errance, it is simultaneously a spiritual rupture that reveals an opacity in the most open sense, in the sense that infinite possibility or ontic unfinishedness, as it were, unfolds itself and suddenly thrusts its beholder into a constructive void. Toward the end of Glissant’s novel *The Overseer’s Hut* (*La case du cammandeur*, 1981), it becomes apparent that knowledge, especially self-knowledge, is an infinite process, always deferred and never fixed. As the principal character Mycéa says, “No no, there is no end, don’t say that you understand, say that you have called out all along the Path”

[*tout au long de la Trace*] (198). If we are to grant Morrison's characters historical validity and resonance, despite their fictive plenitude, we, too, as readers must admit an opacity of the text which never allows it (and its historical allusions) to be grasped as a whole. Taking our cue from Morrison's transplanted and homeless characters, we see that reading becomes a veritable form of "errance" in that the committed reader or "one who is errant [*l'errant*] (one who is no longer traveler, discoverer, or conqueror) strives to know the totality of the world and yet already knows he will never accomplish this—and knows that is precisely where the threatened beauty of the world resides" (Glissant 1997: 20). On behalf of Florens, her a-grammaticality is not aberrant from *her* point of view, from the point of view of one whose destiny has been maimed by a dehumanizing and monolithic grammar. Florens thus subtly erodes empire-building at its core: in language. As Glissant scholar Cecil M. Britton (1999) trenchantly argues:

the historical trauma of transportation has permanently *excluded* the possibility of an essentialist conception of a natural, authentic mother tongue equating with a natural, authentic identity. The response to this situation, Glissant claims, is counterpoetics, which, rather than fantasize about a lost natural language, works to confront, subvert, and partially *reappropriate* the language of the oppressors—but in the knowledge that what will result will be a constrained, compromised, and "unnatural" social construct. (46-7)

Florens's primal trauma, then, is not only the external separation from her mother, but also the internal separation from the Western "father" or overseer of colonial language and culture. Although rasped with peril and an irremovable grief, Florens's counterpoetics speaks above and through the colonial *langue* with her pre-colonial *language*.

In a plausible if more codified approach, Morrison scholar Jean Wyatt reads the primal trauma through the framework of psychoanalysis. As evidenced by Florens's presumably unconscious resentment and rage inflicted onto the blacksmith's infant adoptee, Malaik, Wyatt argues that Florens's particular interpretation of being separated represents an Oedipal desire for the law-like mother's love. As Wyatt argues:

Within the interpretative frame of sibling rivalry, Florens can read "Take the girl" only as the signifier of rejection in favor of the boy. Again, the mother's narration of the scene reveals a quite different motive than Florens attributes to her. The mother focuses entirely on the sexual threat to her daughter, barely mentioning her son: it is Florens who is central to her thoughts and to her love. (6)

On a palpable level, Florens indeed misunderstands (in the ordinary sense) her mother's words and intentions. Otherwise, she would not feel so forsaken and there would be far fewer "tellings." However, is it possible that Florens "mysreads" her mother's words in the way I have sketched? If we look at the crucial enunciation again, we see that Florens interjects her *present* sense of self in a monologue that does not come from herself, but from her mother: "Take the girl, she [Florens's mother] says, my daughter, she says. *Me. Me.* Sir agrees" (Morrison 8, emphasis mine). The syntactical switch from a nominative pronoun ("she") to an oblique one ("Me") suggests that Florens does not read the historical event of separation accurately; she *mysreads* it retroactively, demonstrating that the apparent past can be inflected by the present,

and vice versa. While the trauma is undoubtedly there when Florens interjects the “Me. Me.,” a will-to-alterity also emerges—a desire to both abide as one’s self and to abnegate one’s self during this most social and symbolic of ruptures. Florens’s counter-oblivion is nascent as her telling unearths both her mother’s voice and her mother’s living presence: Florens’s use of the subjective genitive, “my daughter,” literally allows us to hear, if briefly, her mother’s plea to D’Ortega, while the anaphoric “[Take] Me. [Take] Me.” interjects a subtle but fateful accusative case which homophonically suggests Florens’s willingness to not only empathize with her mother’s insufferable choice (preternaturally sacrificing herself at a young age), but also console the inconsolable act by recuperating her mother as perhaps the true and lasting addressee of her tale, as “Me. Me.” sounds very similar to “mamãe,” the Portuguese word for “mommy.”

In several moments, it appears that Florens does not succumb wholly to her various oblivions or losses; we find her often transforming them, coloring them. With phraseology that has to do with faces and their movements, Florens is specifically learning ways to *read*: “[Mother is] saying something I cannot hear. Saying something important to me...” (9); “That is better than a minha mãe standing near with her little boy.... [S]he is always wanting to tell me something. Is stretching her eyes. Is working her mouth” (119); “He [Malaik] is holding her hand. She [Florens’s mother] is moving her lips at me but she is holding Malaik’s hand in her own” (162-3). As this last scene suggests (which is not real and comes from Florens’s dreams), Florens has developed an identity that is capable of embodying apparent multiple temporalities and spatialities at once. Even in her conflation of dream and reality, she is *mysreading* a situation that, wittingly or not, helps her bridge gaps in her comprehension. Florens’s resolute, though not quite stoic, tone in the above passages and others suggests that she sees beyond empirical fact and towards spiritual fulfillment—and not any normative fulfillment, but a fulfillment meant *for her* (recall: “Me. Me.”). Wyatt’s suggestion that many of Florens’s actions signify repressed desires is fair enough. After all, Lacan, even in his unorthodox case studies, has always come to the conclusion that language names what is not (always) present and substitutes a linguistic sign for it, often in the form of a sublimated act that is more symptomatic than veracious (Lacan 207). But the act of reading, “correctly” or otherwise, is by nature a multi-relational engagement and, therefore, a primal ethical act: it must relate to a world that is so vast and complex as to compel us to represent it carefully, to name it, to be humble before it, even if we often overlook this humility upon mastering a language. That Florens can link together seemingly incommensurate events; that she can bestow the benefit of the doubt that her mother is “always wanting to tell me something,” suggests what kind of ethical recourses we might seek in the plantation life-world.^{xi}

If we grant that Florens manifests moments of *mysreading* in the way I am

construing it, then we must take a closer look at how Morrison both endorses and interrogates language in the service of our own possible ethical *mysreadings* as readers. For instance, because the various women in the novel, regardless of class, are all governed by the structuring logic of colonialism, Morrison depicts the white Mistress Rebekka speaking in a way that we would normally attribute to Florens: “How long will it take will she get lost will he be there will he come will some vagrant rape her [Florens]?” (84). The lack of punctuation and modifiers here can easily cause confusion in our reading. But these elements precisely encourage an ethical *mysreading* of Rebekka’s own perilous upbringing. The velocity and vacancy in this sentence not only suit her state of mind, but they recapitulate the viscerality of Florens’s initial separation:

how quickly and breathlessly Florens was removed from her family and thrust into both a literal and spiritual wilderness.

Thus, mysreading might suggest that the novel's momentary, narrative "deaths" of (Western) grammar metonymize the imminent death that bought-slaves experienced upon being torn asunder from their families or communities. Stephen Deyle, for example, has compiled many harrowing first-hand accounts of adult slaves who unanimously describe being sold away from all that they knew as the "epitome of a traumatic experience" (250). Accordingly, Morrison's punctuations of anti-realism and anti-positivism in the novel display not only stylistic guts but arguably reflect the coerced response to the Anglo-European exercise of bio-power. As Deyle reports:

Sale and bodily internment meant that they [slaves] would almost certainly never see their families or friends again, and in many respects, it brought the same type of finality as death. (252)

It has been estimated that at least half of all slave families in the Upper South were broken through...the sale of either a spouse or a child. (246)

The very act (and systematic act) that discursively and, later, institutionally equates being black with being sellable as property reveals a triple expression of power: it violently conceals the personhood and freedom of black persons; it doubles the form of conquest by "feminizing" both colonized persons and their land, allowing Western anxieties towards ethnic difference and heterogeneity to be legitimized in fantasies of rape and order; and it facilitates the utilitarian process of establishing a purportedly universal, rational, and absolute metaphysics.

This trans-American policy of abstracting the subjectivities of African and other indigenous peoples in the name of not only commerce but also a cosmic mastery of nature has its immediate precedence in European Renaissance and Enlightenment expansionism. The orientalized and baroque geography of pre-modern travel morphed into the militant geography of mercantile imperialism and the triangle trade, as the quixotic but unyielding merchant ships of Portugal, Spain, Britain, the Netherlands, and France began to shrink and bind the world along official trade routes. In order to universalize the goals of establishing not only a limitless imperium of commerce but also a limitless imperium of knowledge, European imperialism required both the geographical and psychological erasure of cultural difference. As Francis Bacon (1561-1626) would confess, "My only earthly wish is to stretch the deplorably narrow limits of man's dominion over the universe to their promised bounds" (Farrington 62). What is more, the application of Bacon's world vision entails not only a "gendered erotics of knowledge," as Anne McClintock has examined (1995: 23), but also a racialized economics: "I come in very truth," Bacon asserts, "leading to you [England] Nature with all her children to bind her to your service and make her your slave" (Farrington 62). Hegel too, as a pre-eminent philosopher of the master-slave dialectic throughout history, declares in more damning terms: "Africa has no Historical part of the world...it has no movement or development to exhibit" (Pietz 45). As part and parcel to the politico-intellectual veiling of paranoia, the feminizing,

racializing, and commodifying of a land and its people are compensatory mechanisms designed to drown out and drone over the male (perceived) loss of control, identity, and sexual freedom.

Consequently, as in the case of *A Mercy*, for slaves to articulate their memories and dreams in ways that challenge the binary grammar of private property signals a move to remember and recuperate personhood, self-value, and a sense of belonging. According to Glissant, the historic plantation crystallized into a topology of “immobility and fragmentation.” But it was because of these reified axes, not despite them, that displaced Africans could invent fluid and unrelenting “modes of Relations” (65). Furthermore, if we consider Jessica Adams’ powerful point that the literal translation of “nostalgia” from the seventeenth century is “wounds of returning,” which in turn would extend to signify “a state of ontological homelessness” (Adams 5) characteristic of modernity, then certain disruptions of patriarchal language and usurious discourse can warrant productive “oblivions” or unearth necessary nostalgias. Mysreading here serves as the hammer and chisel to help crack open the subjective historicities that get subsumed under the monolith of objective History. The metaphor might be apropos, considering Florens, in her rage against the blacksmith, violently evolves into a new self, despite feeling that she is “nothing” (Morrison 167) to the blacksmith: “Feathers lifting. I unfold. The claws scratch and scratch until the hammer is in my hand” (167). Paradoxically, the purpose of her fighting with the blacksmith is the peace it might afford her upon learning to let him go. In a way, Florens is revisiting the primal separation from her mother. She is going through another kind of death to be reborn. It is a moment when the “shells of the eagle’s eggs quiver and one even cracks” (73).

As Florens’s rattled, interior monologue during her and the blacksmith’s domestic agon suggests, Florens’s seeming relapse elementally re-writes an American history that we, as readers, know to have actually unfolded: the avian imagery recuperates a natural world that is not yet overcome by an anthropocentric one. The land, while still allegorically feminized through Florens (and suggested by the homology between her name and the Latin word, *flora*, which refers to a region’s species of plant life as a whole), is no longer a passive counterpart to the shaping force of male technology (the hammer). As wild bird, Florens does not remain struck down with the hammer but strikes with it. In other words, Morrison has a displaced *America* talk back—thrash back—at a possessive *Amerigo*.^{xii} If the Anglo-European male anxiety about origins and purity manifests as the insistence to name and domesticate, then that anxiety is exacerbated when someone or something different (a woman/a colonial Other/an uncharted land) confounds the reproduction of the same. Even though Florens’s lover, the blacksmith, is African and free, he has been pervaded, if survivalistically, by the white Master’s insistence on commodifying life and even by a racialized surname which is reified into his only name in the novel: he is *black* and he is *Smith* (or at most, “smithy”). Upon striking down Florens after pre-judging her abuse of Malaik, the blacksmith betrays his colonial mimicry in his inability to categorize Florens’s otherness: “You are nothing but wilderness. No constraint. No mind,” he tells her (166). Simultaneously woman and child (“I fall and curl up on the floor. Tight,” Florens says [165]), Florens sensually pleads for the blacksmith’s reconciliation, but he is repulsed as Florens tells us he “shout[s] the word—mind, mind, mind—over and over” (166-7). Within the gendered value-systems of Western imperialism, this scene finds a male rage for certainty challenged and confused here by a female rage for serenity. In what we might call geo-familial terms—terms that, as we saw, underlay a discourse by which Western imperialism propagated itself—the father has no lasting proof that the “virgin” land/child/mother of his child is his;

although he can penetrate and name its/her body, he cannot penetrate or name its/her polyvalent mind or spirit or interior life-world (also denoted by the term, *flora*, as in the microbiome of the gut).

According to this gendered historical trope, the male colonizer's sense of geographical *space* can only be aggrandized by marking the feminized or emasculated colonized people's sense of *time* as backwards: the others subjugated by male hegemony are figured as belonging to a prehistoric, atavistic, and irrational era.^{xiii} I discuss in more detail Florens's phenomenological yoking and subverting of time below. As it happens, the blacksmith *misreads* and disdains Florens's flight from patriarchal time ("Feathers lifting" [167]). In turn, Florens's seeming temporal entropy is the source of her *mysreading*, the unsilenceable and timeless agency in the form of the narration that not only appears to find its way to the spirit of her mother by the end of the novel, but that also we, as readers, are presently arrested by while reading that very same novel. The eagle's eggs quiver indeed; Florens's story (or *herstory* as opposed to *history*), and by extension the shared experience of the colonized and transplanted, constitute a time that finds a way to be born again, to be multiply if inchoately alive in the now, in peoples who are putting words to their own oblivions. Thus, Florens's primal scene of *mysreading* and its ferocious after-shocks tenuously re-route the erotics of engulfment, initiating a counter-history cry to what would eventually become a history of containment.

II. Go Bravely to The Wall: *Florens's Talking-Room, the Promise of Otherness, and the Decolonization of Time*

In order to do critical justice to the hypothesis that, in *A Mercy*, Morrison sheds light on some of the psychological and cultural blind spots of plantation America, it behooves us to attempt a phenomenological treatment of not only Florens's mystical resistance (if we may call it that), but also the participatory otherness (including the enveloping otherness often forgotten in oneself) on which it depends.

An incomplete but crucial interrogation of *mysreading* may come from considering Maurice Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological notion of the "chiasm," the subject of his last chapter in the uncompleted work, *The Visible and the Invisible*. Briefly, a chiasm, derived from our optic anatomy, is a space where various sense modalities or perspectives "criss-cross" and necessarily "collaborate" with one another. Perception itself, then, is the ultimate chiasm, for it is the reciprocal participation between what Merleau-Ponty calls one's own "flesh" (i.e. embodied beingness) and the encompassing "flesh" of the world. The language of the body is not simply metaphorical for Merleau-Ponty, but a way of conveying our tactile, interwoven, and dynamic exchange with other entities (including non-human ones). This undergirding, synaesthetic engagement between the world and us consists more of a carnal, planetary intelligence than a strictly discursive, anthropocentric one.

For instance, if I wish to most vitally feel the cloth of a coat that I am about to purchase, the incarnate, ever-nourishing chiasm constantly offered by life, as such, will not be understood if I pound the cloth with my fists or carelessly brush my hand over it as I proceed to purchase it.

Instead, the cloth must be touched as it “wishes” to be touched—not abstractly or as a means to an end, but as a co-enveloping, co-expressive “bodily” axis (and access) with which we share this world. For actualizing such a primal touch, my body needs no instruction, for it *is* instruction; it is purposeful relation. Like the cloth, my hand is a part of the tangible world; between it and the rest of the tangible world, there exists a “relationship by principle of Life” (Merleau-Ponty 133).

Because of this “principle of Life,” or what Glissant seems to call the core of Relation which is to *give-on-and-with* (*donner-avec*) (Glissant 33), the endeavor to mysread—to persist in keeping a space open for a political spirituality to evolve—is a kind of promise: from the moment I am born into the world, there is a “promise” that I will belong to it in a fundamental, co-operational, and hence primal-political way. The way my consciousness pre-intellectually grafts onto the contents of the world attests to my subjective and very specific relationship to the world. Indeed, our stark relationship to the world is already meaningful in the sense that since our bodily faculties and dispositions appear to be—at minimum—designed for such existential ends as having senses that guide us and a capacity to seek truths and avoid falsehoods, our body, our very beingness, seems to imply and manifest a kind of “will-to-be,” a kind of desire to *belong* to the world...and to belong *well*.

As such, this sense of mysreading, of haptically and optically receiving (“reading”) every texture of the world because that is what it is always doing for us, is also a promise that is older than we are. It belongs not just to humans, but to the more-than-human world. As Merleau-Ponty asserts at the end of his chapter called “The Body as Expression and Speech” from *Phenomenology of Perception*:

It is the body which points out, and which speaks.... This disclosure [of the body’s immanent expressiveness]...extends, as we shall see, to the whole sensible world, and our gaze, prompted by the experience of our own body, will discover in all other “objects” the miracle of expression. (197)

Returning to the notion of mysreading as promise, before I even decide what to say, or how to read, I already promise to be that which *can* speak, which *can* read. Chiasmically, I am promised by the world that I will never master it, that I will not exhaust its meaning, its beauty, its mercies.

Paradoxically, then, mysreading involves disrupting that without which we could not read. Finding alternate ways of using language does not get rid of language, and it does not necessarily signal derangement, but affirms our commitment to, and faith in, language. As Derrida maintains: “language is there before me and, at the moment I commit myself in it, I say *yes to it and to you* in a certain manner” (1995a: 384). Ethics consists in how conscious we are of this pledge to read the world, to dialogue with it, and how responsible we are in granting others the right to experience this same pledge.

In effect, how we “read” (i.e. relate to) the world in our most private, unmediated and pre-discursive moments is a kind of “illiteracy.” Because such thoughts do not strictly obey the laws of physics or propositional knowledge, mysreading seeks to connect first to the human world of suffering and joy and relation, and not immediately to a law-like linguistic system. In this sense, the veritably unprecedented consciousness or spirituality that can result is a

revolutionary “error,” an a-grammaticality, an illiteracy of (and often against) an oppressively fixed world (and word) order. I equivocate on the word “illiteracy” because etymologically, the word “literacy” stems from the Latin roots *iterare*, meaning “to repeat, try again,” and *litteratus*, meaning “educated, learned” (*OED* 440). In the context of *A Mercy*, then, Florens demonstrates, on my view, a fragile yet potentially redemptive spirituality that is “*illiterate*,” one that opens a space for her to say, consciously or otherwise: “*I’ll-iterate*; I’ll write/learn/tell this world again, anew.” An ethics of mysreading might thus speak to the spiritual that cannot be accounted for in rational terms alone and is, paradoxically, that on which the rational itself may depend. If we recall Glissant’s provocative notion of errantry, then we might mysread Morrison’s pun on the “errand” that sends Florens wandering through the wilderness and into a menacing town: “Being on an errand is not running away” (Morrison 124). From Rebekka’s letter that Florens carries, Morrison suggests that Florens’s errand—literal and psychic—is potentially salvific, for her and for anyone similarly situated: “Our life, my life, on this earthe [*sic*] depends on her speedy return” (132). Even as Florens is lost, she is being found—incorrigibly, yes, but irrepressibly also.

By the novel’s end, we discover not only that Florens has been apostrophizing the blacksmith (and ultimately, her mother), but that she has been indirectly reading to us from the abandoned Big house whose rooms she has inscribed with her story. As Florens forecasts, “These careful words...will talk to themselves. Round and round, side to side, bottom to top, top to bottom all across the room” (188). Wyatt, however, interprets the “talking-room” fatalistically:

But the message must fail.... Although Florens imagines a moment in the future when the blacksmith might enter the house and read her message, it is clear that this will never happen. For the house is locked up; no one is allowed to enter it; the blacksmith may well be dead; and even if he has survived, he is illiterate (“you don’t know how to [read]” [*A Mercy* 180]). The form of the message emphasizes its futility.... A message gains its meaning only in the transmission, only as it moves from sender to receiver. (12)

Though persuasive, Wyatt’s argument pre-empts the ethical idea of a “message” or of language as such. If plantation America convinces itself of a politically disinterested outlook (premised on an abstract and dehumanizing market utilitarianism) that is marked by its unwillingness to check rapid technological advancements and the dictatorial grip of capitalism and nationalist power, then Morrison seems to be preserving—via the metaphor of the talking-room—what cannot be imperialized: the transcendence or transversal nature of trauma.^{xiv} The talking-room is, to recall Adams, the wound that returns, the wound that exacerbates the more it is ignored.

Contra Wyatt, Florens’s “message” or story does not fail. The truth is, we don’t know what will become of Florens’s narrative. It does not fail because it has not died. It still speaks, and therefore, can be “mysread.” As Florens presciently says, “Perhaps these words need the air that is out in the world” (188). Metonymically, we, the readers, are of this world. If history unfolds through intertwining stages and often brings together incommensurate life-worlds, then what we have in the heart of the Big house is that which can always subvert the dominant power structure through itself. It is this destabilization, or ethical “excess,” that cathects and contours the long arc of political revolution. My suggestion is that spiritually engaging the world, coherently or not, is always and already to change the world, even if this change is unrecognized

by others, or, more radically, even by oneself.

In order to truly counter the racism on which plantocracies are based, one must reappropriate what racism seeks to colonize, which is *time* itself. Crudely put, the logic of racism says that certain peoples, because of their racial make-up, are inferior, historically and futurally; inequality is an eternal fact of life. Could we misread, then, the ethical import of the way Morrison infuses Florens's speech with verbs in the present tense, particularly the infinitive form of verbs? Florens's double grammar is arresting: "Before you know I am in the world I am already *kill* by you" (44); "I run away not knowing then you are *seeing* me seeing you. And when at last our eyes hit I am not dead. For the first time I am *live*" (44); "I know you cannot *steal* me nor *wedding* me" (124). In a scene when Lina is nursing a dying Rebekka, Rebekka herself commits a torsion of syntax: "'You and I, this land is our home,' she whispered, 'but unlike you I am *exile* here'" (69, emphasizes mine).

If Morrison is performing an authorial misreading here, in which verbs can be adjectival or nominal, it is because these senses (or more) are necessary for conveying the phenomenal, lived experience, as it is being spoken in its sovereign moment. By infinitizing these words, so to speak—making them do unpredictable and lasting work—Morrison endows her characters with performative utterances, acts of speech that don't just say what is being said, but do it, enable it, through their slanted saying. From an example above, when Florens says, "For the first time I am live," the fact that we as readers must pause and experiment with the idea that Florens feels "(a)live" and/or is actively describing what she holistically wants to do (to "live") suggests that Florens's utterance triumphs over time. By extension, this linguistic slippage suggests that Florens defies the indenturing grammar of colonialism. Thus, an ethics of misreading produces what might be called *illocutionary time*: the congruity between verbal agency and the type of agency projected by the verbalized. That is, the speaker and the audience/outcome are one and the same. The subject-formation of the Florens's utterance is also its own subjectivity,^{xv} suggesting that time (i.e., the sequential doing or happening of events) is not something real in and of itself, independent of our making, but is *precisely* our making, our performing.

Florens's illocutionary telling, which makes things happen when they are perceived or said to be happening, offers us another model of "time" which is not an untouchable linear dimension that we move along and populate with events, starting from an obscure "past" and headed toward an obscure "future." Rather, in this alternative model of time, all experiences and events "move" in the dimensionless "place" of the now, the now that does not itself move but is the place of all "movements"; the now of which we are never without; the now, in fact, that is we. The nature of this now is not ever-*lasting*, which implies, again, an infinitely stretched substance called time. Instead, the now is ever-*present*, meaning it is eternally "here," in and as that which is also eternally with us, which is what we call *I*, the ever-present self from which all things emerge and to which they return; the ever-present self that never moves or is harmed, even as the thoughts that appear in it (our mind) and the sensations that are perceived by it (our body) come and go and *seem* subject to suffering (I qualify the experience of our *seeming* or apparent suffering below). In other words, time is what eternity looks like when filtered by the mind, by the mindset that is steeped in scarcity and separateness and bases its fulfillment on a material and economic timeliness rather than on experience's own understanding of itself as timeless. Through Florens's incarnate telling, Morrison symbolizes this spiritual ignorance and economic atomizing of time as "chores": "I stop telling only when the lamp burns down. Then I sleep among my words. The telling goes on *without dream* and when I wake it takes time to pull <https://www.jsrd-humanities.com/>

away, leave this room and do chores. *Chores that are making no sense*" (185, emphasis mine). In its heterodoxical and illocutionary form, Florens's talking-room performs and thus recuperates the eternal, de-racialized truth of "time" of which racism and slavery—synecdochalized here by "chores"—have deprived countless people. Our true nature, suggests Florens, is like deep sleep, seamless and whole ("the telling goes on *without dream*"), where consciousness is not so much empty as rather all there is. Conversely, it is dreams/illusions/imperialism/patriarchal hegemony/civilization/progress/chores that efface alternative and indigenous ways of say-making our world and veil the eternity of which we are manifestations.

Within this framework of de-territorializing time, or rather, penetrating through to its actual nature so that a decolonial space might open up, it is understandable that reservations may come up about a further reification of time and, as a result, an ironic and reinforced abstraction of the real social inequalities and subjugated lives that an illocutionary time is supposed to overcome. Ian Baucom, for example, in his book *Spectres of the Atlantic: Finance Capital, Slavery, and the Philosophy of History*, has turned such reservations about (Westernized) time and history into a superb chronicling and critique of the fetishized commodity consciousness that engendered the trans-Atlantic slave trade.^{xvi} He analyzes the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century notions of time in relation to various enterprises endemic to Europe's increasingly institutional and self-allegorizing "language of objects" (18). By and large, these notions of time have been historically arbitrated by civilization's elite and manipulative classes, and whose ontological status has been based on unconscious assumptions and inherited beliefs, rather than interdependent experience. The belief that "time is money" stems from these self-fulfilling fantasies of time, fantasies that, once habituated over centuries, evolve into "the casual pursuit of a financializing, decorporealizing logic of equivalence" (7); fantasies that make it permissible to confidently translate four hundred forty slaves into "[f]our hundred forty items of property valued at 30 pounds each" (11).

Baucom is referring here to the enslaved Africans aboard the slave ship the *Zong*, owned by a Liverpool merchant syndicate comprised of Edward Wilson, James Aspinall, and William Gregson and commandeered by Captain Luke Collingwood on 18 August 1781. En route to Jamaica, beset with unsanitary conditions, and taking on twice the number of passengers it could safely transport, the *Zong* misnavigated its destination. Reports of crew members state that the ship was 300 miles leeward of Jamaica before Collingwood recognized the grave error, and only four days worth of potable water remained when the ship required ten to thirteen days to make land. The crew's solution was to throw the slaves, including women and children, overboard. While the crew and the *Zong*'s owners claimed that the slaves had been sacrificed because the ship did not have enough water to survive the voyage (and because as "property and cargo," the slaves could be treated as such in this circumstance), the subsequent court proceedings found the slaves had been killed so that Wilson, Aspinall, and Gregson could claim compensation from their insurance.

The insurance policy held that if the slaves died onshore or from natural causes, the owners would not be reimbursed; but if the slaves were *jettisoned* (a euphemism bandied about by the owners during trials) as cargo in order to save the ship as a whole, then a claim could be made. Furthermore, evidence and testimony surfaced that a heavy rain fell on the ship's coordinates on the second day of the massacre, implying that the crew's murder of the slaves was deliberate. Tragically still, despite the efforts of the lawyers representing the insurers and

abolitionists at the time, including freed slave Olaudah Equiano, no crew member of the *Zong* was prosecuted for murder, suggesting among other things that commoditized law and speculative capital, or “hyperfinancialized time” (29), surpass the values of human life and justice.

According to Baucom’s Benjaminian reading of the circum-Atlantic’s modern economic history, one of imperialism’s practical if not psychological investments is in a “regime of accumulation” (30). In such a regime, what must be accumulated and intensified are time and money; for the capitalist, the two are directly proportional, for having more of one means having more of the other. But despite what the high capitalist thinks, Baucom suggests that what truly accumulates is not abstract time, let alone the more recent fiction of money, but repetition—specifically, the repetition of conflict, of *aprogressive* ventures that were believed to be righteous, of imposed states of exception, and, thus, of an unresolved past that haunts the present for closure. As in the fact-clearing though morally impotent court trials for the *Zong* massacre, “the past returns to the present in *expanded form*, a moment in which present time finds stored and accumulated within itself a nonsynchronous array” (29, emphasis mine) of apparitions, errata, and amnesias returned (we might compare Handley’s poetics of oblivion here). In other words, the time consciousness of capital history, argues Baucom, is not only real, it is *re-real*, re-realized by “detonating the cultural and epistemological charge latent within the moment that has preceded it; the *dialectic* whereby ‘what has been comes together with the now to form a constellation’ [quoting Walter Benjamin from *The Arcades Project*]” (30, emphasis mine).

While Baucom’s formulation of time admirably seeks to delineate the economic psychosis of the slave trade, and while it succeeds in salvaging (and in the case of the *Zong* massacre, literally salvaging) discarded voices inasmuch as that is possible, I worry that Baucom’s dialecticized notion of time inadvertently subsumes (or consumes), à la speculative capitalism, our non-closed or “nonsynchronous” experiences—experiences which are ends-in-themselves and that cannot be collated, objectified, or even potentialized for *this* particular Present, and which are automatically assumed to undergo the same dialectical process for the *next* particular Present. In the context of both *A Mercy* and our basic experience, I argue that not only is there not a real “Past” that can be *ultimately* co-opted by a present or futural agenda (i.e., not whether we have had a *thought* about the past *in* the present—for this *is* a real experience—but whether the past actually occurred as such), but that also there are not several “Presents” lined up along an external dimension called time. My concern is that to still believe in the reality of the so-called *Past* is to tacitly accept the rules (be they epistemic, bodily, historiographical, cosmological, gendered, and so on) of the slaver’s cosmology or at least the cosmology that belongs to what Hegel calls “the third”—the “impartial, disinterested” arbiter or judge who calculates the value of history linearly, deterministically, and hyper-rationally (299). An ethical and decolonial theory that seeks to disrupt uneven power through the binary axis of time (i.e., primitive-civilized, indigenous-modern, colonial-postcolonial, nonsynchronous-synchronous, undeveloped-expanded) risks rehearsing the evolutionary/dialectical logic of Western progress; to varying degrees, such a theory reinscribes the image of time moving forward and upward—ideologically and politically to the Enlightenment, and geographically and culturally to the metropolis.

Baucom is not necessarily guilty of this, but if he is to rely innovatively yet heavily on a Hegelian-Benjaminian notion of time as dialectical, he has to presuppose to some degree that the

most potent “cultural and epistemological charges” and illuminations haven’t happened yet, that they are “detonating... with the now to form a constellation.” As McClintock argues convincingly, the temporal tropes of dialecticality and perfectibility effect “a recentering of global history around the single rubric of European time. Colonialism returns at the moment of its disappearance” (11). In other words, locating liberation in a metaphysical field called time (no matter how complex and vindicationist) rather than in an experiential field in which “*time*” *itself* is known (consciousness) runs the risk of what McClintock calls “a fetishism of form: the projection of historical agency onto formal abstractions [namely, time] that are anthropomorphized and given a life of their own” (64). McClintock’s worry, as my own, is that abstractions such as dialectical time—rather than concrete and direct intuitions such as experiential dissidence or spiritual misprision toward abjection—will do the work of decolonization and self-integration. I go a step further than McClintock, however, by arguing that in order to combat radical objectification in which time is seen as a real object that in turn can be used to classify a people’s sentient status and utilitarian worth, a radical *de*-objectification is needed. What would be de-objectified is the belief that time, let alone the bodies and psyches of persons, is an independently-existing object that can be limited and therefore granted to some people and not to others. This objectification of time (and by extension, spaces and lives) would be seen through for the assumption and illusion that it is.

In order to clarify, or indeed verify, my admittedly counter-intuitive and, for some, *unspeakable* notion of time (*il-locutionary* time), it behooves us to recall Frantz Fanon’s critique of Jean- Paul Sartre’s well-meaning but misplaced application of dialectical reasoning to Black disenfranchisement. In his essay on the negritude movement, “Black Orpheus” (“*Orphée Noir*”) Sartre (in the manner of Hegel’s metaphysics) views blackness as only a minor term/thesis in the dialectic of world history. For both Hegel and Sartre, negritude “passes” into the (more) objective, rational, and complete term that is the arrival of the proletariat. Race is particular and therefore relational, while class is universal and absolute, a vision which implicitly validates and reifies a self-realization predicated on (and *necessarily* predicated on) economics and temporal ipseity (e.g., the metropolis, the Law, the atomic bomb, the nanobyte—imagined *progressive* prostheses of the self). In contrast, Fanon expresses Blackness as he utterly experiences it, not as it is tabulated in a pre-determined teleology:

Sartre’s mistake [in “Black Orpheus”] was not only to seek the source of the source [of being black] but in a certain sense to block that source.... Jean-Paul Sartre, in this work, has destroyed black zeal. (103)

The [Sartrean] dialectic that brings necessity into the foundation of my freedom drives me out of myself. It shatters my unreflected position. Still in terms of consciousness, *black consciousness is immanent in its own eyes*. I am not a potentiality of something, *I am wholly what I am*. I do not have to look for the universal. No probability has any place inside me. *My Negro consciousness does not hold itself out as a lack. It is. It is its own follower*. (114, emphases mine)

Unlike Sartre and even Baucom, Fanon is not seeking to innovate a philosophy of history (because history is historically determined by the place of conquest). Instead, he is seeking to

lasso “history” to its source—not to a universally real “space” called the Past and not to a universally real “space” called the Future, but to the only universally real “space-time” of the Present, the Now that we are never *not* in, the Now that is never not occurring through and as the *I*:

Ideally, the present will always contribute to the building of the future. And this future is not the future of the cosmos but rather the future of my century, my country, my existence. In no fashion should I undertake to prepare the world that will come later. I belong irreducible to my time. And it is for my own time that I should live. (xvi-ii)

Whether you like it or not, the past can in no way be my guide in the actual state of things. (200)

Without devaluing the hermeneutical methods and ethical impulses of Baucom’s exquisitely-prosecuted text, we are now in better position to substantiate—experientially and not merely theoretically—the spiritual import and ethical primacy of what I introduced above as *illocutionary time*. We are now ready to decolonize the belief in time itself so that the self is not unconsciously and perpetually indentured to it; so that it re-discovers that it *does not hold itself out as a lack. It is. It is its own follower*.

Critically, interrogating the notion of the past is also useful because this notion informs Baucom’s (laudable) project to read both Benjamin’s and Glissant’s notions of time as a way of characterizing and critiquing the prevailing assumptions and institutions of Western modernity. In fact, in order to hold modernity to a historical materialist theory of accountability, Baucom requires a particularly precarious but ethically latent notion of memory. Furthermore, this memory is most striking (an unpredictable) as an image which flashes suddenly in our awareness. This vivid derivation of time comes from Benjamin as he articulates it in *The Arcades Project*:

Each “now” is the now of a particular recognizability [or repetition]. In it, truth is charged to the bursting point with time.... It is not that what is past casts its light on what is present, or what is present its light on what is past; rather, [the memorial] image is that wherein what has been comes together in a flash with the now to form a constellation. (463)

Baucom makes a perspicacious connection between Benjamin and Glissant: they both theorize a past that is never completely past, a past that resurrects itself in various ways. For Benjamin, the past strikes in flashes, irrupting in an individual psyche both the remnants of geo-political tragedy and a vision, though ever-deferred, of how to avoid the same mistakes. For Glissant, the past is figured in a different metaphor: the past comes to us in sediments, and the present is precisely the weight and shape of this accumulation. Both thinkers also figure the past as an unconscious abyss into which the present unevenly awakens: for Benjamin, the past has shivers of a dream; for Glissant, the past has sediments of a tomb or decayed site.

Baucom then argues that, for Glissant, the “state of exception” or charged image that has accumulated in the present and that, indeed, is the exemplary space from which modernity has encamped itself and its subsequent structures of exceptional power and terror, is the slave ship of the trans-Atlantic, imperial economy. Modernity has seen that slave ship synecdochalized into the human trafficking port, the plantation, the colony, the hacienda, the shantytown, the barrio, the ghetto, the cemeteries of the sea. “The sea is History,” as Derek Walcott has written in a poem of the same name (and which Baucom fittingly uses as an epigram to his concluding section). As Baucom reads Glissant, time does not so much pass as endures; it grows into and infiltrates the total ecology of human communities, so that this particular catastrophe of the Atlantic both reveals and compels a globalization of relation. In Baucom’s gloss:

If time does not pass (or even recover itself in a lightning flash) but accumulates, then the segment of time we call modernity piles up from a starting point, and that starting point is the ramified system of transatlantic slavery, and that system is crystallized in three enduring images: the image of the plantation, the image of the slave ship, and the image of the drowning slave. These are Glissant’s “images,” and his *Poetics* may be understood as his response to the weight of these modern images as task. (Baucom 321)

Baucom’s exegeses on the circum-Atlantic political economy, Benjamin and Glissant’s shared and differing views of time, and a material philosophy of history are salutary, even unimpeachable in a sense. But I would suggest that, if we affix the psychological dynamics and linguistic re-orderings of time as presented in *A Mercy*, and, perhaps more intimately, if we uphold Baucom’s (and Benjamin and Glissant’s) aim for globalized accountability and relationality by examining how we actually *experience* time, then this ethical aim, too, can be that much closer to being experiential and not primarily (if edifyingly) theoretical.

Bracketing the very intuitive and still very crucial understanding of events happening “in the past,” as well as Benjamin and Glissant’s provocative heuristics of the flash and the sediment, respectively, I begin with a question: have you ever experienced that past to which your thought refers? To be clear, I am not trying to invalidate the *concept* of time. I am trying to discern whether the *concept* of time is a primary by-product of perception, or whether it actually produces or governs our perception as though there really *were* and independent object called time. We can proceed with this discernment by putting the notion of illocutionary time to a phenomenological test or immanent critique, by seeing if it holds up to our *actual experience* of so-called time. Let us take the supposed reality of a past (for to believe in time, there must be at least one of two points with which the present can contrast—the future or the past). Exploring the concept of the past is eminently useful because it is quite natural to have the sense or memory that there was something I “did” in the so-called “past.” For example, there was something that you call “I” that was present this morning when you ate breakfast that is present now, experiencing this “telling” (this reading of the paper). Whatever that “I” was that was having, say, a bagel—that I is still present now, experiencing the current phenomenon. Otherwise, you wouldn’t be able to recall breakfast this morning.

In fact, I would suggest that the same “I” has been present with you all of your life—even the five year old child that you were. When you had your fifth birthday, your thoughts, sensations, and perceptions then were experienced by the *same* I that is experiencing this current

experience. It is true that the mind, body, and world that were then experienced have dissolved. If we reflect on it, we realize that there is no objective consistency in one's thoughts, sensations, and perceptions. Nevertheless, we do have the undeniable understanding that there is a continuity to our experiences. *Something* has remained present throughout all experience. Rationalistic thinking tells us that this constant or reliable something is an "independent," always-there world, and then the body and mind to a lesser extent.

But actually, that's not our experience. Our experience is that the *only* thing that has remained constant throughout all events and interactions is consciousness, awareness—that which we call "I." Contrary to our unexamined assumptions, it is not the experience of the body that remains constant in all perceptions and events. Rather, we are quite often not aware of our body. All we know of the body is our experience of it (our sensations and thoughts about it); that is the only evidence we have for its "reality." But our body is an intermittent experience. Our realization or awareness of "it" comes and goes: were you aware of the soles of your feet until I mentioned them?

But awareness—the presence of that which is aware, the aware being that we name *I*—is not an intermittent experience. It is a continuous or, more accurately, an ever-present experience. How can something that is continuous be a by-product of something that is intermittent? For that fundamental *I*, for that irreducible self, what experience of time does it have? If we take away our images and ideas of time, what experience of time is left? If we say, "Just the now," that's going in the right direction, although even that thought wouldn't be quite right. "Now" is not a moment in time. In order for now to be a moment in this presumably vast, boundless container we imagine as "Time," we would have to know the *experience* of time. But is it our experience that this Now is a *moment*? And if so, how long exactly does the moment last? How long is a moment, exactly? How fast does it go along the supposed arrow of time? Can we quantify it? Because it is difficult if not downright absurd (or arbitrary) to say how much "time" constitutes a moment, we realize that Now doesn't "last" in time at all. It has no duration or quantifiable bookends. It is just eternally Now. We can then ask ourselves: Is it my experience that the Now is slowly moving through time? Or is time a thought that is slowly moving into the *Now*?

Asked another way, do we have the experience of time in the absence of thought? For example, when we are deeply asleep (recall Florens's sleep "without dreams"), when there are no thoughts, there is no sense of time. When we awake from genuine deep sleep, we feel unequivocally that "no time has passed." I propose that this is not a coincidence. It is because in the absence of thought, there is no time. In fact, even in the presence of thought, there is no time, although there is the *belief* that there is time. Thus, *this* Now that is present now is not one of innumerable "Nows" that have existed "in time." We thus see that in order to legitimately claim the experience of change, we must first stand as the changeless knower of any such change. In other words, there is a timeless and fundamental part of our self that witnesses and registers all "moments of danger," but is itself free from real endangerment. With this claim, I am addressing Baucom's Benjaminian stance on time:

[Our task is] a reapprehension of time which insists that the moment of now-being [the present, in Benjamin's idiom] in which we take up the work of historical responsibility (and historical interest) is not ontologically subsequent to, or "after," the violent moments

of the what-has-been [the past]...but exists in a nonsynchronous and long-durational correspondence with these distant moments.... For Benjamin, that is, the task of historical responsibility is...to “seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger” (Baucom 317, quoting Benjamin’s “Theses on the Philosophy of History” [1968: 257])

This Now is the *only* Now there is. It has not come from a past (it is not filled with “distant moments”), and it is not going towards a future. It is eternally present. And to reiterate, when I say eternally, I mean *ever-present*, not *ever-lasting*. There isn’t a past or a future bundled up somewhere, waiting to unpack itself into the present. We can’t find it. As Abram states:

That which has been and that which is to come are not elsewhere—they are not autonomous dimensions independent of the encompassing present in which we dwell. They are, rather, the very depths of this living place—the hidden depth of its distances and the concealed depth on which we stand. (216)

Our belief in the reality of time as Western culture has conceived of it, proclaims Abram, is just a presumption. For instance (and to stay with our phenomenological method of inquiry), try to find three seconds ago. Is it existing just outside awareness, hovering slightly above your ears or neck? Is it crumbling in the trash in the hallway? How about three days ago? Or three decades ago? Where, exactly, is it? *What* is it—this past? Try to go there—try to really experience it. Can you remove yourself out of the Now, just for a moment, and actually *touch* the past that presumably exists in and of itself?

Can you actually leave this Now, this “concealed depth on which we stand”? *Could* you ever go to the past? Has anyone ever gone there?

Why do we believe, then, in the independent reality of time when nobody has ever experienced it? Again, experiencing a *thought* or *belief* about a time in the past is not the same as experiencing time as such. Notice that one’s thought or belief about time *always* takes place in the present. If we are to be rigorously and honestly phenomenological in our investigation of “time,” we have to admit that we never leave the Now and experience some other “time” that exists independently from the Now. Time, then, is just a concept. It’s a very valuable concept, but a concept nonetheless. There’s nothing inherently wrong with concepts. The problem is with beliefs. To *believe* that the concept of time refers to something that is real and absolute is a mistake. And it is a mistake that has undergirded and sustained the racialized and financialized time of slave systems in particular and manifest destinies in general.

Due to the materialist and often exclusive association of consciousness with the body and the mind, we tend to think that any change in the body and the mind implies a change in consciousness. However, if we look closely at our experience, we see clearly that we have never experienced any change in consciousness itself. If we look “back” over our lives, we see that this conscious presence has always been exactly as it is now. It has never changed, moved, appeared or disappeared. The very first experience we ever had as a newborn baby was experienced by this witnessing presence of consciousness. This view, although scientifically heretical, would explain Florens’s acute, empathetic, and even *shared* consciousness of her mother at the moment <https://www.jsrd-humanities.com/>

of their primal separation. In our own (apparent, physical) births, consciousness was present to witness this first experience. If we think that this idea is fallacious, we should ask: but have *we* ever experienced the *appearance* of consciousness?

If the appearance of consciousness *were* an experience, there would have to have been another consciousness or knowing element present to witness this appearance. And if the appearance of consciousness has never been experienced, what validity is there to the claim that consciousness appears, that it has a beginning, that it was born and started “in time”? Likewise, have we ever experienced an end to consciousness? If we experienced the disappearance of consciousness, there would have to be another consciousness or knowing element present to witness *this* disappearance. So too this “new” consciousness, which witnessed the disappearance of the “old” consciousness, would have to be present during *and* after its own disappearance, in order to legitimately make the claim that it witnessed its disappearance.

Therefore, if we cannot claim that we ever have the experience of the disappearance of consciousness, what validity is there to our embedded conviction that we, as consciousness, die? Due to the fact that we have so closely and exclusively identified consciousness with the body and the mind—an identification that, once reified and instituted, further reduced black bodies and minds to objects and exchange-value during the trans-Atlantic slave trade and the formation of the Americas—we presume that consciousness disappears when the body and mind disappear on, say, falling asleep and, by implication, when the body dies. Recall that the primary belief in our world culture is that I, as awareness, am identical to the body. If the body appears and disappears, then I too appear and disappear with it. When the body grows old, I grow old. When the body gets sick, I get sick. But one simple look at our experience tells us that we are not identical to our body. It is like saying that the movie screen is identical to the image.^{xvii} It’s not: all images come and go. The screen is not made out of the image; the image appears in, is held by, and is made out of the screen and its chiasmic light, its ever-present en-light-enment. Correspondingly, all sensations and perceptions come and go, but that which is worthy of the name *I* doesn’t come and go. And although I have made a paronomasia out of the word, “enlightenment,” I must clarify that this *epoché* of the notion of time (and by implication, the consciousness with which any “time” is known) is not steeped in Enlightenment epistemology. It is actually anti- or pre-Enlightenment. It even pre-dates classical Greek metaphysics (e.g., the notion of time as an illusion is found in Parmenides, the Ma’at theology of ancient Egypt, the Vedanta wisdom tradition in northern India, early Buddhism, Zoroastrianism, and Taoism^{xviii}). More intimately, I suggest that regardless of epistemic provenance, *experience itself* reveals to us the nature of so-called time.

To conclude with a perhaps more intuitive metaphor for the Self-that-is-awareness (although it is still an imperfect metaphor), imagine a space that is infinite, empty, but *conscious*—a space that is aware of itself, by itself, in itself. This empty space never lacks, never needs anything, is never agitated. Whatever appears “in” it (a galaxy, a planet, a giraffe, the human race, a war, a lily, a bacterium, a thought) never really displaces or diminishes this infinite space’s infiniteness. The finite appearance of an object will do just that: it will *appear* to eclipse and divide the infiniteness of the space in which it appears, eventually seeming to us to be an actual, independent object made further of an independent substance called matter. But in reality, the infinite, open, knowing space is never divided nor lacking, and it is inherently free of resistance. This space wouldn’t know the meaning of the word, “resistance,” for it is, by

definition, open to and allowing of all appearances. *Hence*, it is undisturbable. Its nature is peace. It's not sometimes peaceful and sometimes distressed. An object might need something. But the space in which the object appears never needs anything because there is nothing in itself other than itself—nothing that could harm or complete or aggrandize this space. Correspondingly, our self, like the space I have posited, is ultimately undisturbable, even though from the relative and limited point of view of our identity as an enculturated and historicized body-mind, we do experience what the body-mind would know as disturbance, disjuncture, and harm. The peace at the core of our proposed essential self^{xix}, however, is not a state of the (individual) mind or body that comes and goes but is ever-present, sitting quietly behind and within every thought, feeling, sensation or perception, open and intimate at every moment, simply waiting, so to speak, to be recognized, to be *told*, to be heard, to be *mysread*.

I suggest that these views of the self and time (namely, linear, progress-oriented time characteristic of Western history and metaphysics) are an unconventional but phenomenologically faithful reading of Florens's concluding prognosis for the blacksmith (and by extension, perhaps for us as readers of the present):

You won't read my telling. You read the world but not the letters of talk. You don't know how to. Maybe one day you will learn.... If 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. (Morrison 188).

We may find added experiential resonance in seeing that Florens's description of the talking-room can be read as a localization or microcosm of the infinite, open, self-contained "space" ("*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*") which I presented above as an analogy for our spiritual or "excessive" plurivocal self. And in the best literal sense possible, Florens's (that is to say, Morrison's) timing is impeccable. As in deep sleep, as in a wholly immersed walk in nature, as in the most present kinds of reading and conversing ("the letters of talk"), as in the sudden stirring of compassion or love—when thought vanishes (that is, when the financializing, hierarchicizing, segregationist mind vanishes or dissolves itself), time vanishes too. Thought needs time and time needs thought. Time is not an object that is known; it is a *way* of knowing, and in the above ordinary examples, they are most gracefully experienced when we do not delimit them in time ("Where did the time go?" we say to time spent in joyful presence with a friend or loved one).

In Florens's idiom, reading—let alone *mysreading*—and the stoppage of reading are not two "moments" in time. They do not take place *in* time, for from where would the "start" of reading come, and to where would the "end" of it go? Is there a time outside of the now, or a space outside the here, into which our "old" experiences could go? In our immanent deduction, we have seen that there is no such time or place. The I-that-tells-itself, the I-that-is-self-aware, doesn't happen in time and space. Time and space happen *in the I*. Our only knowledge of time and space is our perception of them, and perception is located in ever-present awareness—ever-present awareness is not located in perception, let alone time and space.

In this intensely experiential presencing, in this *mysreading* of time, if you will, there may be a truthfulness to saying that Florens—as the I-that-tells-itself, as consciousness, for it <https://www.jsrd-humanities.com/>

must be admitted that the novel's very narrative constitution comes to us as a storied consciousness—is never *ultimately* oppressed (although, of course, relative to colonial thought, time, and space, she is. I want to be clear that I am not undermining nor sanctioning the oppression and exploitation of real lives). The Florens that was riven from her family is the same Florens that speaks to us now. Could she be giving us the experience of telling if she were not aware of that experience, if she were not awareness itself? Despite her autochthonous sunder, could her self-as-awareness ever experience its own sundering? Has it ever stopped being aware and present? We can unfurl all manner of recondite and acrobatic analyses to these questions, but the experiential fact is: we have this book, this talking-room. And what of us? We have, like Florens, the timeless: that in which our perceptions appear; that with which they are known; and that out of which they are made. From Florens's own timeless presence, we realize that I-as-awareness am the one that cannot be aggrandized or diminished by any encounter with the mind, body, or world, and thus, I am fulfilled; or, as Florens says in a way that prompts our mysreading: "For the first time, I am live" (44). Each "time" consciousness expresses itself, it is as though for the first time, always being "born," always bearing life, always already merciful for that which it is being born. That is why, "If you never read this, no one will." Florens's last injunction to the blacksmith (and simultaneously to us, forgers of perception) is profound: there is no self without the other, no I without You, and so any sustained, let alone institutionalized, sense of a *separate* self is what authorizes oblivion and suffering.

Lest I am interpreted as raising a contradiction between the "immanent-transcendent" self from which Florens—brokenly and humanly, to be sure—forges a transfigured, disembodied, and merciful spirit, on the one hand, and the intercorporeal self which necessarily bodies-forth its life with and through others, on the other, when I read Florens as suggesting that there is "no I without You," what I mean is that there are none of these "things" *outside* of the consciousness that witnesses them, that precipitates *as* them. Are the I and the You, and the bodies that each of us seems to have, ever at a distance from or separate from the awareness with which they are known? Their apparent reality (that is, their independence, solidity, continuity in time and space, etc.) is not real. However, experience is real, and to the extent that we experience ourselves as a seemingly separate I and a seemingly separate you, with our seemingly separate bodies, carrying an apparent object called a bag, walking down an apparent object called the stairs, looking at our watch to know an apparently insurmountable object called time, the quality and value of our experiences have no choice but to appear in conformity to these beliefs. And so while our experiences are real, and the sensations of our bodies and possessions valid, it is still the case (although we may not know it) that the reality of those experiences does not belong to the apparent objects. It belongs to consciousness. Thus, it is not that our partners or bodies or purses or anything else are not there when we are not there, but rather that they were never there to begin with in the form we have imagined them—that is, as independent objects. However, *something* was "there" (in fact all experience is "here"); *something* was present, but it was not an object, not an "other" as we normally conceive it. It was ever-present, intimate, indivisible consciousness: the "I" *in the form of* partner-ing, body-ing, bag-ing, stair-ing, time-ing—and, as Florens prescribes (pre-scribes/pre-writes?) to Malaik and, by extension, to us as readers, to know this greater and inclusive "I" is frequently to know it "bend[-ing] down to read my telling" (Morrison 185).

Adding *this* understanding of time and the self of "history" to Baucom's, I suggest and hope, makes Glissant's vision of globalized relationality not only more possible, but more *felt*—

felt before theory, known before knowledge. By the end of his book, Baucom, himself, although somewhat recursively, seems to reach this open, allowing, self-possessed but still empowering sense of “time” as an irreducible ever-presence:

To lay the past to rest thus means not that we should forget it but that we have no choice but to relate to it, no choice but to live on within the full knowledge and unending of it. Time does not pass but accumulates. Why? Because what has been begun does not end but endures. Because this fatal Atlantic “beginning” of the modern is more properly understood as an ending without end. Because history comes to us not only as flash or revelation but piling up. Because this is, not was. Because this is the Atlantic, now. Because all of it is now, it is always now, even for you who never was there. (333)

As Baucom’s concluding remarks suggest, the apparent experience of the past proves that there is no time (“it is always now”), just as the experience of change establishes our self as its changeless knower. While I think Baucom is right to focus on that element of Benjamin and Glissant’s historiographies that haunt us in the present—in the form of the “flash” or sedimenting, alluvial heaviness—I think he does not take that phenomenon to its experiential conclusion (until, it seems, these last lines of his book).

Baucom has successfully argued, and we have seen in our own experiences, that memory comes in two forms: thoughts and images. And yet, when a thought or image appears in awareness, *when* does it appear? It is always in the now. Have we ever had a thought or an image that wasn’t in the now? Although a thought *refers* to the past (say, the *Zong* massacre or your breakfast this morning), the thought itself appears now. When this “memory-thought” appears, where is the past to which it refers? This assumed, vast “space” called the “past” to which our memory-thought refers can never be found. It is true that a thought comes to us which says, “The *Zong* massacre happened.” And it is true that a second thought comes to us which says, “I wish to write about it.” What is our experience of what happens *between* these two thoughts? Normally, we assume something in the immediate past (and by extension, in remoter pasts) caused us to have our current thought, “I wish to write about it,” or any other current thought. But do we ever find this “time” or this temporal cause in between two thoughts? Experience tells us that “in retrospect” (ineluctably, I must borrow the language I am interrogating), we look at the succession of thoughts, and the *current* thought—which is simply just thought #10 from the succession—looks “back” and *imagines* that there is a past cause/determining force in the gaps between each thought. This “past reality” is just *thought #10*. It is not *actually there* in between each thought we have. That is, the notion of a past is simply a thought itself that appears retrospectively.

Thus, we have to make a clear distinction between phenomena whose difference is very subtle: there is a thought of the past, but there is no past. The past *is* the thought; there is no past *of* the thought. What I am implying is actually closer to Baucom’s argument than it would seem. Baucom, after Benjamin and Glissant, wants to argue that “time...piles up from a starting point” (321), and I am suggesting the same thing, but basing this suggestion on experience: there is no dimension called the past that is separate (ontologically and epistemologically) from the now. The belief in the separate past is always an after-thought. Put another way, I am suggesting only that there is no time for an independently-existing Past. However, for the present, for the only

Now there is, there is infinite “time.” Ethically and practically, this is not an abstract statement but instead means that there are infinite possibilities at every “moment”; there are “past” thoughts and “future” thoughts and present decisions that can, literally and not just conceptually, concatenate in any direction. What is errancy if not this? What is complete relationality—and *creative, sensitive, multi-lingual* relationality no less (after all, Glissant’s title is *Poetics of Relation*)—if not this?

In the present discussion, perhaps Baucom’s term, “accumulation” is misleading (“Time does not pass but accumulates”), although it does nicely countervail the historically abusive notion of accumulation. Thus, when he writes, “Accumulation...exists in his [Glissant’s] work as a figure of necessity, the unending, and the unavoidable” (319), what is truly “unending” and “unavoidable” and always abundant (if we could take “accumulating” to mean this) is the eternal present. Furthermore, this sincere experience of the ever-presence of our awareness reveals how much freedom we have and that we have always had (although freedoms can be usurped, as “history” has shown), paradoxically allowing our cultural and material efforts toward safeguarding the freedom and safety of others to flow out of us more effectively, not because that freedom is dialectically overdue (“what comes to us is a piling up”) but simply because it is innate. It is who we are. Would not real agency and creativity be this kind of freedom from the “past” (not forgetfulness of it, but an unshackling from it)? A mode of acting and relating that simply continued from or depended on the same “past” line(s) would be reactivity, not creativity. With *this* re-envisioning of time, I think we have another way of achieving Baucom’s worthy goals: we realize that the apparent past (or its present incarnations) can never chain an idea around us as to what kind of world it wants us to be. That power rests with us, in the now, in those who are willing to witness its atonements and its abuses, its wonders and its wounding. In sum, and to be clear that I do not mean to disavow unconscionable tragedies, it is not that the events of our “past” or “memory” or “history” never happened or are not real; they have been experienced, and are absolutely real. What is not real is the “past” to which we think they refer and “in” which we think they happened. Instead, those events are here *now* (and Baucom and Glissant say as much). But I would contend that it is not time that accumulates; it is consciousness (which can express itself “temporally” or not, as Morrison suggests through Florens’s uncanny narrativity).

Therefore, there is no difference in our actual experience between the substance of the massacre that appears in *memory* or *history*, and the substance of a “live” massacre that appears in “real time.” Our only knowledge of both a memory and a current perception is made out of our thoughts and images of them, and the substance of thoughts and images is awareness. There is no other substance in experience other than awareness and this awareness never disappears (it is never “in the past”). “History” is thus *alive*. That is our ever-present experience, whether it is realized or not. One might ask, “If time, space, causality, memory, and history are constructs of the mind, made of intermittent thoughts and sensations, why is there such a consistency to appearances? Doesn’t this consistency seem to validate the belief in all of these concepts?” The apparent continuity in time or permanence in space of any event does not belong to the realm of thoughts or objects. It belongs to awareness. The ever-presence of awareness is translated—in the language of the conditioned, sedimented, and cultural mind (the “interested” mind, as Baucom would say [311; 318])—as continuity in time and permanence in space. Hence, “memory” proves the now; it does not prove the past, for the word “memory” comes from the Greek *merimna*, meaning “care, thought” (*OED* 459). And does not every moment of care or

thought occur in the now? This relation to “time,” then, may be a more direct way to understand and be responsible witnesses to “history.”

Strangely, understanding that there is no absolute reality to a *personal* consciousness doesn't necessarily lead to behaving in destructive ways towards others. Rather, the genuine if elusive knowledge of our *shared* consciousness, of our shared being, is the ground of a true ethics. What is love, for instance, if not the experience of our shared being? Florens perhaps fails to secure this love, but it is revolutionary enough that she keeps searching for it with a self intimately (though not always coherently) beholden to an other. It is when we believe that there really *is* a wholly personal, separate self that fear, indifference, exploitation, and the whole submarine terror that sedimented the black-Atlantic become possible.

III. The Heart in the Dust: *The Wilderness and the Creolization of Florens*

As I contemplate the blue of the sky...I abandon myself to it and plunge into this mystery, it “thinks itself within me,” I am the sky itself and it is drawn together and unified, and as it begins to exist for itself; my consciousness is saturated with this limitless blue...

-Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*

Perhaps there is not a rigid distinction between “correct” reading and misreading (misreading in the general sense); there are perhaps only readings that are more or less receptive, open-ended, nuanced, particular, pointed, even pointillist. At the very least, I conceive of the misreading proffered here as an engagement of reading that not so much unwelcomes the coded discourse of the world at large, as remains hospitable to the experience of the other, as the other. To extend Handley's recognition of subjective oblivion or destitution, we must consider the nature of one's spiritual movement within and possibly out of one's personal “void” or trauma. Misreading, I propose, restores some kind of active agency to holding open a relation to the other, even when, or especially when that other is the other that can exist in oneself—that wounded or neglected stranger in ourselves whom we are trying to befriend or recognize. What I am calling misreading, Jacques Derrida might generally call “reappropriation,” a move to re-define and re-experience any phenomenon, even if impossible, as when Derrida claims:

The relation to the other—even if it remains asymmetrical, open, without possible reappropriation—must trace a movement of reappropriation in the image of oneself for love to be possible, for example. (1995b:199)

The lacuna where relation remains irreducibly open, “generous,” and delicately “loving,” even amidst the most desolate of conditions, is also what we might mean by the spirit. Oblivion does not abdicate the spirit absolutely. The spirituality that fosters misreading necessarily remains tied to but, ultimately, unencompassed by the codified grammar of the world, the psycholinguistic contract of the prevailing society (often patriarchal in nature).

If we can regard mysreading as a kind of counter-signature to the hegemonic contract of values, then this “signature” not only responds to the normativity or idiom of the dominant world order, it also authorizes the expression of the *other in oneself*. As Derrida analogously argues:

There is finally a signature, which is not the signature one has calculated, which is naturally not the patronymic, which is not the set of stratagems elaborated in order to propose something original or inimitable. But, whether one likes it or not, there is an *effect of the idiom for the other* [including the “other” or “others” in oneself].... [R]eading is a mixed experience of the other in his or her singularity as well as philosophical content, information that can be torn out of this singular context. Both at the same time. (200-01, emphasis in the original)

Elsewhere, Derrida seems to have in mind a kind of intuitive non-knowing—not literally a lack of knowledge but a differential knowledge—that we find in Morrison’s work. For Derrida, this other-kind-of-knowing is

in some way, a structural non-knowing, which is heterogeneous, foreign to knowledge [proper]....It is something in relation to which [conventional] knowledge is out of the question. And when I specify that it is a non-knowing and not a secret, I mean that when a text appears to be crypted [*sic*], it is not at all in order to calculate or to intrigue or to bar access to something that I know and that others must not know; it is a more ancient, more originary experience.... (201)

With the vindication of one’s mysreading comes, I think, an expansion of one’s spirituality, one’s field of awareness of life as such, that “more originary experience.” This awareness, I should note, is not divorced from the body in a Cartesian or Kantian way, but one that is a transversal with the body, even as the experiences one is aware of can transverse (“exceed”) the body by being shared by others. Thus, what we are calling the “spiritual” or “mystical” is a space that is not totally given in advance (such a view might fall into predeterminism), but a space of “testimony” that “opens as one advances” (Derrida 1995b:207), and as advances of *oneness*—or the that “more ancient, more originary experience” which precedes ideas of separation and servitude—are made. As readers, are we not already implicated in these advances?

In terms of physical advancement, we do not know where Florens goes as the Big house presumably erodes. But Florens’s last thoughts of her mother are as cryptic as they are sympathetic:

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. (Morrison 189)

Such inconclusiveness might cultivate mysreading rather than obviate it. For example, Mark Sandy rebuts critics, such as Hilary Mantel, who negatively stress the “half-toldness,” so to speak, of Morrison’s novels. On Sandy’s view, Morrison’s serious engagement with the real/fictive dynamic occurring in and around partial perspectives, memory, and self-discovery

shows her connection to Wordsworth's and other Romantics' spiritually-wrought view of life. Thus, despite Morrison's aporetic narratives, she upholds an aesthetical and, frankly, existential authenticity in her narratives. Sandy's project alerts us to a central tension in Morrison's *A Mercy*: a tension between Nature as a sympathetic, nourishing refuge and Nature as a force unaware or indifferent to "human loss and grief" (Sandy 37). Indeed, Nature is the ultimate witness to the atrocities perpetuated by humans. But this same Nature may be "wild" and vast enough to also overcome Florens's anxiety that what she can "read or cipher is useless now" (Morrison 184). Sandy is right to argue that "[f]or Morrison and Wordsworth, the ruined and the ruinous [nostalgic home or land] articulate grief and frustrate the hope for consolation following moments of destroyed human connections and relations" (Sandy 43). But as we saw earlier, Florens somehow anticipates the surrendering to nature, that ultimate other: "Perhaps these words need the air that is out in the world" (Morrison 188). The Big house in *A Mercy* is ruined, but it is also doing something performatively, mediationaly, trafficking between oblivion and hope. What I am adding to Sandy's analysis is the consideration that our "human connections and relations" are not just with other humans but, perhaps more unceasingly, also with the other that is nature and the other(s) in ourselves.

For instance, by having Florens say, "I have become wilderness but I am also Florens. In full. Unforgiven. Unforgiving." (189), Morrison suggests that, while not a pain-free process, "becoming wilderness" means to come to grips with both extremes of the emotional flora that are almost destined co-germinate in oneself. Florens's closing interrogative and then breath-arresting apostrophe has the effect of a caesuraed Big Bang of a subaltern(ate) universe, out of which we read (and hear) all the laws and conditions of humanity borne and consigned: "Hear me? Slave. Free. I last" (189). In this momentary *deus ex talk-hina*, Florens addresses and consolidates any and every reader, slave and free, as though he were a lexical Moses instructed to mark the poles between which humanity will forever oscillate: slavery and freedom. In echoic (in)sight, Garrett Stewart deciphers the synaesthetic and, alas, narratological Rorschach that emerges from this haunting, proleptically tense syntax (and what Stewart calls elsewhere, a kind of prose *friction*):

[W]hat is heard there...two or three or four times over, is something more than written, something that can only be listened to beneath the punctualities of script, in the return of its repressed. And something that, in the process, may well anticipate the closing chapter's monologue by the long-lost mother—addressed without reception, from a place beyond death or not—to a daughter whose learning to write and then speak in another tongue has preserved nonetheless that original (though not founding or stabilizing) orality in language so often associated with the mother's voice.

Call it once again, if you will—as proposed first in our modification of Ong by Agamben—a kind of *auralterity*. For emerging to vocality, to verbal consciousness, across the staccato stutter of Florens's paradoxical insistence ("Slave. Free.")—two plenary fragments in a categorical disjunction internalized instead as warring psychic condition—is the structuring unsaid of Morrison's entire novel....

But precisely because the defiant paradox of "Slave. Free." cannot wholly overcome its homophonic fusion, via the recursive *v/f* loop, into a two-syllabled vernacular enunciation of "Slavery," the inscribed and stigmatized house must come down, including its "talking room," where an ignited silence will give further dissent. (333-35)

As Stewart indefatigably argues, we are damned if we read the “vocal image” of “Slave. Free.”/“Slave(f)ry.” and damned if we don’t. But this sensorial (con)fusion is existentially apropos: it concentrates the babel and brutality effected by trans-Atlantic slavery and displacement. Equally plausible, Stewart hears Florens’s (and/or Morrison’s) prognosis of the historical present: the empowered “I last” simultaneously must reckon with a “transegmental stranglehold,” “the intractable fact, from which only a much later freedom will be born, that, though yet unnamed, nonetheless ‘Slavery’ll last”” (338).^{xx}

But another palimps-ethic pulse, as it were, persists as well: “Becoming wilderness” may mean that even the *hither* side of babel must be allowed, wherein no negative electron can exist without its spiritual positron, so that we are always vibrating as “Unforgiven [and] Unforgiving... Slave [and] Free” (Morrison 189). As in so much of our lives, what matters is which aspect of the conjunctive matrix we choose to be conscious of (if and when we are not embodying both tissues of the “and”). Speaking to and as nature suggests a world that necessarily allows us to read “wildly” if need be, to *voice*, and to voice a voice that both comes from the “outer” and names it, in all of its rhizomicity and pain. By the end of the novel, although Jacob’s ruinous house is giving way to “all manner of small life [which] enters the windows along with cutting wind” (186), it is serving at least two purposes: it is housing Florens’s spiritual dehiscence and the possible regeneration to come, when “[t]he feathers close. For now” (185); and it is literally, illocutionarily, letting us in as readers. Is not any given group of readers the “For now” for which Florens’s “feathers” (the wild quills of her resurrected writing) may un-close themselves? Are not our readerly breaths, lip-miming, and page-fingerings (not to mention our notes-to-self and petite seismographs across the margins) literally the “all manner of small life [which] enters the windows [of our and Florens’s eyes] along with cutting wind [our individual voices along with Florens’s past-present voice]”? By the same token, a subtle mysreading might detect Florens’s intentions other than vengeance on the blacksmith:

That it is the withering inside that enslaves and opens the door for what is wild. I know my withering is born in the Widow’s closet. I know the claws of the feathered thing did break out on you because I cannot stop them wanting to tear you open the way you tear me. (187)

We have seen that Florens’s language is often chiasmic, so we might pick up on the oxymoronic matrix woven by a “withering” that is “born,” that “enslaves and opens.” The performative nature of Florens’s speech also suggests a pun on “tear”; it suggests not just violence, but empathy, the possibility of bringing someone to tears, of opening a capacity to feel across and despite traumas of erasure and estrangement.

Thus, it seems Florens mysreads her own status: earlier, she says “I never cry. Even when the woman steals my cloak and shoes and I am freezing on the boat no tears come” (81). But by the end of the story, the “claws of the feathered thing” have torn Florens’s consciousness in such a way that her narrative is a protracted “tearing” (i.e. crying), a cry towards the two nourishing figures in her life, her mother and the blacksmith. If we don’t count Florens’s mysreading or errantry as a form of agency—unconventional as it is—then we risk categorizing all or most of Florens’s actions as a result of a pre-determined libidinal trauma or, as Wyatt maintains, “a failed

message” wholly eclipsed by the plantation system.

By the end of the novel, we neither know what empirically happens to the Big house nor to Florens. But a mysreading suggests that some kind of “creolization” in Florens, ontological and psycho-somatic, has occurred. For example, the wood of the house on which she wainscoted her story is—spiritually or magically-realistically or both—grafted onto her body: “the soles of my feet are hard as cypress” (189). She is also able to say plurivocally, “Slave. Free. I last” (189). In this claim, I am following Françoise Lionnet and Shu-mei Shih’s awareness that the terms, “*créolie*, *creolité*, (creoleness), and *créolisation* have...been appropriated to widely differing ideological ends: either to register a range of divisive identitarian and linguistic categories that emphasize social and ethnic cleavages or to promote forms of ‘ecumenicity’ aimed at transcending the exact same cleavages” (22-23). Moreover, the blended fates of Florens and the Big house may be all to Morrison’s point: “Creole casts its shadow, so to speak, on the text, unsettling its meanings so that we are not sure whether we have interpreted it correctly” (Britton 142). Perhaps Morrison alludes to a diasporic bond between an already dying economic system and the fragile beginnings of a self-reflexive America. Lionnet and Shih, too, recognize the chiasmic or even creolized nature of history: “To recognize the structuring principles of colonial inequality is to open the door to active involvement with social change and revolutionary struggles” (16).

The wilderness, then, visually and metonymically casts shadows across its antithetical structures that would domesticate it. After all, it is primarily within elite institutions—whether colonial or nationalist or internationalist—that “history” acquires visibility and order. Writers within the Subaltern Studies collective, for example, argue that the archival and objective, if not self-acclaimed, account of colonial history frequently fails to reflect the opaque and contradictory processes which characterize the political and spiritual consciousness of both autochthonous and “hybridized” communities. These fecund, entangled consciousnesses comprise, in Dipesh Chakrabarty’s words, those “plural and heterogeneous struggles whose outcomes are never predictable, even retrospectively, in accordance with schemas which seek to naturalize and domesticate this heterogeneity” (1992: 20). One of the reasons why these communities’ polyvalent modes of co-existence and resistance remain illegible or omitted at the institutional sites where “authoritative” history is produced is that their unassimilability very often causes them to interrupt even traditional forms of insurgency. Thus, the fact that Florens’s non-institutional narrative is historiographed in and on a central institutional site of history (the Big house) produces an intransigent and almost cosmic irony.

Even this mutual, interanimate enfolding between the colonizer’s edifice (the Big house, the territory) and the colonized’s ecology (the wilderness, the field) suggests consciousness’s creolized recourse in the face of trauma. Glissant ramifies this idea by distinguishing between *métissage* and *creolization*. While both phenomena refer to racial and cultural intermixing at their core, *métissage* is the affirmation of a specific “meeting and synthesis of two differences,” while *creolization*

seems to be a limitless *métissage*, its elements diffracted and its consequences unforeseeable. Creolization diffracts, whereas certain forms of *métissage* can concentrate one more time.... Its most obvious symbol is in the Creole language, whose genius consists in always being open, that is, perhaps, never becoming fixed except according to systems of variables that we have to imagine as much as define. (34)

In other words, creolization exhibits a wild agency and ever-participatory vitality that can sustain a gap between and within imperial closures by refusing to be eclipsed by them. In this capacity, we might say that Glissant's creolization stands as an Antilles articulation of the unruly and ever-cathecting consciousness that irrupts as and ultimately beyond Florens. The unexpected and conciliatory voice of Florens's mother at the end of the novel suggests that this consciousness is life-endavoring enough to relate to and eventually embrace the dead. In fact, Glissant holds that creolization at its essence elucidates the nature of that multi-ontic "generosity of perception" (xvi) he calls Relation. Like the "excessive" yet foundational consciousness that we have examined herein, Glissant seems to understand Relation as that primordial and aware beingness which "search[es] for a freedom within particular surroundings" (20) and persists as "the postulation of an unyielding and unfading sacred" (21). As though it were an eternal *différance* that unites rather than divides, creolization

approximates the idea of Relation for us as nearly as possible. It is not merely an encounter, a shock...a *métissage*, but [an unyieldingly] new and original dimension allowing each person to be there and elsewhere, rooted and open, lost in the mountains and free beneath the sea, in harmony and in errantry. (34)

Sacred, indeed, is the manifold silence that holds both harmony and discord, both the cry of childbirth and what Glissant calls "the cry of the Plantation" (73).

In any case, what is at stake in exploring the consciousness and creolizing energies at the heart of mysreading are the coordinates of a ("a," not "The") post-and-present-colonial ethics that is founded on the deepest level of inter-subjective relation (beyond a hyper-fragmented and dialectically melancholic reality) that finally outflanks the Self/Other, colonized/colonizer antagonism of History. I propose, then, that mysreading (belonging to a story's characters and, alas, our own) is a perceptual process that fluctuates between spiritual fragmentation and social integration, and has the benefit of drawing its survivance from its own finite and concrete "Here-ness," and not an infinite and abstract "There-ness" as entailed by Hegelian and even post-structuralist dialectics (metaphysical, linguistic, or otherwise). The small but far-reaching ethical interventions that Morrison stages in *A Mercy* remind us that there are real and temporal social differences that have evolved into insidious inequalities—uneven structuring realities that seem to call for the full conceptual *and* embodied range of mysreading and how it might manifest across communities. As Laura Doyle recommends, by "[t]hinking intercorporeally about transnationalism, we necessarily grapple with the commitments that our bodies solicit—nationally and transnationally, singularly and collectively, and all of these at once" (20).

Thus, to hazard a general thesis on the ethics of mysreading as arising from and yet interrupting colonialism: Mysreading is but one process whereby we reappropriate the world's immanence and intertextuality that precede and occasion our perceptions, even traumatic ones. It is fitting that Morrison ends *A Mercy* with the circumspect voice of Florens's mother. She addresses her daughter whom she may never see, promising to stay on her knees in the dust "where my heart will remain each night and everyday until you understand what I know and long to tell you" (195-96). And yet, her hope is not futile: not because she *will* reunite with Florens, but because the grace of her thoughts (in a word, her spirit), across distance and oblivion, has

already connected to Florens. Florens's last words express compassion for her mother. Florens still struggles to hear "what my mother is telling me" (189), but in that struggle, she ends up communing with a love that never truly abandoned her, even though Florens does not know that completely. At the deepest level, then, Florens never gives up on mysreading her mother's terribly merciful act. Despite not having a wider emotional and familial vocabulary, Florens's mysreading drives her to be so narratively committed (she turns the Big house into a book) and so desperately loving in what was often an absurd and *unloving* world (even freedom, personified by the blacksmith, cannot reconcile Florens's freedom) that her very existence becomes an act of rebellion.

Conclusion: *The Soul Would Have No Rainbow If The Eyes Had No Tears*

In "Memory, Creation, and Writing" (1984), Morrison states that her storytelling revolves around a central calling: her writing "must bear witness and identify that which is useful from the past and that which ought to be discarded; it must make it possible to prepare for the present and live it out, and it must do that not by avoiding problems and contradictions but by examining them" (389). I have argued that an ethics of mysreading bears witness to its tellers and traumas in this open-ended way, keeping it neither fully present nor absent, for it resides in the act of becoming, in the acts of telling and listening. It is a kind of *gerund* morality. Florens's psychic development, then, is constantly renewing and destroying itself, constituting a self that remains without a discrete remainder. She testifies to the creolization of memory, to the osmosis of the formal witness, to the porousness of a fixed, empirical narration or account. We might think of the kind of spirituality she manifests as the creolization of ontology itself, a syncretic sentience that permits us to be "there and elsewhere, rooted and open" (Glissant 34). I have attempted to argue that an ethics of mysreading (effected primarily by the characters and, associatively, by us) speaks to the possibility of our very relation to the other; and not just to other people, but to other consciousnesses, to the otherness folded into ourselves. The creative labor of mysreading communicates a spiritual state that re-vitalizes the possibility of relation to forgiveness, to acceptance, to faith beyond aporia, to hope. Florens's tale as a literal haunted house, along with her mother's voice retroactively returning to the present, gestures toward a humanity that prevents a schizophrenic young America from closing in on itself. Graphemically as well as philosophically, *A Mercy* seems to represent a time in America when compassion and mercy had not yet systematically ossified: the title, *A Mercy*, mysread glancingly or thoughtfully, is more than half of *America*. Perhaps it still can be.

To a large degree, in every experience, there is a mysreading, an ongoing perceptual encounter with what we cannot recover: Handley is thus commendable for advocating "a poetics that recognizes oblivion—that is, not what is remembered but what is forgotten and therefore unsayable" (Handley 27). But every experience is also an encounter with what we can become. In every perception (thought, memory, emotion, sensation), we might say there is the experience of "illiteracy" which is experience itself, open and ever-present experience before it is codified, phonetically manacled, and metronomed into purposes. And from our phenomenological interpretation of illiteracy and illocutionary time above, literating our life-world, mysreading it along spiritual marginalia, so often requires us to experience it as a chiasmatic if fraught process of mourning and of the new morning, of "[f]eathers lifting" (Morrison 167) and descending, of flying to endure and enduring to stay aflight. Consequently, perceiving a world as having a

vitality that can greet us in multiple forms opens a way to achieving hospitality in and with the world; we are allowed to speak to it and we can allow it to speak to us. In an illocutionary way, such an ethics is a linguistic vulnerability and a linguistic liberation; a surrendering and a strengthening; an *address* (a speaking-to, a migration) that is also an *address* (a returning-to, a home). The fact that this ethics cannot be fully determined and, therefore, cannot be fully dismissed, means that inscribed alongside each “house” of trauma is a spiritual consciousness that is astonishingly near to us; each carving of pain so deep in itself and “hard as cypress” (189) that there is nothing left for it to do but to resound back to the “air that is out in the world” (188), such that even a “false” story about itself (a mysreading and not just a misreading) is proof that it *can* tell itself; that the power of illegibility can be turned back on illegibility itself, so that a prison can imprison itself, and its captive be allowed to leave, if only in the form of being visited from outside (that is, from *our* abidance as readers, witnesses, and mysreaders in the shared present). It is how a curse turns into cursive. We can’t put the tears back into our eyes. But we may be able to “mysread” errant lights in those humid remnants. Sometimes, that is enough.

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Endnotes

ⁱ For a formidable study of "hybridity"—centered in terms of Latin America's geopolitical history but cross-cultural in its response to globalization—see Néstor García Canclini, *Hybrid Cultures: Strategies for Entering and Leaving Modernity*. (Trans.) Christopher L. Chiappari and Silvia L. Lopez. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2005. The essays herein are written with a contemporary, on-the-ground tonality that serves as a counterpart to the highly influential if baroque study on the topic in Homi K. Bhabha's *The Location of Culture*. I use the term "hybridity" broadly here to signify a tense state between tradition and modernity, indigeneity and the global sphere. Importantly for Canclini, one polarity is not necessarily inferior or superior to the other.

ⁱⁱ In an incisive and seminal essay, "Can the Subaltern Speak?", which helped shape and yet critically chastise postcolonial studies (among other disciplines and forms of criticism), Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1988) catches the academic or authoritative knower in the act of "epistemic violence" in his or her attempt to represent the plight and projects of indigenous and historically dispossessed peoples or "subalterns." She memorably writes: "How can we touch the consciousness of the people, even as we investigate their politics? With what voice-consciousness can the subaltern speak?" (1988: 285).

ⁱⁱⁱ With a different political and materialist project in mind, Slavoj Žižek articulates a framework of "excess" that resonates with the one I use here. See Slavoj Žižek. *The Ticklish Subject: The Absent Centre of Political Ontology*. London and New York: Verso, 1999, pp. 256-57, e.g.

^{iv} While not an exhaustive account, the following thinkers have all addressed (and palpably shaped) our modern notions of that which we would deem "spiritual" and an ultimate good in itself. Of course, these thinkers' conceptualizations of what most agreeably could be called "spirit" are tied to their respective larger philosophies, while my usage is much more generalized, naïve (in a non-pejorative way), and, at best, inferential from Morrison's text. For example, compare Plato's "Form of the Good," Leibniz's "World of Monads," Kant's "Noumena," Fichte's "I" and "Not-I," Hegel's "Geist," and Schopenhauer's "Will-to-Live." Spinoza's pantheism and Emerson's "Oversoul" are most apropos here (among Western thought), but the "-theism" in the former term offers itself to

being construed in terms of a religion or particular concept of God, which would then limit the nature of the what we're discussing considerably. The same is true for people's preconceived notions of "soul." Since "spirit" or "spirituality," as such, is something most people intuitively feel we have (to varying degrees) and cannot reduce, it may be a more amenable term for our understanding and for its co-extension as a source of ethical living. See Ralph Waldo Emerson, *The Select Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson*. (ed.) William H. Gillman (New York: New American Library, 1965); Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*. (ed. and trans.) Norman Kemp Smith (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1965); Johann Fichte, *Foundations of Transcendental Philosophy (Wissenschaftslehre), Nova Methodo 1766-99* (ed. and trans.) Daniel Breazeale (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1992); G. W. F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, (trans.) A.V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977); Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, *New Essays Concerning Human Understanding* (1765). (trans.) A.G. Langley (New York: Macmillan, 1896); Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation* (1818, 1844, 1859). (trans.) E.F.J. Payne (New York: Dover, 1966); Plato, *Republic*. (trans.) G.M.A Grube. *Readings in Ancient Greek Philosophy: From Thales to Aristotle 2nd ed.* (eds.) Mark Cohen, Patricia Curd, and C.D.C Reeve (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 2000), pp. 263-535; Benedict (Baruch) de Spinoza, *Ethics*, in *The Collected Works of Spinoza, vol. 1*, (ed. and trans.) Edwin Curley (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1985).

^v I thank Mary Lou Emery for encouraging me to explain in basic, accessible terms my decision to appropriate the term, "spirit." The above is surely an attempt.

^{vi} My conceptual framework presents certain risks. Chief among them is being open to the charge that the ethical strategy of "mysreading" is an *invented* one, as opposed to being one that culturally exists in a traumatized community. I would respond that the proposed ethics attempts to communicate *theoretically* what we already do *experientially*, whether the "we" involves those among a decolonial moment or those outside of it (and who is "outside" a history of the oppressed, especially in this globalized age, becomes increasingly debatable). Thus, the aim of this paper is not to develop the most "correct" or "definitive" ethical theory. Given that we appear to live in and *as* relative time, such a task may be impossible, as significant aspects of any cross-cultural ethics will change according to social, historical, and ecological contexts.

^{vii} Formally, phenomenology deals with occurrences and facts of the world that appear real to our thoughts and senses through the *a priori* structure and intrinsic value of experience, regardless of whether we fully understand the nature or origin of our experiences. Immanuel Kant, of course, largely solidified our modern knowledge of the phenomenological world. Edmund Husserl, considered to be the first Western philosopher to formally study and develop phenomenology, states that the noumenal or objective status of what we know or believe is not the primary concern for us because we are and cannot help but be subjective and, more pointedly, bodily-oriented beings. Thus, phenomenological methodology involves not only the analytic task of determining what we do or ought to do, but also the relational, embodied task of understanding what happens to us over and above our wanting and doing in a world of concrete others. One can already detect the de-centering of the Cartesian, rational independent ego as the arbiter of knowledge. For a comprehensive and successfully lucid work on phenomenology, see Robert Sokolowski, *Introduction to Phenomenology*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge UP, 1999.

^{viii} One might already wonder why Emmanuel Levinas does not make up (indeed, lead) the group of heterodoxical ethical thinkers I have mentioned, as he would be the first philosopher after World War II, arguably, to innovate and exemplify the language I am using with regards to the ethical. The reason is twofold: first, these thinkers together, though not all purposefully, may be said to recapitulate or represent not Levinas himself, but a *Levinasian relation* to the core concepts of ethics, such as the self, the other, consciousness, the body, freedom, power, justice, community, violence and trauma. As Levinas would suffice in his own right as a source of ethical agreement (and departure) in my analysis, omitting him for the present paper allows for that hermeneutic vacuum to be filled by a newly provocative cohort and, not least, by a certain unity in diversity (an elusive postcolonial aim, still).

^{ix} Glissant's formulation is instructive: "Relation is not an absolute toward which every work would strive but a totality—even if for us this means disentangling it, something it never required—that through its poetic and practical and unceasing force attempts to be perfected, to be spoken, simply, that is, to be complete" (*The Poetics of Relation*, 35).

^x Note here that I am already differing from Levinas's language which more traumatically, paradoxically, and dualistically describes the relation between the self and the other, and so to employ Levinas to primarily characterize my hypothesis of ethics would not be quite appropriate. For Levinas, the other is other through a radical remoteness

which, in a strict pre-ontological sense, permits of neither full contact, nor transparency, nor any recourse to metaphysical interpretation. The utterly and infinitely other is situated with reference to me in a dimension of height, what Levinas will call elsewhere a “curvature of intersubjective space” and other formulations that “inflect a distance into elevation” (*Totality and Infinity*, 291). Levinas’s abstruse yet resolute representations of my relation to the other are meant to emphasize the radical asymmetry between us. And so Levinas, from below: “Neither possession nor the unity of number nor the unity of concepts link me to the Stranger, the Stranger who disturbs the being at home with oneself [*le chez soi*]. But the Stranger also means the free one. Over him I have no power [*je ne peux pouvoir*]. He escapes my grasp by an essential dimension.... He is not wholly in my site” (39).

^{xi} Moreover, Wyatt, and the more rigid schools of psychoanalysis in general, seem to presuppose two things: first, that there *is* a normative goal to be attained from one’s trauma; and second, that that goal centers on a “truthful” or “objective” representation in language.

^{xii} Amerigo Vespucci (1454-1512) was a Florentine explorer and cartographer who, after being assigned to navigate the east coast of South America by King Manuel I of Portugal, and later the greater western hemisphere by King Ferdinand Spain, made four voyages to the American continents and West Indies between 1497 and 1504. His expeditions became widely known after the publication of *Mundus Novus* (*New World*), a collection of two letters attributed to Vespucci between 1502 and 1504 in which he claims to have found and named “a fourth continent” (after Europe, Africa, and Asia). The veracity of these letters has been in dispute, however, as many scholars believe that the two letters were fabricated by others who based their content on actual letters by Vespucci. In 1507, German cartographer and author Martin Waldseemüller published a Latin translation of these letters in his *Cosmographiae Introductio*, an influential book on the then views of cosmography and the planet’s collective geography. It is fascinating to note that Waldseemüller used the *feminine* form of Vespucci’s Latinized name, Americas Vespuccius, resulting in “America.” As he explains in his book: “I do not see what right any one would have to object to calling this part, after Americus who discovered it and who is a man of intelligence, Amerige, that is, the Land of Americus, or America: since both Europe and Asia got their names from women” (Ray 93). Finally, and in line with the current paper’s heuristics, Waldseemüller in 1513 appeared to have doubts about his codification of the name, “America,” probably as a response to contemporaneous disputes about the nature of Vespucci’s role in “discovering” and naming America. Thus, in re-editing various atlas portions within *Cosmographiae Introductio*, Waldseemüller simply labeled the north American continent “Terra Incognita” or “Terra Mysterium” (“Unknown Land” or “Mysterious Land”). See Luciano Formisano (Ed.), *Letters from a New World: Amerigo Vespucci’s Discovery of America*. New York: Marsilio, 1992; and Kurt Ray, *Amerigo Vespucci: Italian Explorer of the Americas*. New York: The Rosen Publishing Group, 1993.

^{xiii} In McClintock’s *Imperial Leather*, an intricate study of the particular ways in which race, gender, and sexuality were implicated by Western imperialism and yet also subverted it, she theorizes the colonial invention of what she calls *anachronistic space*, a metaphysical sleight-of-hand that uses the dimension of linear time to categorize and hierarchize terrestrial and social structures of complexity (“spaces”), from primitive (Africa) to modern (Western Europe). These “spaces” are cognitive too and conjure types of behavior and living, as implicated in our categorical notions of the “archaic,” the “primitive,” the “savage,” the “sinful.” As McClintock argues: “imperial progress across the space of empire is figured as a journey backward in time to an anachronistic moment of prehistory. By extension, the return journey to Europe is seen as rehearsing the evolutionary logic of historical progress, forward and upward to the apogee of the Enlightenment in the European metropolis. Geographical difference across *space* is figured as a historical difference across *time*.... The stubborn and threatening heterogeneity of the colonies was contained and disciplined not as socially or geographically different from Europe and thus equally valid, but as *temporally* different and thus as irrevocably superannuated by history” (40). See Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest*. New York & London: Routledge, 1995.

^{xiv} In a similar vein, Mary Lou Emery re-configures Glissant’s notion of “transversality” to apply to the transversal nature of labor, especially for women represented in Jean Rhys’s work. See Mary Lou Emery, “The Poetics of Labor in Jean Rhys’s Global Modernism” in *Philological Quarterly*. (Ed.) Harilaos Stecopoulos. (Spring and Summer 2011) 90(2&3): 167-197.

^{xv} This crux of this notion is systematically (and playfully) treated by J.L. Austin in his seminal work on speech act theory, *How to Do Things with Words 2nd ed.* (Eds.) J.O. Urmson and Marina Sbisa. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1962. Austin distinguishes between constative statements, which are statements whose value is based on whether what is stated is true or false, and performative utterances, which enable an action just by their

being said (or written). For example, saying “I do” as a bride or groom, or saying “I promise to pay you back” is not meaningful or effective because it states something that is either true or false; it is effective because one is fulfilling the act of marriage, or at that moment, making a promise. Further, Austin calls a perlocutionary speech act one whose speaking is meant to produce indirect, consequential effects—“Would you like to go out on a date?” for instance. The asking is meant to show I’m friendly, to build attraction, and possibly spend time with the person of interest. An illocutionary act, however, is really a performative speech act that yields immediate consequences in its speaking: saying, “Forgive me” is not only an entreaty, but (presumably) the exercising of contrition. Also, “Workers of the world, unite!” is a statement that calls for future unity while simultaneously demonstrating the speaker’s present unitedness with others. Hence, we might think of “illocutionary time” as a collapsing or comingling of deeds for a present time *and* a future time (that is, “time” in the relative sense as we have come to live it).

^{xvi} I thank Mary Lou Emery for recommending this work in an earlier review of this essay. Baucom’s magisterial work has both challenged and improved the current essay. Any misreadings (in the normal sense) and unwarranted critiques of his arguments are emphatically my own.

^{xvii} The analogy between a movie or computer screen and the images that appear on it, on the one hand, and consciousness and the objects of thoughts, sensations, and perceptions that appear within and are known by this consciousness, on the other, is a one that can be found in contemporary teachings on nondual spirituality or what has traditionally been called *Advaita* in Sanskrit. An Advaita teacher and artist who uses the metaphor exquisitely is Rupert Spira. See, for example, his *Presence, Vol. I: The Art of Peace and Happiness*, UK: Nonduality Press, 2011.

^{xviii} For an anti-Enlightenment and anti-scientific view of time in Native American traditions, see Vine Deloria, Jr., *The Metaphysics of Modern Existence*, Golden, CO: Fulcrum, 2012.

^{xix} In what has followed, I have been arguing that our understanding of any semblance of a global ethics requires a significant overhaul in the name of realism *and* essentialism, though not in the stale, narrow, and often exclusionary sense of these terms. The “essentialism” (a loaded term that is difficult to use without provoking misgivings) that I understand and employ here is *not*, I contend, a dogmatic philosopheme but instead refers first and lastly to *consciousness’s* experience of what seems to be essential about itself; I am referring to the self’s highest understanding of its fundamental intuitions, which comprehends “essentialism” to refer to the general ontological nature of reality as such (inasmuch as that is discursively possible), and not to its specific, prejudicial uses, such as the essentializing or naturalizing of a culture’s identity or history, or a gender’s purported universal role or behavior. In this sense, the language of essentialism that I am reappropriating is meant to be as empirically rigorous, even scientific in the simplest sense, as possible, for its only criterion is pre-ideological and intersubjectively honest experience. While even a postcolonial deconstructivist thinker like Gayatri Spivak concedes to the necessity for “strategic essentialism”—the need for a group or community to accept temporarily an “essentialist” and unified position in order to be able to effectively act against injustice and persecution—this paper goes one step further in regards to “essentialist” claims. The bedrock for the possibility and viability of the proposed ethics herein is a phenomenological and intuited understanding of our nature. As someone who has diligently contemplated and researched the ontology of ethics (and, consequently, the “ethics” of ontology) for at least the last ten years, I do not make this claim naively. Rather than claiming to invent something new, this paper only claims to see something old with new eyes. Thus, the “essentialism” on which my thesis depends does not limit itself to being only “strategic,” for such a stance implies that the unifying claims are at best instrumentally good, and not inherently good or truthful. Worse still, the epistemic solidarity that results from only a “strategic” essentialism may not be sincerely *believed* in by its otherwise conflictual subscribers, and one’s experience of reality follows directly from one’s beliefs about reality (as already demonstrated with the historically dominant belief about “time”). Throughout this thesis, then, the point of the analyses is not only to expose a contradictory set of epistemic claims at work in good, diligent *anti-essentialism* in its broadest sense, but to consider the ethico-spiritual potential of that ineliminable domain which renders the political field of global living not only intelligible, but possible. For more on strategic essentialism, see Gayatri Spivak, “Subaltern Studies: Deconstructing Historiography”, in Guha, Ranajit and Spivak (eds.), *In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988, pp. 197-221; and also Stephen Morton, *Gayatri Spivak: Ethics, Subalternity and the Critique of Postcolonial Reason*. (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2007), pp. 124-126.

^{xx} I thank Garrett Stewart for sending me (of his own accord upon learning of our mutual interest in the various forms of ethics and textuality in *A Mercy*) a revised and expanded version of his essay on Morrison’s novel that originally appeared in the *English Language History* journal and that now comprises a chapter in what was—at the

time of this writing—his forthcoming book from Cornell University Press, *The Deed of Reading: Literature * Writing * Language * Philosophy*.