Slavery's Ghosts and the Haunted Housing Crisis: On Narrative Economy and Circum-Atlantic Memory in Toni Morrison's *A Mercy*

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The overweening, defining event of the modern world is the mass movement of raced populations, beginning with the largest forced transfer of people in the history of the world: slavery.

—Toni Morrison (“Home” 10)

There is no inheritance without a call to responsibility. An inheritance is always the reaffirmation of a debt, but a critical, selective, and filtering reaffirmation, which is why we distinguished several spirits.

—Jacques Derrida (68)

The 2008 Housing Crisis¹ cannot be fully considered without accounting for circum-Atlantic slavery, and separating the two events from each other via a strict periodization that contains the past as discrete from the present ignores the hauntology of circum-Atlantic memory that continues to exert force on the present.² In *Cities of the Dead: Circum-Atlantic Performance* (1996), Joseph Roach theorizes circum-Atlantic memory as a process of simultaneous remembering and forgetting in which what has been officially “forgotten” lingers on the margins of what has been remembered, such that the present as it is imagined feels the influence of the suppressed past. With this in mind, I turn to Toni Morrison’s novel *A Mercy* (2008), a book about slavery published during the Crisis, to consider what “call to responsibility” (Derrida 68) comes with the inheritance of “the largest forced transfer of people in the history of the world” (Morrison, “Home” 10). Thinking of these events appositionally by considering Morrison’s novel and the Crisis enables an ethics of responsibility deeply grounded in the intimacy, if not the coconstitutive existence, of the past and the present.

Rather than a story of the creation of a utopic sanctuary where the project of democracy would flourish—the kind of story told, for example, in many elementary school classrooms or Fourth of July backyard barbecues—*A Mercy* offers homelessness, displacement, disease, unpaid labor, abuse, and squandered mobility—a crisis of housing and home. This crisis appears by way of an enslaved

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African girl named Florens and her displacement onto the farm of Jacob Vaark, who relies on the institution of slavery to finance the building of his third house in which he never gets to live. Jacob dies before this house is finished being built, and his wife-become-widow, Rebekka, “refuse[s] to enter the grand house, the one in whose construction she had delighted” (Morrison, *Mercy* 179). This empty house stands at the novel’s end as material excess, and Florens fantasizes about burning it to the ground after secretly writing her story on its inner walls (189). After reaping the material benefits of slavery, Rebekka uses her power on the estate to bar her laborers from the fruits of their labor, even putting Florens up for sale, illustrating the economics underpinning the narrative: slavery provides capital, but enslaved workers must be sacrificed to produce this capital.

Ultimately, *A Mercy*’s engagement with excess and power ruptures linear timelines and event containment—especially in the chapter narrated by Florens’s mother, a *minha mãe*.³ Florens spends her entire narrative trying to come to terms with her sale (9). She is never able to escape her reading of the event as her mother choosing her baby brother over her, not because she is a poor reader but because the institution of slavery prevents her from learning alternative timelines that could rupture her containment of the moment within the frame of her mother’s choice. Scholarship on *A Mercy* has thoroughly analyzed the interrupted dialogue between Florens and her mother concerning this scene. These compelling arguments, such as those offered by Jean Wyatt and Maxine Montgomery, tend to focus on Florens (as a reader and producer of signs) rather than the reading strategies invoked by Morrison’s novel as a novel. Building on this work by looking at how Florens reads her mother and how such a reading is structured by the text’s narrative economy as it is underpinned by economic relationships can help readers consider what happens when we read a narrative that is tightly contained by definite timelines and circum-Atlantic forgetting.

Containment is a strategy for making sense of stories in terms that are readily available for an audience. These terms are readily available for a host of reasons, not the least of which being the prevalence of dominant power structures. For example, the story of the Housing Crisis is often told as government intruding on the free market by forcing lenders to give money to “high-risk” borrowers who then took out loans they could not afford. In this case, there is both the act of containing—telling the story—and the narrative container—the frame for the story. Like literal material containers, narrative containers can be ruptured, and such rupturing opens possibilities for both violence and emancipation. In the terms of the novel, one can think of its revision of common myths of America’s “founding” as a free and open democracy dedicated to liberty and equality as the rupturing of a container.

In fact, scholarship on *A Mercy* has already thoroughly and fruitfully examined the ways in which it functions as a historical remembering of an American origin narrative. Valerie Babb argues that the novel “makes plain that the synonymy of

white and *American* was a construction enacted and reenacted by law" (152), and Mina Karavanta frames the novel with the question, "What is there before the time of the nation, *at the very beginnings of transatlantic modernity?*" (724, emphasis added). Given that scholars have already considered *A Mercy* as historical fiction by asking questions about American origins, it is appropriate to ask what happens to conceptions of the present and imaginings of the future when dismembered origins are re-membered, re-vised, and re-turned to through fiction. My use of these hyphenated forms is indebted to Suzan-Lori Parks's essay, "Possession" (1994), in which she argues that unremembered history that has been "dis-membered" by the power dynamics of who gets to write can be "re-membered," or put back together like a literally dismembered body, through the writing and performance of a play. *A Mercy* does the same thing; re-membering a dis-membered history through fiction teaches us how to better read the present Crisis. It is fruitful to consider the novel *both* in terms of the history it re-members, as scholarship has already done, *and* in terms of the historical moment in which it emerges.⁴

A minha mãe's final narration makes clear to the reader, if not to Florens, that to understand what appears to be a discrete moment, one has to go back—to *re-turn*, like the revenant, and like her own narrative voice, displaced from her moving but inaudible mouth in Florens's visions to the novel's final chapter. A minha mãe finds it necessary to recount her journey on the Middle Passage as a way of explaining the moment when she begged Jacob to take her daughter because it is impossible for Florens or the reader to understand that moment without understanding the Middle Passage. Given that *A Mercy* can be read as a retelling of the American origins narrative in the eighteenth-century circum-Atlantic world,⁵ a minha mãe's final word is not only a recontextualization of Florens's story but also a recontextualization of circum-Atlantic modernity—a modernity which is, as Ian Baucom demonstrates in *Specters of the Atlantic: Finance Capital, Slavery, and the Philosophy of History* (2005), strikingly characterized by capital accumulation.

Why insist on (re)turning to the Housing Crisis? Why not just read Morrison's novel on its own terms as a rememory of the American origin story? Simply, to turn to the Housing Crisis is to read *A Mercy* as a rememory of the American origin story because, as the novel makes clear, there is no distinct separation between past, present, and future. What has happened in the past is always lingering, always haunting. Roach writes:

[W]hile a great deal of the unspeakable violence instrumental to this creation [of the so-called New World] may have been officially forgotten, circum-Atlantic memory retains its consequences, one of which is that the unspeakable cannot be rendered forever inexpressible: the most persistent mode of forgetting is memory imperfectly deferred (4).

Thus, when Edward Baptist channels the logic that "if slavery was outside of US history . . . then slavery was not implicated in US growth, success, power, and

wealth" (xix), he is laying out a contained narrative of capitalism that Roach insists will be ruptured by the violence it ostensibly forgets. Therefore, any narrative of the Housing Crisis that posits its radical departure from the seventeenth-century economy that *A Mercy* re-members is a project that will inevitably fail because the unspeakable will be expressed—the bubble of the container *will* burst.

In this spirit and with these ghosts, it is possible to read *A Mercy* as a performance of circum-Atlantic memory via its narrative economy of accumulation and rupture. This narrative economy is set in motion by the accumulation and rupture that characterize the modern history of financial bubbles, not least of all the housing bubble that burst in the year of the novel's release. Therefore, *A Mercy* offers an occasion to consider the inheritance of slavery present within the moment of the Housing Crisis. Reading the novel's narrative economy with attention to containment highlights responsibilities called forth in the catastrophe of the present by the specters of the past.

"Can You Read?"

Morrison's novel opens by imploring the reader, "Don't be afraid," and announcing itself as a "telling." The narrator asks, "Can you read?" (*Mercy* 3), highlighting readership as a central concern. This is true both in the world of the novel—Florens and Lina constantly read signs in nature, Willard and Scully cannot read their labor contracts, and characters' bodies are read—and in the experience of the novel as a book to be read. Taking up the novel's challenge, both Wyatt and Montgomery offer insights into reading Florens as a reader and writer, focusing on her reading of her mother's act of giving her away. Wyatt offers a psychoanalytic reading of Florens's failures as a reader, based on the gap in communication with her mother, while Montgomery traces how Florens's initial misreading of her mother haunts her through what Montgomery sees as "recurring dreams." She writes: "Florens and her mother call to each other in dialogic fashion in a highly symbolic gesture that seeks to bridge the psychic, geographic, and linguistic gulf between Africa and the New World" (629), and yet they never hear each other's calls.

Of course, the reader does in fact read the calls of Florens and her mother even as they talk past each other because of the gulf carved between them by D'Ortega and Jacob, the two men who sequentially "own" Florens as an enslaved African. That gap, however, is mediated by spectral violence. The relationship between one mother and one daughter becomes a ghost story haunted by the "sixty million and more" in the dedication to Morrison's *Beloved* and all the enslaved Africans aboard D'Ortega's sunken ship. This chain of haunting calls forward as much as it calls back if we follow Baucom and consider how the specters of the Atlantic, including the spirits of those enslaved Africans jettisoned from slave ships, haunt finance capital as it develops from being fueled by enslaved bodies, and the

insurance policies that covered them, into a product of the financial systems of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. After all, Wall Street was an official slave market before it was the center of the Stock Exchange, the South Sea bubble burst long before the housing bubble, and enslaved bodies like Florens's were imagined as bearers of monetary value that could be traded as what Fred Moten calls "speaking commodities" (108)⁶ long before anyone imagined the collateralized debt obligations (CDOs) traded at such high speeds in the twenty-first century.⁷

In addition to the ghosts of the Middle Passage, the relationship between Florens and her mother is also haunted by the specter of rape. It is this specter that most immediately provokes a *minha mãe's* decision to give her daughter away. Florens, however, does not see this specter and cannot properly read this moment, resulting in her pain at being given away. Rather, Florens sees her mother's offering of her as a "choice," which is true, but only to the extent that genuine choice is possible for agents disempowered by institutionalized racial slavery. As an enslaved woman, Florens's mother's choice was made within what Saidiya Hartman identifies as "a condition of unredressed injury" engendered by "the erasure or disavowal of sexual violence" (101). Throughout the novel, rape is a lurking threat to every female character, but especially to enslaved women and girls. As such, Florens's mother's "choice" was not really a selection between two equal alternatives. Upon seeing Jacob on her enslaver and rapist's plantation, a *minha mãe* says of Jacob, "He never looked at me the way *Senhor* does. He did not want" (Morrison, *Mercy* 191), indicating that she believed, based on the look in his eyes, that Florens would be safer from rape enslaved to him than under the hand and eye of D'Ortega. Readers may be reminded of Sethe's decision to kill her own child in *Beloved*, a choice that was tragically complicated by the terror of slavery.⁸ In this way, *Beloved's* ghost haunts not only 124 Bluestone Road but the text of *A Mercy*, as well. Although Florens's pain results immediately from her own misreading, that misreading is predicated on a containment strategy made necessary by slavery's crimes of kidnap, murder, and rape, and her mother's action is also predicated on those crimes. As a *minha mãe* says, "There is no protection but there is difference," and her choice gives Florens a different chance in life (195).

This reading of Florens's mother, which places her individual agency within the context of her political (non)existence as an enslaved person, complicates Florens's containing concept of choice.⁹ This troubling of "choice" intersects with narratives of the Housing Crisis. When observers who themselves did not lose their homes ask why people would choose to live beyond their means and take out loans they could not afford, they are telling a story using the narrative container of choice.¹⁰ Yet, in a country founded on the principle that land ownership equals political power, in Jacob's words, "What a man leaves behind is what a man is" (*Mercy* 104), the "choice" about acquiring property is not a choice between essentially equal alternatives. This is especially true because "under

[the laws of racial slavery], ownership of property becomes tied to self-identity and inextricably tied to freedom" (King 40). As Cheryl I. Harris argues, whiteness itself becomes a kind of property necessary to claim citizenship, and, inversely, the very concept of property becomes the mediating principle between race and citizenship (278-79). This is why we cannot talk simply about "rational decisions" within the market, and more broadly why we cannot talk simply about class as transcending race.¹¹ This is the legacy that the United States inherits from slavery, "whether we like it or know it or not" (Derrida 68).

This legacy is also the very reason why such a comparison between the demarcated choices of the enslaved and the demarcated choices of post-slavery subjects is always already a similarity without an exact replication. The delimited choice of actors in the market is *not* the same as the delimited choice of an enslaved person in the seventeenth century. The material conditions of the two subjects are too different to allow for an equal sign. But the point is that despite the difference in political ontology between the enslaved subject and the "post-civil rights" subject, the two exist with a "hauntological" continuity, to draw on Derrida's language in *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International* (1994). The structuring forces of violence that delimit choice within the context of slavery set in motion, and thereby continue to haunt, the conditions within which twenty-first century US subjects make choices about an economic system predicated on the violence of enslavement as its condition of possibility. Florens's mother's condition is not the same as a low-income African American home loan borrower, but both defy conceptions of free choice because, as Lindon Barrett argues in *Racial Blackness and the Discontinuity of Western Modernity* (2014) and as Karla FC Holloway demonstrates in *Legal Fictions: Constituting Race, Composing Literature* (2014), race, specifically Blackness due to the history of slavery, interrupts conceptualizations of the liberal subject even as anti-Blackness makes such a concept possible within the discursive limits of white supremacy. This has material effects on African Americans after emancipation. In other words, as Hortense J. Spillers argues,

Even though the captive flesh/body has been "liberated," and no one need pretend that even the quotation marks do not *matter*, dominant symbolic activity, the ruling episteme that releases the dynamics of naming and valuation, remains grounded in the originating metaphors of captivity and mutilation so that it is as if neither time nor history, nor historiography and its topics, shows movement, as the human subject is "murdered" over and over again by the passions of a bloodless and anonymous archaism, showing itself in endless disguise. (68)

Spillers both unpacks the qualified nature of the comparison between enslaved subjects and "liberated" subjects taking out predatory loans and also sets up the way in which comparison can be appositionally invoked. At no

point in comparing slavery with the Housing Crisis do I claim that the two are merely exactly the same. Rather, within the ambivalence of “liberation” as a material event that actually happened and yet, at the same time, a condition in which “no one need pretend that even the quotation marks do not *matter*,” liberation is always suspect, always incomplete, and always attenuated by reinscriptions of structures of domination, as Hartman argues. It is within this structural ambivalence that slavery and the Crisis, and enslaved peoples and the homeowners who went under, are thrown into comparison in order to take seriously both their material differences and the troubling, haunting legacies that *matter*. Despite these inherited legacies, containment strategies that deny this history persist through circum-Atlantic forgetting. *A Mercy* challenges both its readers and its own characters to work through these moments of forgetting.

Forgetting to Re-member, Re-membering to Forget

While visiting D’Ortega’s plantation in Maryland, Jacob reflects on what creates the class differences between himself and the owner of all the land on which he is walking:

Access to a fleet of free labor made D’Ortega’s leisurely life possible. Without a shipload of enslaved Angolans he would not merely be in debt; he would be eating from his palm instead of porcelain and sleeping in the bush of Africa rather than a four-post bed. Jacob sneered at wealth dependent on a captured workforce that required more force to maintain. (Morrison, *Mercy* 32)

This passage illustrates the extent to which the text’s (narrative) economy is steeped in what Roach calls “circum-Atlantic memory”—a process of re-membering and forgetting that contains tensions and contradictions that manifest in violence and desire, even as the process covers itself up as nothing more than a historical account. Essential to Roach’s formulation of circum-Atlantic memory is the observation that re-membering and forgetting are not dichotomous but rather two parts of the same thing, so that “memory” can present itself as an objective historical account while it is composed of both re-membering and forgetting. In *A Mercy*, Jacob embodies such forgetting as memory in the moment when he takes Florens from D’Ortega as a debt payment, sneering at the methods of D’Ortega’s wealth accumulation while forgetting his own role as a lender whose capital supports the slave trade. But he is not the novel’s only instance of circum-Atlantic memory. In fact, *A Mercy* is itself such a memory.

As a re-membering of colonial North America, *A Mercy* is a particular performance of circum-Atlantic memory that Roach would call a “performance of origin[,] . . . the reenactment of foundation myths along two general axes of possibility: the diasporic . . . and the autochthonous” (42). On the one hand, there

is the story of colonists taking up arms and throwing off the chains of an oppressive Crown; thus, the United States autochthonously rises into existence by its own power. On the other hand, there is the story that *A Mercy* tells, in which Native Americans are systematically exterminated and displaced by white settlers who steal land on which they can accumulate wealth, in forms such as D'Ortega's and Jacob's houses, by kidnapping and enslaving Africans who work to build such houses and whose labor, along with the genocide of indigenous peoples, makes possible the accumulation of wealth. In the novel's second chapter, the narrator references Bacon's Rebellion as the most specific historical context for the ensuing narrative:

[A]n army of blacks, natives, whites, mulattoes—freedmen, slaves, and indentured—had waged war against local gentry led by members of that very class. When that “people's war” lost its hopes to the hangman, the work it had done—which included the slaughter of opposing tribes and running the Carolinas off their land—spawned a thicket of new laws authorizing chaos in defense of order. (Morrison, *Mercy* 11)

In highlighting this slaughter of Native Americans and an interracial unity destroyed by laws that imposed “chaos in defense of order” in the form of a legally codified racial caste system, Morrison frames *A Mercy*'s story of US origin with founding violence. This story of movement, conquest, and forced displacement is a story of diaspora, and it contradicts the claims of autochthony in the former story. What does this mean for narratives of wealth accumulation? Whence comes Jacob's wealth? One source is the labor of the women on his farm. Despite the fact that “the women characters who come together at the Vaark farm all arrive there via transactions” (Babb 156), Jacob believes that “flesh was not his commodity” (Morrison, *Mercy* 25). His forgetting mirrors the forgetting that allows for the narratives of rugged individualism that permeate contemporary discussions of the virtue of economic autochthony. But Jacob, like D'Ortega, benefits from the free labor of Florens, Lina, and Sorrow, in addition to the profits he makes on the slave-dependent rum market. Jacob's wealth, then, does not have an autochthonous origin but a diasporic one.

Baucom's *Specters of the Atlantic* offers a detailed account of how the bodies of enslaved persons became imagined as equivalent to monetary value—an account made literal by Florens's body. Baucom illustrates the wide scope of a network that depended on “trans-Atlantic bills” that linked people in a system of credit where they found themselves “depending on the value of an initial promise made by a person unknown to them” (63). One of the foundational concepts of this system of credit that inaugurated circum-Atlantic modernity was the imagining of enslaved bodies “not only as a type of commodity but as a type of interest-bearing money” (61). This is integral to the narrative economy of *A Mercy* because the very reason that Jacob visits D'Ortega and receives

Florens is a result of the debt owed to him as calculated by the monetary value of the enslaved Africans who died on D'Ortega's ship. The narrative economy of the novel is driven by the economy of the slave trade; it is not simply that narrative economy mimics, reflects, or is similar to economic logic. If those enslaved Africans do not die, Florens does not end up on the Vaark farm, and the entire plot of *A Mercy* does not happen. The narrative thus spends the lives of these unnamed supernumeraries as sacrificial objects of "unproductive expenditure" (Roach 41) in order to move the plot forward, even as Jacob forgets his role in the violent drama of death called slavery.

Jacob's performance, however, is not isolated. Baucom argues that while enslaved persons functioned as commodities, they also functioned as "reserve deposits of a loosely organized, decentered, but vast 'trans-Atlantic banking system'" (61). Later, he describes the role of banks and insurance in the conceptualization of the enslaved body as monetary equivalent in this banking system (94-95). So Florens—whose name alludes to European currency—being traded from D'Ortega to Jacob as "worth twenty pieces of eight" (Morrison, *Mercy* 31) to pay off a debt is not an unusual financial transaction. The fact that Florens's human body is imagined as a signifier of money may seem an incomprehensible act of magic to the reader—an authorial invention to dramatize the extent of the dehumanization rendered by turning human flesh into literal currency—but there is eerie foreshadowing here of the finance banking that would characterize the late twentieth century and lead to the eventual appearance of the CDO and other "assets" that are traded as if they were in fact monetary units. Yet it must be remembered that CDOs are not, in fact, the same as human bodies. As was the case in the similar but not equivalent comparison of structures of choice, there is a hauntological continuity between the "speaking commodities" of slavery and the abstract bundles of CDOs that is important to note, even as the difference in ontology between embodiment and abstraction renders equivalent comparison impossible. Spillers demonstrates that slavery is not only a system of unpaid labor but also a transformation of "flesh" into "body" that structures and is structured by "the realm of discourse" (67). In other words, the violence of slavery was both embodied, in physical and psychological torture and terror, and discursive, in transforming human bodies into "property *plus*," so that these bodies could be utilized for purposes besides unpaid labor. In the words of M. NourbeSe Philip, "In its potent ability to decree that what is is not, as in a human ceasing to be and becoming an object, a thing or chattel, the law approaches the realm of magic and religion" (196).

During legal slavery, enslaved people's bodies could be imagined as currency, and this discursive violence of transforming the ontology of the enslaved person—a transformation encoded in law within *Gregson v. Gilbert*, the court case that Baucom and Philip analyze in their respective texts—enables material violence. With the abolition of slavery, the ontology of formerly enslaved Africans

changes again as the realm of discourse is rearticulated, and thus the material conditions structured by that discourse change. But hauntology, or the being-ness of that which has materially vanished but which still exerts force on the material, enforces continuity in the logic structured by this rearticulated discourse. More specifically, after the abolition of slavery, capitalism continues to imagine objects besides monetary currency as tradeable commodities with knowable monetary values using the discursive logic that enabled and was enabled by the system of slavery that imagined enslaved bodies such as Florens's as monetary exchange. This discursive logic thus enables the imagination of abstractions such as CDOs as tradable commodities. Materially, the two are different, and any comparison that denies this would be absurd. But the latter is haunted by the former, and the material violence caused by this latter imagination—it must be re-membered that people actually lost their homes in the Housing Crisis—while different from the material violence of slavery, is hauntologically continuous with it. It is imperative not to insist on exact replication, but it is also imperative not to insist on absolute separation because to do so is to forget that forgetting is a part of memory.

Jacob is not the only character whose conception of reality is contained by his forgetting of the slave trade. Florens is in a similar situation, although for different reasons. Her epistemology is contained within a binary logic symptomatic of sibling rivalry, and this limiting epistemology is never corrected by hearing what her mother is trying to tell her. In fact, Florens's mother's story in the final chapter is a re-membering that points to how Florens's narrative was dis-membered: it did not go back far enough. Florens's story about being sold to Jacob starts on the day of the sale. This is not sufficient, her mother signifies, insofar as she finds it necessary to go back to how she herself was captured, sold into slavery, and brought from Africa to Barbados in order to explain the moment that Florens takes as a beginning. *A Mercy* thus illustrates that narrative containers such as *choice* may be made readily available by demarcated periodization. From this, it becomes clear that periodized and linear conceptions of time and history shaped by circum-Atlantic memory can themselves lead to containment strategies that presuppose endings. The novel challenges the fact that, as Parks observes in "Elements of Style" (1994), "Standard Plot Line and Standard Time Line are in cahoots!" (11). Fitting an event into a standard timeline allows for the articulation of explanatory theses, but it also forecloses possible narrative interpretations that do not fit on the "Standard Plot Line," whether that Standard Line is structured by dominant archives, hegemonic theories of history, or even generic conventions.

Sacrificial Expenditure

Writing about the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001, Diana Taylor observes that "tragedy is not just *about* containment, it functions as a structure of containment. Tragedy cuts catastrophe down to size. It orders events into

comprehensible scenarios" (261). Because of this, she argues, "using *tragedy* in its aesthetic connotation not only structures the events but also blinds us to other ways of thinking about them" (262). In the case of the Housing Crisis, the event is often fit into an aesthetic container such as tragedy, which has as one of its defining features a standard timeline that is "in cahoots" with its "Standard Plot Line" (Parks 11). The standard timeline is a linear trajectory of defined beginnings that cut off possibilities for diachronic analyses, and the standard plot line to which it is attached is the figure of the "free market." By fitting the Crisis into the container of the free market, one can explain the housing bubble in terms of individual failure on the part of borrowers or lenders to act in accordance with the laws of supply and demand, or spin a tale about how overregulation allowed government to become too involved in the market by forcing lenders to give loans to unqualified borrowers, thus disrupting the free market. The problem, however, is that there was nothing to disrupt: there is no free market.

A Mercy illustrates the way in which any imagining of such a concept must necessarily forget the country's diasporic origins. The current market of US capitalism is and has always been predicated on "the sale of human flesh at public auction" (Roach 41)—legal racial slavery. If a free market is one in which the members of the theoretical construct of *the market* are able to negotiate freely among themselves on the prices of goods and services without any outside limiting factors such as government intervention, then a society that accumulates wealth using slave labor cannot lay claim to being a free market because a segment of that market is barred from negotiations by the legal structures that deny enslaved persons their personhood.¹² Nobody in America can escape that, and Jacob, in all of his sneering, is the perfect example of this; but this fact of the market's accumulation of wealth being dependent on slave labor does not stop the performance from creating the illusion of a free market through dis-membering the diasporic stories of origin that *A Mercy* re-members. Indeed, Jacob asks himself: "There was a profound difference between the intimacy of slave bodies at Jublio and a remote labor force in Barbados. Right?" (40).

Having unpacked how the plot's narrative economy is set in motion by the economics of slavery, it becomes important to interrogate this mobilization by attending to rupture in relation to accumulation as well as containment. As such, the terms *accumulation* and *rupture* each take on double meanings. Both narrative meaning and capital (or wealth) can *accumulate*, and both narrative patterns established by accumulated meaning and economic bubbles established by accumulated capital can be *ruptured*. The novel's form as structured by these double senses of accumulation and rupture ultimately helps us read a narrative of the Housing Crisis that is not detrimentally contained by free markets or standard timelines.

This analysis re-vises dominant modes of understanding the link between slavery and capitalism as a corrective to narratives that claim, "In large part,

the [mortgage] mess was the product of government policies designed to increase homeownership among the poor and ethnic minorities" (Carney).¹³ There are already counternarratives to free market-based accounts of the Crisis, including Michael Lewis's *The Big Short: Inside the Doomsday Machine* (2010). But Lewis's book is itself a "linear narrative of catastrophe" (Roach 35). Lewis wants to claim that bankers, not borrowers, were to blame for the Crisis, but what kind of work is this substitution doing? After all, Judith Roof writes, "reproducing the same narrative with different players is no change at all" (176). This is why "[*A Mercy's*] employment of rememory's capacity to bend space and time calls into question the oversimplification of linear narratives that graph human experience only in terms of a forward progression that forgets the past and repeats its tragedies" (Babb 156). As a re-vision of mainstream American origin narratives, *A Mercy* avoids simply plugging different details into the same structure, which is what other counter-memories such as *The Big Short* do by re-visioning the Housing Crisis as the same linear story with a different cast. Still, the narratives must follow expected rules: "The die is cast, the cast must die" (Roach 35).

Unlike this kind of corrective storytelling structured by substitution within existing frameworks, *A Mercy* teaches us to read within a different temporal frame. We can ask what happens if the organizing principle of the Housing Crisis is *not* a linear timeline. Pushing further, what happens when time itself refuses to contain discrete events, when time accumulates history to the point of rupturing periodization in the moment that accumulated capital ruptures an economic bubble? Such refusal is interrogated by Parks in "Elements of Style." For Parks, the structure of repetition and re-vision "creates a drama of accumulation" (9) because when a reader encounters a sentence, phrase, or scene again after an initial iteration, that repetition in the text appears to the reader as a signifier that has gathered multiple meanings, resulting in each latter repetition carrying with it the meanings that previous iterations have established. Repetition as a literary strategy is thus inseparable from accumulation. In fact, repetition only makes its impact on the reader if meanings successfully accumulate across iterations of terms, such that when the reader of *A Mercy* encounters Florens burning a lamp in Jacob's abandoned house, this repeated scene, first narrated through the third-person limited perspective of a chapter focalized through Willard and Scully, not only takes on the immediate meaning of Florens's act of writing but also has accumulated the perceptions of the other characters that a ghost is in Jacob's house. The reader, then, encounters the scene a second time as an accumulation of meanings and has a sense of Florens not only as a writer in the immediate moment but also as a ghostly figure through the meaning accumulated via repetition in an earlier iteration. Repetition and re-vision, therefore, are "literal incorporation[s] of the past" (Parks 10), which makes the present not only influenced or affected by it but also figures the present as coexistent with the past, thus refiguring conceptions of memory and event. Time is not something that depletes,

passing from one moment to the next, but something that accumulates through repetition. As Morrison illustrates time and again, history itself cannot be conceptualized as “past,” as when Sethe tells Denver in *Beloved*: “[E]ven though it’s all over . . . it’s going to always be there waiting for you” (36). Thus, *A Mercy*, as a book which is read from first page to last, “progresses,” but in that “progress,” meaning is built through recursive accumulation. The novel is a series of re-turns, just as Florens is witness to the re-turn of a *minha mãe*’s specter in her dreams.

The novel not only performs recursive time in its repetition and re-vision of various scenes that accumulate meanings within its content; *A Mercy*’s form is itself a narrative structure of accumulation, re-turn, and rupture. On the first page of *A Mercy*, readers encounter a second-person address. On this first encounter, they become responsible in some way for the story. Yet, as readers proceed, they learn that the chapters in first person are narrated by Florens, and she is narrating to another character: the Blacksmith. So readers are relinquished of responsibility; after all, the book is not addressed directly to them.¹⁴ But what happens when instead of thinking in terms of erasure—since a *minha mãe*’s revelation in the novel’s final chapter does not erase Florens’s perspective—readers think in terms of accumulation and read the first page as being *both* a communication to and interpellation of the reader *and* Florens’s attempt at communicating with the Blacksmith, rather than replace themselves with the Blacksmith? The first chapter, narrated by Florens, is followed by a chapter narrated in third person but focalized through Jacob. Then Florens re-turns as narrator in the third chapter before the fourth chapter shifts back to third person to focalize a different character, Lina. This pattern of departures, interruptions, and accumulating re-turns of Florens’s voice continues.¹⁵ Then, like a bubble bursting after accumulating too much air or water or capital, the pattern eventually erupts. A new first-person narrator ruptures the accumulative recursion of Florens’s narration: a *minha mãe*.

This new voice is not wholly unexpected, of course; she has been in Florens’s story all along. In the novel’s first chapter, Florens’s final words recall her mother giving her away and mark the erasure of a *minha mãe*’s voice by inscribing it in the image of “mothers nursing greedy babies” who are “saying something important to me, but holding the little boy’s hand” (Morrison, *Mercy* 9). In other words, Florens remembers her mother saying something, but exactly what that something is remains absent in her story. From its inception, then, Florens’s narration encodes her mother’s absent testimony, and the novel’s structuring repetition accumulates instances of this absence. The scene of a *minha mãe* asking Jacob to take Florens is repeated in the second chapter by a third-person narrator focalized through Jacob, and in this iteration a *minha mãe* is given a spoken line, “Please, Senhor. Not me. Take her. Take my daughter” (30), which seems to fill the gap left by the first iteration by giving the enslaved woman a presence where she had merely an absence, but this presence is undercut in a moment when

"suddenly the woman smelling of cloves knelt and closed her eyes" (31). Besides the fact that this iteration does not represent a *minha mãe* saying anything to Florens, which is the absence haunting her, this description of a *minha mãe* kneeling and closing her eyes bodies the enslaved woman forth into the narrative to make obvious the foreclosing of her interior life. The overdetermined performative script of kneeling with closed eyes signifies prayer, a deeply internal moment of contemplation and expression of need and desire, but this contemplation and expression is left out of the narrative, and so a *minha mãe*'s absence is repeated and in this repetition it accumulates meaning. Not only is the reader unaware of what a *minha mãe* said to Florens but also what a *minha mãe* was thinking in this moment when she was evidently considering a profoundly difficult decision.

The figure of a *minha mãe* reemerges later in Florens's narration when Florens is dreaming of cherry trees walking toward her and says, "That is a better dream than a *minha mãe* standing near with her little boy. In those dreams she is always wanting to tell me something. Is stretching her eyes. Is working her mouth. I look away from her" (119). Again the reader encounters a *minha mãe* trying to tell Florens something, but in this iteration, meaning has accumulated through repetition so that the reader understands that perhaps what a *minha mãe* is trying to say and what Florens cannot hear are precisely the internal thoughts implied by a *minha mãe*'s performative body in an earlier chapter. This is precisely a case of repetition entailing a "drama of accumulation" (Parks 9). *A Mercy* is structured by a form that inscribes repetition as a governing mode of meaning-making, and the content of that meaning accumulates across iterations of repeated moments. So when the novel's form of a structured pattern of narration is interrupted, that form is ruptured by the accumulation of content. The unspeakable is expressed when the reader finally speaks with the specter haunting Florens.

The enslaved laborers aboard D'Ortega's ship are not the only sacrifice in the novel. The narrative structure is sacrificed by the novel after Florens's unanswered question about what her mother is trying to tell her repeats to the point of Florens accepting her "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 Cyprus" (Morrison, *Mercy* 189). This singular moment has accumulated meaning through repetitions of a *minha mãe*'s absence and the accumulated experiences of Florens through her journey. As a result, this scene contains more than its immediate context. One could imagine the novel ending here, leaving readers to piece together what a *minha mãe* was possibly trying to tell Florens by mining the text for her voice in the moments when it is inaudible. The novel does not end here, however, and the next chapter enacts the rupturing of the novel's narrative structure by its accumulating content when a *minha mãe* finally speaks. The very repetition of her absence actually accumulates her presence so that she is bodied

forth in the final chapter. She is, in Roach's formulation of circum-Atlantic memory, the novel's memory imperfectly deferred; her internal voice is unspeakable for the novel but cannot forever remain inexpressible precisely because, in a classically deconstructive sense, all of the repeated significations of its absence are the very modes of ensuring its presence. In Derrida's words, "the name of the one who disappeared must have gotten inscribed someplace else" (4). We never get a *minha mãe's* name, but we get her voice, and the final chapter is the necessary "someplace else." This is not merely an arbitrary turn to theory given a *minha mãe's* own preoccupation with place and (dis-)placement in her narration. Immediately following Florens commenting that her feet are hardened by her own travels, her mother narrates the thus far unspoken violence of the Middle Passage in her final chapter.¹⁶ This reemergence of the buried voice of the Middle Passage and this hyperattention to place and displacement happen in a novel that is published during a moment when the largest financial collapse since the Great Depression threatens to displace people across the United States who would be foreclosed out of their homes.

A *Mercy's* release may be coincidental with the Housing Crisis, but the repetition of the drowning enslaved peoples of history within the drowning enslaved Africans of D'Ortega's ship and within the drowning of the US economy in the floodwaters of the bursting housing bubble washes away lines of containment, much like literal floodwaters do to plots of property when water accumulates beyond the capacity of levees to contain them. With Spillers and Derrida in mind, it cannot be claimed that all these objects of comparison are equivalent, but they are similar in meaningful ways, so that while people *metaphorically* "drowned" in the bursting of the housing bubble, they did not literally "drown" in the same way as the enslaved Africans thrown overboard the *Zong*; however, some of them did, in fact, lose their homes, so that they did feel material violence in this metaphoric drowning.¹⁷ This violence is ghosted by the specter of slavery, which, in turn, haunts finance capitalism as that which makes it possible. Therefore, the model of a linear progression of time, like the boundaries between plots of property, is revealed in these moments of flooding and drowning to be an artificial barrier too weak to contain the re-turn of the specter. Florens experiences this in the moment when she assaults the Blacksmith, narrating, "Feathers lifting, I unfold. The claws scratch and scratch until the hammer is in my hand" (Morrison, *Mercy* 167). In this moment, the "mothers nursing greedy babies" (9) from the first chapter are refigured in the Blacksmith's injured son Malaik when Florens says of the Blacksmith: "You choose the boy. You call his name first" (165). The word "choose" from the first chapter is repeated and re-vised through the Blacksmith, whose choice thus echoes and is present with a *minha mãe's* choice. Florens's violence is figured by an epistemology rooted in a misreading made possible by slavery and the Middle Passage. To contain a reading of Florens's violence within a strictly periodized moment of her present is to misread the event of the assault.

Taking this lesson to the novel's present of 2008, it might be misleading to think of the Housing Crisis in terms of a one-directional timeline. The seductive linearity of initial accounts was a more digestible package that erased the recursion of bursting financial bubbles in the history of capitalism within circum-Atlantic modernity. Similarly, CDOs are packages of mortgages presented as self-contained financial objects—an autochthonous imaginary—when in fact they are conglomerates corresponding to people's lives scattered around the country. If the reality of the Housing Crisis is scattered, then approaching the problem through unidirectional linear narrative may obscure rather than illuminate. Perhaps such linearity is so seductive, however, because it makes it easy to find someone to blame. Florens can blame her mother for giving her away because her linear narrative cannot conceptualize the mercy of her mother's action.

One magnetic blame target in the Crisis's aftermath was the public advocacy group, the Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now (ACORN). Based on fabricated evidence, ACORN was demonized so much within public discourse that, although it was cleared of charges in March 2010, it is now bankrupt. But why target ACORN? In the words of CEO Bertha Lewis: "Our effective work empowering African-American and low-income voters made us a target" ("ACORN"). ACORN can be read as a specific kind of Roach's "effigy"—what Rene Girard would call a "monstrous double" (qtd. in Roach 40). In order to protect the power of the system on which the financial sector is based, those who blame mortgage borrowers select a subgroup on the peripheries of US society: people of color, especially because these people were relegated to the peripheries by the economic system itself. This socially peripheral group becomes symbolically central to the core of the US capitalist identity, in which each individual is supposed to be self-supportive—that is, economically autochthonous. The financial sector is supposedly able to inoculate itself against deconstruction by forcing a critical gaze toward the "high risk" borrowers, which often means "minority borrowers," as George Lipsitz notes (14). After an effigy was selected in the form of a community "distanced by a special identity that specifies isolation while simultaneously allowing plausible surrogation for a member of the community" (Roach 40), ACORN emerged as a "monstrous double" to stand in for people of color who themselves stand in for the predominantly white financial sector at the center of the Crisis.

Lipsitz hypothesizes *why* racial monstrous doubles are so important to such narratives: "In addition to protecting centralized power and wealth and dividing its opponents, the neoracism of contemporary conservatism also functions as an important unifying symbol for a disparate and sometimes antagonistic coalition" (16). Essentially, in order to maintain a "myth of coherence at the center" (Roach 39), conservatives' accounts of the Housing Crisis need to identify a substitute outside of their own borders at the risk of exposing internal incoherence. This logic of sacrificial expenditure is both a logic of political and social organization and of narrative organization. To reiterate, in *A Mercy*, characters are sacrificed in

order to mobilize the plot. If the enslaved Africans on D'Ortega's ship—who themselves, in their political (non)existence and relation to D'Ortega and Jacob as figures of debts to be paid, monstrously double the enslaved protagonist, Florens—do not die, there is no novel. In a doubly monstrous sense, it is also true that if the nameless members of Lina's tribe—and more generally, Native Americans across the east coast of North America—are not killed or displaced, then there is also no novel. While the references to the genocide of Native Americans are sometimes fleeting in the text, Lina's presence in *A Mercy* makes Native subjects matter to the novel's circum-Atlantic narrative economy of sacrificial expenditure. Her presence on the Vaark farm, especially after Rebekka recovers from her illness and completely changes her friendly demeanor with her servants, is a constant reminder of the condition of possibility for the narrative. Even prior to the deaths of the enslaved Africans on D'Ortega's ship, if Lina's people are not killed and if their land is not stolen, there is no story to tell about the Vaark farm as a coherent community. Lina's suffering does not remain merely instrumental, however, as Morrison leaves readers with the image of Lina standing outside in the rain by herself while Rebekka attends mass, forcing us to dwell with Lina's pain on her own terms. It is thus doubly the case that both Jacob's wealth accumulation that enables the erection of his third house and the novel's narrative accumulation that produces the rupture of the narrative structure in the final chapter are set in motion by sacrifice which enables “myth[s] of coherence.”

While the expenditure of the unnamed enslaved Africans aboard D'Ortega's ship or the sacrificial genocide of Native Americans is *not equivalent* to the sacrifice of ACORN described above, this narrative sacrifice within *A Mercy* disturbingly resonates with the sacrifices of the Housing Crisis because both are structured by the same discursive logic, even if the violence produced is different. Just as the novel must spend the lives of the enslaved persons on D'Ortega's ship to propel the plot, the fiction of the free market must spend the lives of the disempowered in order to maintain its own existence.¹⁸ The comparison between the fictional novel and the real world economy ceases to be coincidental when sacrifice becomes the focal point. The sacrificial expenditure of *A Mercy*'s narrative economy is not merely a metaphor but an expression of the relations of creditors, debtors, and commodified human bodies within the emergence of modern finance capitalism.

In an interview with Reason.com, Peter Wallison asserts that the weak economy following the bursting of the housing bubble was the direct result of government intervention because, “if we had just let the housing market decline[,] . . . then we would have been in recovery right now” (Randazzo). If only, indeed. “One question is who is responsible? Another is can [we] read?” (Morrison, *Mercy* 3). These questions bear repeating, and repeating, and repeating. Reading *A Mercy* is so difficult precisely because it is haunted by ghosts of both real and fictional enslaved persons and real and fictional Native Americans killed

in the genocide that made the United States possible. As a historical novel that “creates new historical events . . . ripe for the canon of history” (Parks 4-5), *A Mercy* also recalls the specters that haunt its present time. While it may seem desirable for some to tell a story of US capitalism as the grand culmination of rugged individualism, a story of autochthony, “diaspora tends to put pressure on autochthony, threatening its imputed purity” (Roach 43). The “free market” has always already been predicated on slavery and diasporic accumulation, and thus its claims on freedom are untenable because of the specters that continue to haunt and, in these repetitions of sacrificial expenditure, possess it.

This of course does not stop performances of ritual sacrifice because, “at this promising yet dangerous juncture, catastrophe may reemerge from memory in the shape of a wish” (Roach 43). Just as Jacob’s initial experience of D’Ortega’s performance of wealth leads him to believe D’Ortega to be a “curdled, arrogant fop” (Morrison, *Mercy* 29), only to reemerge from memory later in the form of his wish to perform his own wealth through the erection of his third house, the United States’ initial experience of the tragedy of slavery reemerges from memory later on in the form of a wish, however silent in its expression, for the repetition of the jettisoning and drowning of dead bodies. Only this time, the bodies may be physically alive but socially dead.¹⁹ Again, repetition is an incorporation of the past within the present, but not exact replication. US law may no longer permit the enslavement of black people such that they may be killed and thrown overboard ships, but it does enable practices of mass incarceration and seemingly unmitigated killings by police. While these forms of violence are not equivalent to the economic violence of the 2008 Crisis, they are grounded in the same assumption that Hartman identifies as the imagination of the black body as always expendable and always a receptacle for violence.

No Protection, But Difference

Morrison, of course, rejects the assumption of the expendability of black bodies. Reading *A Mercy* as a circum-Atlantic memory alongside another such as the Housing Crisis teaches the lesson that Pilate learns from the ghost of her father in Morrison’s *Song of Solomon* (1977): “You can’t just fly on off and leave a body” (147). Not so long as a “voice still echoes in the bone” (Roach 71). Those “nine million just disappeared” (Parks 52), the “sixty million and more” (Morrison, *Beloved*), the 132 thrown overboard the *Zong* (Baucom; Philip), and the countless millions of Native Americans with and without blankets haunt the United States today; and their specters cannot be contained by any narrative of an autochthonous free market or model of a linear progression of history.

Novels such as *A Mercy* which re-member supposed points of origin are able to “intervene at the same point as white supremacists who then write the story in

its most egregiously monolithic terms” and “break the story down so that it cannot end at all, working not only against identity (in the narrative sense) but against the ideological and sexual dynamic of an end product enacted by narrative itself” (Roof 182). *A Mercy* defeats containment strategies by teaching one of its most painful lessons: *there is no protection* from the specters whose memories have not been erased but only imperfectly deferred. The specters of the circum-Atlantic are contemporary America’s inheritance and, as Derrida writes, “There is no inheritance without a call to responsibility.” For Derrida, because “the being of what we are is first of all inheritance” (68), we have, whether we admit it or not, responsibilities on behalf of this inheritance, and until we fulfill the responsibility called forth by the inheritance that we do not choose, we remain in debt.²⁰ This is a debt that cannot be wished away by appealing to the expanse of time that has passed since slavery and Native genocide. The time for taking shelter in time is over—indeed, it never was. The catastrophe of the Housing Crisis was a failure of containment, and that containment was itself an attempt to relinquish responsibility, to leave millions of bodies behind, buried, sunk, or drowned. *A Mercy* places this inheritance literally in our hands—as if it was not there already.

Ultimately, while *A Mercy* is not “about” the Housing Crisis, it *is* about crises of housing and home. Florens, Lina, Rebekka, and Sorrow are all coping with displacement and trying to create home on the Vaark farm. Every character who is the focalizer in a chapter is trying to “build” or “shape” or “mold” a world. Florens is looking for the Blacksmith so he can be her shaper and her world; Jacob begins building a third house to secure his class status; Lina is looking for “a way to be in the world” (Morrison, *Mercy* 57); Rebekka and the women in the ship’s hold with her on her transatlantic journey create a space in which “women of and for men, in those few minutes they were neither” (100); Sorrow is repairing a world perceived through the trauma of loss through her reconceived identity as Complete following childbirth; and Scully and Willard are looking beyond their terms of indenture towards “dark matter . . . aching to be made into a world” (183). In fact, the novel itself is a kind of world-building and home-making. As readers learn, all of the words of the chapters narrated by Florens are words that she has written on the walls of a room in Jacob’s third house. That house was never meant to be a home for Florens; she remains an orphan throughout, defined in her own mind by her separation from her mother who herself was separated from her home. Yet, in the face of this crisis, Florens is able to be in the world through shaping a space in which she can write: “I am become wilderness but I am also Florens . . . Slave. Free. I Last” (189). By writing on property that she helped to build, but to which she has no legal claims of ownership, Florens is able to assert her own humanity in a world that reads her as “worth twenty pieces of eight” (31). She is able, at least in that small space for that short period of time, to *be* in the world.

When faced with a crisis of housing and home, as Florens is, it is possible to find spaces in which to (re)build, as long as we can dwell in those spaces as Florens does and as long as we can re-member the dis-memberment of diaspora, as a *minha mãe* and the novel itself do. When we do those things—when we speak with the specters of the dead and those left behind—then we can answer the novel's question in the affirmative. Then, we can read.

Notes

This essay would not have reached its current form without the insightful commentary, editorial eyes, and helpful guidance of a number of people, including the anonymous reviewers for *MELUS*. Numerous colleagues and mentors at Cornell University, including Margo Crawford, Christine “Xine” Yao, Riche Richardson, Grant Farred, Dagmawi Woubshet, Anna McCormick, and Annie McClanahan, were invaluable interlocutors as I drafted versions of this essay. I would also like to thank my classmates in a course on the Housing Crisis at SUNY Geneseo in 2011 for the initial conversations and workshopping that birthed this project. Finally, this essay would have never been written without the guidance and insight of Beth A. McCoy—thank you.

1. While there are multiple signifiers for the 2008 economic crisis, including “financial crisis” and “subprime (mortgage) crisis,” I refer to the “event” as the Housing Crisis to underscore the human toll of the catastrophe, as thousands of people living in the United States were faced with the crisis of losing their shelter and home.
2. Although I focus on the Housing Crisis, I build on scholarship that establishes slavery as a condition of possibility for capitalism as we know it. For recent examples see Edward Baptist, Lindon Barrett, Sven Beckert, Seth Rockman, and Ian Baucom.
3. While “a *minha mãe*” literally translates to “my mother,” which is a description rather than a name, Florens’s mother remains unnamed throughout the novel and is only ever referred to by this combination of words, so I use this phrase in referring to her throughout my essay.
4. Jessica Wells Cantiello places *A Mercy* within its contemporary moment of the 2008 election of Barack Obama. The majority of scholarship, however, has focused on the former way of thinking about the novel despite the frequency with which the novel has been reviewed in terms of its contemporary moment.
5. See essays by Valerie Babb, Mina Karavanta, Cantiello, and Naomi Morgenstern for arguments that emphasize this framing of *A Mercy*, each to different ends.
6. See Fred Moten’s *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* (2003) (8-11) for his initial riffing on Marx’s imagination of “the commodity who speaks.”

7. A collateralized debt obligation, or CDO, is a kind of structured asset-backed security, or ABS. This type of ABS eventually evolved to encompass mortgage and mortgage-backed security markets, and it was these latter kinds that were traded as bundles of mortgages between major banks in the years leading up to the 2008 market crash. For more on CDOs in a format accessible to nonspecialists of the finance industry, see Michael Lewis's *The Big Short: Inside the Doomsday Machine* (2010).
8. See Morgenstern for more discussion of this connection.
9. See Saidiya Hartman's chapter, "Seduction and the Ruses of Power," in *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (1997) for a thorough analysis of the problematics of "choice" and "free will" under the regime of chattel slavery.
10. Patricia J. Williams discusses the shift in conceptualizing "the notion of ourselves as 'free'" with that of "free agent" in a way that anticipates these reactions in the aftermath of the Housing Crisis (196).
11. While the Great Recession that followed the 2008 Housing Crisis affected Americans of all races, I insist on the centrality of the detrimental effects on people of color. See "Race and Recession: How Inequity Rigged the Economy and How to Change the Rules" (2009) for evidence of the ways in which people of color were disproportionately hurt by the financial collapse. In addition, see George Lipsitz and Ta-Nehisi Coates for accounts of how the US economy has predicated itself on racist policy, David Roediger's *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class* (2007) for an account of the shortcomings of class as an independent analytical framework, and Melvin Oliver and Thomas Shapiro's *Black Wealth/White Wealth: A New Perspective on Racial Inequality* (2006) for an account of the historical wealth disparities between black and white Americans playing out in the studies of Coates and Roediger.
12. Throughout this essay, I take the assumption of enslaved laborers as *slaves*, and thus already as nonpersons, to be untenable, which I reflect in my use of the term *enslaved Africans* as opposed to *slaves*. If we are going to tell a story about the economics of slavery, we have to go back to the enslavement of the enslaved, not start with slaves as an ontological given.
13. Such rhetoric, audible on the Right in heavily circulating political discourse, is not necessarily tied to rigorous economic analysis. One professional economist, Thomas DiLorenzo, offers a prototypical example of this kind of discourse in "The Government-Created Subprime Mortgage Meltdown" (2007). See also Ann Coulter and Peter Wallison.
14. Stephen Best insists on reading Florens's second-person remarks in this way in his essay, "On Failing to Make the Past Present" (2012).
15. Karavanta articulates an insightful reading of Florens as "the mock historian whose specter returns to present her archive" (727).

16. Florens's displacement is not its own diaspora, but her travel can be placed appositionally with her mother's diasporic travel.
17. For elaboration on the material damage of the Housing Crisis, see "Race and Recession"; Matthew Hall, Kyle Crowder, and Amy Spring's study on foreclosures, migration, and segregation; and Ruby Mendenhall's analysis of the political economy of black housing.
18. And yet, as the free market spends the lives of the dispossessed, it also functions as cultural "magic," providing a basis for explaining its own sacrificial expenditure in terms of economic rationalism as opposed to racism, as Derek S. Hoff describes in his review of David Freund's book, *Colored Property: State Policy and White Racial Politics in Suburban America* (2008).
19. I allude to Jared Sexton's theorizing of social death in "The Social Life of Social Death: On Afro-Pessimism and Black Optimism" (2011) as an elaboration on Orlando Patterson's initial formulation in *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study* (1982), which more fully captures the way in which life continues even in the living of social death.
20. Paying this debt to the specters of the Atlantic voiced through a minha mãe's narration in *A Mercy* may mean paying reparations, a gesture which is present in this essay's argument but which does not capture the full or only meaning of "responsibility" or "debt." I acknowledge this here because it would be dishonest to not mention the argument's rhetorical call toward reparation, but it would also be reductive to imply that such an action would be the definitive, sufficient, and necessary logical end of the argument. In other words, this essay is not an argument for reparations, but it is also not *not* an argument for reparations.

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