Research Article

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Botanical imaginary of indigeneity and rhizomatic sustainability in Toni Morrison's *A Mercy*

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Abstract: This article explores a botanical imaginary in *A Mercy* (2008), the ninth narrative by African American writer and critic Toni Morrison. Arguably, *A Mercy* features the botanical design of the rhizome to activate a revisionary model of sustainability. In particular, the narrative's imaginary suggests a synergy that liberates the restrictive root of Indigeneity as a precondition to reconcile a tension of rigid binaries with the customary routes that lead to closure. This reconciliation will enunciate a radical break with the limited sustainability paradigms that are still constitutive of colonial modernity. Arguably, *A Mercy* features a transgressive array of journeys whose rhizomatic root of biodiversity transcends what is cultivated in the colonial American soil and mobilizes symbiotic and liberatory sustainability for humans and non-humans. Deleuze and Guattari's principles of the "rhizome" philosophy contribute a main theoretical framework for construing the narrative's botanical composition that suspends the inequitable realization of sustainability.

Keywords: rhizome, botanical, Morrison, *A Mercy*, nomadism

1 Introduction

This article examines how *A Mercy* (2008), the ninth narrative by African American author Toni Morrison, suggests a botanical imaginary of sustainability to radicalize the ongoing anthropocentric paradigms that are constitutive of colonial modernity. To this end, this essay introduces a radical imaginary of botanical Indigeneity and rethinks its problematic genetics to free its ensuing rhetoric of sustainability from the ongoing anthropocentric and colonial alliances. In this context, Morrison's *A Mercy* presents a relevant case study where a botanical American narrative explores colonial America in the late 17th century and negotiates the rigid binaries of roots and routes, which dominate the colonial American and Transatlantic journeys. A review of the critical readings of *A Mercy* reveals their reliance on customary contexts and national boundaries. The survey reflects the research's critical hold of a short time frame that follows the colonial and hegemonic mapping of history.[1] In particular, *A Mercy* has been cited for its presentation of mobility that is translated in the African American context and particularly tied to the conventional journeys where nature is either

1 Karavanta (2012) reads *A Mercy* as a historical narrative that configures a negative community forged on affiliations, affects, and interdependencies as much as conflict, contradiction, and inequalities.

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marginalized or threatened, or where it is mainly a male experience that is consigned with control and consequent ruptures.[2] However, construing a botanical imaginary in *A Mercy* will locate equitable viability and collective survival for males, females, and nature itself. Arguably, Morrison's *A Mercy* features Deleuze and Guattari's rhizomatic pattern whose botanical imaginary model rethinks the traditional implication of Indigeneity, as a search for centralized root, and the colonial route that leads toward closure; releases the root/route tension of rigidities; and acknowledges cultural, social, ethnic, human, and non-human hybridity. Such revision would entail a collective sustainability that is contingent on the experimental core of the narrative's case of biodiversity.

2 Literature Review

2.1 Problematic Imaginaries of Indigeneity and Limited Sustainability

The existing scholarship on the discourse of new future imaginaries debunks their propagation of neocolonial embeddedness and calls for the suspension of their anthropocentric speculation that arbitrates a limited perception of sustainability. For instance, the critical readings of American future imaginaries demonstrate how these models promote revolutionary technologies that despite their liberation potentials have become of geopolitical dominance (Barbrook, 2007). Critiques of the neocolonial assumptions of the future highlight the emergence of the discourses of Indigeneity as counter imaginaries. In this regard, Baudemann (2022) reiterates that the epistemology of the equitable future mediates the oppositional praxis of Indigeneity to negotiate the colonial visions of what is to come. The imaginaries of Indigeneity then conflate mutable identities and malleable, textual, and digital products that can function as tool for decolonization. In this context, Lewis (2022) illuminates the agency of such imaginaries in challenging the linear and restrictive vision of the future, hybridizing the present, and altering the past. As such, the initiatives for Indigenous futures have conflated pluralistic visions of self-determined futures to empower Indigenous communities and claim the sustainable presence of their realities. Ultimately, the imaginaries of Indigeneity have necessitated unlearning the epistemic control of anthropocentric paradigms to recognize the role of Indigenous communities as a matrix for envisioning alternative futures of sustainability.

Yet, several studies demonstrate that not all anticolonial modes of Indigeneity necessarily are in liberatory channels of sustainability. For instance, Kumarakulasingam and Ngcoya (2016) ultimately warn against "the limitations of an emergent global discourse of Indigeneity to offer an oppositional praxis of sustainability in the face of the depredations of settler colonialism" (p. 843). As such, they call for reclaiming social justice in such discourses of Indigeneity. To this end, other critics contend that "the demands for social justice often intersect with environmental issue" as "the politics of environmental justice arise when peoples' lives are negatively affected by unsustainable economies" (Delanty, 2021, p. 292). Ultimately, these critiques reposition the politics of sustainability within extended channels of the Anthropocene (p. 292) and recommend an engagement between social sustainability and environmental sustainability. Such readings suggest that the imaginaries of Indigeneity need to proceed beyond those that bear familial resemblance to emergent global understandings as they consequently create a problematic vision of sustainability.

2.2 Radical botanical Imaginaries: Subversive Visions of Indigeneity and Sustainability

In response, critiques of botany position botanical Indigeneity as a matrix for suspending the epistemic infiltration of globalization in the imaginaries of Indigeneity. So, they particularly propose botanical fiction

2 Omry (2011) reads Jacob's journey as an inscription of the American dream, with its focus on financial success at the expense of domestic felicity. Omry's interpretation also considers a religious connection with nature and highlights the significance of Judeo-Christian mythology as it plays itself out in the incipient American Landscape.

as a significant, yet effaced, site for mobilizing the ignored voices in the speculative discourses of Indigeneity and visions of sustainability. Arguably, the marginalized tradition of botanical fiction uncovers a long speculative practice that suggests that plants are the "emissaries to a physical world that lies beyond direct human perception" (Meeker & Szabari, 2020, p. 28). Ultimately, narratives of botanical speculations invent and disseminate forms of mediation that integrate botany as a matrix for future scenarios. In this context, many critics, such as Meeker and Szabari (2020), show how discourses of botany and vegetality have contributed to alternative speculative forms for social and political agency. These forms depart from long-standing pastoral and botanical models, in which the plant primarily served as an object of poetic epistemology, and instead experimented with the intermingling of science and fiction (Meeker & Szabari, 2020, p. 56). Meeker and Szabari reveal that as early as the imaginary vegetal societies of the eighteenth century, readers encountered an active form of sociability in which humans and nonhuman alliances galvanize mutability (p. 56). As such, even as they anticipate the vitalist transformation in the life sciences, the 17th and 18th century narratives of botanical speculation suggest "the sustained proximity of plants to modes of animation and vitality unrelated to and undefined by organisms and the life that they embody" (p. 86). Moreover, early modern radical botanists also elaborate "that plants can function as technologies of animation, setting in motion human desires, ideas, and bodies, even as they recede from the values and social ideals that we may try to project onto them" (p. 171). In this regard, many environmental critics contend that excavating this marginalized tradition of motion and animation allows us to rethink our relation to plants as they design fiction and speculative scenarios that challenge current technological changes, global connections, and climate change. This is the counter vision that Deleuze and Guattari will eventually turn in their deployment of the rhizome, a 20th century instantiation of radical botany, which is not an anthropological study of culture. Rather, it is a living organic continuous effort to free the forces that have been constrained – and in relation to literature, a challenge to the assumed literary canon. Considering the speculative potential of botanical narratives, the possibility of envisioning liberatory sustainability in literary and cultural practices necessitates the activation of a rhizomatic praxis that features affinity and mutuality and radically unlearns centralized structures that control the production of the future.

3 Discussion

3.1 Rhizomatic Interplay of Rival Sign Systems

In light of the rhizome's notion, Morrison's *A Mercy* introduces a botanical praxis that decenters the tension of rigidities between the traditionally fixed lineage of indigeneity/root and the oppressive discourse of colonial history/route to construct an imaginary of collective and unrestrained sustainability. The rhizome, as a botanical trope, is central to Deleuze and Guattari's proposed philosophy of resistance in *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (1992). The rhizome is a "form of plant-life that spreads, such as mushroom or crabgrass, without a central root, spot of origination or logical pattern" (Deleuze & Guattari, 1992, p. 29). Deleuze and Guattari read the rhizome as a "symbol of rootlessness because it opposes the traditional, rational, and logical approach to knowledge" (Siundu, 2023, p. 4). Deleuze and Guattari explain that the traditional (logical) approach to knowledge is represented as growing from roots – like a tree does. As a philosophical concept, the rhizome is a rejection of traditional genealogy as it "has neither beginning nor end, but always a middle (melieu) from which it grows and which it overspills" (1992, p. 42) and represents a "self-vibrating region of intensities whose development avoids any orientation toward a culmination point or external end" (p. 43). The absence of ends is an outcome of the rhizome's structure that "brings into play very different regimes of signs, and even nonsign states" (p. 42) and produces "variation[s], expansion[s], conquest [s], [and] offshoots" (p. 47). Ultimately, the rhizome becomes an intertext for the counter narratives to the hegemony of the grand discourses of exclusiveness and control. The first rhizomatic principle that Morrison's *A Mercy* integrates is the interdependence of rival sign systems. *A Mercy* re-inscribes many historical records and features the connections of numerous but often competing narrative perspectives in ways that activate

historical revision. This rhizomatic feature not only worries the borderlines between history and fiction but also expands its botanical mobility to intervene with the colonial past of America. In particular, Morrison both redeploys grand historical, cultural, and economic references and activates their resistance through a rhizomatic structure that features a symbiotic interplay and interdependence of dominantly opposing sign systems.[3]

A Mercy first synthesizes historical narratives that are correlated with colonialism. The first narrative is that of the Abenakis and Lenapes who were treated unequally by the European officials and systematically displaced from the environment through legalized means that devalued their relationships to the land (p. 51). Another infamous historical reference related to the Salem Witch trials that started by the end of the 17th century is also included (p. 110). Moreover, Morrison alludes specifically to Bacon's Rebellion, a 1676 uprising of slaves and indentured servants against the rule of Virginia Governor William Berkeley. Following Bacon's Rebellion, the Virginia government instated a series of laws referred to as the Virginia Slave Codes of 1705, reducing the rights of black slaves and black people in general in the state of Virginia (p. 58). The oceanic narrative is another grand historical reference that is recalled in *A Mercy*. Morrison highlights how the ocean was conceived as a starting point for the colonial history of the African American community and was marked with the transatlantic voyages between West Africa and the Americas. Morrison even refers to the oppressive psychology of the historical slave trade that exterminated Indigenous farming practices and ultimately disrupted the sustainability of the geographical landscape of America. *A Mercy* also contextualizes the 17th century global economy that stretched from Angola to Portugal, to Barbados, and then to North America in which "rum rules, no matter who does the trading" (p. 31) and where tobacco and slaves are married, each currency clutching its partner's elbow. All of these references construct customary routes and sedentary spaces that are striated by ideological hierarchies and colonial closures.

3.2 Rhizomatic Destratification and the Principle of Randomness and Contingency

However, Morrison sustains a rhizomatic composition that alternatively mobilizes patterns of resistance to the controlling grand narratives that enforce isolative and oppressive hierarchies. *A Mercy* activates the illogical pattern of the rhizomatic structure and projects an inclination toward "aleatoricism" or probability that, in turn, adds to the aesthetic value of the narrative. Evaluating such aestheticism, Eco (1989) demonstrates that "the work of art gains its aesthetic validity precisely in proportion to the number of different perspectives from which it can be viewed and understood" (p. 169). To use the Deleuzian and Guattarian terms, *A Mercy* features "lines of articulation or segmentarity, strata and territories" that are decentered by "lines of flight, movements of deterritorialization and destratification" (p. 3). *A Mercy* activates rhizomatic destratification and introduces a non-gendered, non-racially centralized, and non-individualized type of collective identity. In this regard, Weagner (2009) demonstrates how "Morrison offers a multi-voiced litany featuring a collection of waifs of various (mixed) ethnicities, vacuous aristocrats, debilitating religions, conscienceless trade" (p. 91). Weagner's reference to the presence of a "multi-voiced" community is central to the investigation of the community's opaque identities that are unpredictable and resistant to categorization and consequently lead to a larger social collective entity. The narrative first encompasses a multiracial set of characters: Lina, a Presbyterian; Jacob Vaark, the Dutch-Anglo patriarch of the household; Rebekka, Jacob Vaark's white wife shipped from England to marry him; Sorrow, a shipwreck survivor of indeterminate racial background; Florens, a part-African and part-Portuguese black girl enslaved as a debt-payment; and Florens's mother, an Angolan slave. However, these characters coexist in a state of mutual dependency that entails opacity and creates a world of a

3 The rhizomatic interplay that is based on connections corresponds to the "Symbiotic Posthumanist Ecologies" that Karpouzou and Zampaki (2023) urgently propose. Karpouzou and Zampaki call for "new modes of analysis and interpretation" that "must be developed if we seek to go beyond the binaries that underpin the human species' separation from the non- human other and jeopardize the planet's sustainability" (pp. 11–12).

rhizomorphic "patchwork composition" (Deleuze & Guattari, 1992, p. 572) that reflects openness for gender, racial, and ethnic diversity.

The narrative also clearly refers to receptacles whose existence presupposes cultural randomness and hybridity. One case is that of Scully whose racial line is not identified and who is enjoying the recalling of a company in Virginia where there were "twenty-three men working tobacco fields. Six English, one native, twelve from Africa by way of Barbados" (Morrison, 2008, p. 149). Another case is that of the diverse community on the slave ship that carried Florens's mother. She reflects: "their skin was confusing. The men guarding we and selling we are black…They assure we that the whitened men don't want to eat we" (p. 164). The reflections of Florens's mother celebrate the reassuring presence of more than one nationality.

A Mercy also becomes a collective narrative that praises a non-gendered space that features the peaceful coexistence of both males and females. Though the narrative criticizes the centralized and extractive deeds of Jacob, it features a plateau where men are needed and no pure healthy community is grasped without their existence. Rather than serving as a figure of oppressive dominance, Jacob is often depicted as the protector and savior of the women within the text. The Blacksmith, who also represents a superior male figure within the text, is described as a man who aids rather than oppresses the women. Despite his problematic effect on Florens, Lina describes him as having "brought one girl to womanhood and saved the life of another" (p. 49). In this regard, Melton (2013) reads the Blacksmith, Willard, Scully, Jacob, and D'Ortega in light of Morrison's experimentation with the grand boundaries of the neo-slave narratives that passively feature and ironically circulate racialized notions of masculinity. Melton rightly concludes that Morrison's ninth novel extends the established limits of the neo-slave narrative to offer "an inclusive genre that comprehends the experiences of slaves and former slaves, black and white, 'slave' and 'free'" (p. 41). Melton's argument is central to the contention that the rhizomatic composition of *A Mercy* proposes a revisionary narrative that shifts the focus from the passive exposure of hierarchical and violent stratification to the excavation of the effaced, culturally hybrid root that is shaped by reassuring unpredictability and concomitance.

The rhizomatic composition of *A Mercy* also discursively dissociates certain labels from the grand colonial control and imparts the impetus of diversity and contingency to their implications. Interpreting her design of *A Mercy*, Morrison explains her liberatory reconceptualization of slavery. She demonstrates how she "was interested in separating racism from slavery. There have always been slaves, everywhere. However, only in this country are the terms so interchangeable. White people were slaves. They called themselves indentured servants. But they could be put in wills, their debts could be passed on to children, any infraction would extend their term forever" (Bass, 2008, p. 87). Morrison's interpretation entails that *A Mercy* illustrates how hierarchical references must be suspended and privilege relinquished. For example, Scully and Willard, whose race is not identified, find themselves as indentured servants, no better off culturally, economically, and legally than most African slaves. In the case of the Blacksmith, Morrison presents a powerful, self-actualized figure of a black man in colonial America who is not a slave and, because of the late 17th century timeframe of the novel and the still relatively nascent instantiation of the slave culture in the colonies, has never been a slave. The Blacksmith is a figure alternately divine and demonic. He is a healer and "a savior" (Morrison, 2008, p. 127). But his methods are extravagant and frightening, aligning him as much with magic as with miracles. When Sorrow is burned, the Blacksmith treats her with vinegar and her own blood in a ritualistic manner. The description of the Blacksmith's therapy recalls communion, sacrifice, and exorcism: "the smithy called for vinegar. Lina went to fetch it, and when it came, he doused Sorrow's boils and the skin of her face and arms, sending her into spasms of pain. While the women sucked air and Sir frowned, the Blacksmith heated a knife and slit open one of the swellings. They watched in silence as he tipped Sorrow's own blood drops between her lips" (p. 125). Although Scully and Willard appear only briefly in the course of the novel, they do figure importantly as helpers in the community the narrative depicts. For example, it is these two men who, much to their own great delight, help Sorrow give birth to her second child. They also provide much-needed male support and protection to Rebecca and her household following Jacob's death.

A Mercy then envisions an assemblage of provisionary identities and communities that ultimately suggest entryways for re-investigating the beginnings of America. The narrative produces a rhizomatic account of a contingent collective identity that is shaped by heterogeneity and connections rather than individually centered relations. Such provisionary identity would trigger an imaginary of "when, what we now call America,

was [a] fluid" (Lynn, 2008) violation of the centralized roots of identities that ultimately create rigid binaries along with the ideologically stratified routes.

3.3 Rhizome's Cartographic Map and the Activation of Curative Biodiversity

Collective identities are expanded in *A Mercy* to feature biodiversity that challenges the traditional tracing of routes, dismantles hierarchical thought, and proposes an equitable model that expands and sustains possibilities. In this regard, Deleuze and Guattari argue that the rhizome integrates a minor-oriented – rather than dominant-oriented – philosophical approach that is achieved by "surveying, mapping" those lost or dominated cultures, classes, sexes, and races (p. 26). This trajectory entails "a condition where the tap root of ideology has been aborted in favor of the shifting layers and boundless interconnectivities of the rhizome" (Pearce & Toy, 1995, p. 7). The abortion of ideological centralization, suggested by Pearce and Toy, creates, to use Deleuzian terms, a "cartographic map" (Deleuze & Guattari, 1992, p. 310) or "a collage – pasticcios interrelating things that open up a smorgasbord of meanings … not a tracing" (p. 311), which has an anthropocentric restriction as being merely a means to achieve a destination or grasp a home that is hinged by a dominant ideology. What distinguishes this cartographic map from the tracing is that it is "entirely oriented toward experimentation" (p. 312) which reflects "decalcomania," another rhizomatic principle. According to Deleuze and Guattari (1992, p. 21), decalcomania describes the process of a rhizomatic formation through constant experimentation that resists restriction in a fluid "up-rooted" manner – opposite, for the most part, from the stationary habit of a tree. In this regard, Morrison invests in the natural landscape as an integral component for the realization of the cartographic map that produces new possibilities and multiple readings. The natural landscape in *A Mercy* is imbued with varied possibilities, whether medical, cultural, or political. Nature acquires an open and therapeutic dimension in which certain journeys offer healing for the characters' traumatized psyches. Similar medical dimensions for the environment are introduced through the inclusion of the Blacksmith's medical treatments that are also extracted from nature. Cultural implications can also be elicited in Lina's relation with nature. References to colonialism back then are intermingled with natural images referring to the harsh treatment set on Lina by the colonial presence. As such, the indefinite environmental locus that is not oriented toward culmination is included in the revisionary visualization of a fluid pre-racial American history.

Morrison's *A Mercy* features "counter" journeys that deviate from centralized "tracing" of routes through its investment in biodiversity that features the inclusion and mobility of nature. Journeying departs from the conventional readings where nature is either marginalized or threatened during travel and where the focus has been on the traveler only, forgetting all about the environmental surroundings. The narrative reiterates the dynamic role of the natural landscape, as a rhizomatic and naturally and psychologically linked plateau, to jeopardize the restrictive and extractive tracing in colonial routes. As such, the depiction of the first moments of Florens's departure with Reverend Father is related to the environmental space. Florens reflects: "As soon as tobacco leaf is hanging to dry Reverend Father takes me on a ferry, then a ketch, then a boat and bundles me between his boxes of books and food" (Morrison, 2008, p. 5). The word "bundles" stresses the ontological connection between Florens and the environment as if she was one of the tobacco leaves. Also, Florens recalls her suffering from her mother's abandonment and connects to a story told by Lina about the eagle's eggs: "One day, ran the story, an eagle laid her eggs in a nest far above and far beyond the snakes and paws that hunted them…The traveller laughs at the beauty saying, this is perfect. This is mine" (Morrison, 2008, p. 60). She continues, "Creatures come out of caves wondering what it means. Mine. Mine. Mine" (p. 60). What projects Florens's articulation of her psychological fatigue is her question about the eggs: "Do they live?" (p. 60). Florens invests in nature to verbalize her inner query and to stress her position as a traumatized daughter suffering the absence of a mother.

Nature also becomes a space of catharsis where characters can confront inner conflicts and find solutions. Florens sets out multiple journeys experiencing an environmental affinity and proclaiming a distinctively recuperating view of the psychological, physical, and spiritual waves of such an affinity. Similarly, Jacob Vaark, a white settler whose aim is to broaden his property and enter the new world, sets out several journeys.

However, Jacob's journeys conform, in a way or another, to the description of humans' exceptionalist relation with the environment, as clearly explicated by Rueckert (1996), where an anthropocentric spirit spurs humans to "conquer, humanize, domesticate, violate and exploit every natural thing" (p. 113). Yet, the non-gendered, non-hierarchal, and buoyant account of journeys in Morrison's narrative complicates such anthropocentric conformity. This complication is intended to highlight the therapeutic power of nature where journeying seeks liberation, destruction of constraints, and the destabilization of anthropocentric dominance. This healing involves either disconnection from traumatized past experiences and starting over again, as in the case of Florens, or simply an everlasting healing presented in death as in Jacob's case. So, the natural sphere powerfully imposes its influence on both male and female travelers. However, the journeys of the same character need to be re-examined to reveal the gradual natural effect on the characters. The irresistible natural purifying effect is visible in Florens's multiple journeys: heading to Jacob's farm as she was accepted by Jacob in lieu of debt from D'Ortega, her journey to fetch the Blacksmith to heal her mistress Rebekka, and her third journey back to Jacob's farm. Nature becomes a peaceful shelter for Florens who seeks comfort in the landscape as she travels, finding it safer to sleep in a tree or in the hollow of a log than to stay with other people. As for Jacob, the natural world is an inevitable attraction as he observes the beauty in the land as illustrated in many occasions and descriptions throughout his journeys despite his materialized focus on making money and building his fancy house. In fact, not only does nature influence the characters but it also offers psychological curative implications that heal the characters variously. Hence, by investigating the results of both Jacob's problematic and centralized experience and Florens's peaceful encounters, one can realize the power of nature in rewarding Florens and devastating Jacob, metaphorically, but curing both of them psychologically.

3.4 Rhizomatic Nomadism and Experimentation

The narrative features a repetitive mode that introduces journeys with multiple modifiers and heterogeneous stories. The repetitive pattern is meant to clearly show the "psychologically cleansing" natural effect on the characters, who, by turn, either reflect faith in nature even before setting off their journeys or degrade it and suffer. The natural space in *A Mercy* activates the "nomadic trajectory" which is an outcome of decalcomania or experimentation in the rhizome's cartographic map. In the rhizomatic world, "nomadic trajectory does not fulfill the function of the sedentary road, which is to *parcel out a closed space to people,* assigning each person a share and regulating the communication between shares" (Deleuze & Guattari, 1992, p. 416). Instead, it "distributes people … in an open space, one that is indefinite and noncommunicating" (p. 416). It is a nomad space as it is intrinsically "smooth" and therefore without hierarchy. In *A Mercy*, the natural world becomes a nomad space that creates several encounters through which Deleuzian "nomads" (Deleuze & Guattari, 1992, p. 315) tell and revisit their stories and consequently fill the striations assigned by the monologic authorities to release the route/root tension of rigidities. Throughout Florens's series of journeys, the restrictive concepts of fear and authorization are re-defined and thus turned into curing connotations of a rhizomatic experience. Before launching her journey to the Blacksmith, Florens makes it patent that nature's "newness trembles [her]" (Morrison, 2008, p. 3). At the beginning of her journey, Florens declares that "tree leaves are too new for shelter, so everywhere the ground is slop with snow and my footprints slide and pool" (p. 39). After her first solo intimacy with nature, this fear totally vanishes. As such, the fear concept is re-probed and re-defined uniquely by Florens's journeys. Thus, nature features rhizomatic nomads whose stories are reshaped by experimentation and unpredictable experiences.

Ultimately, *A Mercy* features a mutually ontological harmony between the environment and the characters, both males and females, which is also shaped by experimentation. This harmony is symbiotic in the sense that it is provided by both the environment and the characters reciprocally. In this regard, Tolman (2003) highlights Morrison's excellence and prominence in creating such an effaced harmony. Tolman asserts the need for "a psychological, sociological, religious, and historical analysis of nature and its manifestations in the work at hand" and in which "Morrison weaves all of these strands together to produce a narrative history of African Americans; a history largely ignored by white society" (p. 7). Marwan (2020) also reads the natural

landscape in *A Mercy* as a "multi-textured palimpsest" (p. 1) that is open to reuse and alteration. However, the focal reading of the rhizome in our essay adds a new dimension to the previous readings. It suggests that nature forms oneness with Florens who simply starts to cope with the "unexpected" core of this connection, gradually normalizes it as "expected," and construes its innate safety. Imagining the animals' attitude, Florens shows her tendency to visualize peaceful animals: "they [the animals] will approach, run to us to love and play which we missed and give back fear and anger" (Morrison, 2008, p. 3). Florens's prediction of peace in nature unlearns the monolithic anthropocentric knowledge that exoticizes nature as inherently perilous and threatening. In the case of Florens, fear vanishes as she proceeds with her journey and galvanizes symbiosis with nature. Ultimately, the liberation of Florens becomes incomplete unless complemented by the mutual liberation of nature. Consequently, and especially as an outcome of the oneness with nature, Florens, at a later stage of her journey, starts to be able to articulate her ontological existence confidently: "I know I am alive" (Morrison, 2008, p. 77). Nature has affected her positively: "I am not afraid of anything now" (p. 78). Florens's confidence and internal blossoming are also visible to those who knew her before her journey. Scully recognizes the changes right away when she returns: "The instant he saw her marching down the road, whether ghost or soldier, he knew she had become untouchable" (p. 150). After her journey, Florens becomes an independent woman who doesn't need authorization anymore.

3.5 Nature, Anti-Authorization, and Freedom of Choice

One of the ontological challenges that confronts Florens's colonially imposed route is the freedom of choice. *A Mercy* is about Florens's journey to find the Blacksmith following the orders of Rebekka. She could have forsaken those orders and run away. Yet, she opts to complete the task and find the Blacksmith. Florens's option does not reflect freedom of choice, which is denied to her, being a slave. In this regard, Jones (1998) substantiates the ambition of liberatory connection and closeness to nature for African Americans. Jones demonstrates how the "landscape of the South, in the beginning so alien to African slaves, became, for most part, neither legally not economically their own, but, became spiritually their own through their own labor under most difficult of circumstances" (p. 37). Jones takes us back to the beginning when African slaves worked on lands they never owned or inherited. Yet, they forged a spiritual connection despite their lack of freedom and authorization to explore these lands. Jones's historical reference is relevant to the case of Florens who needs permission from varied authorities. On one occasion, it is a religious authorization represented by Reverend Father; on another, it is Rebekka's letter. While on her way to Jacob's farm accompanied by Reverend Father, Florens, as the religious authority (Reverend Father) is away for a while, simply surrenders to the woman who takes her cloak and wooden shoes (Morrison, 2008, p. 5). The presence of Reverend Father legitimizes Florens's journey and offers a sense of security and strength for her. In her second journey to fetch the Blacksmith, the authorization is the letter written by Rebekka – the Mistress. The letter is of symbolic protection for Florens. She confesses: "With the letter I belong and am lawful. Without it I am a weak calf abandon by the herd, a turtle without shell, a minion with no telltale signs but a darkness I am born with, outside, yes, but inside as well and the inside dark is small, feathered and toothy" (p. 115). The significance of this needed authorization for a woman's journey is suggested through Florens's protective measures: "I draw my feet under my skirt, not for warmth but to protect the letter" (p. 37). Another incident that prominently affirms the need for authorization is when Florens is in Widow Ealing's house. She tries to hand Rebekka's letter to the widow's guests to justify her existence, as the letter is the only declaration of her own eligibility: "as fast as I can I remove my boot and roll down my stocking. I pull out Mistress's letter and offer it but no one will touch it" (p. 109). So, Florens internalizes the inevitable need for authorization by her spontaneous act of presenting Rebekka's letter.

However, *A Mercy* invests in the contribution of nature to the mapping of alternative routes that defy restriction, authorization, and closure. Toward the end of the narrative, Florens articulates her own words that defy the historically imposed and restrictive authorization of her journeying. Florens mobilizes her own freedom: "There is no more room in this room. These words cover the floor…I am holding light in one hand

and carving letters with the other" (Morrison, 2008, p. 158). This psychological change, which is an outcome of Florens's rhizomatic journey, gradually takes place. The needed authorization for the traveling Florens starts to lose its validity and cogency as Florens progressively deepens her contact with the environmental surrounding. Florens's first solo encounter with nature starts to change the situation: "I am walking among chestnuts trees lining the road…the land slopes sharply and I have no way to go but down as well" (p. 39). Following this encounter, Florens's obsession with maintaining Rebekka's letter recedes for she stops her repeated references to the document. This starting point predicts a possible transformation in Florens's actions and reactions toward the surroundings.

Though Florens is still in a state of interrogating her surroundings, she starts to surrender effortlessly and confidently to nature. Her journey is no longer a mere task for traveling. Rather, it becomes a self-initiated process of re-reading and re-defining nature. It is the mother-nature that leads her sympathetically: "Hard as I try I lose the road…can I go more, I wonder. Should I…I hear water running and move in the dark toward the sound. The moonlight is young. I hold one arm out in front and go slow" (p. 40). Although she feels lost, Florens trusts the call of nature. With this progress in Florens's journeys, official authorization starts to lose its validity and finally becomes meaningless and useless. This loss is another level of the psychological curative effect that nature yields. In other words, Florens's rhizomatic journeys provide power and freedom to her psyche, which trivializes the need for any authorization other than that of nature. As such, both Florens and nature map a rhizomatic route and identity that are progressive and not compromised by barriers or rules that serve particular ideological ends.

3.6 "Unhoming" Journeys and Sustainable Survival

A Mercy highlights a fluid route that suspends the customary search for destinations. Florens's successive journeys articulate her subversive inference of "home" by unhoming herself through travel. The "unhoming" process is reflected in the "shoes" episodes. The consistent references to "shoes" throughout Florens's journeys debunk any claim of their insignificance and contribute to the release of the "roots/routes" tension of inflexibilities. Many critical readings interpret the "shoes" metaphor as an indication of Florens's evolution from an insecure and submissive child to an audacious and liberated young woman. In this respect, Latsenko (2016) examines the "shoes" metaphor psychologically. She reads the "shoes" motif as a mechanism of defense for Florens as their presence soothes her and replaces the lost mother. Other readings, however, conclude that the "shoes" reference is a metaphor for nature's influence on Florens's reassurance of her own self. However, none of these readings addresses the presence and change of different types of "shoes" and their connection to Florens's progression. As such, it is crucial to note that Florens's shoes, symbolizing a root, are introduced at the beginning of the novel as pre-set conditions that are of great restriction to Florens's journeys of freedom. The trigger of such suggestion starts with Florens's preliminary hint that "the beginning begins with the shoes. When a child I am never able to abide being barefoot and always beg for shoes, anybody's shoes" (Morrison, 2008, p. 2). Observing the dynamic "shoes" connotation, readers could notice the "wooden" (p. 5) shoes in Florens's first journey, a material that is tough and insulating to any external change. After a while, Florens's shoes are described as broken: "[o]n her feet was a pair of way-too-big woman's shoes. Perhaps it was that feeling of license, a newly recovered recklessness along with the sight of those little legs rising like two bramble sticks from the bashed and broken shoes" (p. 24). However, when Florens begins her second journey to fetch the Blacksmith, she is dressed in Jacob's boots. The material from which the shoes are made is "the rabbit skin" (p. 61). Florens's shoes are no longer wooden. They become, as described by Florens, "thick and tender" (p. 134). Hence, a notable change in the connotation of "shoes" is visible through such a change in the material and its texture. The shoes which were tough have become, though thick, tender. Remarkably, the shoes that start as a reflection of inevitable significance to Florens are later thrown away as they are no longer necessary. This radical shift in Florens's use of shoes segues into her nomadic activity that deviates from the original destination of the first journey, seeking the Blacksmith to save Rebekka.

Florens's curative encounters with nature decentralize the pre-established root/route binary. Florens's journeys become a serialized quest for collective survival. To the end of the narrative, communal survival is sustained by the existence of Lina, Sorrow, Rebekka, and Florens on Jacob's farm. So, the survival of solo-identities is demolished. However, this collective survival doesn't mean that Florens is left shattered at the end and with no identity. On the contrary, the identity she gets is a long-lasting one. Terrifically, Florens relates her identity to an entity: "I am become wilderness but I am also Florens. In full. Unforgiven. Unforgiving. No ruth, my love. None. Hear me? Slave. Free. I last" (p. 159). Florens's words recapitulate the emancipatory and equitable vision of sustainability that is not oriented by a certain destination. In a word, Florens, the rhizomatic nomad, opens up a space for other realms and identities to receive the "free" and the "communal" impulses through a continual prism of sustainability.

4 Conclusion

In *A Mercy*, Morrison presents a botanical imaginary that revises the traditional genealogy of Indigeneity, as a root/origin, to become a starting point to defy the colonial and restrictive inscription of a "route" as a guided path that is oriented toward a certain home. This pre-set binary of fixed rootedness and restricted moving impulse creates a tension of rigidities, which coerces a limited notion of sustainability that is dictated by either the root or the route. The resolution of such conflict necessitates a subversive imaginary that conflates a hybrid root and a fluid route. The activation of such imaginary is best located in the botanical sphere, particularly the rhizomatic pattern that has been theorized by Deleuze and Guattari as a framework for discursive resistance to linearity and hierarchal thinking. Deleuze and Guattari's philosophy provides a relevant foundation in terms of cross-fertilization of historical and economic fields along with the literary text found in Morrison's narrative. As argued in this essay, *A Mercy* recreates this rhizomatic design through its aleatoric and multi-voiced community that is extended to include the natural landscape. Thus, the narrative reassigns an inclusive genre that rejects grand agendas and celebrates biodiversity par excellence. The inclusion of the natural space activates rhizomatic nomads whose stories feature experimentation and unpredictable experiences. As such, *A Mercy* produces an aggregate of provisionary identities and communities that suggest entryways for reimagining the beginnings of America. The narrative's rhizomatic pattern envisions a contingent collective identity that is shaped by heterogeneity and ongoing affiliations rather than centralized filiations. Ultimately, the rhizomatic imaginary entails the realization of incessant sustainability that is not restricted by centralized roots or customary destinations, but shaped by fluidity and unhoming. To conclude, *A Mercy* presents a radical botanical narration by transcending the dominant signifying structure that has controlled the imaginary of Indigeneity and its consequent vision of sustainability and by unearthing the mobility of the invisible – the rhizome.

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