

Historical Distance and Textual Intimacy: How Newness Enters Toni Morrison's *A Mercy**

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Abstract

Toni Morrison's *A Mercy* (2008) encourages a meditation on literature's interaction with history. Focusing on the way in which "novel time" operates here to challenge the serial, diachronic conception of history, I seek in *A Mercy* a space to negotiate the historical distance between periods, events, and peoples. The shifting tenses of narrating voices introduced by the novel, along with the linkages that memories create between times, prompt the spreading-out of seventeenth-century American history into a textual network of elastic ligaments and a kind of dialogism. Moreover, challenging the logic of ethnic division and racial segregation, *A Mercy* elucidates the proximity of different races in early American history. It enacts cross-color intimacy as a new way of conceiving the origins of American culture. Morrison's writing about history in *A Mercy* is not simply a return to the past or a retrieval of the repressed. By evoking a lost age and digging out from what has disappeared logics and ideas that resist existent historical lines and racial categorizations, the novel fosters in its textual present an intermediary agency for negotiating the structure of history, thereby ushering in *new* historical epistemes.

Keywords

Toni Morrison, *A Mercy*, history, textuality, time, race, intimacy

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Toni Morrison's ninth novel *A Mercy* (2008) opens with its teenage heroine Florens rushing into the woods in search of a freed black man—an unnamed blacksmith—presumably possessing a cure for both her bedridden mistress and her own lovesick heart. Looking for paths through the dangerous wilderness, she exclaims at one point on her journey: “I am happy the world is breaking open for us, yet its newness trembles me” (5). Set in the late 1600s, when what was not yet the “United States” was only partly controlled by several European powers and the idea of race had not yet solidified, *A Mercy* ushers not only Florens but also its readers into a new world rife with dangers and opportunities. On the one hand, Virginia in 1682 “was still a mess” (11); it featured a world of shifting power formations and changing contours, where “land claims were always fluid” and “turtles had a life span longer than towns” (13). On the other hand, this world vibrated with air “so new, almost alarming in rawness and temptation,” which “never failed to invigorate” a person (12). The words of Jacob Vaark, a disowned orphan traveling from Europe to inherit a piece of land in America, best spell out the chances for those craving change in their social position and destiny: “Where else but in this disorganized world would such an encounter be possible? Where else could rank tremble before courage?” (25).

The “new” world introduced in *A Mercy* is, ironically, also an “old” world when restored to its “place” in the temporal sequence of American history. While the recurring ideas and images of a world still soft, still awaiting forms and formation, arouse readers to a sense of hope and anticipation, it may also be argued, with a clearer historical chronology in mind, that this novel represents, above all, an attempt to commemorate a lost age: whatever chances there were in the 1600s, they have long since been lost. The cartography of America has long been settled, and racial categories polarized into black and white. Interpreting *A Mercy* from the endpoint of either the novel or the history it deals with, John Updike sees in the text a pessimistic fatalism:

[A]s Morrison moves deeper into a more visionary realism, a betranced pessimism saps her plots of the urgency that hope imparts to human adventures. “*A Mercy*” begins where it ends, with a white man casually answering a slave mother’s plea, but he dies, and she fades into slavery’s myriads, and the child goes mad with love. Varied and authoritative and frequently beautiful though the language is, it circles around a vision, both turgid and static, of a new world turning old, and poisoned from the start.

Given his assumption that history is linear and follows a line of succession, Updike sees this past as one doomed to be overtaken by the present. The world in *A Mercy* is inevitably “turning old” and “poisoned from the start” because of the subsequent, more fully-developed role of blackness as a stigma in Western history. The past is held hostage by, inflected by, and subject to our knowledge in the present. Writing about the past is accordingly a “turgid and static” mourning that goes nowhere.

I argue that Updike’s reading places *A Mercy* in the temporal prison house of historicism. Convincing in a way, it nonetheless ignores the operation of “novel time” in its resistance to and negotiation with chronology.¹ Although readers may assume or impose a linear time and history, and give the endpoint of the novel (or the history it speaks of) the greatest weight in their interpretation, the past in/of a novel does not disappear along with our act of reading it. The beginning of the story remains there, on a page one can (re)turn to, coexisting with the ending and any other moments in the story and thus accounting for the everlasting presence of the novel’s fictional times. Moreover, despite the fact that a novel draws materials from the past, the reading act takes place in the present. When the past that is spoken of in a narrative text is “read” in the present, it is given presence and immediacy. Novels are therefore capable of annexing pasts and presents and thereby giving their rendering of the past a new life. They need not subject the past to our present-day knowledge in the way of normal “history”; rather, novels have the potential to enable a flow of time through the interchange of temporal points. If modern history is conceived as being composed of concrete events occurring in succession, novels endow our acts of reading with an intermediary agency capable of enacting a temporal repetition, reversal, and realignment.

This paper takes *A Mercy* as an example to meditate on literature’s interaction with history. By focusing on the way Morrison’s “novel time” functions to challenge our linear, diachronic conception of history, I seek in this novel a space in which to negotiate historical distance. Referring to the temporal distance between

¹ Morrison expressed in an interview that she usually followed the “novel time”: “There is something called *novel time*. If you lay it down too clearly then you are just following a map and you are not letting it—you just have to let it go, wait for it to be there” (Houston 257; emphasis in original). Morrison resists to writing according to a pre-set chronology of plot development. “Novel time” evolves along with textuality and evokes the “paper time” proposed by Roland Barthes: the time of historical discourse, “the presence, in historical narration, of explicit speech-act signs” that “tends to ‘de-chronologize’ the historical ‘thread’ and to restore, if only as a reminiscence or a nostalgia, a complex, parametric, non-linear time whose deep space recalls the mythic time of the ancient cosmogonies” (130).

historical periods or events, the term “historical distance” is usually thought to designate an objective and stable entity measureable by clock-time. In his study of the theory and genres of history, however, Mark Salber Phillips proposes a more elastic conception of historical distance:

Some degree of temporal distance is, of course, a given in historical writing, but temporal distance may be enlarged or diminished by other kinds of commitments and responses. Thus historical distance, in the fuller sense I want to give it, refers to much more than the conventional understanding that the outline of events is clarified by the passage of time, or that the historian’s perspective necessarily reflects that of his or her generation. . . . [O]ur concept of distance, if it is to be helpful, should not be limited to forms of detachment or estrangement; in its wider sense, distance must take in the impulse to establish *proximity* as well as *separation*. Distance, to put this another way, should refer to a whole dimension of our relation to the past, not to one particular location. (217; emphasis in original)

Breaking away from a spatial model that takes the past as a “location” with a fixed distance from the present, Phillips suggests that “temporal distance may be enlarged or diminished by other kinds of commitments and responses.” His “fuller sense” of historical distance pushes the understanding of distance beyond objective, mechanical temporal measurements, and brings the *adjustment* of this distance—adjustments of proximity and separation, intimacy and estrangement between periods, events, and peoples—to the center of historical writing. By associating historical distance with “a whole dimension of our relation to the past,” his argument not only implies that our relation to the past is flexible, but also brings to the fore the importance of negotiating this relation in the formation of histories.

More precisely, Phillips’s notion of a malleable historical distance redirects our attention from history’s contents to its structure. While inquiries into the concrete and putatively “authentic” contents of the past have long been considered of primary importance in historical studies, Phillips’s analysis emphasizes the changeable constitution of historical times and lines. As we know, the modern West tends to organize the meaning and contents of history primarily by breaking time into periods:

Modern Western history essentially begins with differentiation

between the *present* and the *past*. . . . This rupture also organizes the content of history within the relations between *labor* and *nature*; and finally, as its third form, it ubiquitously takes for granted a rift between *discourse* and the *body* (the social body). It forces the silent body to speak. It assumes a gap to exist between the silent opacity of the “reality” that it seeks to express and the place where it produces its own speech, protected by the distance established between itself and its object. (de Certeau 2-3; emphasis in original)

Historical intelligibility as defined by modern Western history is thus generated not only from a temporal rupture but also from the separation of a discursive speaking position from its object of representation. The “rift”—the “distance” between discourse and object—has to be carefully regulated and maintained so that the discourse can be “protected” and the meaning of the object stabilized. Modern Western history could therefore be imagined as grounded on a neatly spatialized structure that forbids unregulated temporal fluidity or random conjoining of historical moments. It features a static structure, for modern Western historians in effect replaced “an acquaintance with time with the knowledge of *what* exists within time” (Gérard Mairet; qtd. in de Certeau 12; emphasis in original). Phillips’s emphasis on negotiable historical distance, however, challenges this logic of division and separation. It compels a different imagination of history: histories in plurality are conceived as networks of elastic ligaments and modifiable conjunctures.

Phillips’s contention thus restores complexity to historical practices. It also paves the way for comparisons and dialogues between history and a range of narratives, including literary ones, that engage with and may “contain” and/or, more particularly, “be contained by” histories. Proposing then that history itself is “a cluster of overlapping and competing genres,” different in terms of their “formal, affective, ideological, and cognitive elements that, in balance, shape the reader’s sense of engagement with the past” (213), Phillips draws attention to the forms, emotional designs, ideological contrivances, and cognitive mapping that underlie the production of each history. He blurs the division between histories and fictional genres such as the (historical) novel, memoir, biography, etc. This inclusion of creative literary writing with the wider spectrum of historical writing helps to explain fiction’s capacity, not just to draw on historical materials for imaginative creation but to intervene into and have a real impact on historical epistemes. If at one end of the historical-writing spectrum lies the conventional historiography that

silences the past with “scriptural tombs” (de Certeau 2), at the other end perhaps lie novels that play on their various proximities with the past through their own fictional elasticity.

A *Mercy* would seem, then, to help us elaborate on this issue of negotiable historical distance because in her novel Morrison has introduced provocative and intricate takes on history. Noted for her interest in the old and in the past, she has set each of her novels in a specific period of the American past. Indeed she claims that all her hopes in her creative literary work are “in the past” (McCluskey 40). Yet she says this not out of a sense of nostalgia or a pessimistic belief in the impossibility of the future, nor because of her passive submission to the return of those repressed memories, those revenants, those ever-haunting pasts. On the contrary, Morrison has actively sought the future and the new in her every effort of writing about the past. When asked whether “any of your characters get away from their past,” she replied:

I hope not. No. I don't want anybody to get off scot-free.

I think what I want is not to reinvent the past as idyllic or to have the past as just a terrible palm or fist that pounds everybody to death, but to have happiness or growth represented in the way in which people deal with their past, which means they have to come to terms, confront it, sort it out, and then they can do that third thing. (Hackney 128-29)

The past in Morrison's novels is neither a refuge we may return to nor a horror we may escape from; it rather offers a temporal space for us to explore, one that somehow fosters the doing of “that third thing.” It is not the past in itself or the past in its being-already-past, its “past tense” that needs to be recovered, but rather the possibility of our own encounter with this past, our own potential confronting and dealing-with it, which may have a generative or transformative effect on our lives.

Morrison spells out more clearly the permanent presence of the past in another passage:

The past for my characters, I believe, is—I was going to say more intimate, but I don't mean intimate. Why don't we put it this way: I understand that in many African languages there is an infinite past, and very few, if any, verbs for the future, and a major string of verbs for the continuous present. So that notion of its always being now,

even though it is past, is what I wanted to incorporate into the text, because the past is never something you have to record, or go back to. Children can actually represent ancestors or grandmothers or grandfathers. It's a very living-in-the-moment, living now with the past, so that it's never—calculated; it's effortless. Sometimes that causes a great deal of trouble to some of the characters. (Hackney 130)

Drawing on African linguistic features, Morrison explains the close connection of the past and the present in her writing. There is no need for one to travel across temporal gaps in order to reach the past as the past is already part of the present, an integral part of our “living-in-the-moment.” Curiously, in the above passage Morrison started to use the word “intimate” to describe her characters’ relationship to the past and then rejected it. “Intimate” is probably not the right word if it denotes—narrowly—a strong emotional attachment or affectionate relationship, given that one’s relationship with the past, which could cause “a great deal of trouble,” is far more complicated than this. Yet this Morrisonian slip of the tongue might lead us to ponder the wider connotations of this adjective: “intimate” refers to the “interior” and the “innermost,” hence to the past as that which is integrally woven with the present; or, it indicates “close” and “near” in terms of distance, hence Morrison’s echoing of Phillips’s emphasis on a malleable historical distance. By portraying her characters’ ambivalent relationships with their past, Morrison is perhaps coming to terms with the various degrees of her own intimacy with history, and/or with the various kinds and degrees of intimacy within history itself.²

Morrison’s play on historical distance finds an illustration in *A Mercy*. In terms of its historical setting, *A Mercy* traces the depth of American history farther than any of Morrison’s previous novels into the 1600s. This effort to dig deeper into history nevertheless comes along with its protagonist Florens’s first person narrating voice in the present tense. The novel thus takes place in a time both far away and in the present. Morrison attests that among the voices of her characters’ in this novel, she

² The concept of “intimate” or “intimacy” as employed in this paper is also indebted to Lisa Lowe, who identifies three meanings of “intimacy”: (1) intimacy as “spatial proximity or adjacent connection” (193); (2) intimacy as associated with “privacy, often figured as conjugal and familiar relations in the bourgeois home” (195); (3) intimacy as embodied in “the variety of contacts among slaves, indentured persons, and mixed-blood free peoples” (202). More about cross-racial intimacy will be discussed later.

heard Florens's first, the girl. And she approaches language in a slanted way. She can read and write; she learned from a Catholic priest under scary circumstances. And she's taken someplace else; she doesn't know what they're talking about. When she was with her mother she spoke Portuguese. She knows Latin. So I just put all her language together and gave her an individual voice that was "I"—first person—and very visual. But also, once I realized that I could make her speak only in the present tense, it gave the narrative an immediacy. . . . (Smallwood 37)

Florens's hybrid linguistic upbringing reflects the geographical and cultural porosity characteristic of the world she grows up in. And as if carrying this cultural and linguistic fluidity into her narrating voice, Florens speaks in a perpetual present tense that resists temporal divisions: "Everything is now with her" (Toomer 21). *A Mercy* is structured so that Florens's voice appears every other chapter. In-between her first person narratives are inserted chapters in a third-person voice in the past tense that features by turns other main characters' perspectives. The shifts between present tense and past tense, complicated by the narrative's movement back and forth between moments of characters' lives, forge a collage of times.

Certainly, not all reviewers appreciate *A Mercy's* resistance to sequential storytelling. Amy Frykholm observes that "the lack of a coherent, continuous plot will frustrate some readers. Just as you think the story is taking off, you turn back again to the past, to the history of another in the menagerie of characters" (46). B. R. Myers further asserts that *A Mercy* is "larded with anachronisms": due to Morrison's "all-too-contemporary prose style," as well as her "back and forth" going "over the same period" by evoking different characters' memories, the novel "never seems to settle into narrative 'real time'" (104). My contention is that the attention to Morrison's "anachronisms," more precisely *A Mercy's* refusal to settle into a specific historical temporality in style and language, instead of invalidating Morrison's writing, actually casts into relief the fundamental difference between the temporality of Morrison's text and that advocated by modern Western history. Firstly, in a way that contrasts with the "history" that appeals to a conventional sense of realism, Morrison's writing, which enacts an encounter of world and words, works toward a "textualization" of the world through a disintegration of the so-called reality into disparate yet intersecting narratives and memories. Moreover, Morrison's "textualized world" resists an arbitrary division between the past and the present. *A Mercy* allows time to "flow" by experimenting with the circular

interchanges of different temporal points. While one may wonder whether textuality here is achieved at the expense of historical depth or truth, it is important to note that the violence of history is usually associated with a fixed and authoritative past or periodization. By transforming the world of evidence into “a world of words,” Morrison might seem to “flatten up” history; yet in doing so she also launches a rhetorical and epistemological movement away from “what was” to the past conditional of “what might have been,” even toward the future projective of “what could be.”

Instead of arguing that *A Mercy* tells the story of what happened—realistically—in the late seventeenth century, I suggest that it is more accurate to interpret *A Mercy* as exploring, and, furthermore, restructuring the ways in which we read and understand pre-revolutionary America.³ The lines and ligaments of textuality—that is, the networks set up between readers and the past which the text tries to recall and reason with—are given a central position. From the very beginning of the novel, Florens’s narrating voice addresses and ushers a “you” into her storytelling: “Don’t be afraid. My telling can’t hurt you in spite of what I have done and I promise to lie quietly in the dark—weeping perhaps or occasionally seeing the blood once more—but I will never again unfold my limbs to rise up and bare teeth. I explain” (3). The “you” to whom Florens addresses her narrative is the free blacksmith with whom she falls in love. Yet there is a strong suggestion she is also addressing to Morrison’s readers at these moments. Apparent throughout is Florens’s intention to direct the attention of the “you” from the real world of violence and blood, where she “unfold[s] her limbs to rise up and bare teeth,” to the world of words—the world of her storytelling and explanation. This urgency for the “you” to read her text instead of the world is brought to the fore again toward the end of her narrative, where Florens calls to mind the fact that the blacksmith is illiterate. He has to learn in order to read her words: “You read the world but not the letters of talk. You don’t know how to. Maybe one day you will learn” (160).

³ Although many critics have sought in Morrison’s text more “authentic” versions of history (versus the whites-dominated version), it has to be noted that Morrison has resisted the idea that her writings make any absolute claims to truth. In her Nobel Prize reception lecture she commented on the need for language to be humble in face of historical reality. Not only must one recognize the fact that “language can never live up to life once and for all” and “can never ‘pin down’ slavery, genocide, war,” but language should never “yearn for the arrogance to be able to do so” (270). The power of language, Morrison continued, lies not in that it is able to capture the whole or to finalize the history, but in its ability to “reach toward the ineffable” (270). These issues will be discussed later on in more depth.

Florens's question about the blacksmith's ability to read "the letters of talk" points to *A Mercy's* concern about the issues of reading and textuality. Florens actually poses two main questions to "you": "Stranger things happen all the time everywhere. You know. I know you know. One question is who is responsible? Another is can you read?" (3). Of primary importance is not only "what happened" but also whether the blacksmith can read what happened. And this question can be directed to Morrison's readers as well: in what way and to what extent have the readers of Morrison's text comprehended the history of pre-revolutionary America? What are the possible readings introduced through the characters in *A Mercy*? Into what forms of textuality does Morrison guide her readers, and how do they change our way of approaching American history or history in general?

The narratives of *A Mercy*, put simply, evolve around the establishment and collapse of the white trader Jacob Vaark's household. A "ratty orphan" abandoned by his family in Europe, Jacob becomes a landowner and a trader after he inherits 120 acres from a distant uncle in Milton, Virginia (12). Over time he sets up a household that develops into a makeshift home and a place of encounter for the following persons: Rebekka (a European escaping religious savagery and limited opportunity, traveling to America in answer to Jacob's advertisement for a wife), Lina (a Native American woman purchased by Jacob after her tribespeople were wiped out by a smallpox epidemic), Florens (a black girl given away at the age of eight by her slave mother to settle her owner's debt to Jacob), Sorrow (a vixen-eyed and red-haired survivor of a shipwreck with unknown ancestry accepted into Jacob's household), and Willard and Scully (two white indentured laborers hired by Jacob to build his house). The increased size of his household and his accumulation of wealth, mostly from his rum investments in Barbados, testify to Jacob's gradual rise in status and fortune in the new world. But Jacob is heirless, and his sudden death in the midst of building his grand house leaves Rebekka, Lina, Florens, and Sorrow in the condition of "unmastered women" whose selves and lives are cast into jeopardy (58).

Told in what Morrisonian scholars identify as a "'chorus' method of storytelling" in which different characters' memories and perspectives are presented by turns (Hooper 5), the rise and fall of Jacob's household serves as a nodal point around which sprawl layers of intersecting narratives, hence the generation of a textual space that allows contacts and connections of historical points and lines. For example, the story of an early European immigrant such as Jacob, who comes to the new world with the heroic ambition to build "a place out of no place, a temperate living from raw life" (12), is coupled in *A Mercy* with a telling of the importation

and exploitation of slave laborers in the Americas. On the one hand, Jacob insists that “flesh” is not “his commodity” (22). Trading only on “goods and gold” (25), he looks down on slave traders such as Sehor D’Ortega and sneers at “wealth dependent on a captured workforce” (28). On the other hand, although Jacob is determined to “prove that his own industry could amass the fortune, the station, . . . without trading his conscience for coin” (28), his investment in a sugar and rum business in the West Indies makes him complicit, albeit from a distance, in the development of slavery. This is revealed in another passage:

Knowing full well his shortcomings as a farmer—in fact his boredom with its confinement and routine—he had found commerce to his taste. Now he fondled the idea of an even more satisfying enterprise. And the plan was as sweet as the sugar on which it was based. And there was a profound difference between the intimacy of slave bodies at Jublio and a remote labor force in Barbados. Right? Right. (35)

Jacob assuages his initial horror at the slave trade by convincing himself of the innocuousness of his investment. He attempts to comprehend the slave trade undertaken in Jublio, a plantation established by D’Ortega in Maryland, as distinct from the recruitment of a labor force in the geographically more remote Barbados. While the “intimacy”—the emotional proximity and physical nearness—between European settlers and the slave bodies in continental colonies is considered immoral, Jacob justifies the “remote” trading and exploitation of slaves in the West Indies as a separate and harmless story. *A Mercy* challenges Jacob’s reasoning, however, by bringing the two lines of history together within one (con)text.

A Mercy restructures American history by playing upon the separation or connection of historical lines. Another example is its conjoining of the rise of European settlers and the ravaging of native and natural life. The epidemic disaster that nearly exterminated the native population, embodied most specifically through Lina’s memory of the wipeout of her tribe by smallpox, is one instance. Another is the slow destruction of nature along with the expansion of whites’ power. Intriguingly, Jacob is introduced in *A Mercy* as a person with a “pulse of pity for orphans and strays” (33). He would dismount his horse to “free the bloody hindleg of a young raccoon stuck in a tree break” (11), and “[f]ew things angered Jacob more than the brutal handling of domesticated animals” (28). Florens’s mother decides to entrust her daughter to Jacob also because Jacob sees Florens “as a

human child, not pieces of eight” (166). As merciful as Jacob may at times appear, he is nonetheless perceived to be in violation of nature’s laws when he decides to build his third house. Lina comments: “[t]hat third and presumably final house that Sir insisted on building distorted sunlight and required the death of fifty trees” (43).

Reading the house-building project from another perspective, Rebekka further attributes Jacob’s changing relationship with nature to his positional changes from a farmer to a trader and then to a squire:

It was some time before she noticed how the tales were fewer and the gifts increasing, gifts that were becoming less practical, even whimsical. . . . Having seen come and go a glint in his eye as he unpacked these treasure so useless on a farm, she should have anticipated the day he hired men to help clear trees from a wide swath of land at the foot of a rise. A new house he was building. Something befitting not a farmer, not even a trader, but a squire. (88)

Indeed, Jacob dissociates himself not only from the land and nature but also from his servants as he ascends in class. As Lina observes, of the three houses Jacob builds, the first one—“dirt floor, green wood”—is too weak to accommodate a household (43). Strong with “wooden floors,” “four rooms,” “a decent fireplace and windows with good tight shutters” (43), the second house is also the one that allows Lina and Florens to stroll in and out at will and gives Sorrow a place to sleep every night. By contrast, the third house marks Jacob’s increasing distance from his mixed-race household. Though “bigger” and “double-storied,” the third house is “fenced and gated” (43). The servants’ entrance into it is even completely forbidden by Rebekka after Jacob’s death.

And inseparable from this emergence of class demarcation is the formation of racism. Morrison once declared that the central question she wanted to ask in writing *A Mercy* is: “How did racism develop in the United States?” (Stein 178). The setting of her story against the historical moment not long after Bacon’s Rebellion clearly spells out an institutional origin of racism against blacks in relation to class conflicts:

Half a dozen years ago an army of blacks, natives, whites, mulattoes—freedmen, slaves and indentured—had waged war against local gentry led by members of that very class. When that “people’s war” lost its hopes to the hangman, the work it had done . . . spawned

a thicket of new laws authorizing chaos in defense of order. By eliminating manumission, gatherings, travel and bearing arms for black people only; by granting license to any white to kill any black for any reason; by compensating owners for a slave's maiming or death, they separated and protected all whites from all others forever.
(10)

While tracing the birth of racism in American laws, this passage conveys a provocative message. It subtly calls attention to the fact that “black people only” were picked up as scapegoats in what initially was a war between classes. The color lines were drawn as a convenient legal solution to—or a distraction from—class divisions. Indeed, if racial discrimination was not juridically institutionalized until “a thicket of new laws” passed after Bacon’s Rebellion, racism (in the way we know it) is by no means natural or innate in the Americas. While admitting to the fact that racism against blacks has existed “forever” since Bacon’s Rebellion, the passage above also conjures up a time during and before Bacon’s Rebellion, a time when races were not clearly delimited and blacks could ally with natives, whites, and mulattos in a “people’s war” against local gentry.

If the development of the Americas has come along with the production of lines and separations between humans and nature, between classes, as well as between races, clearly Morrison does not simply trace the emergence of these lines and separations but also evokes a time and place before and beyond the codification of differences. Instead of offering a unidirectional narrative that mimics the progressive line of history, the narrative of bifurcating memories in *A Mercy* restrains from imposing order on the “mess” or the “wilderness” characteristic of pre-revolutionary America. In a way, seventeenth-century America was chosen as a productive setting for the novel not as much because it offers a temporal point of origin for the subsequent development of American history as because it provides a time before the history with which we have been familiar takes shape. Morrison’s writing evokes a lost age and digs out from what has disappeared logics and ideas that resist existent lines and separations.

When asked about why she was drawn to seventeenth-century America for her novel, Morrison uttered that this era is marked by “wilderness” that allows intimacy across color lines: the seventeenth century is “raw, ad hoc. Everybody was here” (Toomer 21). The Spanish, the Dutch, the French, the British, the Portuguese, the Swedes, etc., according to Morrison, were all there: everybody was “clambering for space and resources. . . . And you want to know what were all these people running

from” (Interview by Charlie Rose). In *A Mercy*, Jacob’s household could be read as a microcosm of the colonial settlement that brings people of different racial origins and cultural backgrounds together. Although the death of Jacob leaves the cross-racial community on the verge of collapse, characters in different chapters bring readers recurrently to the presence of the community. In Florens’s narrative, for example, the image of four women—Lina, Rebekka, Florens, and Sorrow, each with a different skin color and “each holding a corner of a blanket” whereon lies Jacob, who is “sleeping with his mouth wide open and never wakes” (37)—testifies to these women’s mutual need and support of each other. In Lina’s chapter, Florens, Rebekka, and Lina are described as “a united front in dismay” when joined by Sorrow (53). In fact, Lina “had fallen in love” with Florens right away, “as soon as she saw her shivering in the snow” (60). And although she and Rebekka have seen Sorrow as “useless” (53), a person who “dragged misery like a tail” (55), they accept Sorrow into their household and allow her to “sleep by the fireplace all seasons” (54). Moreover, as if echoing Lina’s remembrance that the initial animosity between Rebekka and herself is “utterly useless in the wild” and “died in the womb” (53), Rebekka in her chapter reasons that “[p]erhaps because both were alone without family, or because both had to please one man, or because both were hopelessly ignorant of how to run a farm,” she and Lina “became what was for each a companion” (75).

Among the four women, Sorrow appears to express “placid indifference to anyone” except Twin, her imaginary double (124). Yet Lina has paid close attention to her. It is Lina “who told Sorrow she was pregnant” (122), which makes Sorrow flush “with pleasure at the thought of a real person . . . growing inside her” (123). Besides, the fact that Sorrow has been saved by different men through her life makes her a figure bridging genders: she is first saved by the sawyer’s sons and then Jacob after the shipwreck; the blacksmith cures her smallpox; the two white indentured laborers, Williard and Sully, further help her deliver a baby daughter.

Like Sorrow, Willard and Scully seem to occupy the margin of Jacob’s household. Yet they are sharp observers of other household members: “Willard judged people from their outside: Scully looked deeper” (151). In their chapter, they comment on the four women and their changes after Jacob’s death. Willard points to the “melancholy” added to Rebekka’s “newly stern features” (145), to which Scully appends the fact that underneath Rebekka’s piety is “something cold if not cruel” (153). Lina’s loyalty to Mistress or Florens indicates to them not so much her “submission” as “a sign of her own self-worth” (151). Florens has changed in their eyes from the “combination of defenselessness, eagerness to please, and . . . a

willingness to blame herself for the meanness of others” into a “feral” woman after her journey through the woods (152, 146). Besides, they disagree with Lina and assert that Sorrow is not “the odd one” (152). For them, Sorrow is the only one whose change seems “an improvement” (146).

As shall be seen, a “chorus” in *A Mercy* occurs as characters speak to, read, and memorize each other. Although Jacob’s household is never released from its temporary nature and fragile structure when put back in historical reality, a sense of community, if not sustainable through the flow of time, is achieved and preserved in textuality. On the one hand, *A Mercy* narrates the inevitable disintegration of a cross-racial community in historical progressivism: Lina may have “relished her place in this small, tight family,” but she has to admit that this “family” is nothing but “a swallow’s nest” (58). Likewise, Willard and Scully confess toward the end of their chapter that “the family they imagined they had become was false. Whatever each other loved, sought or escaped, their futures were separate and anyone’s guess” (156). On the other hand, however, by writing about the cross-racial intimacy that once existed or is imagined between Jacob’s household members, *A Mercy* has registered a textual presence of this intimacy. The novel’s grammatically striking title, in which mercy is represented as countable and singular, attests to the fact that Jacob’s “mercy” that makes his household possible might not be common in pre-revolutionary America.⁴ Yet even if Jacob’s household is not a typical representation of “what was,” by recording and deploying its presence *A Mercy* has launched an imaginary projection of “what could be,” based on the logic of chance encounters and racial mixings characteristic of what Morrison termed “pre-racial” America (Interview by Charles Rose).

The cross-racial intimacy evoked in *A Mercy* carries an echo of the “intimacy” Lisa Lowe describes in her project on “the intimacies of four continents.” One problem of Western historical studies Lowe points to is the lack of comparative perspectives:

Europe is rarely studied in relation to the Caribbean or Latin America, and U.S. history is more often separated from studies of the larger Americas. Work in ethnic studies on comparative U.S. racial formation is still at odds with American history that disconnects the study of slavery from immigration studies of Asians and Latinos or

⁴ As Stein notes, *A Mercy* was initially titled “Mercy,” but Morrison “changed it to *A Mercy* because there is only one” (179).

that separates the history of gender, sexuality, and women from these studies of “race.” (204-05)

Based on the tenet of demarcation and separation, modern Western history may allow a parallel existence of different histories under the banner of multiculturalism, but fails to explore “the braided relations” between them (Lowe 205). Lowe thus calls for the study of cross-racial intimacy in the formation of the Americas, with a view to teasing out the political and economic knowledge that “might link the Asian, African, creolized Americas to the rise of European and North American bourgeoisie societies” (204).

The relevance of Lowe’s argument in the reading of *A Mercy* becomes evident if we take note of the fact that Morrison has been concerned with the crisscrossing relations between people of different colors from an early point of her career onward. When editing *The Black Book* in the seventies as a Random House editor, she already commented on the interconnection of black and white histories.⁵ In *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (1993), Morrison explored further and in greater detail the important position of “the four-hundred-year-old presence” of Africans and African Americans in the formation of the Americas (5). Morrison’s argument is twofold. First, she suggests, it has been a misconception in terms of historical chronology to think that white people have come earlier than Africans or African Americans to the Americas. Morrison elaborates that “a black population accompanied (if one can use that word) and in many cases preceded the white settlers” (8). Moreover, Morrison notes that the black population “has always had a curiously intimate and unhingingly separate existence within the dominant one” (12). Like Lowe, she argues that a “parallel inclusion” of African American culture into the American culture is inadequate in tackling the much more complicated racial structure, which prescribes separation yet remains susceptible to intimacies across color lines.

Sharing Lowe’s attention to the issue of cross-racial intimacy, Morrison nonetheless has focused her study not on the nineteenth century which Lowe investigates, but on a much earlier time, the late seventeenth century. More importantly, while Lowe draws insight mostly from historical and anthropological

⁵ Morrison states in “Rediscovering Black History”: “In spite of this tendency to have one set of rules for black history and another for white history, I was, in completing the editing of *The Black Book*, overwhelmed with the connecting tissue between black and white history. The connection, however, was not a simple one of white oppressor and black victim” (49).

evidence, Morrison has taken literary creation as a crucial site upon which to experiment with different logics of racial formation. As the work of anthropologists and historians is driven primarily by a realist desire for a more “genuine” or “complete” version of the past, literature’s long suit is not so much to provide a first-hand sociopolitical record as to introduce to the past a textual immediacy and, if possible, a dimension of futurity. Indeed, as if foreseeing her writing project in *A Mercy*, Morrison meditated, as early as 1974, upon the insights colonial America could lend to our imagination of racial relationships. In “Rediscovering Black History,” she pointed to the possible value of “speculat[ing]” a line of history out of its absence in the past:

Just as it is interesting to speculate on what Africa might have become had it been allowed to develop without the rapacity of the West, it is wondrous to speculate on what black Americans might have been had we moved along at the rate and in the direction we seemed to be going in New York in the sixteen-hundreds. During that time, the Dutch had given large tracts of land to blacks of various homelands and descriptions. (53-54)

What does the racial and cultural logic once existing in early America inspire us to think beyond the logic of ethnic division and racial segregation? Is literature’s function not to provide an imaginary grounding for exploring possibilities that have not been carried out? Instead of providing a history of affirmation, literature as Morrison urges works toward a history of speculations and possibilities.

Morrison’s passage on why she wrote *Beloved* (1988) most vividly captures literature’s function to summon into presence a history of absence:

There is no place you or I can go, to think about or not think about, to summon the presences of, or recollect the absences of slaves; nothing that reminds us of the ones who made the journey and of those who did not make it. There is no suitable memorial or plaque or wreath or wall or park or skyscraper lobby. There’s no three-hundred-foot tower. There is no small bench by the road. There is not even a tree scored, an initial that I can visit or you can visit. . . . And because such a place doesn’t exist (that I know of), the book had to. (*The World* 44)

Literature serves as a monument commemorating a place and time that did or did

not exist. In this way it generates a “textual” life for history to pursue a direction it did not take. Following this line of thinking in the way that it does, does *A Mercy* not mark Morrison’s effort to summon into textual presence a cross-racial community, be it existent or non-existent in early America? While Updike, as mentioned in the beginning of this paper, is correct in pointing out that America’s “new” world is destined to “turn old,” by writing her novel Morrison nonetheless transforms the absent or the disappeared into textual existence.

One dramatic episode in *A Mercy* is that Florens covers the walls of Jacob’s grand house with her narrative. Designed with a “spectacular” gate that separates its “impressive” enclosure from the outside (149), Jacob’s third house, as made clear in the discussion above, best symbolizes the emergence of lines and demarcations in the new world. After Jacob’s death, the house is left incomplete and empty, turning from the symbol of white wealth and status into an embodiment of a disintegrated household. Yet the meaning of the house changes again after Florens sneaks into it at night and carves her words, with a nail, into the walls of one room. From being a house with an iron gate, it gradually transforms into a “house-qua-text” that begs a reading by “you.” Indeed, is this house-qua-text not a metaphor of Morrison’s text as a monument? Is *A Mercy* not a “text-qua-house” that has been created as a substitute for the disappearance of Jacob’s household? The makeshift family described in the novel might disappear as time moves on, but the “house-qua-text” remains in Morrison’s novel to be (re)visited.

Perhaps not too surprisingly, Morrison once compared a novel to a house in an interview. Reading a novel, according to her, is like exploring an unknown house.⁶ In *A Mercy*, the “house-qua-text” is conceived by Florens as a space that is capable of generating conversations and connections. Through textual threads and lines it continues forms of intimacy now forbidden in the world: even if “you” cannot read the text, Florens observes, these “careful words, closed up and wide open, will talk to themselves. Round and round, side to side, bottom to top, top to bottom all across the room” (161). Besides, as Florens transforms the house into a text, the “wilderness” also gradually invades and slowly takes over the house: “Spiders reign in comfort here and robins make nests in peace. All manner of small

⁶ Morrison elaborated this novel-as-house comparison in an interview: “If you would just, as a reader, open the door or see an open door, step in, and look around. No, you don’t know who this is right away, no, you don’t know who that is, no, you may not know what that room is for. If you like it, you’ll go further. If you’re afraid of it, you’ll step out. Maybe you’ll go back in later in another time. And then maybe you’ll run around the whole house and get the lay of the land” (Silverblatt 222).

life enters the windows along with cutting wind” (158). The acceptance of “all manner of small life” into one house bespeaks a mercy given by the text itself. Perhaps the act of mercy that Morrison means with her novel’s title is not Jacob’s acceptance of Florens. Perhaps it is by giving American history an open memory that Morrison delivers a true mercy.

I started this paper by citing Florens’s entrance into the “new” world. It turns out that, while Florens “see[s] a path and enter[s]” the presumably pathless woods (106), Morrison’s readers are not simply led into a remote past—the historical era already superseded by the development of Western modernity—but also guided into a textual labyrinth of times and encounters that project newness into our imagination of history’s future. In her lecture “The Future of Time: Literature and Diminished Expectations” (1996), Morrison suggests a turning toward “literature in general and narrative fiction in particular” in search of “the future of time” (178). The “future of time” as defined by Morrison is not equal to time in the future (as differentiated from the time of the past or that of the present). Nor does it connote a linear progress achieved through a breakage from the past. Rather, it refers to a temporal dimension that brings newness to history. Morrison makes this clear: the “future of time” becomes available when “one looks through history for its signs of renewal” (185). The historical past is not “past” when taken as a reservoir of the “signs of renewal.” Morrison’s texts ceaselessly evoke the past’s proximity to the present and the future, as well as the affective force it exerts upon them.

To conclude, if modern Western history generates meaning by producing order—both temporal and epistemic—*A Mercy* casts the temporal breakage and epistemic delimitations into flux for unregulated intimacy to become conceivable. The textual present, where the temporal points and historical lines are played out and restructured, is where “newness” is able to enter *A Mercy*. In fact, when Homi Bhabha seeks in “the sign of the present” of modernity an empowering condition for newness to enter the world, does he not also foreground the textual nature of the present? Rejecting the idea of the present as a transparent point of temporal measurement, Bhabha casts it as a “sign” made of “disjoined signifiers” (220). An “in-between” space where temporal points conjoin and “foreign” elements converge, the present is described by Bhabha as a “textile superfluity of folds and wrinkles” (227). Perpetually splitting, it heralds newness by enacting postcolonial cultural translation. In encountering Morrison’s “textual present” along with Bhabha’s “sign of the present,” we uncover a clearer idea of the “new” as inseparable from the past and the old, and experience its production as entangled with the negotiations with historical lines and cultural differences. Like Morrison, Bhabha looks for history’s

“intermediacy” that “poses the future . . . as an open question” (235). It is the textual present that fosters an intermediary agency to negotiate the structure of history and usher in “newness” in historical epistemes.

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