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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