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"My Telling Can't Hurt You": Teaching Toni Morrison's *A Mercy* in a Survey of American Literature

ABSTRACT: This article describes how Toni Morrison's 2008 novel *A Mercy* serves as a capstone for an American literature survey course. Set in 17th century America, the novel mobilizes early American literary tropes, asking students to review what they already know. Yet *A Mercy* also raises conceptual questions fundamental to a survey course by foregrounding the processes of literary historiography and canonization. By featuring the narration of a female African American writer – and by marking the uncertain future of her writings – the novel encourages students to consider how canonical literary histories are formed. The students are asked to recognize American literary histories as being marked not only by the national visions they produce, but also by the ones they exclude. *A Mercy*, therefore, urges students to think of their own reading as being both historically located and subject to history.

In the introduction to their 1991 literary history, *From Puritanism to Postmodernism: A History of American Literature*, Richard Ruland and Malcolm Bradbury state with confidence: "All literary histories are critical fictions." Indeed, the way that we construct literary pasts in our writing and in our teaching is an act of complex and problematic narration. We determine which authors and texts are worthy of inclusion and which we must leave out. We monitor the borders and boundaries of inside and outside, most important and less important. Compounding the difficulties of the process is the fact that the literary historical narratives we present to others (in our writing, in our teaching) are rarely straightforwardly "ours": we are lent a variety of narratives – those constructed by earlier literary histories, anthologies of various sorts, and the exams some of our students must eventually take – and we must decide which narrative we will pass along. Teaching my first American literary survey course at

Radford University, a public university in rural Virginia, has forced me to consider which story I want to tell about American literature – and how to do so.

We might think of the survey course as a means of telling our students: here are the texts, authors, schools and genres you need to know. For the national literary survey course, more specifically, we might think of it as telling them: here is the way to think about "our" national literature. As Randy Laist points out in "The Self-Destructing Canon," "To teach a survey course in any discipline is, almost by definition, to construct and propagate the kind of grand narrative of history that has been discredited by postmodernism, deconstruction, multiculturalism, and in fact, by most contemporary theory" (50). In other words, the survey course implicitly participates in the construction of and conversation about a canon. I'm uncomfortable with taking on this role of cultural expert and monitor. I'm uneasy with the way I have to negotiate between old and new canons, with the way I'm expected to balance between the texts and writers that have historically been considered important and the texts and writers I believe are important. Laist argues that the canonicity of the survey course need not lead to a conservative (or "hegemonic") classroom; rather, he claims, "it is the pedagogical approach to [canonical] texts that will determine the degree to which they will be characterized as transcendent and inviolable or contingent and provisional" (51). He offers three methods for addressing and thereby destabilizing canonicity: first, by drawing attention to the mutability of various literary texts (he uses *Hamlet* as an example); second, by emphasizing intertextuality and allusion (as in "The Waste Land"); and third, by incorporating texts that expose the exclusionary nature of the canon (he references

"The Yellow Wallpaper" and *A Room of One's Own*). Thus far, I've negotiated the uncomfortable task of constructing a literary history in a similar way: by foregrounding the production, maintenance and transformation of the American literary canon. In what follows, I will map out my approach to the course as a whole and discuss how my decision to end the semester's readings with Toni Morrison's 2008 novel *A Mercy* embodies the pedagogical goals of the course.

The temporal span of the semester-long course is daunting; it begins with the contact era and ends in 2012. I focus the course on a loosely constructed theme, encouraging my students to grapple with the way literature produced within the Americas (and primarily the United States) imagines the people and spaces of "America." How do the texts, I ask them, engage with questions like: What does it mean to be "American"? To inhabit the spaces of "America"? What is the relation between interior, subjective spaces and exterior landscapes? While we read works of literature considered "classics," we also read texts that are lesser-known.

Our first unit is framed through the lens of "borders, boundaries, and frontiers." We read literature by Columbus and Las Casas, Native American origin tales, Puritan visions of the New World, and Indian captivity narratives. I ask students to think about borders, boundaries, and frontiers not only geographically, but also socially and ideologically. We consider how borders are constructed, and what it means to cross them. In the second unit, we move on to the early nineteenth century, juxtaposing Romantic writers of various strains with Enlightenment-era writers. This unit focuses primarily on the tension between the irrational and the rational, the tamed and the

untamed, the knowable and the mysterious. We consider how historical writers like Cooper and Hawthorne envision the early days of the colonies. With writers like Poe, we begin to engage with questions of "the real": how does the new Gothic subject imagine a relation between the inside and the outside? This concern with modes of representing "the real," with the relation between subjectivity and the environment, extends into the units on the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In the last unit of the course, focused on post-WWII literature, we return to the questions with which we began, this time considering how the concept of the border can help us understand contemporary national and personal identities and literatures. In the last unit, as in the first, the border is spatial, social and imaginative.

As we work through the course, we inevitably place various texts in conversation with each other, asking: how does the way "America" is imagined change over time? What kinds of debates and dialogues implicitly take place amongst the texts we read? Which definitions and approaches still resonate and which seem strange – and why? These questions implicitly forward a conception of a national literary conversation that is unstable and contested. This approach asks students to mark the changing visions of the nation and its people, and to think of their own reading as being historically located. They begin to recognize their own stake in the creation of a literary history.

The course encourages students to consider how canonical literary histories are formed, and to recognize these histories as constructing certain visions, ideologies and "critical fictions" about national identities. In one early activity, I distribute first pages of tables of content from American Literature anthologies compiled between the 1980s and

today, emphasizing the increasing inclusion of Spanish, French, and Native American texts where earlier "American literature" was considered to begin with John Smith, William Bradford, and John Winthrop. We discuss the implications of such a transformation: what does it represent about changing conceptualizations of "America" and "Americans"? If the canon is historical, it is also unstable; I emphasize the notion that the creation of the canon – and therefore a national imaginary – is a process of inclusion and erasure, conflict and dialogue. When reading women writers like Harriet Beecher Stowe and Charlotte Perkins Gilman, for example, I talk about how these writers were reclaimed by the literary establishment with the rise of second wave feminism. At the end of the semester the students engage explicitly with the formation of the canon; after presenting to each other the contemporary texts they feel represent the vanguard of American literature, they write critically about canonicity and literary history itself. This final assignment gives them multiple options. They can "reinvent the canon," by making an argument for incorporating a specific work into the canon of American literature. They can also make an argument for or against the literary canon or the survey course as concepts. This end-of-semester assignment asks them to reflect critically not just about "American literature," but also about what it means to learn about and produce such a category.

Toni Morrison's recent novel *A Mercy* serves as the capstone to the course: working both pragmatically as a review text and by foregrounding the process of literary historiography. *A Mercy* is set in late 17th century America. It tracks the tales of four women: Florens, Lina, Sorrow and Rebekka. The four women are brought together by

Jacob Vaark, the Dutch-Anglo patriarch of the household: he purchases Lina, a Native American, from a group of Presbyterians; Rebekka, his white wife, is shipped from England to marry him; Vaark purchases Sorrow, a shipwreck survivor of indeterminate racial background to help around the house; and finally, attains Florens, who is black, as a debt-payment. Florens' mother – an Angolan slave who gives away her daughter near the beginning of the novel – haunts the book as a fifth female character, emerging in the final chapter to explain her actions. Over the course of the book, Jacob gradually transitions from a simple farmer into a wealthy trader of rum and sugar, bringing home gifts instead of stories and obsessively building bigger and more lavish houses. When Jacob dies of smallpox soon after his last mansion is completed, Rebekka (otherwise known as "Mistress") takes ill. To save her, Florens sets off into the wilderness to find the free African blacksmith she is in love with – the man who, the women believe, can save Rebekka's life.

A Mercy's setting takes students back to the beginning of the course, reminding them of where we began our discussions. Its status as historical fiction invokes the works of early nineteenth-century writers like Cooper and Hawthorne. Morrison's literary-cubist style reminds the students of their grapplings with Faulkner. Finally, *A Mercy* implicitly raises the question of inclusion in relation to literary historiography and canon-formation. The thematic concerns raised by its retelling of American history encourage students to reflect on the various national narratives produced throughout the course and urge them to think about both fiction and history as contested acts of erasure and inclusion. By ending the course with *A Mercy*, I encourage students to

engage with three aspects of the novel, all of which reflect and forward the self-reflexive goals of the course. First, the novel mobilizes early American literary tropes, asking students to review what they already know; second, by retelling American history and emphasizing the production of writing, it questions conventional literary histories; finally, its status as a historical novel raises the question of the relation between contemporary U.S. society and early America.

As Valerie Babb has pointed out, *A Mercy* engages with and redeploys common tropes of early American literature, creating in the process its own "origin tale." When Florens sets off through the wilderness to find the blacksmith, she tells the reader "Everything I want is west" (48). Florens' familiar glorification of a west full of possibility sets up Morrison's engagement with other tropes of American literature. Florens writes about her journey, "Hard as I try I lose the road. Tree leaves are too new for shelter, so everywhere the ground is slop with snow and my footprints slide and pool. . . . Can I go more, I wonder. Should I. Two hares freeze before bounding away. I don't know how to read that" (48). In the face of this mysterious landscape, she climbs a tree and attempts to rest. "I know sleep will not claim me because I have too much to fear. My plan for this night is not good. I need Lina to say how to shelter in wilderness" (49). It is hard not to read this passage as being in explicit conversation with Puritan images of the "howling wilderness" and the stereotype of the Native American guide. Yet the novel transforms these images as it employs them. Geneva Cobb Moore has argued that Morrison "parodies" dominant narratives in order to "reconstruct[] and deconstruct[] American history as it pertains to the lives of the subjugated Other" (2). She classifies *A Mercy* as

"demonic parody," which offers an "apocalyptic representation of an unbearable world of evil" (3) to "emphasiz[e] the hell on earth [Native Americans, black Africans, and black Americans] suffered, shortly after the arrival and settlement of the Europeans" (3). Yet if we see parody in this passage, I would argue that it downplays apocalypse, emphasizing instead the wilderness as a space of both danger and possibility. Here, the wilderness is neither inherently threatening nor inherently unknowable. Florens' fear comes, rather, from her inability to "read" the landscape, to understand its signs. Lina is remapped as a personal friend with helpful knowledge, not as an all-knowing guide.

As in this passage, the rest of the novel revisits and revises American history. The most obvious revision of early America is effected by the novel's emphasis on slavery, servitude, and ownership at the originary moment of the nation. Each of the women is bought: If Florens, Lina and Sorrow are slaves, Rebekka too is "sold" to her future husband ("already sixteen, she knew her father would have shipped her off to anyone who would book her passage and relieve him of feeding her" (86)). Jessica Cantiello argues that Morrison "wants the text to trouble the connection between slavery and African Americans" (170). "Morrison does not just dislodge the alignment between race and slavery;" writes Cantiello, "she also inserts the possibility of a myriad of different labor arrangements in this 'ad hoc' America" (170). Indeed, in the book servitude crosses racial boundaries; two other characters include white indentured servants William and Scully, whose servitude will likely stretch over the course of their lives, and during her journey Florens encounters white indentured servants in the process of escape.

Along with servitude, Morrison disrupts the classificatory nature of early American slave codes by emphasizing in her descriptions of the major female characters hybrid identities of various sorts. Lina, for example, is taken from a Native American community to a Presbyterian one, where she constructs an individual, syncretic religious practice: "Relying on memory and her own resources, she cobbled together neglected rites, merged Europe medicine with native, scripture with lore, and recalled or invented the hidden meaning of things" (56). Sorrow, whose racial background is deliberately blurred, grows up on the nebulous space of the sea, and when she is found, is thought by her rescuers to "be a boy." Florens is described as having the "hands of a slave and the feet of a Portuguese lady" (4). The women embody in their persons and practices the crossing of racial, gendered, religious and class borders.

Their identities seem representative of the New World itself, in which the frontier wilderness allows them to transcend social boundaries in the common fight for survival. We see this possibility in the passage in which Rebekka arrives at the homestead. If her relationship with Lina is originally characterized by "hostility," Morrison writes, "the animosity, utterly useless in the wild, died in the womb. Even before Lina midwifed Mistress' first child, neither one could keep the coolness. The fraudulent competition was worth nothing on land that demanding" (61-62). Here again, the wilderness becomes a space of danger and possibility: it offers a vision of cooperation, not competition.

If it at first seems that common servitude, hybridity and the struggle for survival

might allow the women a modicum of solidarity, however, the book's closing makes clear that the legal and political structures in which the women are enmeshed impede and overpower their individual crossings of social boundaries. If the women are bound in servitude to varying degrees, those varying degrees are of no small significance. After Rebekka recovers from her illness, we learn that the "tangled strings among them . . . were cut. Each woman embargoed herself; spun her own web of thoughts unavailable to anyone else" (158). As Cantiello points out, "The text's setting approaches the era when race began to be codified in the United States; most of the characters were born into a relatively pre-racial era but would die in a racial period" (169). On pages 11 and 12, Morrison emphasizes this transformation by describing the "thicket of new laws" springing up after Bacon's Rebellion, which "separated and protected whites from all others forever." Rebekka, who as the Mistress of the household holds legal right over the others, takes advantage of her power to "spread disaffection": "[S]he beat Sorrow, had Lina's hammock taken down, [and] advertised the sale of Florens" (182). Scully muses: "They once thought they were a kind of family because together they had carved companionship out of isolation. But the family they imagined they had become was false. Whatever each one loved, sought or escaped, their futures were separate and anyone's guess. One thing was certain, courage alone would not be enough. Minus bloodlines, he saw nothing yet on the horizon to unite them" (183).

In *A Mercy*, Morrison rethinks early America. While her wilderness landscape seems to offer possibilities for solidarity, "the family they imagined they had become

was false." While hybridity and the blurring of boundaries forms the core of the New World, increasingly rigid legal and political structures disrupt border-crossings. The "howling wilderness" is refashioned as one not of unknowable, frightening chaos, but of social possibility overrun by dangerous order.

A Mercy remobilizes early American literary tropes and crafts an alternative vision of the past that counters conventional literary studies of the era. As it does so, the novel asks the reader to reconsider the act of literary historiography. Which narratives are transmitted and which are lost? Morrison begins the novel with the words of Florens, who urges the reader not to be afraid: "my telling," she writes, "can't hurt you" (3). Babb argues that this passage "can be seen as an urging not to fear the telling of a broader, different American origins narrative. That she can write makes her unique among a slave population forbidden literacy, and in this fictional world she is able to join prenational authors such as Bradford, Winthrop, Ralph Hamor, and John Smith in recording history" (149-150). Florens' narrative is literally engrained in the structure of American history, as suggested when we discover, at the end of the book, that she has been covering the walls of Jacob's last house with her own writing. This detail also asks us to question the transmission of historical narratives. What eventually happens to this story? Is it transcribed? Is it lost? Which stories do we receive (and therefore, emphasize) and which ones are never passed along (and therefore, forgotten or never considered to begin with)? How, in other words, are literary histories constructed?

A last aspect of the novel that I think can be productive in class discussion is its position as a work of contemporary fiction. I hope that its inclusion asks students to

think about not only what the text is saying about history and literary history, but also what it is saying about societal narratives today. What is at stake in telling such a story in 2008? What does it make us question about the borders and boundaries of the nation today? What does it illuminate about gender, race, and the possibilities and limitations of solidarity? About the stories we hear and the stories we don't?

The national literary canon is fluid. Texts and authors are incorporated and dropped, included and excluded, in a process of intense negotiation and revision. I hope that by teaching *A Mercy* I help my students to recognize and reflect upon that process and to think critically about their relation to it.

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