

## CHAPTER SEVEN

# RUTHLESS EPIC FOOTSTEPS: SHOES, MIGRANTS, AND THE SETTLEMENT OF THE AMERICAS IN TONI MORRISON'S *A MERCY*

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Toni Morrison's challenging new novel set in the 17<sup>th</sup> century recalls the vexed intercultural beginnings of the settlement of the New World—rather than the grand myth of a chosen people's compact with God to establish an exemplary City upon a Hill, Morrison offers us a multi-voiced litany featuring a collection of waifs of various (mixed) ethnicities, vacuous aristocrats, debilitating religions, conscienceless trade. Published in the aftermath of the 2007 Jamestown Jubilee celebrating 400 years of the first permanent English settlement, Morrison's novel serves as a tough counterpoise to any unreflective patriotism which glorifies the American project while neglecting the ruthless exploitation based on ethnicity, gender, and class, historically part and parcel of the European advancement into the Americas. The Native American character Lina, calling the settlers "the Europes," refers disdainfully to the "*deathfeet of the Europes*,"<sup>1</sup> who trample on existing cultures, landscapes, and resources with thoughtlessly heavy tread and self-seeking avarice.

The vision at the end of the first page dominates the novel: "*I see a minha mãe standing hand in hand with her little boy, my shoes jamming the pocket of her apron*" ("minha mãe" is Portuguese for "my mother").<sup>2</sup> As I will demonstrate, Toni Morrison astonishingly and movingly manages to encode the entire Atlantic slave trade triangle in this picture, as well as international colonization, ethnicity, cultural/language differences,

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<sup>1</sup> Toni Morrison, *A Mercy* (London: Chatto and Windus, 2008), 52; italics added.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 1; italics added.

and gender issues. It also signals the literary genre of the bildungsroman with an adolescent first-person narrator and introduces the leitmotif of “shoes,” which becomes a key structural device in Morrison’s novel.<sup>3</sup> The personal fate and growth of the story-writer Florens is a vignette of the pain, subjugation, and misunderstanding, the thwarting of good intentions and the discovery of unexpected strength which characterized the New World experiences of its 17<sup>th</sup>-century inhabitants. As we will see, Toni Morrison sets her novel in the narrow window of historical time after the beginning of the settlements in the New World and before black slavery is irrevocably institutionalized, a decisive moment in the birth of legal racism when it—at least fascinatingly in novelistic imagination—possibly could have been avoided for the future generations.

[...]

Taken from Jopy Nyman, ed. *Post-National Enquiries: Essay on Ethnic and Racial Border Crossings*. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2009: p. 91-112.

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<sup>3</sup> The cover of the British edition features a prepubescent black girl wearing ladies’ shoes too large for her, picking up on the novel’s description of “those little legs rising like two bramble sticks from the bashed and broken shoes” (*A Mercy* 24).