

**RE-INSERTING AFRICA INTO AFRICAN AMERICAN: THE
ROOTS OF TONI MORRISON'S NARRATIVE TECHNIQUE IN
*THE BLUEST EYE***

by

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Abstract

Toni Morrison is a highly respected writer, critic and teacher. She is also a highly respected *black* writer, critic and teacher. When Morrison won the Nobel Prize for literature, the acceptance of the award was not without controversy. Critics such as Chinweizu who reject “Stockholm [as] the intellectual capital of the Black World”¹ and “would not wish a Nobel on any black whom [they] respect”,² adopt a point of view that sees the acceptance of an award proffered by a non-African community as a compromise of Afrocentric goals. The acceptance of a standard set by a white-led society whose goals and motivations differ vastly from those of people on the African continent is as controversial as the debate as to whether African American writers faithfully represent African themes and concerns in their writing.

Importantly, Morrison clearly identifies herself as an African American, but defines the terms on which she makes this pronouncement. She defiantly circumscribes the audience for which she writes as being black, yet in her insistence on a lack of specificity with regards to the meaning of the term “black” there arises significant scope for an investigation of the evidence of Africanisms in her work, inasmuch as the narrative technique displayed in Morrison’s works faithfully reflects that evident in African literary works.

Wole Soyinka has been used as the African literary cornerstone for this study. Soyinka’s views fuel the debate as to whether the interchangeable use of the terms “African” and

¹ Chinweizu. *Decolonising the African Mind*. Lagos: Pero. 1987. p. 199.

² *Ibid.* p. 197.

“black” in American literature is the reflection of an attempt to force a bond with African history, or whether it is an accurate representation of Africanisms and literary links to Africa. The Frazier-Herskovits debate presents two sides of the argument regarding the existence of Africanisms within American culture and whether Africa has significantly influenced the direction and style of American writing and specifically, African American narrative technique.

“Morrison’s first novel, *The Bluest Eye*, was published at the height of black cultural nationalism, when the women’s movement was gaining visibility”.³ *The Bluest Eye*, perhaps in part due to the influence of this movement, apparently demonstrates a greater use of African narrative technique. This discussion investigates the degree to which Morrison’s use of narrative technique supports Herskovits’s belief that literary Africanisms survived in the diaspora, or whether Frazier’s argument, that African American writing demonstrates an effective severing of the umbilical chord of African literary influence, is proved true.

Key terms:

African American; Africanist; Africanism; Afrocentrism; Black; Diaspora; Ethnology; Frazier-Herskovits; Narrative technique; Post-colonial studies; Soyinka; Toni Morrison.

³ Gates, H.L. Jr. and McKay, N.Y. (eds). *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature*. New York: Norton. 1997. p. 2094.

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1. Pondering “Africanisms”: glimpses of Africa in the narrative technique of African American writers

Melville Herskovits's *The Myth of the Negro Past*, published in 1941, aimed principally at studying Africanisms within American culture and proving that “those elements of culture found in the New World that are traceable to an African origin”⁴ do indeed exist within the context of what is the United States of America. Du Bois, Woodson and Turner supported Herskovits's perspective at various stages of the debate. Criticism of Herskovits's approach focuses mainly on the fact that he draws most of his examples from Latin American and Caribbean nations that are typical of countries with a significantly higher “abundance of living African culture”.⁵ Leading the opposing argument was E. Franklin Frazier, who believed that the effects of white slave owner interference on the customs and culture of black slaves of African origin was so devastating that these aspects were completely destroyed during the period of slavery. To Frazier, the experience of slavery was responsible for cutting the umbilical cord between slaves and their continent of origin, while stripping them of their “social heritage”.⁶ African writers such as Molefe Kete Asante share his views. Barbara Rigney seems to support Frazier's view by stating that Morrison's novels have as one of their goals the “rediscovery of an African past, lost through slavery and perhaps irretrievable except through myth”.⁷ Frazier further argues that blacks in the United States have passed through periods of attempted integration into a white-ruled society. These periods are

⁴ Holloway, J.E. (ed.). *Africanisms in American Culture*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press. 1991. p. ix.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ Rigney, B.H. *The Voices of Toni Morrison*. Columbus: Ohio State University Press. 1991. p. 66.

marked by a de-emphasis, or blurring, of cultural differences between different race groups.

Because a definitive view of the term “Africanism” is difficult to achieve, “a ‘generalized’ Africa becomes [a] more meaningful”⁸ source for its definition. Holloway’s comment that the term “Africanisms”⁹ cannot be used interchangeably with “West Africanism”¹⁰ highlights the challenge in ensuring a consistent use of terminology, even within an African context. African writers, and writers and critics focussing on African American writing have been used in this study as contributors for a definition of the term. The opinions expressed by Toni Morrison on some issues, such as the influence of Africa on her writing and her views on her own work, have been incorporated extensively into this dissertation, and form an integral part of the sources used for a definition of “Africanisms”.

Wole Soyinka offers a categorisation of the African World that sheds some light on the term “Africanism”.¹¹ Critics such as Chinweizu, Madubuike and Jemie do not consider Soyinka as being representative of an African world view because his “reputation was made in England”.¹² In part, their views are contained in Bamikunle’s comment that writers such as Cullen emphasise “the creation of highly imaginative and lofty literature as opposed to realistic literature”¹³ which dilutes the objectives of African writers of using literature as a means of addressing topics relevant to Africa and its people. But

⁸ Howe, S. *Afrocentrism*. London: Verso. 1999. p. 103.

⁹ Holloway, J.E. (ed.). *Africanisms in American Culture*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press. 1991. p. 1.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ Soyinka, W. *Myth, Literature and the African World*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 1992.

¹² Chinweizu et al. “Gibb’s Gibberish”, *Research in African Literatures*, 17.1. Spring 1986. p. 49.

¹³ Bamikunle, A. “The Harlem Renaissance and White Critical Tradition”. *College Language Association Journal* 29.1. September 1985: 48.

“certainly the plays of Soyinka were real”¹⁴ to Morrison, and so Soyinka will be used as the African cornerstone of this study as it is reasonable to expect that Morrison’s impressions of Africa and her use of Africanisms may have been influenced by him. He provides a starting point from which a definition of the term “Africanisms” can be formulated. It is nonetheless useful to point out that Soyinka believes that “Herskovits was another notable sinner in his efforts to understand traditional African theatre”¹⁵ by being prone to an “enthusiasm”¹⁶ or exaggeration over the sociological similarities between African theatre and that in the diaspora.

Writers and critics draw attention to the existence of African influences in black American society. Soyinka focuses his work on several key areas, one of which is the performative in African writing (which should not be interpreted to include drama only). Holloway cites religion and voodoo, attitudes towards life and death, sacrificial practices, artistic culture, music and folklore and language influences.¹⁷ This in general terms reflects the conclusion of both Carter G. Woodson in *The African Background Outlined* and du Bois in *Black Folk, Then and Now*.¹⁸ Woodson lists “technical skills, arts, folklore, spirituality, attitudes towards authority and a tradition towards generosity”¹⁹ as having survived within their new culture. In addition, he calls attention to the African influence on “religion, music, dance, drama, poetry and oratory”.²⁰ Berry *et al* cite that in

¹⁴ Morrison, T in Taylor-Guthrie, D (ed.). *Conversations with Toni Morrison*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi. 1994. p. 229.

¹⁵ Soyinka, W. *Myth, Literature and the African World*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 1992. p. 32.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ Holloway, J.E. (ed.). *Africanisms in American Culture*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press. 1991. p. xi.

¹⁸ Du Bois, W. E. B. *Black Folk, Then and Now*. New York: Holt. 1939.

¹⁹ Woodson, C. G. in Holloway, J.E. (ed.). *Africanisms in American Culture*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press. 1991. p. xi.

²⁰ Woodson, C. G. in Holloway, J.E. (ed.). *Africanisms in American Culture*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press. 1991. p. xi.

a study of Georgia blacks, “investigators found 70 elements of African culture in the region”.²¹

Ishmael Reed identifies “a marked independence from Western form”²² as a characteristic of African writing. Morrison adds that “there is a level of appreciation that might be available only to people who understand the context of the language”.²³ Many critics and writers will say that Soyinka’s argument is too generalist²⁴ when he argues that there is

“a recognisable Western cast of mind, a compartmentalising habit of thought which periodically selects aspects of human emotion, phenomenal observations, metaphysical intuitions and even scientific deductions and turns them into separatist myths (or ‘truths’)”.²⁵

Soyinka’s arguments point to a trend displayed by writers such as Ngugi wa Thiong’o, Kunene, Abdul JanMohamed, Achebe and Soyinka himself, all of whom demonstrate increasing reluctance to compromise on any aspect of their Africanist perspective. His arguments also display a criticism of an approach responsible for a less fluid style that often translates into unambiguous closure in non-African works. Morrison herself hints at the different African psyche where “the fabrication of an Africanist persona is reflexive; an extraordinary meditation on the self; a powerful exploration of the fears and desires that reside in the writerly conscious”.²⁶ She admits that a narrative technique

²¹ Berry, M.A., Blassingame, J.W. “Africa, Slavery, & the Roots of Contemporary Black Culture”, excerpt from *Long Memory: The Black Experience in America*. New York: Prentice-Hall. *Massachusetts Review*. 18. 1977. p. 509.

²² Reed, Ishmael. *19 Necromancers from Now*. New York: Harper. 1970, p. xvi.

²³ Ojo-Ade, F (ed.), *Of Dreams Deferred, Dead or Alive; African Perspectives on African-American Writers*, Westport: Greenwood Press, 1996, p. 173.

²⁴ To his credit, Soyinka does often come to his own rescue, by cautioning “against a sadly familiar reductionist tendency” [Soyinka, W. *Death and the King's Horseman*. London: Methuen. 1975. (Author’s note)], even if it is in this case in the defence of his own work.

²⁵ Soyinka, W. *Myth, Literature and the African World*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 1992, p. 37.

²⁶ Morrison, T. *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*. New York: First Vintage. 1993. p. 17.

characterised as Africanist will include an intrusive narrator (even the writer him or herself) in an attempt at achieving verisimilitude of African style. This may be one of the reasons for Morrison's choice of a first-person narrator in *The Bluest Eye*, as well as her inclusion of an explicatory afterword in the novel. But the latter is controversial, from an Africanist perspective, because through its inclusion it can be argued that Morrison succumbs to precisely the literary closure that Soyinka implies is a facet of non-African writing. It also seems to contradict Henry Louis Gates, Jr.'s opinion that black literature is not characterised by "the presence of voice at all, but [by] its absence"²⁷

Fox is wary, however, of accepting glib generalisations regarding style, and points out that a characteristic of African American writing is that "there is already a natural ethnicity functioning in the dynamics of that style"²⁸ which is both "a condition of mind [and] a mode of existence".²⁹ He attributes this ethnicity directly to black writers and by implication to African writers. Equally implicit in his statement, therefore, is a close literary relationship between black writers in the United States and African writers. This is important, as care must be taken not to expect Morrison to display *obvious* renditions of a narrative technique influenced by African writing.

While Berry and Blassingame submit that "most scholars [hold] the most obvious African retentions in black American culture [to be] music and dance"³⁰ this study will focus

²⁷ Gates, H.L. Jr. *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African American Literary Criticism*. New York: Oxford University Press. 1988. p. 167.

²⁸ Fox, R.E. "The Logic of the White Castle: Western Critical Standards and the Dilemma of Black Art". *Obsidian: Black Literature in Review*, 3.2. 1977: 21.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ Berry, M.A., Blassingame, J.W. "Africa, Slavery, & the Roots of Contemporary Black Culture", excerpt from *Long Memory: The Black Experience in America*. New York: Prentice-Hall. *Massachusetts Review*. 18. 1977. p. 509.

primarily on narrative technique where orality is considered to be a key component of the analysis.

In a controversial article that touches on the question of orality, Barbara Christian states that most “potentially radical critics have been influenced, even co-opted into speaking a language alien to and opposed to our needs and orientation”.³¹ Christian takes the general concept of African “communal evolution of the dramatic mode of expression”,³² as described by Wole Soyinka, and extends this to other aspects of non-Western existence. Christian draws attention to the differences that may exist between African and non-African textual constructions. Her comments also highlight that the degree to which differences in textual constructions are minimised will indicate the degree to which assimilation of African linguistic and cultural characteristics has occurred. Thus the concept of syntactic fusion, often mistaken as an attempt at “verisimilitude”,³³ is in fact a search for “rhythmic fidelity”³⁴ where cultural neologisms conveyed in written form transmit a feel that is typical of the specific culture. An example that reinforces this, while not alluding necessarily to a corresponding Africanism, is Morrison’s use of a melodious pattern of repetition (“he’s just picky. He ain’t picky”)³⁵ and double negatives (“ain’t no chicken, ain’t no buzzard”)³⁶ frequently used in black culture in the United States.

³¹ Christian, B. *The Race for Theory*, in Mitchell, A. (ed), *Within the Circle: An Anthology of African American Literary Criticism from the Harlem Renaissance to the Present*, Durham: Duke University Press, 1994, p. 349.

³² Soyinka, W. *Myth, Literature and the African World*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 1992. p. 38.

³³ Ashcroft, B. et al. (eds) *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literature*. London: Routledge. 1989. p. 71.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ Morrison, T. *The Bluest Eye*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf. 2000. p. 14.

³⁶ *Ibid.* p. 14.

While in no way purporting their analysis to be complete, the work by Ashcroft *et al* on post-colonial writing provides an interesting perspective on Africanisms, as it investigates some strategies for the replacement of African style and narrative technique in non-African cultures. This is particularly appropriate because most non-African writers, whether black or white, tend to write in non-African languages (mostly due to lack of detailed knowledge of the latter or the perceived need to write within the context of a primarily non-African literary community, including the audience and the publishing medium). Writers may therefore choose to emphasise or de-emphasise techniques such as the use of ellipses, or as Morrison puts it: “how Africanist language practices are employed to evoke the tension between speech and speechlessness”.³⁷ Other examples of such techniques are the use of the performative, and the use of visually descriptive words that signify the “iconic and constitutive function of language”,³⁸ such as those that describe Pauline in *The Bluest Eye*, whose injured foot and her subsequent loss of a tooth convey as much a physical deterioration as they do a successive lessening of self-confidence and self-esteem.

The use of English does not disqualify a text from retaining its Africanism. Nonetheless, there should be evidence of the inherent conflicts that the writer faces in appropriating a foreign language for his or her own use. In the case of African American writing, the issue is further complicated because very few writers (as a percentage of the total of African American writers) have knowledge of any African language, and are compelled

³⁷ Morrison, T. *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*. New York: First Vintage. 1993. p. 52.

³⁸ Ashcroft, B. *et al.* (eds) *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literature*. London: Routledge. 1989. p. 55.

to write in English, which Henry Louis Gates, Jr. comments is an irony given that African American writers are attempting to “posit a ‘black self’ in the very Western languages in which blackness itself is a figure of absence, a negation”.³⁹ The point is exacerbated, perhaps obviously, because English is *the* language of African American writers. The recourse that African American writers have to ensure that they maintain control of the medium whose language has been determined primarily by a white culture is to refuse to adhere to the “correct” usage of English or to writing according to a certain “style”. These two words are purposefully highlighted because their acceptance or attempted definition is in itself highly problematic and questionable. The tension in works of African American writers must be considered when an analysis of the retention of Africanisms in African American texts is contemplated.

Certain narrative techniques tend to indicate an incomplete assimilation of Africanisms by Western writers, often highlighted by the attempt to imply equivalence between African writing and writing in the diaspora. “Parenthetical translations of individual words are the most obvious and most common authorial intrusion in cross-cultural texts”.⁴⁰ The technique of glossing inserts a layer of additional interpretative meaning, which is often reductive, into the story. The question of untranslated words is problematic in the sense that their inclusion may be interpreted either as a retention of originality or as the inability to adapt to cross-cultural requirements, and therefore the inability to assimilate and integrate into a culture in the diaspora. However, both techniques may “force the

³⁹ Gates, H.L. Jr. (ed). *Black Literature and Literary Theory*. New York: Methuen. 1984. p. 7.

⁴⁰ Ashcroft, B. et al. (eds) *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literature*. London: Routledge. 1989. p. 61.

reader into an active engagement with the horizons of the culture in which these terms have a meaning".⁴¹

While the text itself is of primary consideration in analysing the narrative technique for examples of Africanisms, context is also important in establishing the framework within which African American writers create their texts. Howe argues that "Afrocentrists do not, by and large, proclaim relativism"⁴² and that writers such as Paule Marshall dilute Afrocentric perspectives by adopting the posture that African works *must* exist within the framework of foreign cultures. Marshall advocates a combination of a need for Africans to assert themselves on their own terms and to dominate the signs and systems of foreign cultures. Rather than an admission of submission, I view this as a pragmatic suggestion to elevate the position of Africans in the world, by increasing their knowledge of the foreign rather than constraining themselves to knowledge of their own cultures. It reflects Rafael Pérez-Torres's opinion that "Gates finally come[s] to argue that that black writers have had to digest both Western and non-Western forms of literary production."⁴³ Nonetheless, in the context of writing in America, this would be an apparently contradictory position to that of Morrison who refrains from using frequent references from outside the black community and culture (for example the infrequent reference to non-black race groups in many of her novels). By virtue of her inclusion of and allusion to some references from outside the black community, such as the bluest eye which is metonymic of white beauty, she recognises the existence of these influences, and even the

⁴¹ Ashcroft, B. et al. (eds) *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literature*. London: Routledge. 1989. p. 65.

⁴² Howe, S. *Afrocentrism*. London: Verso. 1999. p. vii.

⁴³ Pérez-Torres, R. in Peach, L. (ed.). *Toni Morrison: Contemporary Critical Essays*. New York: St. Martin's Press. 1998. p. 129.

enormity of the impact they can have on her community *despite* the attempt to preserve cultural singularity and independence. Writers such as Morrison and Marshall understand that the selective use of cultural signifiers can simultaneously be effective tools and weapons.

While recognising that it might be controversial by Africanist standards, I argue that, in the context of what has been said thus far, the choice of a prominent writer as a basis for this study is important. Equally, from an African perspective, I would argue that it is important for the impact of the continent's literature and narrative technique to be correctly acknowledged, in the cases where it has been used as an influence to other literature, in this case African American. Because the definition of an "Africanism" is, as we have seen, difficult and not without controversy itself, first-hand analysis of African American texts is necessary, to determine whether such literature depicts the use of narrative technique similar to that used in African literature. Nonetheless, some writers succumb to what I term "appropriation" of African terms by using these very terms in the context of expressions and works that do not demonstrate an African influence. Toni Morrison is not necessarily exempt from this characteristic that would add weight to the opinion of E. Franklin Frazier, that African American culture (and therefore literature) has lost its links with Africa. As part of this study, the next chapter will focus on the debate surrounding the use of the term "African" in "African American" literature, and whether this constitutes an instance of appropriation or not.

2. Exploring the Frazier-Herskovits debate: challenges in reducing the literary distance between the diaspora and its Africanist roots

Frazier's and Herskovits's points of view form the cornerstone of the debate as to whether the term "African" in American literature has been used in an attempt to create a literary bond with Africa, that may be artificial inasmuch as it does not reflect, among other things, the retention of narrative technique emanating from Africa, nor the interests and concerns of an American readership. The risk is that if the literary bond has been forced there is the possibility of alienation of both audiences. It is debatable whether the fact that "one day, black Americans begin to call themselves African Americans, suggesting an ethnic link to the peoples in Africa"⁴⁴ indeed implies a sufficiently faithful representation of Africanisms, including ethnological, social and specifically literary links to Africa. The argument is by no means made easier by the fact that attempts at defining the basis for a common understanding of the term "African American" or any of its derivative terms have often culminated in an admission of a certain impenetrability and insolubility of the problem. A case in point is the work by Stephen Howe⁴⁵ that, while both far-ranging and well-researched, nonetheless concludes that "it is fairly generally accepted that clearly identifiable African elements are far less significant in black North American cultures".⁴⁶ This is in direct contrast to Toni Morrison's view that "the Africanist presence informs in compelling and inescapable ways the texture of

⁴⁴ McPherson, J.A. "Devolutionism and Beyond: Looking for a Doomo". *Chiba Review*, 11. 1989: p. 5.

⁴⁵ Howe, S. *Afrocentrism*. London: Verso. 1999.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.* p. 101.

American literature”.⁴⁷ Nonetheless, in *Playing in the Dark*, Morrison does not substantially document evidence of Africanisms, and this undermines her general statement and reinforces the challenge of identifying what constitutes a true representation of heritage in the case of African American literature. There is frequent interchangeable use, as will be seen from the various sources cited in this dissertation including Morrison herself, of the terms “African” and “black”, the former primarily a geographic and sociological representation, and the latter reflecting a position focussed on race and a specific set of sociological assumptions. The degree to which the terms “African” and “black” can be used interchangeably, in terms of their respective allusion to narrative technique influenced by African writing, is central to the debate of whether Africanisms have been retained within African American literature.

The arguments presented within the works of Toni Morrison as well as references to critics such as Ojo-Ade and Mitchell seem to indicate that the reality of the closeness of the diaspora to Africa lies somewhere in the space of debate between Herskovits’s and Frazier’s points of view. They highlight the difficulty that critics and writers have in proving unambiguously that narrative techniques employed by African American writers have as their origin African narrative technique. Morrison herself admits that she is “not sure which [links] are genuine and which are not”.⁴⁸ In addition, new influences from the African continent have reached the United States, but evidence as to extent or degree to which these influences have had any effect on narrative technique in African American writing is scarce. Ultimately, however, Morrison believes that the “Africanist presence

⁴⁷ Morrison, T. *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*. New York: First Vintage. 1993. p. 46.

⁴⁸ Morrison, T in Taylor-Guthrie, D (ed.). *Conversations with Toni Morrison*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi. 1994. p. 224.

may be something the United States cannot do without [because] deep within the word ‘American’ is an association with race”.⁴⁹ Just as “to identify someone as a South African is to say very little [without] the adjective ‘white’ or ‘black’ or ‘colored’”,⁵⁰ so too “American means white”.⁵¹ To Morrison, therefore, the uncertainty as to which evolutionary links between Africa and the United States are genuine is clearly secondary to ensuring that the issue of black influence on American literature is addressed. This position reinforces Morrison’s own stated view that her loyalty is primarily to the advancement of “black” literature versus ensuring similarity of narrative technique to that demonstrated in works of Africans. It can be further argued that if Morrison is struggling to define the position of black writers within the United States, she will not perceive that ensuring the use of Africanisms in her works is a priority. At least one critic feels that

“Morrison’s text suggests a connection between its narrative strategies and the socio-historical realities of Africans in the Americas [where] Gates argues that the Signifyin(g) of black narratives – the linguistic playing, punning, coding, decoding and recoding found in African-American texts – emerges from the pressing necessity for political, social and economic survival.”⁵²

Morrison, however, believes that the “Africanist presence”⁵³ in American writing has evolved from looking to the “creators of American literature for clarification about the invention and effect of Africanism in the United States”⁵⁴ to realising that there are “self

⁴⁹ Morrison, T. *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*. New York: First Vintage. 1993. p. 47.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² Pérez-Torres, R. in Peach, L. (ed.). *Toni Morrison: Contemporary Critical Essays*. New York: St. Martin’s Press. 1998. p. 133.

⁵³ Morrison, T. *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*. New York: First Vintage. 1993. p. 17.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.* p. 15.

evident ways that Americans choose to talk about themselves through a choked representation of an Africanist presence".⁵⁵ It is therefore questionable whether the Africanisation of African American literature in the United States, or the Americanisation of Africa, including its literature, has occurred. The United States retains, as Morrison points out, a preoccupation with issues of national identity implying that writers such as Morrison focus their (literary) efforts on the advancement of race causes above any particularly ethnic ones. While "Gates' exposition offers the means by which Morrison's fiction enables us to see a sign [as] capable of 'signifying' a conventional and 'Signifyin(g) an oppositional meaning simultaneously,"⁵⁶ Africanists such as Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Kunene, Abdul JanMohamed and Chinua Achebe have little time for the contemplation of the influence of American literature on African writing, believing it to be irrelevant to African literature.

It is appropriate (and typical of the writer, I would add) that Morrison herself lays down the gauntlet so daringly in the debate of the use of the terms "black" versus "African", by stating that she wants her "work to capture the vast imagination of black people".⁵⁷ Not "African American, African, or Afro-Caribbean literature, but Black literature".⁵⁸ Morrison's nationalistic tradition seems "to be affirming the *apartness* of the African American community"⁵⁹ and is of particular interest because "*The Bluest Eye* was published at the height of black cultural nationalism, when the women's movement was

⁵⁵ Morrison, T. *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*. New York: First Vintage. 1993. p. 17.

⁵⁶ Burton, A. in Peach, L. (ed.). *Toni Morrison: Contemporary Critical Essays*. New York: St. Martin's Press. 1998. p. 171.

⁵⁷ Nwankwo, C. in Ojo-Ade, F (ed.), *Of Dreams Deferred, Dead or Alive; African Perspectives on African American Writers*. Westport: Greenwood Press, 1996, p. 172.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵⁹ McPherson, J.A. "Devolutionism and Beyond: Looking for a Doomo". *Chiba Review*. 11. 1989: p. 6.

gaining visibility”.⁶⁰ While Morrison refers to her use of the term “black” as alluding to a state of mind unconfined by race, I believe the opinion expressed is in essence a racial one. My justification is that Morrison’s references throughout most of her works are based on the experiences of black people (primarily in the state of Ohio), while other population (race) groups do not play a significant role in her works other than as a basis for comparison (for example, as a point of reference in Pecola’s “bluest eye” or the white hospital in *Song of Solomon*). This mirrors the concern expressed by Byerman that “the dynamic of being black in a society that has ignored or denigrated the value of that skin color has been crucial to African American identity”.⁶¹ Du Bois advances this argument by stating that “we are Americans, not only by birth and by citizenship, but by our political ideals, our language, our religion. Farther than that our Americanism does not go. At that point we are Negroes”.⁶² Valenti underscores this by describing that “the emphasis on ... Africanism... is replaced ... by an emphasis on color, Blackness”.⁶³ Morrison is in fact part of the group of writers and critics that make the assumption that the terms “black” and “African American” can be used interchangeably. In her essay on roots, she argues that the “novel [as a form] needed by African Americans”⁶⁴ displays “major characteristics of Black art”.⁶⁵

⁶⁰ Gates, H.L. Jr. and McKay, N.Y. (eds). *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature*. New York: Norton. 1997. p. 2096.

⁶¹ Byerman, K. “Hip-hop Spirituality: African-American Cultural Criticism”. *College Literature*. 22.2. June 1995: 141.

⁶² du Bois cited in Warren, K.W. “Delimiting America: The Legacy of du Bois”. *American Literary History*. Spring 1989. p. 172.

⁶³ Valenti, S. “The Black Diaspora: Negritude in the Poetry of West Africans and Black Americans”. *Phylon: The Atlanta University Review of Race and Culture*. 34. 1973: 397.

⁶⁴ Morrison, T “Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation” in Walder, W. (ed.). *Literature in the Modern World*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. 1990. p. 328.

⁶⁵ Morrison, T “Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation” in Walder, W. (ed.). *Literature in the Modern World*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. 1990. p. 328.

Bearing in mind the Frazier-Herskovits debate, it is worthwhile to determine whether statements such as those by Eagleton, that “in the West, especially in the United States, questions of ethnicity have enriched a radical politics narrowly fixated on social class”,⁶⁶ imply a usage of the terms “black American” and “African American” that conveys a true ethnic commonality or whether it implies racial grouping and therefore an appropriation of the term “African” in “African American”. The argument is further fuelled because

“Afrocentrism may, in its looser sense, mean little more than an emphasis on shared African origins among ‘black’ people, but in its stronger versions is accompanied by a mass of invented traditions, a mythical vision of the past and by a body of racial pseudo-science, much of it centred on ideas about melanin”.⁶⁷

It is equally challenging to determine whether the existence of Africanisms in the diaspora is a result of direct influence from the continent and, given that writers such as Toni Morrison admit to little direct contact with the continent, whether this changes if the contact is indirect. While a complete analysis of the arguments is not possible at the general level, the objective of this study is to determine whether the presence of Africa and African narrative technique can be observed in the style, and more specifically the narrative technique, of American literature written by Toni Morrison (and by implication other black Americans).

In *Africanisms in American Culture*, Ojo-Ade points to the differences, and not the similarities, between Africa as a continent and African American as a grouping of people

⁶⁶ Eagleton, T. *Literary Theory: An Introduction*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press. 1996. p. 205.

⁶⁷ Howe, S. *Afrocentrism*. London: Verso. 1999. pp. 12.

with an implied link with Africa. By equating the United States to an idealised state of existence represented as the American Dream, by implication Africa takes on the role of the “quintessential nightmare”⁶⁸ for the African American, as well as representing an implied savagery and “repressed darkness [that] became objectified in American literature as an Africanist persona”.⁶⁹ He points to the “nightmarish side of the (essentially white American) dream”⁷⁰ which, he argues, ironically sees many African Americans seeking to attain an ideal not conceived by or for them. The dream, synonymous with principles such as a preoccupation with material wealth and an individualistic outlook on life, is rendered useless for African Americans when its ideals are compared to those of a more traditional Africa.

Ojo-Ade brings to the forefront the debate regarding the American Dream and the possibility (and lack of demonstration) of its fulfilment, particularly by the American population at large. In doing so he highlights the point made in Ashcroft *et al* that

“in contrasting Black American writing with that from Africa it overlooks the very great cultural differences between literatures which are produced by a Black minority in a rich and powerful white country and those produced by the Black majority population of an independent nation”.⁷¹

This comment is more generally applicable in post-colonial Africa, because nations such as South Africa, Zimbabwe, Namibia and Angola are now under majority rule.

⁶⁸ Ojo-Ade, F (ed.), *Of Dreams Deferred, Dead or Alive; African Perspectives on African-American Writers* Westport: Greenwood Press. 1996, p. xiii.

⁶⁹ Morrison, T. *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*. New York: First Vintage. 1993. p. 39.

⁷⁰ Ojo-Ade, F (ed.), *Of Dreams Deferred, Dead or Alive; African Perspectives on African-American Writer*. Westport: Greenwood Press. 1996, p. xiii.

⁷¹ Ashcroft, B. *et al.* (eds) *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literature*. London: Routledge. 1989. p. 21.

McPherson argues that the integrationists who attempt to find a point of convergence between African American as a group and the American Dream often fail to do so because “because the material dimensions of what has been called the ‘American Dream’ have assumed predominance over almost every spiritual dimension in American life”.⁷² As this assumption may not be made with regard to African nations because literature is created within very different contexts, the translation of these aspirations into African literature and African narrative technique is likely to be even more difficult than establishing a link between “American” aspirations and African American writing.

Given the above debate, it is not surprising that Ojo-Ade has difficulty in proving that there is an undeniable influence of Africa on most black writing in the diaspora. His somewhat revisionist and reader-centric approach to exploring both pro- and anti-African stances among African American writers is useful inasmuch as it provides an avenue for the attainment of an ideal by those not necessarily committed to the American Dream as constructed by a majority white population. In this context, it is Africa that now holds the “hope of legitimating the black self”⁷³ (notwithstanding the fact that we note the potential dilemma between “black” and “African” arising in this statement). Langston Hughes demonstrates an anti-American Dream stance, but even his own position is complicated because it envisions a return to the all-black state by ridding African countries of foreign, restrictive forces, while seemingly (or at least to a large degree) ignoring the view of treason by “certain buffer-Negroes [who] are helping to maintain the

⁷² McPherson, J.A. “Devolutionism and Beyond: Looking for a Doomo” *Chiba Review*. 11. 1989: p. 7.

⁷³ Gikandi in Ojo-Ade, F (ed.), *Of Dreams Deferred, Dead or Alive; African Perspectives on African-American Writers*. Westport: Greenwood Press. 1996, p. xiv.

status quo of Eurocentricity”⁷⁴ within post-colonial regimes, in a sense the “native auxiliaries of colonialism, the Ariels”.⁷⁵

It is understandable that it is difficult to draw unambiguous conclusions regarding Africanisms in the diaspora because these same conclusions are equally difficult to reach within an African context. The fact that Holloway argues that the often-used term “Africanisms”⁷⁶ cannot be used interchangeably with the term “West Africanism”⁷⁷ underscores the difficulty that many critics and writers have in ensuring a consistent use of terminology. I would argue that Holloway falls prey to precisely the unmitigated homogeneity against which he preaches, by assuming that “Africanism” implies solely black African influence (neglecting thus Arabic, white and other influences).⁷⁸ Morrison might equally find issue with his view as she describes “Africa as [composed of] very distinct, very different, very specific, widely divergent people connected ... *perhaps* [by] their skin, but not really that”.⁷⁹

Part of the challenge of understanding to what extent writing and narrative technique in the diaspora demonstrate Africanisms, is determining whether there is a transferability and superimposition of the terms “African American” and “black American”. Likewise, it is worth considering whether the terms “African” and “black” are equivalent, negating the possibility of inclusion of other race groups in the definition of “African”. The

⁷⁴ Ojo-Ade, F (ed.), *Of Dreams Deferred, Dead or Alive; African Perspectives on African-American Writers* Westport: Greenwood Press. 1996, p. 186.

⁷⁵ Chinweizu. *Decolonising the African Mind*. Lagos: Pero. 1987. p. 2.

⁷⁶ Holloway, J.E. (ed.). *Africanisms in American Culture*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press. 1991. p. 1.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.* p. 1.

⁷⁸ Although bearing in mind that the black population is the most representative, the question of recognition of other sources to the complex fabric of Africanism is an important aspect of the wider debate.

⁷⁹ Morrison, T in Taylor-Guthrie, D (ed.). *Conversations with Toni Morrison*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi. 1994. p. 228.

failure to address these questions more directly generates a gap in understanding and interpretation, due to the ethnological and cultural (and in the case of literature, stylistic, among others) differences involved, not to mention the debate as to whether there can ever be a transferability of political Africanisms given the contexts that exist within Africa and the diaspora, which are so different. Also, consideration must be given to the geographic closeness to Africa, the continent, expected from the use of the terms “Africa/n” (primarily a consideration of whether writers and critics have had direct contact with the continent).

A pertinent example of this debate is Ojo-Ade’s *Of Dreams Deferred, Dead or Alive: African Perspectives on African American Writers*, which succumbs to precisely the same dilemma of the interchangeable use of the terms “African American” and “black American”. While using the term “African American” to encapsulate writers such as Claude McKay from Jamaica and Paule Marshall from Barbados, Ojo-Ade makes clear in his work that the writers he analyses are black writers who reside in the United States, or who adopt a perspective in their works clearly favouring the United States in terms of geography and ideology. What the writers of the essays are in effect analysing are *black writers who have or are residing in the United States, and have a link to Africa because of their colour*. It is therefore a very specific group of people and only exacerbates the question of overlap between “black” and “African American”. While to a large extent this overlaps with the black African writer’s perspective (especially given the history of colonisation) it is not a complete overlap, and contrasts to Achebe’s vision that “the

African novel has to be about Africa",⁸⁰ because "Africa is not only a geographical expression, it is also a metaphysical landscape – it is in fact a view of the world and the whole cosmos perceived from that particular position".⁸¹

In *Africanisms in American Culture*, many of the writers appear to have an expectation that the views of black writers coincide with that of African writers. They are apparently disappointed when they do not. An analysis of the motivations of Claude McKay shows that his motivation to leave Jamaica is "to achieve something new, something in the spirit and accent of America".⁸² He is disinterested in Africa for Africa's sake, and his motivation in defending a cause twice removed from his own is questionable. The reason I say this is that McKay is NOT an "exiled son of Africa".⁸³ He is in fact a *son of Jamaica, a grandson of Africa, and on self-imposed exile in the United States*. I would question whether it is possible to be born "far from his native land"⁸⁴ (physically impossible in most cases, I would argue), but rather from one's ancestral birthplace, a subtle but significant difference. These distinctions serve to illustrate that there is an attempt to create a du Boisian Pan-Africanism extending to the diaspora, by the inclusion (in this case, by the critic) of black writers in general. Once again, the point is that this insistence appears to persist even when the ideological differences are great.

⁸⁰ Nwankwo, C. in Ojo-Ade, F (ed.), *Of Dreams Deferred, Dead or Alive; African Perspectives on African-American Writers*. Westport: Greenwood Press. 1996, p. 173.

⁸¹ Nwankwo, C. in Ojo-Ade, F (ed.), *Of Dreams Deferred, Dead or Alive; African Perspectives on African-American Writers*. Westport: Greenwood Press. 1996, p. 173.

⁸² *Ibid.* p. 66.

⁸³ Ojo-Ade, F (ed.), *Of Dreams Deferred, Dead or Alive; African Perspectives on African-American Writers* Westport: Greenwood Press. 1996, p. 65.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.* p. 69.

One may wonder why the issue of differentiation between the terms “African” and “black” is relevant at all. One of the reasons is that African Americans and black Africans are dealing with different situations with respect to the question of majority. In the United States, black Americans, including Morrison, are a minority. In Africa, black Africans are a majority. The role of the African writer becomes one of reinforcing cultural characteristics and historical values, while Morrison positions herself as “a black writer struggling with and through a language that can powerfully evoke and enforce hidden signs of dismissive ‘othering’”.⁸⁵

Morrison severely criticises “powerful literary critics in the United States [who] have never read, and are proud to say so, *any* African-American text”.⁸⁶ A parallel may be drawn with the extent to which African Americans have read African texts or have had direct contact with the continent. The fact that Morrison openly admits to do “no research”⁸⁷ on Africa and to have her recollections of Africa “identified by Africans”,⁸⁸ emphasises the second-hand nature of her contact with the continent and makes her, in my opinion, just as prone to criticism for lack of direct contact with an important source of influence for her work. Because Morrison chooses to make her position “vulnerable”, it is clear that she emphasises her allegiance to the advancement of black literature rather than any affiliation to African literature. From Morrison’s statement that critics have not read African-American texts, one can infer that Morrison believes that critics in the United States have not aided black literary advancement. From an Africanist perspective,

⁸⁵ Morrison, T. *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*. New York: First Vintage. 1993. p. x.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.* p. 13.

⁸⁷ Morrison, T in Taylor-Guthrie, D (ed.). *Conversations with Toni Morrison*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi. 1994. p. 225.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.* p. 224.

it can therefore be equally concluded that neither the critics nor Morrison have helped the advancement of *African* literature. Inadvertently, Morrison's criticism of other critics together with her stated pro-black position have highlighted the question of the ambiguity of the terms "black" and "African".

The preceding ambiguous views regarding the homogeneity of the use of the term "African" indicate the difficulty in establishing a clear distinction between the use of the terms "black" and "African". The subsequent chapters will deal in detail with the way in which the writing of Toni Morrison displays (or not) a more clearly observable parallel between her narrative technique and Africanisms prevalent in African writing. I will look to analyse this *despite* the fact that Morrison, as we shall see, positions her literary allegiance as being to a "black" and not an "African" cause *per se*. In doing so, it will be seen whether Frazier's argument is reinforced, or whether the Africanisms within Morrison's work are sufficiently strong as to conclude that the faithful maintenance of an African narrative technique has prevailed despite the fact that Morrison and other African-American writers do not have it as one of their primary stated objectives.

3. Elements of Africa in the writing of Toni Morrison

In his review of Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*, John Leonard of the *New York Times* writes: "*The Bluest Eye* is an inquiry into the reasons why beauty gets wasted in this country. The beauty in this case is black. [Ms. Morrison's prose is] so precise, so faithful to speech, and so charged with pain and wonder that the novel becomes poetry...I have said 'poetry', but *The Bluest Eye* is also history, sociology, folklore, nightmare, and music".⁸⁹ While Leonard does not provide specific examples, he hints at the verisimilitude of orality that exists in Morrison's work, which is so faithful to speech. This emphasis on orality is also made by Ojo-Ade, who points to a need for an increased Afro-centrism (as opposed to Eurocentrism) as well as to the recognition that orality in texts derives originally from an African tradition. Ruth Finnegan states that the "status and qualities of many African literary forms arise from [their] oral nature".⁹⁰ Soyinka refers to orality primarily as reflected in the performative or "dramatic mode of expression",⁹¹ while Morrison postulates that "to make [a] story appear oral, meandering, effortless, spoken [is] to have the reader *feel* the narrator without *identifying* that narrator".⁹² Berry and Blassingame argue that in a sense, "largely banned from acquiring literacy, slaves remained, like their African ancestors, an oral people",⁹³ with a "dominantly vocalic quality of the sound system".⁹⁴ Morrison characterises Black art as

⁸⁹ Review appearing on back cover of stated edition.

⁹⁰ Finnegan, R. *Oral Literature in Africa*. Nairobi: Oxford University Press. 1976. p. 1.

⁹¹ Soyinka, W. *Myth, Literature and the African World*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 1992. p. 38.

⁹² Morrison, T. "Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation" in Walder, W. (ed.). *Literature in the Modern World*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. 1990. p. 328.

⁹³ Berry, M.A., Blassingame, J.W. "Africa, Slavery, & the Roots of Contemporary Black Culture", excerpt from *Long Memory: The Black Experience in America*. New York: Prentice-Hall. *Massachusetts Review*. 18. 1977. p. 506.

⁹⁴ Lestrade in Finnegan, R. *Oral Literature in Africa*. Nairobi: Oxford University Press. 1976. p. 67.

having the “ability to be both print and oral literature: to combine the two aspects so that the story can be read in silence”.⁹⁵

The Bluest Eye, Morrison’s first work, demonstrates a greater use of African narrative technique, more “speakerly, aural, [and] colloquial”,⁹⁶ than some of her later novels. Although the novel is in principle not intended for the stage, *The Bluest Eye* conforms, to a larger degree, to Soyinka’s classification of the performative in writing, due in part to the use of a first-person narrator. In literary terms, there may be a question of the objectivity of the narrator but by Africanist standards this would play a secondary role to the process of intended message (for example, the need to educate the masses or to communicate an message about Africa itself) and audience (for example, youth), because it can be perceived that considerations such as the narrator are literary while those of message and audience are pragmatic (namely, they have a direct impact). Morrison’s reverse chronological order technique is an oral technique. The altering (or not) of narrative structures can also be an indication of the proximity of style to the African tradition, as exemplified by the palm-wine drinkard in Tutuola’s work of the same name, and Azaro in *The Famished Road*. These characters pass continuously between the world of the living and the dead, displaying a fluidity between states of existence that is reflected in the process of story-telling itself. Among the examples of the altering of narrative structures is what Salman Rushdie describes as the “shape of the oral narrative. It’s not linear. An oral narrative does not go from the beginning to the middle to the end

⁹⁵ Morrison, T. “Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation” in Walder, W. (ed.). *Literature in the Modern World*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. 1990. p. 328.

⁹⁶ Morrison, T. *The Bluest Eye*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf. 2000. p. 215.

of the story. It goes in great swoops, it every so often reiterates something”.⁹⁷ Ashcroft *et al.*, in *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures*, emphasise that “this technique of circling back from the present to the past, of building tale within tale, and persistently delaying climaxes are all features of traditional narration and orature”⁹⁸ and represent a “hybridity”⁹⁹ that characterises texts which have a place in both colonial and post-colonial literature. Although Morrison states that the “fabrication of an Africanist persona is reflexive”,¹⁰⁰ the use of the third-person narrator, such as in *Song of Solomon*, and the evoking of images of Africa through “the prism of American folklore rather than with direct reference to Africa itself”¹⁰¹ reduce, it can be argued, the immediacy of an Africanist presence in the novel by emphasising the distance between writer and characters. Nonetheless, Morrison herself emphasises the “highly aural syntax”¹⁰² characterised by “the ordinariness of the language, its colloquial, vernacular quality”,¹⁰³ displayed in *Song of Solomon*. The work is replete with phrases such as Feather’s “I said get him outta here”,¹⁰⁴ and the emphatic “that ain’t her brother, Mama. They cousins”¹⁰⁵ uttered with respect to the true relationship between Guitar and Milkman, that highlights how closeness of friendship is alike to kinship. In using a more aural narrative style in her work, Morrison emphasises her intention to make the work

⁹⁷ Rushdie interview, *Kunapipi* 7: 1. 1985. p. 8.

⁹⁸ Ashcroft, B. et al. *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures*. London: Routledge. 1989. p. 183.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.* p. 182.

¹⁰⁰ Morrison, T. *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*. New York: First Vintage. 1993. p. 17.

¹⁰¹ Howe, S. *Afrocentrism*. London: Verso. 1999. p. 106.

¹⁰² Morrison, T. *Unspeakable Things Unspoken: The Afro-American Presence in American Literature* in Mitchell, A. (ed.). *Within the Circle: An Anthology of African American Literary Criticism from the Harlem Renaissance to the Present*. Durham: Duke University Press. 1994. p. 393.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁴ Morrison, T. *Song of Solomon*. New York: Plume/Penguin. 1987. p. 57.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.* p. 44.

more musical and fluid; an experience, for both characters and reader alike, rather than the recounting of a story.

The use of repetition to emphasise underlying messages is a technique that Morrison uses extensively in her novel. In *The Bluest Eye* Morrison makes reference to the 1930s and 1940s Dick and Jane children's books that are aimed at educating primarily white children in a simple way. By association, Morrison implies that the same didactic methods are being forced on Pecola, even if not by her family but by the forces of the environment (which are dictated by whites) and which is imposed on her (and all blacks). The phrase "play Jane play"¹⁰⁶ as well as the repeated use of the word "play" in the first page of the novel indicate, ironically, the absence of such play and of the conditions in which it could meaningfully exist. In the chapter titled "HEREISTHEFAMILYMOTHERFATHERDICKANDJANETHEYLIVEINTHEGREE NANDWHITEHOUSETHEYAREVERYH"¹⁰⁷ the ellipsis indicates the absence of what is probably "APPY" and thereby negates the possibility of its existence by exclusion. By implication, the teaching method which is characterised by less interaction and more simple, verbal repetition, might not be successful for all (and specifically non-white) children and is not suitable for Pecola, whose attraction to Mr. Henry is in part due to his ability to transport them to a world beyond their immediate existence through references to "Greta Garbo"¹⁰⁸ and "Ginger Rogers".¹⁰⁹ In a wider sense, Pecola's entire educational

¹⁰⁶ Morrison, T. *The Bluest Eye*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf. 2000. p. 5.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.* p. 38.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.* p. 16.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*

process under white-led institutions is less than satisfactory for her as an individual, and the historical is reduced to a refrain from a children's book.

The use of descriptive, naming words as opposed to technically or scientifically correct words is also a factor that adds to the novel's performative Africanism. The lack of punctuation reduces its effect as a means of creating meaning (by, for example, introducing pauses) and throws the work more immediately into the domain of the reader, increasing reader engagement and heightening the probability of multiple interpretations and less closure. Morrison adds that "Africanist language practices are employed to evoke the tension between speech and speechlessness".¹¹⁰ This is consistent with the performative or "dramatic element"¹¹¹ in African writing, often written with consideration to a stage audience (or an audience that displays behavioural patterns resembling that of a theatre audience). A further example is Maureen and Pecola's conversation regarding "the belly buttons grow[ing] like-lines",¹¹² which conveys the practical and emotional purpose of the link between mother and child at birth without naming it as an umbilical chord. This strikes us as being educationally African in nature, given that learning often involves visual exemplification.

Morrison's naming of the chapters in *The Bluest Eye* after the seasons reflects the African custom of a proximity to Nature, inasmuch as the development of the lives of Pecola's family members is described using the seasons as a point of reference. Morrison's ordering of the chapters in *The Bluest Eye* is roughly in reverse chronological order, with

¹¹⁰ Morrison, T. *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*. New York: First Vintage. 1993.p. 52.

¹¹¹ Soyinka, W. *Myth, Literature and the African World*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.1992. p. 49.

¹¹² Morrison, T. *The Bluest Eye*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf. 2000. p. 70.

Autumn as the first chapter covering the most recent period in the family's life, while Summer ends the novel in terms of sequence, yet is first chronologically. This possibly conveys a progressive cooling or deterioration of the situation of the family and of Pecola as an individual. By subverting traditional Western narrative techniques, Morrison manages to emphasise Nature's supreme power, and Man's inability to influence either its direction or his own. This determinism, consistent with a traditional African world-view by placing all characters as subservient to Nature, contributes directly to the inability of characters such as Pecola to achieve the American Dream. Within a culture that requires an intensively proactive management of advancement within the status quo, Pecola has little chance of succeeding in attaining white aspirations, which she has also set as a standard for herself, in a white-dominated world. Nonetheless Nature is not only conveyed as a powerful force, but also an inspirational one. It is in the woods, surrounded by Nature and despite being hunted, that Milkman's stream-of-consciousness thought process begins as the "rest of him disappeared".¹¹³

There is liberal use of uncomplicated, yet effective, simile and metaphor, a characteristic apparent in works by other African writers such as Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* where complexity of narrative structure and vocabulary is sacrificed in order to ensure clarity of message to the reader.¹¹⁴ It also indicates how the writer successfully appropriates the English language by defying any expectations for the use of a complex narrative structure, and by condensing meaning into simply constructed text. This is the

¹¹³ Morrison, T. *Song of Solomon*. New York: Plume/Penguin, 1987. p. 277.

¹¹⁴ An example of this simple yet evocative writing occurs at the start of chapter twenty, where the narrator describes that "Seven years was a long time to be away from one's clan. A man's place was not always there, waiting for him. As soon as he left, someone else rose and filled it. The clan was like a lizard; if it lost its tail it soon grew another." Achebe, C. *Things Fall Apart*. Oxford: Heinemann, 1991. p. 121.

case in the narrator's description of the fact that "we [the girls] had dropped our seeds in our own little plot of black dirt just as Pecola's father had dropped his seeds in his own plot of black dirt".¹¹⁵ The multiplicity of meaning includes multiple interpretations of the word "black" and "seed". The use of "dirt" to describe Pecola is an indication both of her father's proprietary stance towards her and also her low self-esteem generated, among other things, by her perception of her own lack of beauty. The parallel between the futility and barrenness encountered in both attempted sowings is clearly evident. In both cases, there is an indication of the strength of both Pecola and her womanhood, and the soil, all of which survive (beyond the) attempts to impregnate them. It is possible to argue that both incubators reject their respective seeds due to a lack of truth and honesty in their planting. Both are sown with disregard to the inherent beauty of what would be created. It is also possible that in both cases, the seed is allowed to be planted, by an intuitive yearning or need for companionship and love that has not been achieved through other means. Pecola needs to feel touched by human love, and a child would be a way to attain this. The land, in turn, needs to feel it is nurturing a living thing. The return to barrenness in both cases is the ultimate irony, as the situation does not change. I would argue that Morrison reinforces the traditional male-dominated structure in, but not particular to, African society because Pecola is not offered the psychological or structural framework within which she can address her confusion and humiliation.

The use of simile is taken a step further to incorporate the important allusion to dance which, together with poetry, "are speech and gesture raised to a magical level of

¹¹⁵ Morrison, T. *The Bluest Eye*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf. 2000. p. 8.

intensity”,¹¹⁶ according to Soyinka. The description of “conversation like a gently wicked dance”¹¹⁷ conveys both the intricacies as well as the highly interactive nature of communication, making it a living medium. In the way that they learn to “hear” adults by watching “their faces, their hands, their feet, and listen[ing] for truth in timbre”,¹¹⁸ they reinforce Soyinka’s focus on the performative.

When referring to the oral effects in her writing, Morrison states that she aims to express “something that has probably only been expressed in music”,¹¹⁹ in keeping with the performative nature of Africanist writing. Music acts as an element of stability against changing times and circumstances. It is often a backdrop suggesting constancy, both underpinning its central role within African American culture, as well as emphasising the lack of control that characters have over their lives and destinies. To Cholly, music is a reprieve from sadness and the incomprehensible. Because “Cholly had not fully realised his aunt was dead”,¹²⁰ he deals with the incident by experiencing “a kind of carnival spirit”,¹²¹ blotting out reality in a wave of gaiety. The musical analogy is continued in the description that “the pieces of Cholly’s life could become coherent only in the head of a musician. Only a musician would sense that Cholly was free”.¹²² So free that his freedom bordered on the edge, not of genius like a musician but, of madness. Likewise, the thin brown girls who come from places that “make you think of love”,¹²³ have their origins defined with respect to their musicality. Even when they are learning to “get rid

¹¹⁶ Soyinka, W. *Myth, Literature and the African World*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.1992. p. 33.

¹¹⁷ Morrison, T. *The Bluest Eye*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf. 2000. p. 15.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁹ McKay, N, ed. *Critical Essays on Toni Morrison*. Boston: G.K. Hall. 1988. p. 1.

¹²⁰ Morrison, T. *The Bluest Eye*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf. 2000. p. 143.

¹²¹ *Ibid.* p. 143.

¹²² *Ibid.* p. 159.

¹²³ *Ibid.* p. 81.

of the funkiness”,¹²⁴ they maintain their inevitable musical roots by singing “second soprano”¹²⁵ with “voices [that] are clear and steady”.¹²⁶

The musical images are extended through the use of song, which is often interspersed as dialogue in the text. This creates the feel of a performative musical within Morrison’s novels. It is interesting to note that the less central characters, such as Poland in her “sweet strawberry voice”¹²⁷ and the children in *Shalimar*, tend to revert to the use of music more frequently. This indicates a more fundamental communication mechanism, accessible to not only those who have the command of the spoken word. The implicit creation of a communication hierarchy would imply that song is placed alongside theatre, where “the significance of the actual performance is often overlooked”,¹²⁸ as a communication method. It becomes one of the basic elements in the communication pyramid that within an African literary world view does not, “like [that] of contemporary Europe, lay stress on the idea of literacy and written tradition”.¹²⁹ Just as it is meaningful that music is accessible to all, it is equally noteworthy that it is also the mechanism that ultimately unlocks much of the mystery of Milkman’s ancestry to him. The children’s song, repeated again and again, is an indication of the persistent refrain which ensures survivability of history (but which also emphasises the ease with which it is corrected, thereby rendering it toothless, like a child’s song), and which so awakens in Milkman a sense of having pieced together major portions of the puzzle of his ancestry that he

¹²⁴ Morrison, T. *The Bluest Eye*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf. 2000. p. 83.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.* p. 82.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*

¹²⁷ *Ibid.* p. 58.

¹²⁸ Finnegan, R. *Oral Literature in Africa*. Nairobi: Oxford University Press. 1976. p. 2.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.* p. 1.

“almost shouted when he heard ‘Heddy took him to a red man’s house’”.¹³⁰ Rigney’s comment that “the duet sung by Pilate and Reba at Hagar’s funeral is spontaneous, yet staged, theatrical, an operatic performance”¹³¹ as well as the fact that “Pilate sings throughout *Song of Solomon*”¹³² is a reinforcement of the musicality inherent in the texts. Cultural uniformity and tradition is preserved when Milkman, who “knew no songs, and had no singing voice...sang”¹³³ for Pilate at her death, thus preserving the cycle of melodic accompaniment to the departed.

Other examples of imagery include a description of time through its reflections in nature. Thus morning turning into afternoon is described as “the shadow that was in front of me when I left the house had disappeared when I went back”.¹³⁴ This is also consistent with the Africanist characteristic of using nature as the frame of reference against which all evolution is measured. Despite the fact that it could be argued that this reference to the passage of time could signify a parallel for Pecola’s view of herself (and thus a certain element of the omniscient ancestor in her personality), I would hold that the use of the passage of the sun and the time is the use of Nature in a simple referential form, and that Morrison in a sense allows the narrator to seek some form of “solace”¹³⁵ for Pecola “from the contemplation of serene nature as in mainstream white literature”.¹³⁶

¹³⁰ Morrison, T. *Song of Solomon*. New York: Plume/Penguin. 1987. p. 303.

¹³¹ Rigney, B.H. *The Voices of Toni Morrison*. Columbus: Ohio State University Press. 1991. p. 8.

¹³² *Ibid.*

¹³³ Morrison, T. *Song of Solomon*. New York: Plume/Penguin. 1987. p. 336.

¹³⁴ Morrison, T. *The Bluest Eye*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf. 2000. p. 97.

¹³⁵ Morrison, T. “Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation” in Walder, W. (ed.). *Literature in the Modern World*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. 1990. p. 330.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*

The use of the name “Breedlove” is used as an image to convey the ambiguous, perverse love that exists between Cholly Breedlove and his daughter. The name is replete with the ambiguities of his emotions and his inability to channel them effectively. The irony of the name does not escape us, with Cholly’s lack of successful impregnation of his daughter (albeit unwanted and unintentional) an indication of his failure both physically and emotionally. The rape of his daughter is thus “hatred mixed with tenderness”¹³⁷ as his emotionally misguided nature prevents him from drawing the line between protection and invasion. One can also not avoid the anagrammatic nature of the name Beloved, loaded with the emotion that is so missing in Sethe’s household. Examples such as these mirror an Africanist use of visually representative words to trigger a series of possible meanings and messages.

The Bluest Eye also exemplifies instances of determinism, an acceptance of a combination of environmental conditions and higher powers that influence, beyond mortal control, one’s destiny. The inability to meet financial obligations is often perceived “an aspect of life over which you had no control, since you could not control your income”.¹³⁸ This seems to mirror an African approach influenced by Nature and religion, both of which play a role in regulating traditional African attitude towards the larger community and the perception of the reduced importance of certain Western preoccupations.

¹³⁷ Morrison, T. *The Bluest Eye*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2000. p. 63.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.* p. 17.

While *The Bluest Eye* reflects some literary conversion (or meeting of the minds) with African writing, thematically there are both similarities and some important differences. The fact that Morrison alludes to the all-important African theme of land ownership is significant. It cuts to the heart of Africans' "hunger for property, for ownership [...] the firm possession of a yard"¹³⁹ as a symbol of their commitment to and involvement with the places where they live, but also an important allusion to the political nature of land and its role in the colonial and post-colonial debate. The imagery is further expanded to reinforce the imaginative and regenerative qualities of the earth itself, with which contact proves to be of vital creative importance. In a description of nature through the antithetical description of the sterile environment, "the dreadful and humiliating absence of dirt"¹⁴⁰ and the "irritable, unimaginative cleanliness"¹⁴¹ arguably highlight the creative powers of what is natural. In an oblique but possible link, one could argue that the narrator is commenting on Pecola herself by stating that her flaws are an important part of what makes her real.

Just as land is an important component of ownership and belonging, the role of the mother within the African community is key to emphasising generational continuity. I would argue, however, that we see a far from traditional approach to the mothering role within Morrison's work. Because the role of the mother, both in Africa and in general, is such a broad topic, I will attempt to focus on the question of generational continuity. Pilate's role in being the primal mother to Milkman can be compared to that of the

¹³⁹ Morrison, T. *The Bluest Eye*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf. 2000. p. 18.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.* p. 22.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*

mother in Roy Campbell's poem "The Zulu Girl", where "in that drowsy stream his flesh imbibes"¹⁴² "information about his past and the past of his ancestors"¹⁴³. In *Beloved*, milk plays a central role in continuity and identity. Beloved's sister "swallowed her blood right along with my mother's milk"¹⁴⁴, both sources of learning and continuity (the former in an attempt to avoid the fading of memory). This (perceived) success contrasts to Sethe's despair at the fact that "those boys came in here and took my milk"¹⁴⁵, as much a cry of bitterness and panic at the invasion of her person as one of despair at not being able to impart the history to her children, sent off "when [her] breasts [were] full".¹⁴⁶ Both Pilate and the Zulu girl to an extent aim to preserve the continuity of memory or history, albeit with different primary motives, Pilate's being personal and the Zulu girl's being tribal. Nonetheless, Pilate's role is that of a foster mother, a substitute intent on ensuring this transfer despite the absence of conditions within the direct family circle for it to occur effectively. Through the use of a surrogate for this purpose, Morrison points to the difficulty of ensuring an historical continuity. This is obviously applicable to the difficulty in ensuring historicity given the methods that are available or selected for the purpose, and would tend to support Frazier's thesis of discontinuity.

But in contrast to the similarities, one of the most important divergences stems from the title of the work – the reference to the bluest eye and that "a little black girl yearns for the blue eyes of a little white girl".¹⁴⁷ These terms and physical features are symbolic of

¹⁴² Campbell, R. *The Zulu Girl* in Chapman, M. (ed.) *A Century of South African Poetry* Johannesburg: Donker. 1981.

¹⁴³ Rigney, B.H. *The Voices of Toni Morrison*. Columbus: Ohio State University Press. 1991. p. 13.

¹⁴⁴ Morrison, T. *Beloved*. New York: Plume/Penguin. 1988. p. 205.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.* p. 16.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.* p. 205.

¹⁴⁷ Morrison, T. *The Bluest Eye*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf. 2000. p. 204.

Pecola's and, in a broader sense, black American longing for aspects of what it means to be white. Pecola's aspirations represent a hungering for beauty as defined along Western lines, and are contradictory to the more traditional belief that Africans, Africanisms and African literature should be seen and aspires to be seen from an African perspective. One view expressed by some Africanists, in part summed up by Howe's interpretation that "what Americans call Afrocentrism is not especially popular among continental or non-diasporic African intellectuals",¹⁴⁸ is that they would not base the primary plot and its effects on the character's longing for white characteristics but rather on an affirmation of the uniqueness and beauty of blackness. The point is further emphasised through the character's repetition of "My eyes. My blue eyes, [...] they get prettier every time",¹⁴⁹ an indication that the salvation from mental anguish can increasingly only come from her vision of the physical feature for which she so yearns. The point in *The Bluest Eye* is not that the characters are not in fact praising black beauty in its own right (versus "beauty taken for granted within the community")¹⁵⁰ but that they use a comparison to white beauty as a means to do so, and present it as their ultimate emotional retreat. While it is worth emphasising that the strength of Morrison's lament of a young black girl having to assess her self worth, under brutal conditions created by a white regime, is in no way diminished, from an Africanist perspective the writer's use of primarily white terms of reference is not acceptable as it implies the diminished value of an African standard, or indeed that it does not exist in its own right.

¹⁴⁸ Howe, S. *Afrocentrism*. London: Verso. 1999. p. 2.

¹⁴⁹ Morrison, T. *The Bluest Eye*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf. 2000. p. 201.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.* p. 210.

There are some elements of African morality in *Song of Solomon*, inasmuch as Pilate's treatment of her father's bones demonstrates a belief in the need to give attention to the "Rites of Passage"¹⁵¹ of the deceased. Thus Pilate's responsibility with regards to the bones of the man she had killed reflects a ritual archetype dealing with the "rites of regress and entry".¹⁵² The fact that Pilate is unaware that the bones belong to her father underscores the principles of her actions. Nonetheless Morrison's use of a murder victim is unusual, as it tends to defeat the moral and educational ends that are often part of African writers' objectives and tradition. This is exemplified in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* where one tribe willingly offers a young girl to another tribe as compensation for a crime perceived to be committed by the tribe. While this does not condone the act itself, it nonetheless sets it within a context that includes cause and effect (and is therefore by implication, although perhaps in a bizarre way by Western standards, educational). There are nonetheless examples in African literature of both violent and yet noble works, such as Armah's *Two Thousand Seasons*, which Soyinka classifies as "hardly squeamish in its depiction of violence, [but which displays] insistence on a revolutionary integrity".^{153 154} This mirrors Guitar's description of the framework within which the group of seven killers operates in *Song of Solomon*, as a basis for exacting revenge for the killing of black people, but in a way which exacts precision in creating as closely as possible a set of circumstances which mirrors the initial crime. If one is to observe the actions in a detached way, it could be seen how Guitar views his actions as educational (as well as

¹⁵¹ Soyinka, W. *Myth, Literature and the African World*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.1992. p. 2.

¹⁵² *Ibid.* p. 4.

¹⁵³ *Ibid.* p. 114.

¹⁵⁴ I agree with the point made by writers such as Tolagbe Ogunleye ("African American Folklore: Its Role in Reconstructing African American History", *Journal of Black Studies*, 24:4. p. 440.) that there is a risk that (primarily) white writers focus on the violent or

retributive). Morrison's work thus displays a tension of factors that would classify the literary treatment of the bones as both African and simultaneously not. To expand further: Morrison states that in addition to an oral quality and the presence of a chorus, the presence of an "ancestor is [one of] the distinctive elements of African American writing".¹⁵⁵ "In *Song of Solomon*, Pilate is the ancestor",¹⁵⁶ bearing "historical witness".¹⁵⁷ While she is not an elder in the sense of having lived a long time, she acts as the link between past and present. One of the mechanisms she uses is the preservation of her father's bones. Her lack of awareness of the true identity of the bones heightens the sense of cosmology (and therefore Africanism) of the act of their preservation. The bones represent a dichotomy – they are a non-living representation of (one of) the symbols of cross-generation cultural, living, continuity. Morrison in this way links generations of families and cultures. In *Pilate* Morrison depicts someone whose "intrinsically African identity is literally cloaked in the quilt of African tradition".¹⁵⁸

The debate surrounding morality is extended beyond the use of violence, to the description of Macon's rent collection that reminds us of a similar character in Ben Okri's *The Famished Road*. In both novels the unmoving nature of the rent collectors contrasts with the needs of the general population. While there appears to be a veiled criticism of these practices, which are perpetrated by blacks on blacks, it serves simultaneously to

obscene' elements in African writing, and ignore those that are morally elevating, although I would question whether sufficient evidence is at hand to support his implication of their proactive adoption of this stance.

¹⁵⁵ Morrison, T "Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation" in Walder, W. (ed.). *Literature in the Modern World*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. 1990. p. 330.

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.* p. 331.

¹⁵⁷ Rigney, B.H. *The Voices of Toni Morrison*. Columbus: Ohio State University Press. 1991. p. 61.

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.* p. 66.

remind us of the conflicts facing traditional societies as they come into contact with customary Western practices (such as rent collection for cash).

The fact that the novel demonstrates no particular references to African religious origins tends to mirror Soyinka's opinion that "'world view' [is preferable] to 'religion', [...] for the former expression is more evocative of fundamental cosmogonic acceptances, specially for the African reality".¹⁵⁹ It is thus interesting to analyse the extent to which Morrison's embodiment of a secular (black) ideal displays a convergent Africanist approach, according to Soyinka's definition. Broadly speaking, one could argue that Morrison presents a secular novel, inasmuch as its characters display "harmonies of social interactions and human functions".¹⁶⁰ In Morrison's stated aim of dealing with issues pertaining to blacks, there are "implicit principals of race-retrieval which are embodied in the concept of Negritude".¹⁶¹ But it appears as though Morrison's "re-entrenchment of black values was not preceded by any profound effort to enter into this African system of values".¹⁶² The novels display a combination of secular and deterministic rather than religious characteristics, which Morrison defends as a combination of an "acceptance of the supernatural and a profound rootedness in the real world".¹⁶³

One of the aims of Soyinka's *Myth, Literature and the African World* as well as works by writers such as Morrison is to force a reconsideration of "the once convenient location of

¹⁵⁹ Soyinka, W. *Myth, Literature and the African World*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.1992. p. 122.

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid.* p. 126.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁶² *Ibid.* p. 127.

¹⁶³ Morrison, T. "Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation" in Walder, W. (ed.). *Literature in the Modern World*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. 1990. p. 329.

contemporary African (or African American, in this case) literature as an appendage of English literature".¹⁶⁴ To a large extent, thus, the issue in the novels lies in Morrison's inherent conflict as a writer. As a professional and an artist she is subject to the same rigorous questioning as her works are, and as such faces the perpetual challenge of being a black writer attempting to seek her race's roots in an increasingly sophisticated and (often) anthropologically disinterested society. There is a parallel to her works which, like any attempting to bridge gaps or build bridges, at times lie between literary genres (in this case African American and (black) American), attempting to find their place in both while not alienating themselves from either. Part of the tension is located in the heavy emphasis placed on race. In the context of American writing, one would want to downplay this.¹⁶⁵ As Morrison herself admits, she is "a black writer struggling with and through a language that can powerfully evoke and enforce hidden signs of racial superiority, cultural hegemony, and dismissive 'othering'".¹⁶⁶

The gap is further enhanced by what I would term a Westernised style, one that leaves less to the imagination of the reader. This can be observed in Morrison's use of explanatory endings, where both plot and message are clarified and little interpretative open-endedness is provided for the novel. The fact that Morrison's has included an afterword in *The Bluest Eye* is in direct contradiction to her statement that what is important is that the "reader [should] *feel* the narrator without *identifying* that narrator,

¹⁶⁴ Soyinka, W. *Myth, Literature and the African World*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 1992. p. viii.

¹⁶⁵ This is one of the reasons why works such as those edited by Gats, et al, always face a difficulty in becoming the basis for a 'niche' literary canon.

¹⁶⁶ Morrison, T. *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*. New York: First Vintage. 1993. p. x.

and to have the reader work *with* the author in the construction of the book”.¹⁶⁷ While some critics may argue that the afterword is a representation of Morrison’s musing on what is effectively her first major work, I would argue that it displays a controlling impulse that contradicts Morrison’s stated purpose of user interaction, and strongly posit that this has a significant impact on the likelihood of an unbiased rereading of the work by the reader.

While Morrison posits that her works display a “cosmology”¹⁶⁸ and are “political”,¹⁶⁹ she displays a similar dichotomy to that with which she is faced as a black writer recognised within a white literary system. While Morrison may address the socio-political issues of blacks within the political system of the USA, *Song of Solomon* is not political in the sense that, for example, Ayi Kwei Armah’s *The Beautiful Ones are Not Yet Born*, Ezekiel Mphahlele’s *Down Second Avenue* and Alan Paton’s *Cry, The Beloved Country* are. These works all contained a message that was targeted at influencing the political and colonialist direction of the writers’ respective countries.¹⁷⁰ Likewise, *The Bluest Eye* does not demonstrate the elements of cosmology that Ben Okri’s *The Famished Road* or Amos Tutuola’s *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* do. In the Africanist sense, her works convey an uncomfortably neutral position when compared to any of the above works or to a work such as Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*. In more traditional African writing, there is a greater occurrence of the undefined or ill defined. Grey areas abound, and characters do not necessarily find all the solutions, but progress (or not) to the next phase of their lives.

¹⁶⁷ Morrison, T. “Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation” in Walder, W. (ed.). *Literature in the Modern World*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. 1990. p. 328.

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.* p. 329.

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid.* p. 330.

¹⁷⁰ Note that I do not use the word ‘colonial’ as Armah’s novel was written more than ten years after Ghana’s independence.

Abdul JanMohamed's statement that oral cultures are characterised by "mystic rather than historical consciousness"¹⁷¹ emphasises the difference of Morrison's approach in *Song of Solomon*, where few characters pursue a mystical route to self-knowledge. Even in the case of Milkman, his ultimate self-knowledge (and mystical understanding of his past and of himself relative to it) originates from an historical need to trace past generations, and to position himself within the context of the worldly rather than the mystical. This can be contrasted to Azaro's constant movement between and communication with both the world of the living and the dead in *The Famished Road*, which is a reminder of his belief that people have "half of our being always in the spirit world"¹⁷². He represents a markedly more mystical position than Pilate, perhaps the most mystical of Morrison's characters in *Song of Solomon* and identified by Morrison as the ancestor in the novel, and a difference to what many writers consider the Africanist "ethical universal"¹⁷³ which is often not present in Western writing. This is despite the fact that Morrison claims to, in works such as *Song of Solomon*, "blend the acceptance of the supernatural and a profound rootedness in the real world at the same time".¹⁷⁴

The bathos evident in Hagar's drenching as she attempts to prepare herself for the ritual of death is at once a reaffirmation of her (almost) solitary death as well as a communication of the likelihood of failure, in part due to it not being a community-led, African-like experience. Solomon and Milkman's flights are equally contradictory

¹⁷¹ JanMohamed, A. "Sophisticated Primitives: The Syncretism of Oral and Literature Modes in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*". *Research in African Literatures*. 22(1), 1991, p. 13.

¹⁷² Okri, B. *The Famished Road*. London: Vintage. 1991. p. 4.

¹⁷³ Levey, D. et al: *African Literature in English (AFRLIT-J)*. Tutorial letter 101 for 1998. p. 16.

¹⁷⁴ Morrison, T. "Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation" in Walder, W. (ed.). *Literature in the Modern World*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. 1990. p. 329.

because, although each has reached a realisation of the potential freedom they may have, the realisation affects them only, and in no way have they helped their community in making the leap to bridge the epistemological bridge. This is quite evident in Solomon's song, where the singers tell Solomon not to "leave me here",¹⁷⁵ the fact that the family "screamed out loud for days"¹⁷⁶ as well as the general mystery surrounding the reasons for his departure. For both, it emphasises freedom while reinforcing the captivity of the ones they leave behind.

This schism (often historical and not intended) is reflected to a large degree in the distance between African and non-African concerns displayed by Morrison in the context of her work produced in the African diaspora. It appears as though Morrison herself admits to an inevitable distancing of her characters (and indirectly all blacks and herself as writer) from Africa as they, "like a good Victorian parody, learn [...] all that was worth learning – to separate [themselves] in body, mind and spirit from all that suggested Africa".¹⁷⁷ In an indirect way, Morrison appears to choose to adopt Frazier's point of view and through her writing admit that literary references alone are insufficient to support the claim that African American writing maintains its close cultural and historic links to the African continent. Her literary approach, while praised as displaying a "radical use of language"¹⁷⁸ and "movement beyond language into music",¹⁷⁹ is reflected in a narrative technique that does not totally correspond, as we have seen, to either theoretical descriptions (such as those made by Soyinka) or practical applications (such as

¹⁷⁵ Morrison, T. *Song of Solomon*. New York: Plume/Penguin. 1987. p. 303.

¹⁷⁶ *Ibid.* p. 323.

¹⁷⁷ Morrison, T. *The Bluest Eye*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf. 2000. p. 167.

¹⁷⁸ From Rigney, B.H. *The Voices of Toni Morrison*. Columbus: Ohio State University Press. 1991. Blurb on back page.

¹⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

those of African writers cited in the course of this dissertation) of Africanisms. Bearing in mind that Morrison's narrative technique nonetheless contains similarities to the techniques employed by some African writers, there appears to still be a sufficient difference in content to question whether Morrison and, by implication, other black writers in the United States place sufficient emphasis on the Africanist element in the term "African American".

Finally, it is Morrison herself that highlights the inherent ambiguities in her work by commenting in the debate of "black" versus "African" that she wants her "work to capture the vast imagination of black people".¹⁸⁰ Not "African American, African, or Afro-Caribbean literature, but Black literature".¹⁸¹ Debate regarding the question of the interchangeability between the terms "black" and "African" is complicated by the references to one with the implied connotation of referring to the other. Fox, in his essay regarding the difficulty of whites in fathoming black experience, emphasises that "black works of art [are] 'impenetrable' to whites because black experience, and style, are impenetrable to anyone whose critical understanding is predisposed to reject difference".¹⁸² I would argue that Fox's reference to "style" is an allusion to what is generally considered an African influence. Although he does not say so explicitly in this statement, he refers to the term "Afro-American"¹⁸³ and further states that "no counterpart in European culture"¹⁸⁴ can be found for a "striving after oral effects"¹⁸⁵ which he later

¹⁸⁰ Nwankwo, C. in Ojo-Ade, F (ed.), *Of Dreams Deferred, Dead or Alive; African Perspectives on African-American Writers*. Westport: Greenwood Press. 1996, p. 172.

¹⁸¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁸² Fox, R.E. "The Logic of the White Castle: Western Critical Standards and the Dilemma of Black Art". *Obsidian: Black Literature in Review*. 3.2. 1977: p. 21.

¹⁸³ *Ibid.* p. 18.

¹⁸⁴ *Ibid.* p. 21.

¹⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

relates to the “African continuum”.¹⁸⁶ Given the way that he presents his argument, I would contend that all the other characteristics that Fox represents as belonging to black writers are in fact characteristics of African writers. Among these is an emphasis on a “style [which] is at the very heart of the concept of a black aesthetic”.¹⁸⁷

Throughout the course of this dissertation, the perception that the term “African” has been to some extent appropriated for the expression “African American”, without demonstrating closeness to Africa or Africanisms, is further complicated by the subtle, yet important, point that unmitigated racial (among other aspects) homogeneity needs to be supported, and cannot be assumed. By equating the terms “black” to “African” there is the risk that Africanist issues can be subsumed beneath those of race needs in the context of writing by blacks in the United States. This would support Frazier’s point of view even further, in reinforcing the lack of emphasis on the Africanist element in the term “African American” and in the narrative technique of African American writing.

¹⁸⁶ Harrison, P.C. *The Drama of Nommo*. New York: Ultramarine Publishing Company. 1972.

¹⁸⁷ Fox, R.E. “The Logic of the White Castle: Western Critical Standards and the Dilemma of Black Art”. *Obsidian: Black Literature in Review*. 3.2. 1977: p. 20.

4. Bridging the gap: the role of the critic in widening the literary chasm

The previous chapters have highlighted that there persists a generalised belief that black American as well as black African literature is best served by writers and critics of the same race, and to this end the issue of perspective, or how the reader's own background relates to the views of the writer, is fundamental. Morrison's reiteration of this perspective appears to reinforce an existing view rather than establish a new one. At this point in the research, it becomes blatantly clear that independently of the race of the critic, the object of criticism (namely African American literature) is subject to subtle changes in definition. The reason for this I trace back to two points: firstly, it is difficult to trace a consistent differentiation between "black American" and "African American". This blending into one of the two terms causes general confusion, and indeed it is one of the reasons why several writers and critics, such as the contributors in Ojo-Ade's work, are surprised when they do not find the link (either on a personal or a literary level) between the narrative technique of Americans and Africans: they are almost always analysing black American literature and calling it African American. This implies that there is very little African American writing and more black American writing (of which the issues are in general similar, but in specific areas very different). As Valenti emphasises, "the black American faced this problem [because] he was black, but an American as well. He was not an African".¹⁸⁸ While this may appear to be a small,

¹⁸⁸ Valenti, S. "The Black Diaspora: Negritude in the Poetry of West Africans and Black Americans" *Phylon: The Atlanta University Review of Race and Culture*. 34. 1973: p. 396.

semantic point, it is not so for the reason that in the United States the black community is a minority in a society whose standards are largely set by the white majority. In Africa, the black population is the majority, but colonisation (or minority rule) has had a marked influence on the perspective of all Africans, and this influence cannot be discounted, because (even if unwillingly) the African stance has been influenced by minority regimes.

Secondly, the use of "African" is too often applied when writers or critics need to create a link to their "African" heritage in an all-embracing term, once again allowing for generalisations that often go as far as to qualify those from South America and the Caribbean as *African Americans* (due to previous ties to Africa). While "Negritude has ... reached an 'unfolding' common to both black American and black African poetry",¹⁸⁹ even in the case where one assumes that a second-generation American of African descent qualifies for inclusion under the general term "African American", normally the writer himself or herself is the first to point out that he or she is twice removed from the African experience. Cheatwood's use of "Afrikan" is an example of an attempt to change the term without really providing a very different perspective.¹⁹⁰

I believe that African writers and critics rightly preserve the message of the need for, among all critics and writers of *African American* literature, a direct experience or contact with the continent. In a sense, this opinion conveys a very pragmatic message, insofar as the ability of any writer to correctly interpret the nature of the continent and its people merely by second-hand observation is questionable. There is no substitute for this

¹⁸⁹ Valenti, S. "The Black Diaspora: Negritude in the Poetry of West Africans and Black Americans". *Phylon: The Atlanta University Review of Race and Culture*. 34. 1973: p. 398.

¹⁹⁰ Cheatwood, K. T-H. "Fire-casting an eternal de-fascination with death: writing about the South, and the responsible necessity of reading and knowing black South writing in the quest for Afrikan world salvation". *African American Review*. 27.2. 1993. p. 301.

contact and the message from African critics such as those cited in this dissertation is that the writers most likely to reflect Africanisms in their work, if they have not had contact with the continent, are those who demonstrate some personal characteristic, whether personal or merely empathic, that resembles a perceived African trait (in itself difficult, as we have seen, to define unambiguously, and not entirely desirable given that debate could become entirely subjective). This is certainly no academic or even empirical basis for criticism. By implication this would support a view, in essence, that an African perspective cannot be entrusted solely to black writers, as they are not necessarily African.

Albeit subjective, I was left with the distinct feeling that increasingly the topic of writing about the *black* experience in the United States is one left to black critics for reasons of authenticity and intersubjectivity: the contribution of white critics is seen with scepticism, which ironically is somewhat similar to the position expressed by many black Africans that African solutions specifically for the African (implied black) population must be provided by (black) Africans. As Valenti points out, "Africa is to be for Africans"¹⁹¹ and "the responsibility for the critical evaluation of African writing belongs to Africans (implied black Africans) themselves, for they are the primary audience".¹⁹² Even Morrison herself appears to succumb to the apparently impenetrable wall of resistance proffered by Africans when she makes the generalisation that "some of the interest has been to find whatever cultural connections there were between Afro-Americans and

¹⁹¹ Valenti, S. "The Black Diaspora: Negritude in the Poetry of West Africans and Black Americans". *Phylon: The Atlanta University Review of Race and Culture*. 34. 1973. p. 392.

¹⁹² Chinweizu et al. "Gibb's Gibberish", *Research in African Literatures*. 17.1. Spring 1986. p. 48.

Africans, but it's always been interesting to me that Africans are not interested in it at all".¹⁹³ While debate rages on, perhaps we are confronted by the fact that "the seemingly unresolvable problem of defining the black self and culture remains a key characteristic of that culture".¹⁹⁴

While I have been at pains to resist falling prey to the accusations of a reductionist approach "attributing universality to African writers",¹⁹⁵ to an extent the debate surrounding the concept of a neo-African¹⁹⁶ literature remains unresolved. While some Africanists imply a parallelism between African literature and the primarily black component of the continent's population, they succumb, I would argue, to a simplification of composition that they criticise in their American counterparts. Nonetheless, given that the scope of this dissertation has permitted the inclusion of only one writer and a limited number of critics to be cited, for the purposes of analysing possible similarities between narrative technique in African American and African writing, there is some risk that the views of those included represent a degree of simplification of composite African literary views. This creates an obvious tension.

Above all, the works cited above and an analysis of Morrison's work demonstrate that while writing about Africa is not simple, interpreting works by writers who have not been or have only been very briefly to Africa is even more complex. There nonetheless appears to be a genuine attempt, by critics such as Ojo-Ade, to recognise the efforts of

¹⁹³ Morrison, T in Taylor-Guthrie, D (ed.). *Conversations with Toni Morrison*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi. 1994. p. 224.

¹⁹⁴ Byerman, K. "Hip-hop Spirituality: African-American Cultural Criticism". *College Literature*. 22.2. June 1995: p. 141.

¹⁹⁵ Bhabha, H.K. (ed.). *Nation and Narration*. London: Routledge. 1990. p. 238.

¹⁹⁶ Jahn, J. "Die Neo-Afrikanische Literatur." *Kindlers Literatur Lexicon*, p. 695.

writers to explore the cultural, social, economic and historical links between Africa and Africans in the diaspora. But the “far-flung catchword ‘universality’”¹⁹⁷ is one that, in practical terms, is usually taken for granted as almost impossible to achieve and almost always demonstrates the imposition of a perspective on the interpretation of literary texts, events, and the determination of cultural homogeneity across Africa and the diaspora.

The focus of this particular dissertation has been on the extent to which Africanisms are evident in the “African American” writing of Toni Morrison, and the extent to which the use of these terms adequately depicts an ethnological, social and literary link to the African continent. Morrison herself delimits the audience for which she intends her work to have most immediacy, by giving due emphasis to a target black audience (versus other race or ethnic groups, such as African). She is the first to acknowledge that she uses the “term ‘Africanism’ not to suggest the larger body of knowledge on Africa that the philosopher Valentine Mudimbe means by the term, nor to suggest the varieties and complexities of African people and their descendants who have inhabited this country. Rather I use it for the denotative and connotative blackness that African peoples have come to signify”.¹⁹⁸ Morrison thus prefers to gloss over Africanist meaning to allow black interpretative meaning.

In addition to the question of narrative technique, it is important to consider the extent to which, if any, writers other than black writers have influenced African American culture and writing. The debate is not made any easier by the difficulty in positioning the role of

¹⁹⁷ Fox, R.E. “The Logic of the White Castle: Western Critical Standards and the Dilemma of Black Art”. *Obsidian: Black Literature in Review*. 3.2. 1977: p. 22.

¹⁹⁸ Morrison, T. *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*. New York: First Vintage. 1993. p. 6.

white Africans within the context of future developments on the continent. Although somewhat dated, the comment by Nadine Gordimer describes just this dilemma. She states that "if [whites] are going to fit in at all in the new Africa, it's going to be sideways, where-we-can, wherever-they'll-shift-up-for-us",¹⁹⁹ and thus poses a general challenge for the creation of a pan-African (and thus African) literary ethos.

This dissertation presents one (of many, no doubt) possible interpretative view of the above topic. The writer is an African who has lived in the United States. It is possible that he may be perceived as blinkered because he is white. But he is African. The United States, or America, as it is often called, is a large, powerful nation, which often appropriates terms. Simple yet illustrative examples of this are the use of America for the United States and the World Series for the baseball series held only in the United States. It can create and perpetuate its own influences and other, less powerful nations are at a disadvantage in that they do not have the (often economic) power to counteract this. This implies that other nations run the risk of having their identity appropriated for ends which are not their own²⁰⁰. This is of particular relevance because when one nation imposes an interpretative context on another, and thereby on another nation's literary works, it is possible that the writer's objective for the original text, as well as the context within which it was written, may be misinterpreted. It further opens any criticism of the text to a possible accusation of lack of understanding of context, or even, lack of sensibility or awareness of relevant, topical issues. In that context, I would argue that literary

¹⁹⁹ Gordimer, N. *The Essential Gesture*. Penguin: London. 1988. p. 32.

²⁰⁰ For an interesting perspective on how the mass media of the United States play a role in supporting and propagating this position of domination, see Herman, S and Chomsky, N. *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media*. New York: Pantheon. 1988.

appropriation is just such a possibility. Toni Morrison, as an American writer categorised (not necessarily by herself, I hasten to add, but by critics such as Henry Louis Gates, Jr.) as an African American, was selected as the focus of this dissertation so as to determine the extent to which her narrative technique displays the use of Africanisms, or whether it can be shown that there has been an appropriation of the term “African” (whether willingly or not) in association with describing her works as part of a body of African American literature. Substantial weight is given to Frazier’s argument that there is a distance between Africa and the diaspora that has not been successfully bridged, as literature and specifically the use of narrative technique do not demonstrate sufficient use of Africanisms. The fact that Morrison identifies her allegiance to black American literature as far greater than any intention to support African causes, emphasises that the use of African narrative technique in the diaspora is likely to diminish even further.

It is hoped that this work will contribute towards the investigation of whether the interests of the African continent are being fairly represented within the context and references of other literatures (in this case African American). It will hopefully add to the debate of whether the interests of the continent can in part be served by non-African communities in the diaspora, but will not, I submit, provide a platform for pursuing the investigation of the extent to which there is a “renewed pride of black people in shaping a future based on the concept of one African people living in the African diaspora”²⁰¹ because the aspirations of black people in the United States and elsewhere in the diaspora are simply not the same as those of Africans.

²⁰¹ Holloway, J.E. (ed.). *Africanisms in American Culture*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press. 1991. p. xx.

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