

## ARTICLES

JOY JAMES

### POLITICIZING THE SPIRIT: 'AMERICAN AFRICANISMS' AND AFRICAN ANCESTORS IN THE ESSAYS OF TONI MORRISON<sup>1</sup>

Within her non-fiction essays, Toni Morrison's dissection of racist paradigms is framed by a world view that testifies to African American ancestral spirits, the centrality of transcendent community, as well as her faith in the abilities of African American intellectuals to critique and 'civilize' a racist society. Reading Morrison as a cultural observer-practitioner, I share her *Weltanschauung* which privileges community and ancestors while confronting dehumanizing cultural representations and practices.

This reading of Morrison, which quotes extensively from her non-fiction, sketches a framework for viewing her observations on racist stereotypes and Black resistance. Even in its partiality, a sketch reveals clues for deciphering how Toni Morrison uncovers and recovers ground for 'discredited knowledge' in which 'traditional' and contemporary cultural beliefs held among African Americans are connected to political struggles.

The following outline of a conceptual site or world view is not an argument for Black 'essentialism' – recognizing the political place of African American cultural views, which manifest and mutate through time and locations, neither constructs these views as quintessential or universal to everyone of African descent. Likewise, a passionate interest in African American intellectual and political resistance to anti-Black racism is not a synonym for indifference to non-African Americans or Black/non-Black accommodations to Eurocentrism and White supremacy.

*Cultural Studies* 9(2) 1995: 210–225

© 1995 Routledge 0950-2386

#### 'American Africanisms'

My work requires me to think about how free I can be as an African-American woman writer in my genderized, sexualized, wholly racialized world. To think about (and wrestle with) the full implications of my situation leads me to consider what happens when other writers work in a highly and historically racialized society.

(Morrison, 1993: 4)

Writers working in a highly racialized society often express an overt and covert fascination with Blackness. Morrison maintains that European Americans 'choose to talk about themselves through and within a sometimes metaphorical, but always choked representation of an Africanist presence' (Morrison, 1993: 17). This practice and its arsenal, which she labels 'American Africanisms', mirror (if not stem from) European Africanisms. The term 'Africanism' represents for Morrison:

the denotative and connotative blackness that African peoples have come to signify, as well as the entire range of views, assumptions, readings, and misreadings that accompany Eurocentric learning about these people. . . . As a disabling virus within literary discourse, Africanism has become, in the Eurocentric tradition that American education favors, both a way of talking about and a way of policing matters of class, sexual license, and repression, formations and exercises of power, and meditations on ethics and accountability.

(Morrison, 1993: 6–7)

As a literary and political tool and vehicle, the Africanism 'provides a way of contemplating chaos and civilization, desire and fear, and a mechanism for testing the problems and blessings of freedom' (Morrison, 1993: 4). The distinctive difference of the New World, writes Morrison, is that its claim to freedom coexisted with 'the presence of the unfree within the heart of the democratic experiment' (Morrison, 1993: 48). It is arguably still the same. Morrison advises that we investigate 'the Africanist character as surrogate and enabler' and the use of the 'Africanist idiom' to mark difference or the 'hip, sophisticated, ultra-urbane'. Her own investigations inform us that within the 'construction of blackness and enslavement' existed:

not only the not-free, but also with the dramatic polarity created by skin color, the projection of the not-me. The result was a playground for the imagination. What rose up out of collective needs to allay internal fears and to rationalize external exploitation was an [European] American Africanism – a fabricated brew of darkness, otherness, alarm, and desire that is uniquely American.

(Morrison, 1993: 38)

Newly constructed beings and inhumanities, such as the White male as both exalted demigod and brutish enslaver, were sanctioned by literature. Morrison emphasizes the cultural aspects of dominance to critique the Euroamerican literary imagination:

cultural identities are formed and informed by a nation's literature ... what seemed to be on the 'mind' of the literature of the United States was the self-conscious but highly problematic construction of the American as a new white man.<sup>2</sup>

(Morrison, 1993: 39)

In the formation of this 'new American' identity, Blackness embodied in the African was indispensable to elevating Whiteness. In this elevation of Whiteness, the Africanist other became the device for 'thinking about body, mind, chaos, kindness, and love; [and] provided the occasion for exercises in the absence of restraint, the presence of restraint, the contemplation of freedom and of aggression' (Morrison, 1993: 47-8). Within this framework, the boundaries of the conventional, literary imagination were set to ignore or rationalize enslavement and freedom-based-on-enslavement. Transgressing such boundaries is rarely encouraged. However, those determined to see themselves without mystification do transgress.

According to Morrison, historically an exceptional few, exceptionally brave European American writers attempted to free themselves of entrapment in Whiteness. Describing the courage of Herman Melville's tormented struggle to demystify 'Whiteness' in *Moby Dick*, she observes:

[T]o question the very notion of white progress, the very idea of racial superiority, of whiteness as privileged place in the evolutionary ladder of humankind, and to meditate on the fraudulent, self-destroying philosophy of that superiority, to 'pluck it out from under the robes of Senators and Judges,' to drag the 'judge himself to the bar,' – that was dangerous, solitary, radical work. Especially then. Especially now.

(Morrison, 1988: 18)

Today, this 'dangerous, solitary, radical work' is discouraged by claims that 'race' or discussions of racism politicize and so pollute literary work:

When matters of race are located and called attention to in American literature, critical response has tended to be on the order of a humanistic nostrum – or a dismissal mandated by the label 'political'. Excising the political from the life of the mind is a sacrifice that has proven costly. I think of this erasure as a kind of trembling hypochondria always curing itself with unnecessary surgery.

(Morrison, 1993: 12)

This surgery is also selective, usually performed only upon those deviating from the dominant ideologies. Literary works derive their meaning from world views which intend political consequences. World views carry cultural values as well as political agendas. Only by replicating or naturalizing the dominant political ideologies, in effect reproducing the racialized hegemony, can writers claim to be apolitical. Morrison clearly identifies her work as a practical art with a political focus, writing in 'Rootedness: the ancestor as foundation':

I am not interested in indulging myself in some private, closed exercise of my imagination that fulfills only the obligation of my personal dreams –

which is to say, yes, the work must be political. It must have that as its thrust. That's a pejorative term in critical circles now: if a work of art has any political influence in it, somehow it's tainted. My feeling is just the opposite; if it has none, it is tainted.

(Morrison, 1984: 344-5)

These writings enable critical discussions in a society guarded against analyses of White supremacy. Her critical thought, invigorating analyses despite increasing calls for the irrelevance of 'race', is particularly important in a society which routinely rejects such critiques as politically uncivil. Racial discourse seems directed or pulled by marionette strings working to curtail anti-racist critiques. As Morrison notes:

For three hundred years black Americans insisted that 'race' was no usefully distinguishing factor in human relationships. During those same three centuries every academic discipline, including theology, history and natural science, insisted 'race' was *the* determining factor in human development. When blacks discovered they had shaped or become a culturally formed race, and that it had specific and revered difference, suddenly they were told there is no such thing as 'race,' biological or cultural, that matters and that genuinely intellectual exchange cannot accommodate it. In trying to come to some terms about 'race' and writing, I am tempted to throw my hands up. It always seemed to me that the people who invented the hierarchy of 'race' when it was convenient for them ought not to be the ones to explain it away, now that it does not suit their purposes for it to exist. But there is culture and both gender and 'race' inform and are informed by it. Afro-American culture exists and though it is clear (and becoming clearer) how it has responded to Western culture, the instances where and means by which it has shaped Western culture are poorly recognized or understood.

(Morrison, 1988: 3)

African American culture exists within the world views which shape and inform it. This culture and its traditional practices reappear in Morrison's work. For instance, typical of the African (American) call-and-response tradition, Toni Morrison receives the call to testify to world views greater than White myths and to demystify, and thereby resist, a Frankensteinian Blackness.

Politicized by and politicizing the spirit, she issues her own charge to intellectuals and educators. The spirit which Morrison politicized is one of Black resistance to oppression, a resistance historically rooted in the African American community, elders and ancestors. The spirit she politicizes fuels current social debates. The world view that shapes her politics is rooted in traditional African culture. This world view coexists with and influences other world views within the dominant culture.

#### Traditional world views

[In *Song of Solomon*] I could blend the acceptance of the supernatural and a profound rootedness in the real world at the same time with neither

taking precedence over the other. It is indicative of the cosmology, the way in which Black people looked at the world. We are very practical people, very down-to-earth, even shrewd people. But within that practicality we also accepted what I suppose could be called superstition and magic, which is another way of knowing things. But to blend those two worlds together at the same time was enhancing not limiting. And some of those things were 'discredited knowledge' that Black people had; discredited only because Black people were discredited therefore what they *knew* was 'discredited.' And also because the push toward upward social mobility would mean to get as far away from that kind of knowledge as possible. That kind of knowledge has a very strong place in my work.

(Morrison, 1984: 342)

Distinguishing world view from superstition requires sketching the cosmology that grounds Toni Morrison's work. What some call 'superstition' or 'magic', in *Traditional African Religions and Philosophies* John Mbiti describes as aspects of a cultural world view:

Most [traditional] peoples . . . believe that the spirits are what remains of human beings when they die physically. This then becomes the ultimate status . . . the point of change or development beyond which [one] cannot go apart from a few national heroes who might become deified. . . . [W]o]Man does not, and need not, hope to become a spirit: [s]he is inevitably to become one, just as a child will automatically grow to become an adult.

(Mbiti, 1969: 79)

Mbiti notes that historically African world views maintain nonlinear time in which the past, present and future coexist and overlap (this view is also held in other cultures and in some scientific communities). Traditional African cosmology sees the non-duality of time (as past, present, and future) and space (Mbiti, 1969). Rather than suggest a monolithic Africa, Mbiti's work describes the diversity of religions throughout the continent. Yet, he maintains, various organizing principles are prevalent despite ethnic and societal differences. The cosmology he documents rejects the socially constructed dichotomies between sacred and secular, spiritual and political, the individual and community characteristic of Western culture. This specific cosmology described by Mbiti reappears in African American culture. World views or values are not deterministic. One may choose. In fact, Mbiti, an African theologian trained in European universities, depicts Christianity as 'superior' to traditional African religions, religions which he notes share Christianity's monotheism. One may elect to reject the traditional world views shaping African cultures, as Mbiti does, or s/he may reaffirm these values, as Morrison does. Stating that 'discredited knowledge' has 'a very strong place' in her work, Morrison refuses to distance herself from a traditional African/African American cultural world view, despite the fact that academic or social assimilation and advancement 'would mean to get as far away from that kind of knowledge as possible.'

Without considering the validity of this 'discredited knowledge' or

academically marginalized belief system, some may perceive and portray Morrison's work as romantic, ungrounded mysticism. Outside of a world view that recognizes the values mirrored in her work, it is difficult to perceive of Toni Morrison as something other than exotic. Morrison's fiction is not mere phantasm. As her non-fiction essays explain, she writes within the framework of African American cultural values and political-spiritual perspectives.

Morrison's work clearly relies upon African-centered cultural paradigms, paradigms documented by academics, theologians, philosophers and sociologists. For centuries these paradigms have been derided by European colonization and Eurocentric thought, dismissed as primitive superstition. The dismissal of these values and their frameworks is traceable to European colonization on several continents for several centuries. Historically European racial mythology constructed people whose physiology and ancestry designated whether they create theory, philosophy and cosmology or merely ape superstition. Today, the dismissal of 'discredited knowledge,' held by not fully assimilated African Americans, branches from the historical disparagement of the African origins of these views. As Congolese philosopher K. Kia Fu-Kiau notes in *The African Book Without Title*:

Africa was invaded . . . to civilize its people . . . ['civilization'] having 'accomplished' her 'noble' mission. . . . African people are still known as people without logic, people without systems, people without concepts. . . . African wisdom hidden in proverbs, the old way of theorizing among people of oral literature [cannot be] seen and understood in the way [the] western world sees and understands [a proverb]. . . . For us . . . proverbs are principles, theories, warehouses of knowledge . . . they have 'force deloi,' [the] force of law.

(Fu-Kiau, 1980: 62-3)

A people whose traditional culture is 'known' to be illogical, without complex belief systems, are generally received in racialized societies as dubious contributors to intellectual life or theory. Spoken and unspoken debates about their epistemic 'sub-culture' range ideologically from reactionary conservatism to progressive radicalism.

Toni Morrison's writings are radical, precisely because (while cognizant of the value of aspects of European culture) they reject the Eurocentric mandated label of 'primitive' for traditional African cosmology and the epistemological aspects of African American culture. Critiquing the racial stereotypes of White supremacy, she asserts the presence of traditional, communal culture as connected to Black/African ancestors. Her words concerning community and ancestors reconstruct values distinct and distant from Eurocentric, academic paradigms. Challenging hegemonic paradigms, Morrison delineates and deconstructs the Euroamerican muse's addiction to ethnic notions. She issues two complementary and intermingled calls that politicize the spirit: resist the racial mythology embodied in the White/European American imagination; and reconnect and reconsider the values rooted in traditional African American culture. Of these values, the one that

provides the foundation for her work is that of Afro-American community. In her writings, Morrison draws down the spirit to house it in community.

### The centrality of community

Perhaps one of the most questioned or debated concepts is the viability or value of an autonomous Afro-American cultural community. Irrespective of the arguments seeking to discredit this concept, Morrison expresses a personal sense of responsibility and accountability to community, making community a cornerstone in her work. The individual's salvation, her or his sanity, comes through relationship in community. This knowledge resonates in Morrison's work. The value of community inspires and informs Toni Morrison's political risk-taking and daring. The community she explores is neither a global nor nation-state community; yet, she does not deny the existence or significance of either. The community that engages her is the African American community. And it is its synthesis of seeming polarities, maleness and femaleness, ugliness and beauty, good and evil, the spiritual and the mundane, that intrigues her.

In 'Unspeaking things unspoken,' Morrison's analysis of her novels, particularly her comments on *Beloved* and the *Song of Solomon*, illustrates her emphasis on the centrality of community and the individual's relationship to it. In this essay, Morrison examines how language 'activates' and is activated by outlining the backdrop or context for the first sentences of each of her novels (Fu-Kiau, 1980: 62-3). She reminds us that this exploration into how she 'practice[s] language' seeks and presents a 'position of vulnerability to those aspects of Afro-American culture' shaping her novels (Fu-Kiau, 1980: 33).

Of those novels, *Beloved* is a striking example of Toni Morrison's awareness of the destructive impact of unbalanced spiritual and political worlds on community. According to Morrison, *Beloved's* haunting works in part 'to keep the reader preoccupied with the nature of the incredible spirit world while being supplied a controlled diet of the incredible political world' (Morrison, 1993: 32). The incredible political world in this novel is inspired by a specific historical tragedy, the story of an African American woman, Margaret Garner, fleeing slavery with her children in the nineteenth century.<sup>3</sup> The context of community and resistance to oppression ground Garner's story of the 'unnatural' mother who may or may not have demonstrated the fantastic depths of maternal love and political resistance, fictionalized in *Beloved*.

In life and in death, individuals remain connected to and grow within the life of the community. This is true in *Beloved* as well as *Song of Solomon*, where the essentialness of community directs Morrison's discussion of freedom and grace.

Toni Morrison describes the insurance agent in *Song of Solomon* whose suicide fulfills his promise<sup>4</sup> to fly from (no-)Mercy hospital:

The agent's flight, like that of the Solomon in the title, although toward asylum (Canada, or freedom, or home, or the company of the welcoming

dead), and although it carries the possibility of failure and the certainty of danger, is toward change, an alternative way, a cessation of things-as-they-are. It should not be understood as a simple desperate act . . . but as obedience to a deeper contract with his people.

(Morrison, 1988: 28)

Dangerous but not desperate, according to Morrison, the insurance agent's act embraces rather than flees community. His notion of contract is tied to a cultural understanding of community as transcendent, while his flight transcends dualities which posit a divide between life and death. Morrison relates how the agent acknowledged and received his not fully comprehensible gift:

It is his commitment to them, regardless of whether, in all its details, they understand it. There is, however, in their response to his action, a tenderness, some contrition and mounting respect ('They didn't know he had it in him.') and an awareness that the gesture enclosed rather than repudiated themselves. The note he leaves asks for forgiveness . . . an almost Christian declaration of love as well as humility of one who was not able to do more.

(Morrison, 1988: 28)

Exploring the relationship between the community and the individual, Toni Morrison suggests that her novels involve the reader and narrator in communal ties. In the world view providing the meanings of her literature, knowledge and insight emerge from relationships to rather than alienation from community. Wisdom arises within community, in spite of the flawed character of its constituents:

That egalitarianism which places us all (reader, the novel's population, the narrator's voice) on the same footing, reflected for me the force of light and mercy, and the precious, imaginative yet realistic gaze of black people who (at one time, anyway) did not mythologize what or whom it mythologized. The 'song' itself contains this unblinking evaluation of the miraculous and heroic flight of the legendary Solomon, an unblinking gaze which is lurking in the tender but amused choral-community response to the agent's flight.

(Morrison, 1988: 29)

Morrison's own unblinking gaze fosters critical self-reflection in regards to African American communities. It would be simple and simplistic to idealize an African American community as a haven of safety and harmony against dehumanizing racism. Nowhere do Morrison's essays argue for this perfected Black bliss. Everywhere in her literature there exists the reality of grim, bizarre and determined struggle in communities which embody both the rotting and purifying. Rather than succumb to romantic idealism, Morrison acknowledges: 'My vulnerability would lie in romanticizing blackness rather than demonizing it; vilifying whiteness rather than reifying it' (Morrison, 1988: xi). Her deconstruction of Eurocentrism and Africanisms coexists with a critique of the limitations of Black community.

Those limitations partly stem from African Americans' stunted abilities to be in community, and our refusal to recognize or honor the ancestors and each other. For example, Morrison details how, in *Song of Solomon*, the ancestral figure represented by Solomon and who embodies the African ancestors' flight towards freedom, is not readily recognized by community members. Morrison writes: 'The African myth is also contaminated. Unprogressive, unreconstructed, self-born Pilate [the female protagonist] is unimpressed by Solomon's flight' (Morrison, 1988: 29).

Rejection, alienation and violence towards self, others or the ancestors, however, does not negate the reality of the ties. Relationships are determinant. One cannot erase community. One decides only how to relate to the community, which includes self, others, ancestors and future born. Morrison's reviews of *Beloved* and *Song of Solomon* suggest that our ancestors are indispensable to community. Through them, the past sits in the present and future, guiding descendants. The writings suggest that to the extent that we recognize our ancestors, seeking their guidance and spiritual power, we deepen our ability to grow in community with them.

#### The role of African ancestors

When you kill the ancestor you kill yourself ... nice things don't always happen to the totally self-reliant.

(Morrison, 1984: 344)

For some world views, the greatest spiritual development is tied to service to the community; in fact, in time through such service one will likely evolve into elder and later ancestor. Ancestors are communal members in these traditional world views.<sup>5</sup> All collectively comprise 'community'. Extending through time and space to include our predecessors, contemporaries, and future generations, community here is not bound by physical or temporal limits; its relationships are transcendent. This transcendence is marked by the presence of ancestors.

Morrison uses the term 'ancestor' to refer to physically living elders and ancestral spirits (I reserve the term for ancestral figures). Arguing that 'There is always an elder' in Black literature, Morrison maintains that a distinctive characteristic of African American writing is its focus on the ancestors, writing: 'these ancestors are not just parents, they are sort of timeless people whose relationships to the characters are benevolent, instructive, and protective, and they provide a certain kind of wisdom' (Morrison, 1984: 343). For Morrison, studying how African American writers relate to the ancestor(s) is revealing:

Some of them, such as Richard Wright, had great difficulty with that ancestor. Some of them, like James Baldwin, were confounded and disturbed by the presence or absence of an ancestor. What struck me in looking at some contemporary fiction was that whether the novel took place in the city or in the country, the presence or absence of that figure determined the success or the happiness of the character. It was the

absence of an ancestor that was frightening, that was threatening, and it caused huge destruction and disarray in the work itself. That the solace comes, not from the contemplation of serene nature as in a lot of mainstream white literature, nor from the regard in which the city was held as a kind of corrupt place to be. Whether the character was in Harlem or Arkansas, the point was there, this timelessness was there, this person who represented this ancestor.

(Morrison, 1984: 343)

Speech about the ancestors not only enables critiques of historical oppression (such as the references to slavery made in *Beloved* and *Song of Solomon*), it also establishes communal realities to support and reflect political-spiritual, secular-sacred traditions. Within certain world views, ancestors illuminate an avenue for liberation: listen and one learns from them; acknowledge their contributions and legacies and one shares their power (which does not necessarily promise redemption.) In their physical lives, our predecessors, who attained the stature of elders, helped others to develop as free human beings. As spiritual forces after death, in this belief system, they continue to guide human development. This is a world view where, according to Congolese philosophy, knowledge is 'the experience of that deepest reality found between the spiritualized ancestors and the physically living thinkers' (Fu-Kiau, 1980: 62). As a living thinker, Toni Morrison is a mapper of recollection sites.<sup>6</sup> Her writings present us with the knower who reaches beyond the strait-jacket of Africanisms into the past, which is the present and future, to pull out both the African presence and the Euroamerican imagining of that presence.

Toni Morrison is only one of many African Americans following liberating traditions which acknowledge the ancestors as a spiritual-political place and practice. References or calls to the ancestral presence and the primacy of historical African American figures appear in African American religion, politics and art. This recognition appears in written or literary and oral culture. For instance, the African American women's vocal group, Sweet Honey in the Rock, consistently honor the ancestors in song. Their 'Ella's Song,' dedicated to civil rights activist Ella Josephine Baker, uses excerpts from Miss Baker's speeches: 'We who believe in freedom cannot rest, until the killing of black men, black mothers' sons, is as important as the killing of white men, white mothers' sons.' Introducing the song 'Fannie Lou Hamer,' Sweet Honey founder, Bernice Johnson Reagon, former SNCC activist and current Smithsonian director of African American culture, in oral tradition explicates a world view:

During the civil rights movement of the 1960s ... Fannie Lou Hamer ... became a symbol of the strength and power of resistance. ... We call her name today in the tradition of African libation. By pouring libation we honor those who provide the ground we stand on. We acknowledge that we are here today because of something someone did before we came.

(Sweet Honey in the Rock, 1977)

In the academic works of African American intellectuals, the ancestral spirits also appear. Angela Davis speaks of the ancestors in *The Autobiography of Angela Davis and Women, Race, and Class* (Davis, 1981). Historian Vincent Harding pays tribute to the ancestors in *There is a River: The Black Struggle for Freedom in America*. Using 'we' throughout the text, Harding's narrative history of African American resistance to enslavement over centuries merges past, present and future (Harding, 1986).<sup>7</sup> Harding describes as 'mentacide' the 'breaking in' practices that turned Africans into slaves; to enslave a people, one must destroy their belief systems, their knowledge in themselves, and their understanding of both physical and metaphysical power.

Morrison's work is very familiar in the world view framing the vision of African American artists and writers who assert that invoking the spirit honors the memories of ancestors. Invoking also testifies to the prevailing wisdom that we, as a people, resist enslavement and genocide because of the spirits which politicize our lives. Our ability, and perspectives as strangers in a strange land, to in turn politicize the spirit of our times, invigorates intellectual and moral life.

#### African American intellectuals and academic questions

The education of the next generation of black intellectuals is something that is terrifically important to me. But the questions black intellectuals put to themselves, and to African American students, are not limited and confined to our own community. For the major crises in politics, in government, in practically any social issue in this country, the axis turns on the issue of race. Is this country willing to sabotage its cities and school systems if they're occupied mostly by black people? It seems so. When we take on these issues and problems as black intellectuals, what we are doing is not merely the primary work of enlightening and producing a generation of young black intellectuals. Whatever the flash points are, they frequently have to do with amelioration, enhancement or identification of the problems of the entire country. So this is not parochial; it is not marginal; it is not even primarily self-interest.

(Morrison in Raboteau *et al.*, 1993)

In the interview 'African American intellectual life at Princeton: a conversation,' Toni Morrison explores the intellectual service of African American educators, which, like or unlike the flight of the insurance agent, humanizes both African American life and social life in general.<sup>8</sup> If, as Morrison argues, the questions African American intellectuals raise for and among ourselves reverberate beyond our own communities, then it would be vital to explore a world view guiding our writings which presents service and community as indispensable; time and space as expansive; knowledge as intergenerational and responsive to the conditions of people; and community as a transcendent, shared and thorny tie (Christian, 1990). This world view frames our resistance to civilize American life and probes academic mindsets.

Toni Morrison's essays raise a number of questions about the possibilities

for critiquing and developing curricular paradigms which acknowledge realities greater than those recognized by conventional academia. World views shape educators's lives and determine how they develop curricula, pedagogy and scholarship to talk about, or silence talk about, racialized knowledge. To question academics' relationships to the world view nurturing Morrison's writings investigates the metaparadigms influencing academic work. It also raises questions of misuse and appropriation.

For instance, teaching her writings without a critical discussion of racism and slavery is an incredible, but perhaps not uncommon, appropriative act that reproduces racial dominance. Toni Morrison's integrity weaves the demystification of racism and a deep commitment to the well-being of African Americans into art. Unraveling these ties depoliticizes the radical nature of her writings; in effect, re-politicizes the work as compatible with intellectual paradigms indifferent to the racist practices of American society destabilizing American life.

In the classroom, expanding the intellectual canon to include Morrison, or other 'Others,' – people of color, women, poor and working class, gay, lesbian and bisexual people – for more inclusive and representative curricula does not subvert racialized hierarchies. Additive curricula do not inherently democratize education:<sup>9</sup> in integrative reforms the axis of the universe remains the same. At best, 'additive' curricula, that offer no critique of the dominating world view, 'civilize' racist practices; at worst, they function as decorative shields against critiques of Eurocentrism. Where analyses of Whiteness as metaparadigms are absent, critiques of racialized oppression are insufficient to create a learning environment in which teaching Morrison's work maintains, rather than dismantles, her communal ties and subversive insights. Honest representation of the diversity of intellectual life and the work of transgressive African American intellectuals requires some context greater than the traditional academic paradigm. Perhaps the only way to attain this honesty is to stand on some terrain, within some world view, other than that legitimized by Eurocentric academe. Engaging in this 'dangerous, solitary, radical work,' we might finally confront the academic penchant for playing in the dark.

#### Conclusion

The ability to distinguish humanistic culture from dehumanizing, racialized myth presupposes critical thinking grounded someplace other than the conventional academic mind. Since critical race thinking is rarely encouraged in racialized settings, we rarely ask how a people, manufacturing and depending upon racist myths and ghosts in order to see their reflections in the world, lose more than they gain. It seems that hauntings cannot be restricted. Inevitably the racially privileged caste, and entourage, finds itself marked and demarcated, more obsessed and possessed than its demonized, Africanist 'inferiors'. Morrison's work clinically, coolly, dissects both production and possession. It brings witness to a literacy that predates and overcomes Africanism, individualism and materialism. With this literacy,

we read of spirit and power through time and space. This knowledge is made meaningful, or meaningless, by the world views we embrace – world views which credit or discredit the questions raised by the non-fiction of Toni Morrison.

All educators' works reflect and articulate world views in which they reveal themselves as compromised or uncompromised knowers, reproducing or resisting dominance. (There seems at least three types of compromised knowers tied to academe – the unwittingly, the voluntarily, and the forcibly compromised.) Bernice Johnson Reagon maintains that the uncompromised knower is the one who straddles (Reagon, 1991), standing with a foot in both worlds, unsplit by dualities and unhampered by a toxic imagination. As I straddle and sometime seem to fall from places in which an African American spirit world and European American racial myth converge, I marvel at Morrison's grace, her ability to walk and call out both the reactionary – the Africanisms of the White mind, and the revolutionary – African ancestors and communal commitments.<sup>10</sup> 'Those of us who straddle' walk between worlds, in a space where insight and agency arise from community. Between, in, and within worlds, some intellectuals when called, in the tradition, respond. Morrison is such a traditionalist, an uncompromised knower, a straddler with deep communal ties. How else could she blend two worlds to stand, rooted as she is, politicized by and politicizing the spirit? and in that rootedness write:

There must have been a time when an artist could be genuinely representative of the tribe and *in* it; when an artist could have a tribal or racial sensibility and an individual expression of it. There were spaces and places in which a single person could enter and behave as an individual within the context of the community. A small remnant of that you can see sometimes in Black churches where people shout. It is a very personal grief and a personal statement done among people you trust. Done within the context of the community, therefore safe. And while the shouter is performing some rite that is extremely subjective, the other people are performing as a community in protecting that person.

(Morrison, 1984: 339)

Since cultural remnants are markers for realities denied or suppressed in a racialized society, African American subjective-and-communal rites determine and reveal the discernible and immeasurable distance between African Ancestors and European/American Africanisms. Through her essays, which are unique and representative, political and spirit-filled, Toni Morrison invites us to struggle with these distinctions and differences in a polarized world.

#### Notes

1 Parts of this essay appear in James (1993).

2 David Roediger explores 'naturalizing Whiteness' and criticizes White Marxists who discuss class without analysing race and ethnicity. By ignoring race-

ethnicity, he argues, they redouble the hegemony of 'Whiteness' or White supremacy by naturalizing it (Roediger, 1992).

- 3 The Garner story appears in Davis (1981). In a video-taped interview with the BBC, Morrison describes how her own 'haunting' by Margaret Garner's life and death ended when she wrote *Beloved*.
- 4 'The insurance agent does not declare, announce, or threaten his act. He promises, as though a contract is being executed faithfully between himself and others. Promises broken, or kept; the difficulty of ferreting out loyalties and ties that bind or bruise wend their way throughout the action and the shifting relationships' (Morrison, 1988: 28).
- 5 The practice of honoring or worshipping ancestors is prevalent worldwide. The symbols of Euroamerican cultural icons are both physical and literary. In Euroamerican culture, the ancestral spirits of Confederate soldiers and slaveholders, in the icon of statues in Memphis, Jackson or Birmingham parks, inspire devoted visitors, The fervor of canonical reverence in universities belies their disdain for ancestral worship. Popularized Euroamerican ancestors, such as George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, and Elvis, evince complex relationships to and facile representations of White American freedom, civilization and culture dependent upon enslaved or exploited African Americans. Increasingly, since the civil rights movements, national American culture jumbles the contradictory values embodied in ancestors manifesting oppositional world views: holidays, coins and postage stamps pay tribute to Washington and Jefferson (John Brown is rarely memorialized), as well as Ida B. Wells Barnett and Martin Luther King, Jr.
- 6 Instructional and often inspirational calls to expansive community come from various sites of recollection, which despite cultural variances, point to unifying elements or commonalities based on shared values. In my own recollection sites, I remember the values of family, peers and schooling. I also recall the political work in the 1980s of friends and co-activists working in the anti-apartheid movement and to counter US imperialism in the Caribbean and Latin America where Nicaraguans and El Salvadorans, fighting US-funded contras or death squads, honored their dead by calling 'Presente!' after their names in roll calls. The teaching of activist elders and ancestors, the technique of seminary and the spirit of African-based religious houses in Brooklyn and the Bronx, all these experiences politicize, and remind me of the futility of travelling without faith, without ancestral hope, and the liabilities of academic training that blesses my ignorance of – and contempt for – non-elite, communal culture.
- 7 Harding writes 'we' including himself in the historical telling of our liberation struggles. Finding the historical accounts of black radicalism in the US 'too narrow, abstract, Eurocentric,' Harding creates a 'narrative, analytical, celebrative history' of the African American freedom struggle in the US, using the metaphor of a river and the imagery of Langston Hughes's poem.
- 8 The role of the African philosopher as development within and through service is described by Tsenay Serequeberhan in *African Philosophy*: 'The calling of the African philosopher ... comes to us from a lived history whose endurance and sacrifice – against slavery and colonialism – has made our present and future existence in freedom possible. The reflective explorations of African philosophy are thus aimed at further enhancing and expanding this freedom (Serequeberhan, 1991: xxii).

This 'call' of the African philosopher or theorist, shared by the African American intellectual, predates imperialism, enslavement, and Whiteness in the

literary imagination. Responding to the call to be in community, African Americans may address spiritual and physical needs, with a critical thinking that transpires from the standpoint of the individual in relationship to community. Whether that relationship is shaded by objectification and rejection, or ambivalence, or acceptance and service depends upon how we intervene in academic life.

- 9 bell hooks writes: 'A white woman professor teaching a novel by a black woman writer (Toni Morrison's *Sula*) who never acknowledges the 'race' of the characters is not including works by 'different' writers in a manner that challenges ways we have been traditionally taught as English majors to look at literature. The political standpoint of any professor engaged with the development of cultural studies will determine whether issues of difference and otherness will be discussed in new ways or in ways that reinforce domination' (hooks, 1990: 131).
- 10 Whether reactionary, reformist, or revolutionary, movement for curricular change entails a spirit of political struggle. These oppositional (and sometimes overlapping) tendencies manifest in: advocacy for an exclusive, romanticized past as intellectually superior; integrating hierarchical, hegemonic structures; visionary projections towards the unknowable known as the promise and risk of future justice.

#### References

- Allen, Paula Gunn (1986) *Sacred Hoop: Recovering the Feminine of American Indian Traditions*, Boston: Beacon Press.
- Christian, Barbara (1990) 'The race for theory', in Gloria Anzaldúa (ed.) *Making Face, Making Soul = Haciendo Caras: Creative and Critical Perspectives by Women of Color*, San Francisco: Aunt Lute.
- Davis, Angela (1981) *Women, Race, and Class*, New York: Random House.
- Fu-Kiau, K. Kia Bunseki (1980) *The African Book Without Title*, Cambridge: Fu-Kiau.
- Harding, Vincent (1986) *There is a River: The Black Struggle for Freedom in America*, New York: Random House.
- hooks, bell (1990) *Yearning: Race, Gender and Cultural Politics*, Boston: South End Press.
- James, Joy (1993) 'African philosophy, theory, and living thinkers' and 'Teaching theory, talking community', in J. James and R. Farmer (eds) *Spirit, Space and Survival: African American Women in (White) Academe*, New York: Routledge.
- Mbiti, John (1969) *Traditional African Religions and Philosophies*, London: Heinemann.
- Morrison, Toni (1984) 'Rootedness: the ancestor as foundation', in M. Evans (ed.), *Black Women Writers*, New York: Doubleday.
- (1988) 'Unspeakable things unspoken: the African American presence in American literature', *Michigan Quarterly Review* Winter 28: 1–33.
- (1993) *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*, New York: Vintage.
- Raboteau, Albert, Morrison, Toni, Lubiano, Wahneema and Simons, Ruth (1993) 'African American intellectual life at Princeton: a conversation', *Princeton Today* Summer.
- Reagon, Bernice Johnson (1991) 'Nobody knows the trouble I see' and 'By and by

I'm gonna lay down my heavy load', *Journal for American History* Vol. 78, No. 1, June.

- Roediger, David (1992) *Wages of Whiteness*, New York: Routledge (Verso).
- Serequeberhan, Tsenay (1991) *African Philosophy*, New York: Paragon House.
- Sweet Honey in the Rock (1977) 'B'lieve I'll run on . . . , see what the end goona be', Ukiah, California: Redwood Records.