



The powerful writing strategies of Assia Djebar and Toni Morrison –  
Differentiation of the depictions of otherness through literature



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Les femmes d'Alger, Pablo Picasso, 1954.

**The powerful writing strategies of Assia Djebar and Toni Morrison –  
Differentiation of the depictions of otherness through literature**

MA Literary Studies - Thesis

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*“[...] I must lean over backwards, plunge my face into the shadows, closely examine the vaulted roof of rock or chalk, lend an ear to the whispers that rise up from time out of mind, study this geology stained red with blood. What magma of sounds lies rotting there? [...] Alone, stripped bear, unveiled, I face these images of darkness...”*  
(Assia Djebar. *Fantasia, an Algerian Cavalcade*, p. 46.)

*“It’s a kind of literary archaeology: on the basis of some information and a little bit of guesswork you journey to a site to see what remains were left behind and to reconstruct the world that these remains imply. What makes it fiction is the nature of the imaginative act: my reliance on the image—on the remains—in addition to recollection, to yield up a kind of a truth.”* (Toni Morrison. “The Site of Memory” In: Denard, Carolyn C. *Toni Morrison What Moves at the Margin*, p. 71.)

## Foreword

Two great novelists, Assia Djebar and Toni Morrison, are the centres of attention in this thesis. Both have particular strategies of writing in their literary works, which powerfully imagine the experiences of marginalized groups in society. Moreover, they challenge the official narrative of a historical context and the traditional idea of the nation.

In this thesis I hope to show the relevance and importance of cultural practices in society. I intend to illustrate how the literary works of Djebar and Morrison allow for a better understanding of each other.

I want to thank Dr. Birgit M. Kaiser for her inspiring thoughts and supportive role as a thesis supervisor. She has had a great influence on my thinking during my BA and MA at Utrecht University, in particular within the field of postcolonial theory and literature. Again, during my MA year, I always left her classes or office with new perspectives and positive energy.

Bas, Karlijn and Jeftha, Margriet and Henk, thank you for supporting me, at all times.

Sanne Boersma, October 2010.

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## Introduction

Throughout the twentieth century, phenomena as decolonization and globalisation have moved the world towards a postcolonial era. People from different cultural backgrounds share a history, but may maintain different perspectives. Often there is one official dominant narrative on history that marginalizes other versions of the same historical contexts. Consequently, this results in an inaccurate representation of the marginalized groups. The theoretical and political debate on depictions of otherness has the tendency to generalize and reduce the marginalized other. The theoretical debate in postcolonial studies has as its main goal to stress diversity of postcolonial subjects, though unintentionally theorizing leads to the creation of a homogenised totality once again. For instance, Homi Bhabha's theoretical notion of hybridity is focused on the ambivalence between colonizer and colonized. Bhabha's theory liberates the postcolonial subject from the specific determined position within a national discourse, but at the same time places the postcolonial subject in an 'in-between' space, known as the 'Third Space'.<sup>1</sup> This mode of thought determines the position of the postcolonial subject and situates the subject within a group that forms a homogenised totality based on unity once again. In contrast to theoretical, political or historical discourses, the discourse of literature has the potential to show a larger complexity and therefore can avoid the generalizing and homogenising tone of the debate on depictions of otherness.<sup>2</sup> Aristotle distinguished the task of the poet from the task of the historian in his *Poetics*: "[...] it is not the function of the poet to relate what has happened, but what may happen- what is possible according to the law of probability or necessity."<sup>3</sup> In literary works the poet can imagine what may happen and what may have been possible to this law of probability or necessity, besides dominant generalizing modes of thought. Due to the act of imagination, literature can gain access to the interior lives of people and expand on details. The aim of this thesis is to show how the literary works of two authors, Assia Djébar and Toni Morrison, have the potential to lay bare these problematic issues of determination and homogenisation by using a plurality of perspectives and differentiation of otherness as its line of thought. Furthermore, this thesis attempts to show how this line of thought represented in Assia Djébar's and Toni Morrison's literature dismantles the official narrative of a nation's history and goes beyond the traditional idea of the nation determined by political, social and geographical boundaries.

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<sup>1</sup> Jane Hiddleston. *Assia Djébar Out of Algeria* 2006 Liverpool: Liverpool University Press. p. 15.

<sup>2</sup> In "This Strange Institution Called Literature" Jacques Derrida distinguishes particular kind of discourses. He states that in certain contexts the discourse of literature can be more powerful than other kind of discourses: "The 'economy' of literature *sometimes* seems to me more powerful than that of other types of discourse: such as, for example, historical or philosophical discourse. *Sometimes*: it depends on the singularities and contexts. Literature would be potentially more potent." ("This Strange Institution Called Literature": An Interview with Jacques Derrida" In: Derrida, Jacques. Attridge, Derek (ed.). *Acts of Literature* 1992. p. 43.)

<sup>3</sup> <<http://classics.mit.edu/Aristotle/poetics.1.1.html>> 25/09/2010 Aristototele. 350 B.C.E *Poetics* Butcher, S.H. (trsl). section I, part IX.

First of all, I would like to introduce the authors who will take centre stage in this thesis. Assia Djébar is an Algerian author, translator and filmmaker who was born on June 30, 1936 as Fatima-Zohra Imalayen in Cherchell, a small coastal town near Algiers. She grew up during the growing tension in French Algeria, which resulted in the war of decolonization and eventually the independence of Algeria. Her experiences of living in a divided world, in between languages, became the inspiration for her literary works and films. Djébar published her first novel *La Soif (The Mischief)* in 1957 while living in Paris. Several novels followed, but at the end of the 1960's she decided to stop writing and commit herself to film. With her film *La Nouba des femmes du mont Chenoua* (The nouba or 'ritual' festival of the Women of Mt. Chenoua) she won the Biennale prize at the 1979 Venice Film Festival. During this 'silent decade', in which Djébar did not write, she collected oral testimonies of Algerian women while travelling through the country. These testimonies would become material not only for her film projects but for her later literary works as well. About her return to writing she says: "I was in charge again. This time I positioned myself neither as an outside observer, nor as an Algerian woman, nor as a colonized being. I defined myself as a *gaze*, a way of looking upon my very own space."<sup>4</sup> In 1980 Djébar publishes a novel with short stories called *Femmes d'Alger dans leur appartement (Women of Algiers in their apartment)* and in 1985 the semi-autobiographical and historical novel *L'Amour, la fantasia (Fantasia, an Algerian Cavalcade)*. These two literary works will function as case studies in this thesis. Djébar was awarded with many prizes for her literary achievements, among which the International Literary Neustadt Prize in 1996 and the Prix de la Paix in 2002.

As Djébar, Toni Morrison also 'looks upon her very own space' to write her novels. She is an African American author, editor and professor who was born on February 18, 1931 as Chloe Adella Wofford in Lorain, Ohio. She started her writing career in the 1960's. In a recent interview Morrison says about her motivation at the time to start writing:

"Most of what was being published by black men were very powerful, aggressive, revolutionary fiction or non-fiction. And also they had a very positive, racially uplifting, rhetoric to go with it. [...] Wait a minute, they are going to skip over something, and no one is going to remember that it wasn't always beautiful, you know."<sup>5</sup>

In the following decades Morrison writes nine novels in which she recreates African American life in the United States in different historical settings. She produces a history that should not be passed over. According to Morrison there is no possibility to escape from the

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<sup>4</sup> Clarisse Zimra. "Women's memory spans centuries. An interview with Assia Djébar" In: Assia Djébar *Women of Algiers in their Apartment* 1999 [1980] Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press. p. 173.

<sup>5</sup> <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8Zgu2hrs2k>> 25/09/2010 "Toni Morrison Motivation for Writing", 04/12/2008. [2004].



past: “The past, until you confront it, until you live through it, keeps coming back in other forms. The shapes redesign themselves in other constellations, until you get a chance to play it over again.”<sup>6</sup> Besides her novels she writes several non-fiction works and short stories. With her 1987 novel *Beloved* she won the Pulitzer Prize for fiction and in 1993 she was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature. As case studies for this thesis I will focus on her newest novel *A Mercy*, published in 2008 and *Paradise*, published in 1998.

Although Djébar and Morrison each write within a different context, their literary achievements are based on similar elements. Postcolonial theorist Jane Hiddleston writes about Djébar’s style of writing: “Djébar’s work is experimental, many-layered, ambivalent and reflexive, and sets out to problematise the representation of postcolonial Algeria [...]”<sup>7</sup> Morrison’s literary works contain the same elements, such as an experimental and many-layered technique of narration. Her novels question the representation of Afro-Americans and black communities in the United States throughout its history. Both authors rediscover the trajectory of their nation and its inhabitants. Morrison explains her task as: “My job becomes how to rip that veil drawn over ‘proceedings too terrible to relate.’ [...]”<sup>8</sup> The power of imagination is crucial for the works they produce. According to Morrison only the ‘act of imagination’ can help her to rewrite the unwritten interior lives of people throughout history.<sup>9</sup> Therefore, Djébar and Morrison’s literary writings are different from other forms of writing, such as history writing. In their literary oeuvres, Djébar and Morrison take up the task of the poet as described by Aristotle, to imagine what may happen and what may have been possible to this law of probability or necessity, besides the official narratives of Algerian and American history. For both nations, these official narratives of history are male dominated. Both the United States and Algeria are patriarchal societies. Traditionally, men construct the laws of society and the rules of behaviour within the family, while the voice of women is marginalized. Besides, in the representation of the United States white has always been superior in contrast to black people. For Algeria, French colonization from 1830 till 1962 resulted in a dominant French version of the nation’s history. However, Djébar and Morrison do not attempt to create a determined counter narrative of their nation’s history in contrast to the official narrative. Their strategies of writing allow for differentiation and a plurality of perspectives of the nation’s history.

At this point, it is necessary to make an important note. I do not intend to make a comparison between the authors and their work in this thesis. Although similarities and differences can be found on the level of their literary techniques, I would like to focus on each

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<sup>6</sup> Judylyn S. Ryan. “Language and narrative technique in Toni Morrison’s novels” 2007 In: Justine Tally (ed.). *The Cambridge Companion to Toni Morrison* 2007 Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. p.160.

<sup>7</sup> Jane Hiddleston. *Assia Djébar Out of Algeria* 2006. p. 185.

<sup>8</sup> Toni Morrison. “The Site of Memory” 1987 In: Denard, Carolyn C. *Toni Morrison What Moves at the Margin* 2008 Jackson: University Press of Mississippi. p. 70.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 71.

of their works separately, to give an insight in the writing strategies that are at work in each novel. I will propose several strategies of writing present in the literary works to analyse in detail how the strategies show a larger complexity on depictions of otherness and how they question the official narrative of the nation's history. Important elements of Djébar's writing strategies are documentation, testimonies, conversations and the autobiographical aspect. In Morrison's strategies of writing the recreation of early history, communities, democracy of narrative participation and enunciation and eclipse take centre stage. For both authors, poetic imagination plays a central role to all of these strategies.

Several notions from the field of philosophy and postcolonial theory will inform the reading of the literary works of Djébar and Morrison. The first notion I would like to introduce is Jean-Luc Nancy's 'singular plural'. Nancy interprets 'being' as singular, rather than specific or determined, but not in an absolute sense. He adds plural to the singular, although he mentions that in Latin *singuli* already implies the plural because it says 'the one' that belongs to 'one by one': "The singular is primarily *each* one and, therefore, also *with* and *among* all the others. The singular is plural."<sup>10</sup> Important for Nancy is that the singular being always exists in relation 'with' other singular beings. 'With' is at the heart of Being according to Nancy.<sup>11</sup> He argues that the singular being does not have substance or an identity of its own, but is defined by its relations. However, these relations never become fixed. Hiddleston says about Nancy's interpretation of the inseparability of 'being' and 'relation': "There is no substance to the 'with', only the process of one singular being brushing against another and reinventing itself as a result of these contingent relations. Relationality for Nancy does not imply resemblance but rather coexistence and conjunction."<sup>12</sup> In other words, relations between one singular being and other singular beings are multiple and change all the time. Hiddleston summarizes this as: "Being is born into relation and its singularity is the result of its multiple encounters and combinations."<sup>13</sup> With and among all others in multiple encounters and combinations make the singular being plural. In the analysis of the literary works of Djébar and Morrison I will show how Nancy's singular plural is helpful to understand the strategies of narration of the stories and the characters who seem to be in this contingent process of multiple encounters and combinations.

Reda Bensmaïa's concept of the 'experimental nation' will help to elucidate further on the strategies of narration in the works of Djébar and Morrison. According to Bensmaïa identities are not determined by geographical or political boundaries but rather interpreted within 'a plane of consistency', which goes beyond the traditional idea of the nation. This

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<sup>10</sup> Jean-Luc Nancy. *Being Singular Plural* 2000 [1996] Stanford: Stanford University Press. p. 32.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 30.

<sup>12</sup> Jane Hiddleston. "The specific plurality of Assia Djébar" 2004 *French Studies* 58: 3 Oxford: Oxford University Press. p. 374.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibidem*.

new approach of the nation he calls 'experimental': "My nations are experimental in that they are above all nations that writers have had to imagine or explore as if they were territories to rediscover and stake out, step by step, countries to invent and to draw while creating one's own language."<sup>14</sup> Both authors, Djébar and Morrison, have in their own way re-imagined the trajectory of their nation, though not by (re)constructing a determined unity within the boundaries of the geographical or political, but by focusing in their representation on plurality and differentiation within the nation and the groups and individuals belonging to it.

In the light of this strategy of plurality and differentiation, the notion of 'counter-hegemonic usage', introduced by Patrick Corcoran while writing about Francophonie is a relevant addition at this point. He describes this as: "[...] a counter-hegemonic usage which insists on respecting the individuated identity of the francophone 'other' and its capacity for autonomous agency."<sup>15</sup> This can be called the bottom-up strategy concerned with diversity and the questioning of authority. In contrast to this Corcoran outlines the top-down strategy, which he calls 'imperial usage' that aims for a unified vision. In the context of the relation between France and Francophonie this means to spread Frenchness and to look at Francophonie as a homogenised totality.<sup>16</sup> Although Corcoran focuses on the French/Francophone situation, this model shows the existence of an official top-down strategy that tries to unite in contrast to counter bottom-up strategy that tries to dismantle this unity and show diversity. Djébar's and Morrison's literary strategies offer a platform for Corcoran's bottom-up strategy.

The notions introduced above will turn out to be helpful in the analysis of the writing strategies present in the literary works of Djébar and Morrison that I will analyse in detail in the coming chapters. Their literary works will show a larger complexity on depictions of otherness and expose a different understanding of the nation's history and its traditional boundaries. In the first and second chapter I will analyse two literary works of Assia Djébar, respectively *Fantasia, an Algerian Cavalcade* and *Women of Algiers in their Apartment*. In the third and fourth chapter Toni Morrison's literary works will be analysed. In the third chapter I will pay attention to her most recent novel *A Mercy*. In the fourth chapter Morrison's novel *Paradise* will take centre stage. The literary works are the main focus in the chapters, though the notions and models that I have paid attention to in this introduction will appear in the chapters when helpful.

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<sup>14</sup> Reda Bensmaïa. *Experimental Nations Or, an Invention of the Maghreb* 2003 Princeton: Princeton University Press. p. 8.

<sup>15</sup> Patrick Corcoran. *The Cambridge Introduction to Francophone Literature* 2007 Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. p. 11.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibidem*.

Assia Djébar

*Fantasia, an Algerian Cavalcade*

Rediscovery of Algeria's history—

childhood memories, witness-reports and testimonies

Assia Djébar's *Fantasia, an Algerian Cavalcade* is a historical and semi-autobiographical literary novel published in 1985. The novel contains two historical sequences, one that takes place during the War of Colonization in Algeria, the other 130 years later known as the Algerian War of Decolonization. In both sequences, Djébar uses different kind of reports, written and oral, to imagine the events and experiences of the people at the time, especially the experiences of Algerian women. Furthermore, the novel contains another storyline, which can be called semi-autobiographical. Within these parts of the novel a first-person narrator who sometimes appears as a young girl and at other times as an adolescent, observes her environment and tells her experiences. These descriptions are Assia Djébar's memories of her past that she carefully tries to share in this novel. Within these storylines, a critical 'meta voice' is present to comment and reflect on the stories created. For example, this voice stresses not only the kind of reports that the stories rely on, but also the absence of certain reports. Hiddleston says about this 'meta voice': "Her [Djébar's, SB] narratives of war and love are repeatedly interrupted by the self-conscious reflections of the narrator, who strives endlessly to analyse and refine the narrative she constructs."<sup>17</sup> From this point on, I will call this narrator the 'critical voice' to avoid misunderstanding since the novel contains many layers of narration. In this chapter I will show different writing strategies of Djébar within the different parts of her novel. The storylines I have distinguished above do not appear in a linear sequence but are intertwined throughout the novel. This choice for nonlinearity helps to show how the events, people and memories are entangled. About the connection of the different parts and historical settings Dorothy S. Blair says in her introduction of the English translation of the novel:

"While the last part of the book is a dialogue between the author and the peasant women whose voices she reproduces, throughout the work she intervenes 'with the nomad memory and intermittent voice' to create a polyphony of the incidents from her own girlhood and early womanhood interwoven into the fabric of the historical sequences from 1830 to the present day."<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Jane Hiddleston. *Assia Djébar Out of Algeria* 2006. p. 78.

<sup>18</sup> Dorothy S. Blair. "Introduction" 1989 In: Assia Djébar. *Fantasia, an Algerian Cavalcade* 1993 [1985] Portsmouth: Heinemann.

While connections between the stories and voices from different historical settings are present in the novel, the fragments of stories are constructed in different styles, by different strategies of writing. I will explain these strategies in three case studies of the novel. The first case concerns the semi-autobiographical parts of the text. The witness-reports of the chroniclers of the War of Colonization in the nineteenth century will be subject in the second case. The last is concerned with the testimonies of the experiences of women in the War of Decolonization. Furthermore, the diversity of Djébar's writing will support the main argument I want to make: that the textual arrangement of *Fantasia* offers a plurality of different perspectives of Algerian women and problematizes the official narrative of Algeria's history by using particular strategies of writing.

In the first section on *Fantasia, an Algerian Cavalcade* I want to pay attention to Djébar's *strategy of semi-autobiography*. Djébar introduces a first-person narrator within these parts of the novel, who recalls her childhood memories. The experiences that are described are scenes from Djébar's own childhood and youth. The choice to write from the perspective of a first-person narrator explains the *semi* before autobiography in the title of this strategy. *Fantasia* is the first novel in which Djébar was able to give in to the autobiographical dimension of a literary text. In earlier novels she struggled with this dimension and wanted to refuse it. In an interview, Djébar says about this: "Why is it that autobiographical questions are so abhorrent? I believe that it is because, all through my first three novels, my writing consisted in systematically turning my back on my own life—in short, in refusing the autobiographical dimension of writing."<sup>19</sup> After Djébar's 'silent decade of writing', caused by this struggle about the inevitability of the self being involved in the novel, she manages to find a way to return to writing and embraces the autobiographical elements to be present in her work. She does not allow herself to be in a position, such as the Algerian woman or the colonized being, rather she defines herself as a *gaze* to look upon her very own space.<sup>20</sup> In the semi-autobiographical parts of *Fantasia* this results in a first-person narrator who tells about her observations of encounters that take place during her youth in Algeria. In these parts of the novel, Djébar deals with several themes that have been important in her life such as the bilingual aspect, colonization and decolonization, love, family and Islam.<sup>21</sup> I think these themes are very interesting in themselves to study and in

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<sup>19</sup> Clarisse Zimra. "Women's memory spans centuries. An interview with Assia Djébar" In: Assia Djébar *Women of Algiers in their Apartment* 1999 [1980]. p. 169.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibidem*, 173.

<sup>21</sup> I do not attempt to write on the themes of the novel, though it is important to note that the structure of the novel is influenced by these themes, especially the bilingual aspect and the Islam within family spheres. In the semi-autobiographical part, Djébar uses the first person pronoun, which is a taboo in her familial space. Nevertheless, Djébar has chosen this Western mode of behaviour. Moreover, she writes in French, the language of the colonizer, the enemy. Especially in the testimonies of the women of the War of Independence she expresses this uneasy position through the narrator who reflects on the recreation of these stories.

relation to Djébar, however this is not the aim of this analysis of *Fantasia*. The aim of this part of the analysis is to show how the writing strategy of semi-autobiography offers a plurality of perspectives and differentiation of otherness, in this context of Algerian females. Therefore, the focus should be on encounters and relations of the characters that exist within the semi-autobiographical parts of Djébar's work. In two examples from the novel I attempt to illustrate these encounters and relations. First, I will show how the people observed by the narrator are in multiple relations and in a contingent process of creation and change. Second, I will show how the narrator is caught up within this same process of creation and change. These multiple relations and processes of contingent creation and change offer a plurality of perspectives of Algerian females.

In "Three Cloistered Girls" the narrator is eleven years old and tells about how she spends her summers at another house where three girls, a little older than her, are living. Their upbringing is stricter and more traditional than hers; they are cloistered in the family home. Nevertheless the girls found a way to keep in touch with the outside world by writing to distant pen pals. The narrator recalls: "That summer the girls let me into their secret. [...] These girls, though confined to their house, were writing; were writing letters; letters to men; to men in the four corners of the world; of the Arab world, naturally."<sup>22</sup> The letters came from and went to different places such as Lebanon, Syria, Iraq and from Arab students in Paris and London. The girls dealt with it in different ways. The oldest was corresponding with a dozen distant pen-pals, while the middle one refused to write to a stranger. She was going to wait for the right man to marry, as her family would expect of her. The youngest wrote to almost as many men as her oldest sister and she is the most rebelling of the three:

"I'll never let them marry me off to a stranger who, in one night, will have the right to touch me! That's why I write all those letters! One day, someone will come to this dead-and-alive hole to take me away: my father and brother won't know him, but he won't be a stranger to me!" (*Fantasia*, p. 13).

The narrator herself has to admit that she listened, kept the secret, but was very afraid that their sin was to be revealed. Within this private sphere the story relates very well to the theoretical notions I have presented in the introduction. The girls help to illustrate the idea of Nancy's singular plural being. Their being depends on the relations they have. The relation towards their family may be experienced as fixed and limited though never impossible to change. The letters help them to relate to others in the world, to be in the process of multiple encounters and combinations. In their relation with their father, mother or brother or in their

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<sup>22</sup> Assia Djébar. *Fantasia, an Algerian Cavalcade* 1993 [1985] Portsmouth: Heinemann. p. 11. Further references to the novel will appear in the text by the short reference of: (*Fantasia*, p. ...).

relation with the men in other countries the same issue is at stake in line of Nancy's thinking, in which one singular being brushes against another singular being and reinvents itself every time.<sup>23</sup> Djébar's characters are in a contingent process of multiple encounters and combinations. Furthermore, the strategy of semi-autobiography exposes differentiation of the cloistered girls by showing the different perspectives they have of the situation at home and towards the outside world. The girls dismantle the official idea of Muslim girls of being at home, conforming to the way their fathers want them to behave. The description of the girl's behaviour questions both the authority and the depiction of a family as a homogenised totality.

In "The French Policeman's daughter" the strategy of semi-autobiography allows for similar forms of plurality and differentiation in the representation of the characters and discussions that take place. The narrator, still a young girl, recalls how the daughter of a French policeman living in the area is subject of a discussion between the native Algerian women. One of the women shares her thoughts on how an Arab chief or Sheikh would fancy a "young, vigorous Frenchwoman" and that encountering such a French woman is perhaps not interpreted as a sin. (*Fantasia*, p. 24). Another woman protests to this idea, which the narrator describes as:

"The eldest sister protested; she accused the relative of scandal-mongering, or of ignorance at least. She was very fond of Janine [The French policeman's daughter, SB], and she could assure them that the morals of the policeman's family were as pure as any Arabs'." (*Fantasia*, p. 25).

Different perspectives are present within the group, which results in a plurality of voices of the Algerian women. This part supports Nancy's idea of relationality that does not imply resemblance, but rather coexistence and conjunction.<sup>24</sup> The characters do not have similar thoughts on the French woman, but they are able to share these with each other.

As said earlier, not only the characters observed by the first-person narrator are in this process of multiple combinations and contingent relations, the narrator is taking part within this process as well. In the encounters with the cloistered girls, the native Algerian women or her family members, the narrator is also a singular being brushing against another and reinventing itself as a result of these contingent relations.<sup>25</sup> She is born in this process of changing relations and this process of being never finishes. It makes being neither specific, in a determined position, nor absolutely singular, self-existent without relations, but singular

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<sup>23</sup> Jane Hiddleston. "The specific plurality of Assia Djébar" 2004. p. 374.

<sup>24</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>25</sup> Ibidem.

plural.<sup>26</sup> The strategy of semi-autobiography exposes differentiation of the Algerian women. The following sections on the historical sequences will show how other strategies of writing based on documentation and testimonies expose differentiation of the official narrative of the nation's history.

In her writings on the nineteenth century War of Colonization Djébar makes use of the documentation of different kind of chroniclers. These chroniclers show a plurality of voices. The official reports of French military commanders are distinguished from less official one's, like private letters of soldiers and other people involved. The critical voice reflects on why and how the narrative is constructed as it appears in the novel. This narrator also stresses the fact that certain kinds of reports are absent. I would like to propose this way of writing of Djébar as a *strategy of differentiating documentation*. She grounds the parts of the novel on archival material, which she structures by imagining the events and describing them within a fantastical narrative. The critical voice outside of the narrative introduces the chroniclers and comments when necessary. For example, the critical voice interrupts the narrative with "I re-read the chroniclers of these first encounters [during the capture of Algiers, SB] and note contrasting styles." (*Fantasia*, p. 15). But right after, the reader is in the middle of the narrative again: "The warriors eye each other from afar, [...]" (*Fantasia*, p. 15). The narrative is interrupted whenever a problem occurs, which results in different layers of narration throughout its chapters. Hiddleston says about this element of Djébar's writing: "Each time she reflects on the problems of masking and occlusion, however, she adds another layer that further screens the process of masking that she wants to describe."<sup>27</sup> Djébar retells the events of the War of Colonization, but this is in itself a 'process of masking'. The critical voice throughout the narrative distinguishes her story from other history accounts on these events. At the end of each chapter the critical voice reflects on how this narrative was recreated, whose voices were involved and the one's that were missing. The strategy of differentiating documentation allows for differentiation of the reports used for the story, which prevents the process of masking in Djébar's novel. I will show this strategy of writing in a concrete example from the novel.

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<sup>26</sup> In *Absolutely Postcolonial, writing between the specific and the singular* published in 2001, Peter Hallward distinguishes the singular and the specific modes of being. In his view, the singular is absolute; 'constituent of itself, expressive of itself, immediate to itself. Being is without relations, in a 'world-without-others''. (p. 3,19) The specific 'implies a situation, a past, an intelligibility constrained by inherited conditions.' (p. 5) From Hallward's view the specific mode of being is not determined, but 'forever ongoing, forever incomplete'. (p. 5) Hallward situates Djébar's work in the specific. Hiddleston complicates Hallward's view on the 'inherited conditions' included in his definition of the specific. According to her, Djébar escapes from circumscriptions and normative categories; 'the subjects that Djébar investigates are specific but their affiliations are also fleeting and provisional, as they position themselves in relation to history and politics without being reduced and fixed by these circumscriptions.' (Jane Hiddleston "The specific plurality of Assia Djébar" 2004. p. 373) Therefore, Hiddleston places Djébar's work within Nancy's notion of singular plural in which the mode of being is based on 'with' and the circulation of multiple relations and combinations without the existence of inherited conditions.

<sup>27</sup> Jane Hiddleston. *Assia Djébar Out of Algeria* 2006. p. 78.



A striking part of the novel concerning the nineteenth century events is “Women, Children, Oxen Dying in Caves”. This part shows very well the plurality of perspectives within the chroniclers’ accounts. Djébar narrates how the Berber tribes in the western regions of the hinterland try to keep their independence. She particularly focuses on the Ouled Riah tribesmen who were unwilling to surrender and withdrew in caves. The French army led by Pélissier decided after failed negotiations to set the caves on fire and men, women and children were as the order was announced; ‘smoked out like foxes’. Again, Djébar works with documents from archives to recreate this story. She works with a montage of official military reports that registered the events during the war but also include letters and witness reports from soldiers to their families. In the case of the Ouled Riah tribesmen the official military reports claim that there was no other possibility than setting the caves on fire. A French doctor wrote about ‘a cannibalistic scene’, but as the critical voice says; ‘to piece together a picture of that night’ attention is paid to two less official eyewitnesses. One is a Spanish officer who is fighting with the French army and writes for the Spanish newspaper *Heraldo*: “The soldiers [...] shove wood into the cave – ‘like into an oven’ – to keep the furnaces stoked throughout the night.” (*Fantasia*, p. 71). The other witness is an anonymous soldier who wrote a private letter to his family in which he utters his emotion about the event:

“What pen could do justice to this scene? To see, in the middle of the night, by moonlight, a body of French soldiers, busy keeping that hellfire alight! To hear the muffled groans of men, women, children, beasts, and the cracking of burnt rocks as the crumbled, and the continual gunfire!” (*Fantasia*, p. 71).

These witness-reports are different from more official French reports. The writing strategy of differentiating documentation achieves to present the official and unofficial reports, though also stresses the absence of other voices that makes it impossible to recreate a narrative from all perspectives of the War on Colonization. In the part of “Captain Bosquet leaves Oran to Take Part in a Razzia” the critical voice emphasises the fact that the stories of the enemies of the French are undocumented: “But the enemy slips back in the rear. *His* war is mute, undocumented, leaving no leisure for writing. [...] our chroniclers are haunted by the distant sound of half-human cries, cacophony of keening, ear splitting hieroglyphs of a wild, collective voice.” (*Fantasia*, p. 56). The only stories known of the Algerian side are written down by the ‘official discourse’ created by mostly French warriors. The official French reports use Corcoran’s notion of top-down strategy to create a unified homogenizing totality of the events. Though, part of the French reports, the less official ones do express emotions and question the actions of the French army, such as what happened to the tribe in the caves. With the strategy of differentiating documentation Djébar supplements the official French

voices by other voices, and hence differentiates the history of the war. The novel shows Corcoran's bottom-up strategy based on diversity and the questioning of authority.<sup>28</sup> Nevertheless, the absent voices of the native Algerian tribe people should have been documented in the archives on Algeria's history more extensively to dismantle the unifying version of the story of the War of Colonization and show more diversity.

A paradoxical situation is at stake at this point of the analysis; the French official and unofficial reports *do* document the consequences of their actions in Algeria. The reports on the enemy are reported as victories or only mentioned on the side. However, the reports do catch the horrific actions against the Algerians. For example, Djébar calls upon a report, which mentions on the side that a woman's foot was hacked off because of gold and silver anklets. According to Hiddleston especially these details are important for Djébar: "Yet for Djébar, the detail stands out; it reveals the horror of the atrocities that glossed over by the existing accounts and announces its own impenetrable presence."<sup>29</sup> The focus of Djébar on the details illustrates the potential of the discourse of literature over other forms of discourse.<sup>30</sup> Within the discourse of history for instance, the minor notes on the side of a report will remain details in the official narrative of the war. I want to argue that fiction is a particular discourse that is capable of drawing these details from the shadows because of its imaginative power. Due to the act of imagination, literature can provide access to personal experiences, thoughts and feelings. The abstract, factual accounts on the events lack this aspect of imagination and therefore are surpassed by the discourse of literature. In *Deletion* the critical voice says about dealing with limited knowledge: "[...] I must lean over backwards, plunge my face into the shadows, closely examine the vaulted roof of rock or chalk, lend an ear to the whispers that rise up from time out of mind, study this geology stained red with blood. What magma of sounds lies rotting there? [...] Alone, stripped bear, unveiled, I face these images of darkness..." (*Fantasia*, p. 46). Djébar's focus on the details and the interruptions by the critical voice in her literary work challenge the official narrative of the events. Due to Djébar's watchful eye within the witness-reports found in the archives in combination with her imaginative power, her strategy of writing offers a plurality of perspectives on the War of Colonization and problematizes the official narrative of the war.

The other historical sequence present in *Fantasia* concerns the War of Decolonization, also known as the Algerian War of Independence. In the second half of the book the experiences of women during this war are central. During Djébar's silent decade of

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<sup>28</sup> Partrick Corcoran. *The Cambridge Introduction to Francophone Literature* 2007. p. 11.

<sup>29</sup> Jane Hiddleston. *Assia Djébar Out of Algeria* 2006. p. 74.

<sup>30</sup> At this point I would like to make a reference to Jacques Derrida's theory on the distinction between particular kind of discourses again. One might argue that for the complex context of postcolonial Algeria, which contains so many versions of history, documented and undocumented, the discourse of literature is more potent than for example the discourse of history to lay bare all these perspectives.

writing she travelled through Algeria to meet and listen to women who supported and/or joined the maquisards<sup>31</sup> and who lost their husbands, sons and/or brothers in the war. Djébar collected the oral testimonies of the Algerian women to later recreate these stories in her novel and give voice to these women. I want to propose this recreation of oral testimonies by Djébar as a *strategy of recording*. In her attempt to transform these oral testimonies to a written story for the novel, she invents different parts with titles such as ‘Voice’, ‘Murmurs’, ‘Whispers’, ‘Embraces’. This set-up offers the possibility to write down the testimonies from different perspectives and moreover, reflection on how these stories were told and recreated a few decades later. For these reflections Djébar introduces, as in the semi-autobiographical parts, the first-person narrator who records the testimonies.

One of the women is Cherifa, who tells her story twenty years after the war. She recalls how she joined her brothers in the mountains. The French surrounded their camp one night and Cherifa and the others tried to escape. One of her brothers was shot before her eyes. Her voice is recalled from different perspectives. In ‘Voice’ her story is narrated from her own perspective. About the moment that she found her dead brother she tells:

“I saw the wadi nearby. I tried to carry him; I managed to drag him, his bare feet scraped along the ground behind me ... I wanted to wash him, at least to moisten his face. I took water in the palms of my hands; I started to sprinkle it over him, as one does for one’s ablutions, without realizing that I was crying, sobbing all the time ...” (*Fantasia*, p. 121).

In ‘Clamour’, the story of Cherifa is told from a different perspective. An omniscient narrator recalls the same part as:

“[...] The girl – little more than a child – has dragged the corpse herself, shortly before the men arrive. She tried to drag it down to the stream but could not get further than the first rough ground ... She splashes water on the faces, but he does not wake: she rests it sideways again a rock.” (*Fantasia*, p. 122).

In a following part called ‘Voice’ again, Cherifa continues her story about the time she did not escape and was imprisoned and tortured by the French. Furthermore, in ‘Embrace’, the first-person narrator tells about the moment twenty years later when Cherifa shares this story. The narrator stresses the difficulty of recreating her story:

“Cherifa! I wanted to re-create your flight: there, the isolated field, the tree appears before you when you are scared of the jackals. Next you are driven through village, surrounded by

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<sup>31</sup> Algerian soldiers.

guards, taken to the prison camp where every year more prisoners arrive ... I have captured your voice; disguised it with my French without clothing it. I barely brush the shadow of your footsteps!" (*Fantasia*, p. 142).

The narrator experiences an uneasy position and expresses the complexity of capturing the voice. The French language plays a major role in this,<sup>32</sup> but the impossibility to express in writing the atrocities that took place complicate the recreation of the story as well. Language will never resemble the actual atrocities that took place. The first-person narrator in the story of Cherifa expresses the frustration of not being able to grasp the situation as it was. The strategy of recording is helpful to get grip on the story to a certain extent, because the recorded voices are described from a plurality of perspectives. An attempt to get an understanding of the situation is possible through more than just one position. Again at this point, the discourse of literature that provides access to the human mind is more powerful than the discourse of history for example, which relies on facts. Furthermore, the strategy of recording lays bare experiences of Algerian women that were part of the events that took place during the War of Decolonization. However, these experiences were never part of the official story of the War of Decolonization that is dominated by the documented reports of the war by the French. The strategy of writing dismantles this dominant narrative of the war.

With all three strategies of writing in *Fantasia, an Algerian Cavalcade*, Djébar exposes a plurality of perspectives and differentiation of Algerian women and Algeria's history. The strategy of semi-autobiography allows for differentiation of the Algerian women by showing the different perspectives they have of the situation at home and towards the world outside. The descriptions of the girl's behaviour and the debate on the French woman by the group of Algerian women question the idea of Algerian women as a homogenised totality. The strategy of differentiating documentation allows for differentiation of the War of Colonization. The strategy stresses the presence of official French reports, less official one's from the French side and the absence of documentation from the Algerian side. The strategy of recording is as effective as the strategy of differentiating documentation to expose a plurality of perspectives of another part of Algeria's history, the War of Decolonization. The testimonies of Algerian women on the War of Decolonization are written from different perspectives and moreover, include a reflection on how these stories were told and recreated a few decades later. The discourse of literature turns out to be more powerful than other forms of writing because it goes beyond the abstract and factual accounts of the wars. Literature provides access to personal stories and describes thoughts and feelings to the law of probability. This results in a more subtle and complex approach of Algeria's history.

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<sup>32</sup> As said earlier, I do not intend to write extensively on themes in this thesis. However, it is important to keep in mind that the rewriting of the testimonies in French, the language of the enemy, is experienced as a major problem in this part of the novel.

Assia Djébar

*Women of Algiers in Their Apartment*

Restoration of conversation

The novel *Women of Algiers in Their Apartment* is a collection of short stories published in 1980. Djébar's encounters with Algerian women during her travels in Algeria have been of great influence for this collection. Mainly, the stories of the women are narrated as dialogues. The dialogues take place in the present or between women of the past and of the present. The War of Independence and general experiences of life as an Algerian woman are central issues to these conversations. The collection is split in three different parts called 'Today', 'Yesterday' and 'Postface', which all contain several chapters. 'Today' illustrates encounters between a diversity of women in Algeria. Most of them are in the process of coming to terms with their situation and/or past. Emphasis is put on 'talking' to unblock their situation. In 'Yesterday' voices of the past are connected to the present. Especially in this second part of the collection the autobiographical element is present in the short stories. Djébar does not write about her own experiences as a child or adolescent, but focuses on her family members. She says about the autobiographical element in the collection: "I was seized by the urge to bring my grandmother into it, to bring the past into a dialogue with the present."<sup>33</sup> The short story "The Dead Speak" is dedicated to her grandmother and stresses the importance of passing on stories from the past to the present. These stories narrate the history of Algeria, nonetheless, "The Dead Speak" shows how the passing on of these stories is disrupted. The third and last part called 'Postface' is written in an essayistic style and therefore very different from the stories earlier in the novel. This part reflects on the stories that are told in 'Today' and 'Yesterday'. Djébar intended to bring together the stories of the collection: "I spent a couple of weeks on the Postface, weaving a kind of textual meditation that would serve as a reflective background to the stories I had just put together."<sup>34</sup> The painting of Eugène Delacroix from 1834, with the similar title as the collection, and Pablo Picasso's version 120 years later are the main focus to conclude on the stories that were narrated in the preceding chapters. Delacroix's painting represents a harem around 1830 in Algeria. The artwork came into existence after his travels in the Orient of North Africa where he was allowed to visit a harem during a stopover in Algiers. The painting exposes a glimpse of what is forbidden to the outside world. There are three Algerian women sitting together and a black female servant standing in the back of a room with Orientalist attributes and details. The three Algerian women are presented unveiled and in coloured costumes with some parts of their bodies

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<sup>33</sup> Clarisse Zimra. "Women's memory spans centuries. An interview with Assia Djébar" In: Assia Djébar *Women of Algiers in Their Apartment* 1999 [1980]. p. 174.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 175.

uncovered. However, the monotonous looks on their faces, the darkness and curtain in the back of the painting show the enclosed situation of the women. While Delacroix's women are cloistered in their home, Picasso's version of the harem 120 years later sets the women of the harem free. His women are totally nude and the paintings are full of light. These two remarkable different representations of Algerian women are in the background of Djébar's collection of stories on dialogues between Algerian women.<sup>35</sup>

One main strategy of writing is central to the short stories of *Women of Algiers in Their Apartment*. I would like to propose this strategy as a *strategy of restoration of conversation*. As in *Fantasia*, the voices of Algerian women are the inspiration for the stories, though this strategy is slightly different from the strategy of recording analysed in the previous chapter. The voices in *Fantasia* are captured in stories on the personal events. In this collection, the stories are written down in appearance of conversations. According to Djébar, the restoration of conversation between Algerian women refers to the one conversation between Algerian women that Delacroix froze in his painting in 1834. In her reflection at the end of the collection Djébar says about this: "Only in the fragments of ancient murmuring do I see how we must look for a restoration of conversation between women, the very one Delacroix froze in his painting."<sup>36</sup> I will show how Djébar in her collection of short stories tries to restore the conversations of Algerian women with her imaginative power. These conversations express several versions of Algeria's past that as a consequence challenge the official narrative of Algeria's history, which is based on a unified male dominated perspective and the exclusion of the female gaze.

'Today' starts with the short story "Women of Algiers in Their Apartment", similar to the title of the collection. The focus in my analysis will be first on the importance of conversation and second on the diversity represented in the story. Djébar works towards the strategy of restoring conversation as a means to improve and enlighten the situation of Algerian women. Djébar cannot restore and describe the conversations between the women straightforwardly. In the prologue of her collection called 'Overture' she says about this struggle to write down the stories that she recorded on her "journey of listening" (WAA, p. 1): "Today, how do I, as water dowsers, craft words out of so many tones of voice still suspended in the silences of yesterday's seraglio? Words of the veiled body, language that in turn has taken the veil for so long a time." (WAA, p. 1). While Djébar struggles to write down stories that are still veiled, the characters she creates experience the struggle to express their stories. Her strategy of writing lays bare the process of the women of coming to terms with their

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<sup>35</sup> See appendix I and II for images of the paintings of Eugène Delacroix and Pablo Picasso.

<sup>36</sup> Assia Djébar. *Women of Algiers in Their Apartment* 1999 [1980] Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press. p. 151. Further references to the collection will appear in the text by the short reference of: (WAA, p. ..).

present situation and past and being able to share this. In the example of the characters Leila and Sarah I attempt to show this process of coming to terms with their experiences. Leila is an ex-resistance fighter of the Algerian War of Independence and traumatized by her experiences, especially the tortures in prison. Sarah was involved in the war as well and spent her adolescence in prison. Sarah meets Leila in the hospital and Leila starts telling flashes of horrific memories. At this moment, Sarah is not able to share these stories in a conversation and says weeping: “[...] ‘be quiet, my darling, don’t talk anymore! ... Words, what good are words?’” Leila answers with: “[...] I’ve got to speak, Sarah! They are ashamed of me. I’ve dried up, I’m the shadow of my former self.” (WAA, p. 45). She stresses the fact that the ‘brothers’ of the war never knew about the tortures the women underwent. Leila’s process of coming to terms with her experiences and longing to share these can be linked to the philosophy of Nancy on Being as singular plural. Once, during the war, Leila was fighting for liberation of Algeria together with the male soldiers. As singular plural Being she took part in the process of multiple encounters and combinations. After the war she ended up in the determined position of Algerian woman, not allowed to participate in the public spaces with Algerian men. This disrupted her Being as singular plural. She became, as she says, a ‘shadow of her former self’. This ‘former self’ relates to the Leila she was allowed to be during the war. Her desire to speak implies that she longs to a form of Being as singular plural, which in Nancy’s line of thinking would mean in multiple relations ‘with’ others. He states: “Being cannot *be* anything but being-with-one-another, circulating in the *with* and as the *with* of this singularly plural coexistence.”<sup>37</sup> Leila should be able again to circulate freely in an open space that allows multiple encounters with both women and men. Earlier on, in the chapter on *Fantasia* the possibility of circulating in this open space seemed to be central to the semi-autobiographical stories. The collection seems to be more focused on the struggle of the characters to participate and the limits they are confronted with. If Leila is able to circulate again in this open space she can confront the ‘brothers’, the Algerian former soldiers, with her story. This reference to the ‘brothers’ makes the conversation between Leila and Sarah question the official story of the war. Leila is aware of the importance to talk about her experiences. This is the only way to dismantle the homogenized official story of the war dominated by the male perspective. By talking she can show that there are more versions of the story of the War of Independence. To express more than one narrative of a nation’s history, the discourse of literature turns out to be very helpful again. Literature throws light upon the interior thoughts and feelings. Most of the time, these thoughts and feelings are not documented in official archives, which is the basis for the creation of a discourse of history. Due to the act of imagination in literature, these interior lives can come into expression.

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<sup>37</sup> Jean-Luc Nancy. *Being Singular Plural* 2000 [1996]. p. 3.

These expressions result in more than one perspective on the past. In line of Derrida's thinking, I want to argue that in this case the discourse of literature is more potent than other discourses, because the multiple narratives offer a more diverse understanding of a complex context such as Algeria.

In the particular example of Sarah and Leila the restoration of conversation between women is in progress. Nonetheless, it shows the friction between the desire to express memories and the difficulty to talk about these experiences. Sarah refuses to listen to Leila, though in another part of the short story a conversation is presented of Sarah with her friend Anne, in which Sarah's attitude changes. She becomes aware of the importance of words. She realizes that talking is the only way Algerian women can succeed in the transition to a different life and moreover question the male-centred official story of Algeria's history:

“For Arabic women I see only one single way to unblock everything: talk, talk without stopping, about yesterday and today, talk among themselves, in all the women's quarters, the traditional ones as well as those in the housing projects. Talk among ourselves and look. Look outside, look outside the walls and the prisons! ... The Woman as look and the Woman as voice, [...].” (WAA, p. 50).

Leila and Sarah represent the Algerian ‘Woman as Voice’, who talks to unblock everything. By talking about their experiences and sharing their stories they will question the official narrative of Algeria's history and moreover the representation of Algerian women as a homogenized totality excluded from participating in public spaces of society. The bottom-up strategy of Corcoran is useful at this point, which challenges the unified view, in this case of Algerian women, and therefore exposes a diverse counterview.

While Leila and Sarah each tell their version of Algeria's past, several other characters of “Women of Algiers in Their Apartment” challenge this unified view of Algerian women. They show very well the diversity within Algerian society. For example, most of the young women of Sarah's family distinguish themselves from the traditional role of Algerian women. They do not stay at home to take care of the household and isolate themselves from the outside world, but they study, practice sports and/or work. Sonia for example decided to become a physical education teacher and Baya works as a laboratory assistant at the Cytology Department that examines children of questionable sex. Sarah works at the institute of musicology studying women's songs of earlier times. By creating these characters, Djébar challenges the official depiction of Algerian society in which women are absent in the public and work spaces. Even though this creates an optimistic sphere for the women of Algeria, Djébar troubles her own created counterview of Algerian women right away. She wants to



avoid the creation of a new determined feminine Algerian identity. Hiddleston says about this strategy of Djébar:

“[...] her texts initially strive to unveil or conceive a specific feminine Algerian identity, rescuing Algerian women from occlusion both by colonialism and by Islamic law, and giving voice to this particular oppressed group. This does not mean that they are passively specified, but that they are positioned in relation to a series of specific influences and negotiate between them. Despite Djébar’s belief in the necessity of this project, however, she then troubles the determinations of that position. [...]”<sup>38</sup>

In “Women of Algiers in Their Apartment” Djébar first dismantles the representation of Algerian women as a homogenised totality by creating characters who do work, study and play sports, but troubles this dynamic position of the Algerian woman by showing how a lot of Algerian women are still imprisoned, physically and/or mentally. A lot of references are made by the characters in their conversations about how they still feel like they live in a prison. Leila says for instance: “Barbed wire no longer obstructs the alleys, now it decorates windows, balconies, anything at all that opens onto an outside space...” (WAA, p. 44). Nevertheless, with the strategy of restoration of conversation Djébar exposes these women to the world outside and therefore still challenges the official narrative that is known of Algeria, being dominated by the male gaze and the absence of the female gaze. To illustrate this I want to give one more example from the short story, which is a striking anecdote of the encounter between Sarah and a cloistered woman. The anecdote exposes a glimpse of the cloistered woman to the world outside though stresses her limitations as well. While Sarah leaves work she notices a woman appearing in front of a window, the only one that is open and without curtains. The woman lifts her young child and dances for a few seconds. From a distance, Sarah observes this three days in a row, every day around six o’clock the woman dances in front of the open window. While driving away in her car Sarah thinks about the unknown dancing woman: “Is she locked up that she thus takes revenge, by this gratuitous burst of frivolous dancing ... or is it the child who demands space, freedom?” (WAA, p. 23). Sarah cannot ask the woman, because the distance and cloistered situation of the unknown woman prevents them from talking. This encounter of the two women stresses the necessity of being in contact with others to be. At this point the novel again illustrates the philosophy of Nancy on Being as singular plural. Only through the encounter with others the woman experiences her existence and do others know that she exists. Cloistered in her home, she does have encounters but limited to the same persons every day. This disrupts the possibility of taking part in the process of multiple encounters and combinations. The encounter between her and

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<sup>38</sup> Jane Hiddleston. *Assia Djébar Out of Algeria* 2006. p. 20.

Sarah is limited; they are not able to talk with each other. The woman ends up being singular, which would mean in Nancy's line of thinking that she has no substance or identity of her own. 'With' is at the heart of Being and its relations define therefore Being.<sup>39</sup> These relations should exist of encounters with others in numerous combinations. This anecdote stresses how a cloistered woman is limited to experience Being as singular plural. Sarah and Leila are closer to this experience, although they struggle as well. The younger characters represented, Baya and Sonia, seem to circulate in an open space that allows multiple encounters and combinations. This shows how the short story differentiates the representation of Algerian women.

The strategy of restoration of conversation in "Women of Algiers in Their Apartment" shows a plurality of perspectives on Algerian history and society. To conclude on this short story I want to argue that Djébar recreates an Algeria in what Bensmaïa has called the 'experimental nation'.<sup>40</sup> Djébar does not determine the feminine identity within the boundaries of the geographical or political. She creates a "plane of consistency"<sup>41</sup>, a space in which she explores a plurality of perspectives on Algeria's history and society. These perspectives do not become fixed, but float around freely in a space called Algeria with the possibility to change and to add new ones. This way of recreating a territory goes beyond the traditional idea of the nation, which has fixed boundaries politically, socially and geographically. Conversations of 'Today', that take place within the process of multiple encounters and combinations, belong to this space. Furthermore, the stories of the past, of 'Yesterday', that are passed on to the present participate in this space as well. These stories are central in the second part of the collection.

'Yesterday' contains four short stories. The strategy of restoration of conversation applies to these stories as well, yet 'conversation' should be interpreted differently. In 'Today' direct conversations between the women are restored and presented. In the stories of 'Yesterday' the conversations take place between the voices of the past and the voices of the present. The chapters stress the importance to pass on stories from generation to generation through conversation. To write the stories Djébar also uses the strategy I proposed in the chapter on *Fantasia* of semi-autobiography. As said earlier, she does not write down her own experiences as a child or adolescent (as in *Fantasia*, SB), but focuses on her family members. For the short story "Nostalgia of the Horde", in which a great grandmother tells stories about other family members to her great-grandchildren, Djébar's former mother-in-law inspired her:

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<sup>39</sup> Jean-Luc Nancy. *Being Singular Plural* 2000 [1996]. p. 30.

<sup>40</sup> Reda Bensmaïa. *Experimental Nations Or, an Invention of the Maghreb* 2003. p. 8.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibidem*.

“[...] my former mother-in-law, who was able to show me that a woman’s memory spans centuries—just one woman. She would talk of an obscure, forgotten old woman she used to know who used to talk of the old days. This is precisely how Algerian women “relay” the past: they tell the (his)story of colonization, *but tell it otherwise*.”<sup>42</sup> (my own emphasis, SB).

Djebar is inspired by the generations within her own family that help to differentiate the (his)story of colonization as it is known. The official story of this episode of Algeria’s history is male-dominated and excludes the experiences of women. With the strategy of restoration of conversation Djebar opens up these experiences. She does not straightforwardly write her own family chronicle, but with her imaginative powers she creates her own characters. Through them she can express the stories she heard within her own family. Most of the stories are constructed as intimate family stories, in which older women tell stories to the youngsters. Furthermore, the strategy of writing also lays bare how the passing on of these stories fails. The short story “The Dead Speak”, dedicated to her maternal grandmother, illustrates this. (WAA, p. 75). The story introduces the character of an old woman, Yemma Hadda, who has died recently. During her life she passed on stories about her experiences as an Algerian woman. Hadda’s cousin Aïcha, her friend Saïd and her grandson Hassan are all pulled down to the past at the day of her funeral. Their thoughts tell about their relationship with Yemma Hadda and the stories she has told them. They all have their own particular memories of her and her stories and deal with these in their own way. Saïd has promised Hadda to pass on stories to her grandson Hassan, because she did not have a chance to see him again before she died. She has directed her last hopes on her grandson. Corcoran describes in his chapter on Assia Djebar the grandmother and her grandson: “Hadda represents the ‘authentic past’, a harsh unromanticised version of Algerian cultural traditions [...], while her absent grandson, Hassan, who is away fighting with the resistance, belongs to a forward-looking generation intent on building a new Algeria.”<sup>43</sup> Hassan does not want to listen to Saïd and the conversation between past and present is cut off partially. An omniscient narrator in the text comments on the situation: “Still the dead speak. The old woman’s voice murmurs to Aïcha, touches the sharecropper’s [Saïd, SB] memory with loyalty. What does the man [Hassan, SB], toward whom Hadda’s last hopes were directed, notice of all this? Nothing.” (WAA, p. 116). On the one hand, the strategy of restoration of conversation shows how the stories do pass on within certain circles. On the other hand, the strategy shows the disruption of the restoration of conversation between women from the past and the present due to the male-dominated society. Corcoran writes within the context of Hadda and Hassan about male-controlled Algeria and the effect of this on Algerian women:

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<sup>42</sup> Clarisse Zimra. “Women’s memory spans centuries. An interview with Assia Djebar” In: Assia Djebar *Women of Algiers in their Apartment* 1999 [1980]. p. 170/171.

<sup>43</sup> Patrick Corcoran. *The Cambridge Introduction to Francophone Literature* 2007. p. 67.

“The gaze and the spoken word are male-controlled and are policed as tightly as the physical spaces which women are able to occupy. Such is the isolation and marginalisation of women, even of supposedly modern, middle-class, ‘liberated’ women of professional status, that the strategies of ‘speaking/listening’ and ‘seeing’ are proposed as mutually supporting, radically subversive strategies of resistance.”<sup>44</sup>

The woman is marginalized by the male-controlled gaze and spoken word and therefore cannot take part in the official story telling of the nation. The story of Hadda and Hassan shows how men disrupt the opening up of stories that belong to the nation’s history. The notion of Being as singular plural of Nancy asks for an open space in which Algerian women should be able to participate. However, Algerian women are not welcome in the contingent process of multiple encounters and combinations.

With the strategy of restoration of conversation Djebbar shows major struggles to overcome. She struggles to write down the stories, the characters struggle to express their experiences and once they have the desire to speak and participate the male-dominated society does not want to listen. At the same time, the writing strategy does challenge the official story of Algeria’s history and society by opening up the conversations from past to present and its problems. Also in these conversations Djebbar goes beyond the traditional idea of the nation in which everything is determined politically, geographically and socially. She takes up the task of the poet and creates a new dynamic space to show what may have happened or what may have been possible.<sup>45</sup> This space is occupied among others by conversations of people from the past and the present.

In the last part of the collection, called ‘Postface: Forbidden Gaze, Severed Sound’, Djebbar changes her tone of voice to a more essayistic style of writing. She mixes her writings of fictional short stories with an in-depth analysis of the position of women in Algeria. This results in a dense essay on how the Algerian woman’s gaze is still forbidden and her sound severed. The painting of Delacroix, *Femmes d’Alger dans leur appartement*, and Picasso’s version 120 years later are the artistic achievements central to this part.<sup>46</sup> According to Djebbar the paintings serve as a reflexive background to the stories in ‘Today’ and ‘Yesterday’.<sup>47</sup> As said in the introduction, Delacroix represents a traditional Algerian harem cloistered in a home. About the importance of Delacroix’s work Djebbar says: “For the first time, he

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<sup>44</sup> Ibidem, p. 68.

<sup>45</sup> <<http://classics.mit.edu/Aristotle/poetics.1.1.html>> 25/09/2010 Aristotle. 350 B.C.E *Poetics* Butcher, S.H. (trsl). section I, part IX.

<sup>46</sup> See appendix I and II for images of the paintings of Eugène Delacroix and Pablo Picasso.

<sup>47</sup> Clarisse Zimra. “Women’s memory spans centuries. An interview with Assia Djebbar” In: Assia Djebbar *Women of Algiers in Their Apartment* 1999 [1980]. p. 175.

[Delacroix, SB] penetrates into the world that is off-limits: that of the Algerian women.” (WAA, p. 133). Delacroix froze an image of women that is forbidden to the outside world. The women in the painting are unveiled and parts of their bodies are uncovered. Djébar tries to make sense of their thoughts and feelings:

“Is it because these women are dreaming that they do not look at us, or is it that they can no longer even glimpse us because they are enclosed without recourse? Nothing can be guessed about the soul of these doleful figures, seated as if drowning in all that surrounds them. They remain absent to themselves, to their body, to their sensuality, to their happiness.” (WAA, p. 137).

According to Djébar, it is almost impossible to grasp what is going on in the minds of the women in the painting. She says that the painting “still stirs questions deep within us.” (WAA, p. 135). In ‘Today’ and ‘Yesterday’, Djébar proceeded on the forbidden glimpse created by Delacroix to unravel what is going on in the minds of Algerian women. With her strategies of writing and imaginative power, Djébar restores conversations between women in the present and from the past to the present. With these conversations she invents a trajectory for Algerian women to liberate themselves. As the character Sarah said: “[...] The Woman as look and the Woman as voice, [...]” (WAA, p. 50). While Delacroix’s traditional painting helps to raise questions on the position of women in the Orient, Picasso’s version 120 years later represents the liberation of the women of the harem. In her essay, Djébar quotes Pierre Daix who has said about Picasso and the harem: “Picasso has always liked to set the beauties of the harem free.” (WAA, 149). Picasso’s painting is full of light and exposes the woman’s body naked that bursts out into the open space. His painting stresses the necessity for women to be free to do this. With the strategy of restoration of conversation in her collection of short stories, Djébar creates a trajectory for Algerian women to make the transformation from the traditional cloistered harem represented in Delacroix’s painting to the dismantling of the harem and setting free of the Algerian women as expressed by Picasso. The collection lays bare the obstacles for Algerian women within Algerian society, but also dismantles the representation of Algerian women as homogenised totality and the official narrative of Algerian history based on a unified male dominated perspective. Picasso’s artistic achievement would be the highest ambition for Algerian women. Djébar’s final words of her collection refer to this image: “[...] Only in the door open to the full sun, the one Picasso later imposed, do I hope for a concrete and daily liberation of women.” (WAA, p. 151).

Toni Morrison  
*A Mercy*  
Recreation of an early history

Toni Morrison's novel *A Mercy*, published in 2008, is set in the second half of the seventeenth century. In this novel Morrison recreates the early history of the 'New World' in which society was not yet racially segregated, as it would become in later centuries. *A Mercy* is a story about a group of men and women of different descent who try to make a living together on the farm of Anglo-Dutch trader Jacob Vaark in the northern wilderness of the 'New World'. In the first chapters of the novel it is not easy to grasp who narrates the story. It turns out that the story contains multiple layers of narration in which every character adds his or her part to the story. Most of the character's stories are written in third person. The story of Florens, a part African, part European sixteen-year-old girl, is narrated in first person. To let her speak only in the present tense gave the narrative 'an immediacy', clarifies Morrison.<sup>48</sup> Their stories together offer a plurality of perspectives on the situation at the time. As in Assia Djebar's literary works, documentation and the autobiographical element are present in Morrison's novels, though her approach towards these elements is slightly different. Most of the time, Morrison explains, she comes across an image of something or someone in the past and without doing extensive research or interviews, she starts in its mystery to explore two worlds—the actual and the possible. The facts come last.<sup>49</sup> What is most important in her writing is the *act of imagination*. She says about this:

“It's a kind of literary archaeology: on the basis of some information and a little bit of guesswork you journey to a site to see what remains were left behind and to reconstruct the world that these remains imply. What makes it fiction is the nature of the imaginative act: my reliance on the image—on the remains—in addition to recollection, to yield up a kind of a truth. By “image,” of course, I don't mean “symbol”; I simply mean “picture” and the feelings that accompany the picture.”<sup>50</sup>

For *A Mercy* Morrison journeyed to a site in the late seventeenth century. Archival material helped her to have an image to rely on in her process of writing. The feelings that accompany this image create the stories of the people living at that site. Usually, Morrison's literary works draw upon her own memories and recollections of others.<sup>51</sup> These are limited for a

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<sup>48</sup> Christine Smallwood. “Back Talk Toni Morrison” *Nation* 2008 287: 19. p. 37.

<sup>49</sup> Toni Morrison. “The Site of Memory” 1987 In: Denard, Carolyn C. *Toni Morrison What Moves at the Margin* 2008 Jackson: University Press of Mississippi. p. 75.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 71.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibidem*.

story set in such an early time of history. Especially in this novel the act of imagination is a crucial element of the writing process. Morrison takes up the task of the poet as defined by Aristotle in his *Poetics*. She does not write on what happened, which would be the task of the historian, but on what may have happened or have been possible to the law of probability.<sup>52</sup> For *A Mercy* she strongly relies on the exploration of the possible world.

In this chapter I will show two writing strategies of Morrison present in the novel. The first I want to propose as the *strategy of the recreation of early history*, the second as the *strategy of democracy of narrative participation and poetic imagination*.<sup>53</sup> I will argue that these strategies offer a plurality of perspectives on the early history of the New World and its inhabitants, later known as United States. Furthermore, the strategies challenge the official narrative of this early history and the traditional idea of the United States as a nation. *A Mercy* shows how everyone was in the process of development of the New World together at first, before the laws of racial segregation were constructed. These laws were established much later, though created depictions of the entire black population as if they have always been enslaved. As a consequence the official narrative of history is based on the unified view of white superiority over the black population. In the long run, the construction of racial segregation has determined the nation politically, socially and geographically.

In the first section of this chapter on *A Mercy* I will pay attention to the *strategy of the recreation of early history*. The novel illustrates a moment in history in which nothing was determined yet. Most important to the novel within this context is that slavery was still separated from race. Morrison rediscovers this early time because she wants to show that slavery was not a natural state of being of black people, but something that was constructed, institutionalized and legalized later.<sup>54</sup> The official narrative of the early history of the New World consists of mainly white superiority and black enslavement from the beginning. Morrison tells about her choice for this moment in history:

“The period before there was a United States, before there was even an idea of America, the name of a continent, when everybody was scrambling, the Portuguese, Spaniards, the Brits, the French and it was fluid. And there was nothing going on that couldn’t possibly change. So

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<sup>52</sup> <<http://classics.mit.edu/Aristotle/poetics.1.1.html>> 25/09/2010 Aristotle. 350 B.C.E *Poetics* Butcher, S.H. (trsl). section I, part IX.

<sup>53</sup> For this second strategy I will embed my analysis in Judylyn S. Ryan’s invention of ‘the strategy of democracy of narrative participation’ in her essay on Toni Morrison’s techniques of writing: Judylyn S. Ryan. “Language and narrative technique in Toni Morrison’s novels” 2007 In: Justine Tally (ed.). *The Cambridge Companion to Toni Morrison*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. p. 159.

<sup>54</sup> <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7IZvMhQ2LIU>> 25/09/2010 “Toni Morrison Discusses *A Mercy*”, 29/10/2008.

I was looking for a time *before* slavery and black became married. Before racism became established. Because slavery was the most common experience of people.”<sup>55</sup>

In *A Mercy*, ‘nothing was going on that couldn’t possibly change’ says Morrison. The novel shows a plurality of possibilities within late seventeenth century society of the New World. For example, the slave advertisements that Jacob Vaark reads in a newspaper show how slavery was a common experience to many people, regardless of colour:

“[...] Girl or woman that is handy in the kitchen sensible, speaks good English, complexion between yellow and black. . . . Five years time of a white women that understands country work, with a child upwards of two years old. . . . Mulatto Fellow very much pitted with small pox, honest and sober. . . . White lad fit to serve. . . . Wanted a servant able to drive a carriage, white or black. . . .[.]”<sup>56</sup>

These advertisements show a diversity of people who ended up as slaves. The racially undefined characters Scully and Willard are quasi-enslaved and working on Vaark’s farm to pay off debts to someone else than Vaark. The blacksmith (called ‘blacksmith’ only, SB) works at Vaark’s farm as well, not enslaved, but as a free black man who gets paid for his labour. These examples show how the phenomenon of slavery was not yet bound to black people. *A Mercy* challenges the moment of the coming into existence of slavery and black belonging together. While the official narrative presents a racially segregated society from the beginning, *A Mercy* questions this representation of society in the late seventeenth century. La Vinia Delois Jennings writes the following on how *A Mercy* challenges this understanding of racial division:

“It [the novel, SB] challenges us to historicize the racialized political momentum that ushered in perpetual servitude based on non-whiteness and to mediate on the analogous forms of early colonial servitude, formal and informal, that might have united rather than divided persons of disparate religions and nationalities, especially those of underclass status.”<sup>57</sup>

Delois Jennings puts emphasis on the direction of unity instead of the direction of division that might have been possible in the setting of the late seventeenth century. I would argue that this direction of unity would have developed towards a homogenised totality, which seems impossible considering the multiple religions and nationalities at the time. In my view the

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<sup>55</sup> <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q5D5PLI7kvc&feature=related>> 25/09/2010 “A Conversation With Toni Morrison”, 30/11/2008.

<sup>56</sup> Toni Morrison. *A Mercy* 2008 London: Chatto & Windus. p. 50. Further references to the novel will appear in the text by the short reference of: (*A Mercy*, p. ..).

<sup>57</sup> La Vinia Delois Jennings. “A Mercy Toni Morrison Plots the Formation of Racial Slavery in Seventeenth-Century America” *Callaloo* 2009 32: 2. p. 645.



novel shows a direction of coexistence rather than unity *or* division of people from different descent. This connects to Nancy's idea of relationality that does not imply resemblance but rather coexistence and conjunction.<sup>58</sup> The novel does not aim for a place based on unity and similarities, but for a place where differences are accepted. The characters living at the Vaark home represent a very diverse community who manage to make a living together. Morrison describes them as: "[...] they really are an interesting collection of, as Lina says, orphans who make a life in one of the few places where you could have all these extraordinary people come together and belong together."<sup>59</sup> The characters in *A Mercy* are able to accept their differences and live together. Jacob is an Anglo-Dutch trader, his wife Rebekka was sent away from England by her poor parents to have a chance of a better life, servant Lina is a native American, who was almost the only one of her tribe who survived the smallpox and Florens was born out of an African slave mother and European father and spent the first years of her childhood on a plantation in the south. They, among several others, are very different from each other but nevertheless invent their own way to live and work together on the farm. Their being at the Vaark home depends on being 'with and among others'. This illustrates again Nancy's notion of Being: "Being cannot *be* anything but being-with-one-another, circulating in the *with* and as the *with* of this singularly plural coexistence."<sup>60</sup> The novel presents the circulation of the characters in the 'with'. They are not specific, in a determined position, nor absolutely singular, self-existent without relations, but singular plural. Earlier on, I referred to the debate between Hallward and Hiddleston on these notions. At this point of the analysis the characters are helpful to demonstrate Hiddleston's line of thinking in which they 'escape from circumscriptions and normative categories'. They are specific but their relationships are also 'fleeting and provisional'.<sup>61</sup> Therefore the characters fruitfully illustrate Nancy's notion of singular plural in which the mode of being is based on 'with' and multiple relations and combinations without the existence of inherited conditions. With the strategy of the recreation of early history Morrison imagines a place based on diversity in which everything can change all the time. This dismantles also the idea of slavery and black as an indissoluble combination. I want to argue that Morrison's recreation of early history in the novel illustrates Bensmaïa's notion of the experimental nation. To cite again Bensmaïa: "My nations are experimental in that they are above all nations that writers have had to imagine or explore as if they were territories to rediscover and stake out, step by step, countries to invent and to draw while creating one's own language."<sup>62</sup> Morrison rediscovers a

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<sup>58</sup> Jane Hiddleston. "The specific plurality of Assia Djébar" 2004. p. 374.

<sup>59</sup> <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7IZvMhQ2LIU>> 25/09/2010 "Toni Morrison Discusses *A Mercy*", 29/10/2008.

<sup>60</sup> Jean-Luc Nancy. *Being Singular Plural* 2000 [1996]. p. 3.

<sup>61</sup> Jane Hiddleston. "The specific plurality of Assia Djébar" 2004. p. 373.

<sup>62</sup> Reda Bensmaïa. *Experimental Nations Or, an Invention of the Maghreb* 2003. p. 8.

territory in a way that goes beyond the traditional idea of the nation. She creates a space in which nothing was determined within geographical, social and political boundaries yet.

Nevertheless, as noticed in the analysis of Djébar's literary works, also Morrison complicates her own counter-view. She troubles the fluid and diverse community that she has created, because she lets it fall apart throughout the novel. Scully narrates the breakdown at the Vaark property and ends on: "Sad. They once thought they were a kind of family because together they had carved companionship out of isolation. But the family they imagined they had become was false. Whatever each one loved, sought or escaped, their futures were separate and anyone's guess." (*A Mercy*, p. 154). In an interview Morrison explains that she wants to show the dangers of individuality and self-sufficiency and the necessity of belonging to something bigger than oneself. "You really do need a community, you do need a structure whether it's a church or a religion as Rebekka thinks or whether it's just belonging to a military or belonging to a tribe. There is no outside thing that holds them together."<sup>63</sup>

Morrison argues that without a larger structure present, such as a religion or tribe, the individual is very vulnerable. In the novel, Jacob Vaark is the one who holds the community together. After his death the women he leaves behind at the farm are lost. Lina becomes aware of their vulnerable situation: "Sir and Mistress believed they could have honest free-thinking lives, yet without heirs, all their work meant less than a swallow's nest. Their drift away from others produced a selfish privacy and they had lost the refuge and the consolation of a clan. Baptists, Presbyterians, tribe, army, family, some encircling outside thing was needed." (*A Mercy*, p. 56). The downfall of the Vaark community based on diversity and coexistence troubles the analysis of the characters within Nancy's singular plural. The idea of belonging to a religion, tribe or family disrupts the circulation in the 'with', in multiple encounters and combinations without the existence of inherited conditions and circumscriptions. The groups or clans are bound to inherited conditions, which connects to Hallward's notion of the specific mode of being.<sup>64</sup> In *A Mercy* Morrison expresses the tension between the importance of individuality in contrast to being part of a community with a larger structure as well. She asks: "[...] how to be an individual and yourself and how to adore privacy and at the same time belong to something larger than you are? And that tension is always going to be there, always."<sup>65</sup> With the strategy of the recreation of early history, Morrison explores more than one possible world at the site of the late seventeenth century. She does not recreate a counterview that again creates a unified view of the early history. She

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<sup>63</sup> <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7IZvMhQ2LIU>> 25/09/2010 "Toni Morrison Discusses *A Mercy*", 29/10/2008.

<sup>64</sup> Peter Hallward. *Absolutely postcolonial, writing between the specific and the singular* 2001. Manchester: Manchester University Press. p. 5.

<sup>65</sup> <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7IZvMhQ2LIU>> 25/09/2010 "Toni Morrison Discusses *A Mercy*", 29/10/2008.

differentiates the rediscovered space and its inhabitants by lying bare the tension between the importance of individuality and belonging to a community.

With the recreation of a space in history that challenges the official narrative of history and the traditional idea of the nation and at the same time differentiating this rediscovered space and its inhabitants, the novel opens up a diversity of positions and relations of the people living in this space. The way the characters are represented offers a plurality of perspectives on the situation at the time. Therefore in this second section of the chapter on *A Mercy* I want to pay attention to another strategy present in the novel that concerns the interior lives of the characters. Judylyn S. Ryan invented this strategy in her analysis on writing techniques in Morrison's earlier novels. Ryan calls this strategy of Morrison a "democracy of narrative participation".<sup>66</sup> She explains: "As a literary technique, democracy of narrative participation dismantles the binary casting of central and marginal characters and enables the artist to expand the narrative to reveal that even individuals whose presence is temporally or socially limited have full personalities and unlimited human agency."<sup>67</sup> Within the context of *A Mercy* I would like to propose this as the *strategy of democracy of narrative participation and poetic imagination*. I add *poetic imagination* to Ryan's proposal because the discourse of literature, in which the act of imagination is central, is in particular helpful to create narratives based on democracy of participation. Where the other discourses, such as that of history, rely on the presence of major and minor facts, literature can play with these facts and for example equal the major and minor presences. In line of Aristotle, the literary artist can imagine what may have been going on in the mind of the minor figure to the law of probability. In a novel like *A Mercy* the division between minor or major characters is absent. Some are present more than others, though all have an equal voice to tell their perspective. This makes the narration of the story multilayered, which means that every character puts together a piece of the puzzle. A striking example of this multilayered narration is the moment of Florens' separation from her mother. This moment is told three times throughout the novel. First Florens expresses her experience of that moment:

"[...] I see it forever and ever. Me watching, my mother listening, her baby boy on her hip. Senhor is not paying the whole amount he owes to Sir. Sir saying he will take instead the woman and the girl, not the baby boy and the debt is gone. A minha mãe begs no. Her baby boy is still at her breast. Take the girl, she says, my daughter, she says. Me. Me. Sir agrees and changes the balance due." (*A Mercy*, p. 5).

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<sup>66</sup> Judylyn S. Ryan. "Language and narrative technique in Toni Morrison's novels" 2007 p. 159.

<sup>67</sup> Ibidem.

Jacob Vaark is second to tell his struggle to deal with the situation. The novel describes his thoughts at the moment that he takes Florens as: “Jacob looked up at her, away from the child’s feet his mouth still open with laughter, and was struck by the terror in her eyes. His laugh was creaking to a close, he shook his head, thinking, God help me if this is not the most wretched business.” (*A Mercy*, p. 24). Clearly, he does not experience the deal on Florens with the plantation owner of the South as usual business. In the last chapter of the novel Florens’ mother tells her version of the story, which places the ‘abandonment’ in Florens perspective and ‘uncomfortable deal’ in that of Vaark, in a whole new perspective again. “Take you, my daughter. Because I saw the tall man see you as a human child, not pieces of eight. I knelt before him. Hoping for a miracle. He said yes. It was a miracle. Bestowed by God. It was a mercy. Offered by a human.” (*A Mercy*, p. 164/165). Florens’ mother experiences Jacob Vaark as the chance of a better life for her daughter and therefore is able to sacrifice her role as mother. The choice to narrate this story three times differentiates the story and prevents the possibility of a unified view of one of the characters. This way of narration illustrates the bottom-up strategy of Corcoran that dismantles a unified view of someone or something and shows diversity.<sup>68</sup> The strategy of democracy of narrative participation and poetic imagination dismantles the unified view that might have come into existence if the story was told from only one perspective. For example, Vaark could have given the impression of a dominant white slave trader or Florens’ mother as indifferent towards her daughter. Morrison says about the structure of her story and representation of her characters: “You are never out of the track, but at the same time you can pause and look around you and see who these people are and learn their relationships.”<sup>69</sup> *A Mercy* aims to lay bare the interior world of each character to offer a plurality of perspectives on the situation in the late seventeenth century. The act of imagination is crucial for the recreation of such an early history. Morrison explores a possible world, ‘to yield up a kind of a truth’ as she says, by relying on the remains that were left behind.<sup>70</sup> Especially, the belief that slavery was not a natural state of being of all black people in this early time, made her write the story. Morrison’s rediscovery of a space in early history challenges the official narrative of this time, which contains white superiority and black enslavement. The novel questions this narrative by showing a space in which everything is fluid and a community based on diversity and coexistence. Nevertheless, Morrison troubles her own created counterview in *A Mercy*. She stresses the importance of belonging to something larger than oneself, such as a religion, tribe or family, which creates a tension between a fluid space based on individuality and self-sufficiency and the groups based on

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<sup>68</sup> Partrick Corcoran. *The Cambridge Introduction to Francophone Literature* 2007 p. 11.

<sup>69</sup> <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7IZvMhQ2LIU>> 25/09/2010 “Toni Morrison Discusses *A Mercy*”, 29/10/2008.

<sup>70</sup> Toni Morrison. “The Site of Memory” 1987 In: Denard, Carolyn C. *Toni Morrison What Moves at the Margin* 2008. p. 71.

inherited conditions. The writing strategies of the recreation of early history and democracy of narrative participation and poetic imagination allow for a recovery of a space and show differences and layers within this space, which emphasizes the potential of the discourse of literature. With the power of imagination it is able to open up certain tensions and offer a plurality of perspectives on the early history of the New World in the late seventeenth century.

Toni Morrison

*Paradise*

Reinvention of a race-specific yet nonracist home

*Paradise* is the first novel Toni Morrison published after winning the Nobel Prize of Literature in 1993. In her essay called “Home”, which appeared shortly before the publication of *Paradise* in 1998, Morrison poses the following question on what she always deals with in her literary works: “How to be both free and situated; how to convert a racist house into a race-specific yet nonracist home?”<sup>71</sup> In the previous chapters of this thesis on the novels of Djebbar and Morrison’s novel *A Mercy*, I want to argue that this combination of race-specific and nonracist was central to the analyses. Namely, race-specific leads to the existence of a diversity of people and nonracist implies coexistence rather than segregation. All three novels attempt to allow their characters, or show their troubles, to be situated, race-specific yet within a free, nonracist space in which they are able to circulate in multiple encounters and combinations. In *Paradise* Morrison creates two communities to work on the question of ‘race-specific yet nonracist’. The novel represents a fictitious black town called Ruby that is inhabited by two communities, the town members living in Ruby and a group of women living in the ‘Convent’ at the edge of the town. In “Home” she describes the working strategy in *Paradise* as “enunciation” of the racial gaze followed by “eclipse”.<sup>72</sup> Morrison creates a space in which race is present, though is overshadowed by other issues and events in the lives of the characters. This reduces race to an insignificant event in their lives. The novel is set within the shift from the Civil Rights era to the Post-Civil Rights era in the middle and second half of the twentieth century. The eight chapters of the novel are titled with names of women. As in *A Mercy*, each chapter adds several perspectives to the events of the story. Again, it is not easy to grasp who narrates the story and who is involved in it. Only after several chapters the novel hints at a coherent storyline. Nevertheless, this way of narration makes possible that every character occupies the narrative spotlight for a moment. As in Morrison’s other novels the strategy of democracy of narrative participation<sup>73</sup> and poetic imagination is at work. I will refer to this throughout the chapter.

*Paradise* dismantles the importance of race to determine someone’s identity. This strategy of writing I would like to propose as the *strategy of enunciation followed by eclipse* based on Morrison’s own description in “Home” on her writing strategy in *Paradise*.

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<sup>71</sup> Toni Morrison. “Home” 1998 In: Wahneema Lubiano (ed). *The House That Race Built: Original Essays by Toni Morrison, Angela Y. Davis, Cornel West, and Others on Black Americans and Politics in America Today* 1998 London: Vintage Books. p. 5.

<sup>72</sup> Ibidem, p. 9.

<sup>73</sup> Judylyn S. Ryan. “Language and narrative technique in Toni Morrison’s novels” 2007 In: Justine Tally (ed.). *The Cambridge Companion to Toni Morrison*. 2007 p. 159.

Furthermore, I will show how the novel differentiates the two communities of Ruby by the *strategy of differentiating communities*. This strategy challenges the representation of the black community as a homogenised totality. As in the previous three novels, the act of imagination is crucial for the strategies of writing in the work. Although Morrison is familiar with solely black settlements in the United States in the twentieth century, she will not first research facts and recollect memories. Morrison states that facts and memories will not give access to the ‘unwritten interior life’ of people.<sup>74</sup> The town Ruby that she creates is a fictitious town, which makes it possible to imagine and explore eventually two worlds—the actual and the possible.<sup>75</sup> As said in the introduction of this thesis, to write on the possible, on ‘what may happen’, distinguishes the task of the poet from the task of the historian. To cite again Aristotle: “[...] it is not the function of the poet to relate what has happened, but what may happen- what is possible according to the law of probability or necessity.”<sup>76</sup> In *Paradise*, Morrison has taken up the task of the poet to imagine what may happen and what may have been possible besides the dominant racial gaze and the representation of the black community as a homogenised totality.

In the first section of this chapter I would like to pay attention to the *strategy of enunciation and eclipse*. *Paradise* starts with a direct reference to race: “They shoot the white girl first.”<sup>77</sup> Nonetheless, throughout the novel it will not become clear which one of the characters is this white girl. Lucille P. Fultz observes in her essay “Figuring the Reader, Refiguring History” that “the identity of the white women is less important to the overarching issues in *Paradise*.”<sup>78</sup> The novel plays with the positions of all characters, such as the example of the white girl. Sometimes the novel makes references to race, but for the most part it is not mentioned. Moreover, the search for the characters’ race should not be the main focus within the story. Morrison’s own comment on this strategy is:

“[...] by withholding racial markers from a group of black women, among whom was one white woman, so that the reader knew everything, or almost everything, about the characters, their interior lives, their past, their faults, their strengths, except that one small piece of information which was their race.”<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> Toni Morrison. “The Site of Memory” 1987 In: Denard, Carolyn C. (ed.). *Toni Morrison What Moves at the Margin* 2008. p. 71.

<sup>75</sup> Ibidem, p. 75.

<sup>76</sup> <<http://classics.mit.edu/Aristotle/poetics.1.1.html>> 25/09/2010 Aristototele. 350 B.C.E *Poetics* Butcher, S.H. (trsl). section I, part IX.

<sup>77</sup> Toni Morrison. *Paradise* 1999 [1998] London: Vintage Books. p. 3. Further references to the novel will appear in the text by the short reference of: (*Paradise*, p. ..).

<sup>78</sup> Lucille P. Fultz. *Playing with Difference* 2003 Urbana: University of Illinois Press. p. 78.

<sup>79</sup> <<http://www.time.com/time/community/transcripts/chattr012198.html>> 25/09/2010 “Toni Morrison”, 21/01/1998.

I will illustrate this strategy of enunciation and eclipse of the racial gaze with the example of the character Mavis from the novel. Mavis ran off from home because she forgot to take out her twin babies from the car and sadly they died of suffocation. She cannot manage to live in her area where everyone knows about her dreadful mistake and therefore decides to leave. She lets down her other children as well by leaving them behind. After driving for days she coincidentally ends up at the Convent and stays there. The novel describes her past, her faults and her thoughts on it, though these do not depend on her race. Morrison states that it is not necessary to know this small piece of information to dislike the character or feel empathy for the character's actions in the past.<sup>80</sup> References to race are only to be found between the lines. For instance, Mavis picks up hitchhikers during her trip and observes: "The white ones were the friendliest; the colored girls slow to melt." (*Paradise*, p. 33). Followed straight away by eclipse, which reduces race to an insignificant event in life:

"But all of them told her about the world before California. Underneath the knowing talk, the bell-chime laughter, the pointed silences, the world they described was just like her own pre-California existence — sad, scary, all wrong. High schools were dumps, parents stupid, Johnson a creep, cops pigs, men rats, boys assholes." (*Paradise*, p. 33).

These sentences make the issue of race irrelevant. The story of Mavis serves as an example for the stories of the other characters in *Paradise*. The issues that the characters are dealing with, such as miscarriages, marriage or the loss of sons in the Vietnam War, overshadow the importance of race. The way they will be liked or disliked by others will depend on several issues. With the strategy of enunciation and eclipse of the racial gaze, the novel differentiates the characters by focussing on multiple other issues than just the issue of race. Furthermore, this writing strategy of Morrison links to Bensmaïa's idea of the experimental nation. To repeat, Bensmaïa focuses on the reinvention and rediscovery of a territory that goes beyond the traditional boundaries of a nation, politically and geographically.<sup>81</sup> In *Paradise* Morrison rediscovers a territory that is not based on a determined unity and in particular not on people's race, but on plurality and differentiation within the groups and individuals belonging to it. I want to argue that especially the Convent may be interpreted as a symbolic reference to the experimental nation. I will elucidate on this later in this chapter.

In the second section of this chapter I aim to explicate Morrison's *strategy of differentiating communities* in *Paradise*. In a non-fiction work brought together by Morrison, called *Race-ing Justice, En-gendering Power* on the lawsuit of Anita Hill and Clarence

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<sup>80</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>81</sup> Reda Bensmaïa. *Experimental Nations Or, an Invention of the Maghreb* 2003 p. 8.



Thomas, the construction of social reality within American society is a central issue. The black community is perceived as a collective homogenized totality. Morrison says about the perception of the black community within American society in her introduction: “In a society with a history of trying to accommodate both slavery and freedom, and a present that wishes both to exploit and deny the pervasiveness of racism, black people are rarely individualized. [...]”<sup>82</sup> In the essay “Whose Story Is It, Anyway?”, included in *Race-ing Justice, En-gendering Power*, Kimberlé Crenshaw states that the black community is responsible for this stereotypical view of a collective black community as well. She writes in her essay: “Often there is a sense of camaraderie between African Americans, a ‘we’re in this together’ sensibility. I call this a zone of familiarity, one that creates expectations of support and mutuality that are essential to survival in a work world that is in some ways alien.”<sup>83</sup> This group-minded way of thinking is often based on the common social history of exclusion that they share, explains Crenshaw. In *Paradise*, the characters of Stewart and Deek Morgan express their preference for a collective homogenised form of community in their town Ruby. They strongly rely on the history of their father and grandfather who worked hard to found the town they live in today. The Morgans do everything to protect the town and its members. One of them thinks at some point: “Unique and isolated, his was a town justifiably pleased with itself. It neither had nor needed a jail. No criminals had ever come from his town. And the one or two people who acted up, humiliated their families or threatened the town’s view of itself were take good care of.” (*Paradise*, p. 8). They want to keep up the ‘zone of familiarity’ in which everyone supports each other and should say, think and feel the same. Nevertheless, the novel does differentiate the black community of Ruby by its strategies of writing. First of all, the strategy of narration opens up a plurality of perspectives on the situation in Ruby. As in *A Mercy*, the *strategy of democracy of narrative participation and poetic imagination* is present in *Paradise*. The various events and issues in the town are narrated from multiple perspectives. This shows a diverse view on the issues at stake. Stewart and Deek both narrate their version of the founding of the town and their personal memories of it. Later in the novel, Anna Fleetwood criticizes their ‘monopoly’ on the history of the town when she says: “Fifteen families founded this town. Fifteen, not two. One was my father, another my uncle—”. (*Paradise*, p. 115). At this point, the strategy of writing challenges the idea of one official narrative of history. Her reaction among others towards the Morgans breaks open the sense of unity in the town. The conflict between the younger generation of Ruby and the older one of Deek and Stewart makes this even clearer. The conflict concerns the renovation of the Oven, a historical important object in town and in particular the sentence

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<sup>82</sup> Toni Morrison (ed.). *Race-ing Justice, En-gendering Power Essays on Anita Hill, Clarence Thomas and the Construction of Social Reality* 1992 New York: Pantheon Books. p. xv.

<sup>83</sup> Kimberlé Crenshaw. “Whose Story Is It, Anyway? Feminist and Antiracist Appropriations of Anita Hill” In: Toni Morrison (ed.). *Race-ing Justice, En-gendering Power* 1992. p. 426.

written on the front of it. To illustrate this I will quote a few sentences from the town meeting that takes place due to the uproar:

“‘Seems to me, Deek, that they are respecting it. It’s because they do know the Oven’s value that they want to give it new life.’ [...] ‘They don’t want to give it nothing. They want to kill it into something they made up.’ ‘It’s our history too, sir. Not just yours,’ said Roy.’ ‘Then act like it. I just told you. That Oven already has a history. It doesn’t need you to fix it.’” (*Paradise*, p. 86).

The conflict on the Oven shows one official story on the history of Ruby in contrast to an approach of history in which everyone knows his or her own version. Moreover, it dismantles the idea of in this case the Morgans to strive for a collective community based on resemblance. This relates to Nancy’s mode of thought against community and collectivity as sameness. Hiddleston summarizes this part of Nancy’s theory as: “Conceptions of nationality and culture are unsettled and opened out, as singular beings cannot be gathered together and conjoined by a pre-existing framework, but instead continually move and shift in relation to one another.”<sup>84</sup> In the novel, the Morgans among some others try to maintain this ‘pre-existing framework’, but other town members refuse to take part in their fixed plan for the town or their version of its history. Besides, the Convent at the edge of the town challenges their framework of unity and resemblance even more, which results in a horrible attack by male town-members of Ruby on the women of the Convent eventually. Fultz writes about the relationship between both communities that ends in a clash: “The use of women in and outside Ruby offers a contemporaneous counter narrative to the patriarchal narratives espoused by the leaders of Ruby.”<sup>85</sup> The novel shows a diversity of women who all have their own story of how they ended up at the Convent. These stories are narrated in fragments and different perspectives throughout the novel. Earlier on, I argued that in *Paradise* the Convent might be interpreted as a symbolic reference to the experimental nation of Bensmaïa. With the writing strategies of enunciation and eclipse and differentiating communities, Morrison rediscovers a territory that is not based on a determined unity and in particular not on people’s race, but based on plurality and differentiation of the groups and individuals belonging to it. While in Ruby there is a strong patriarchal group present to maintain a framework to which everyone should confirm, I attempt to show how the Convent seems to be free of these pre-existing structures. With the Convent the novel does create a space that goes beyond traditional boundaries that are determined politically, genealogically or geographically.

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<sup>84</sup> Jane Hiddleston. “The specific plurality of Assia Djebar” 2004. p. 375.

<sup>85</sup> Lucille P. Fultz. *Playing with Difference* 2003. p. 98.

Consolata has been living at the Convent the longest. The nuns who once lived at the Convent raised her when it still served as a school for native Indian girls. Eventually, the school closed down and Consolata remained to take care of Sister Roberta and Mary Magna. Besides she sells good quality peppers to the town members of Ruby. Mavis is the first woman to arrive at the Convent and by that time Sister Roberta is in a nursing home and Mary Magna is at the point of death. After Mavis arrival, more women end up at the Convent. Consolata narrates their arrival and stay as: “Each one asking permission to linger a few days but never actually leaving. Now and then one or another packed a scruffy little bag, said goodbye and seemed to disappear for a while—but only a while. They always came back to stay on [...]” (*Paradise*, p. 222). Not only women from outside, but also from Ruby visit the Convent and sometimes decide to stay for a while. Billie Delia is one of them and when she brings the lost girl Pallas to the Convent, she describes the place to her as: ““This is a place where you can stay for a while. No questions. I did it once and they were nice to me. Nicer than—well, very nice. Don’t be afraid. I used to be. Afraid of them, I mean. Don’t see many girls like them out here.’ She laughed then. ‘A little nuts, maybe, but loose, relaxed, kind of. [...]’” (*Paradise*, p. 175/176). The women at the Convent come from different places and from different families, but find a way to share life. As the Ruby community but more straightforward, the way of living of the Convent women demonstrates Nancy’s idea of coexistence and conjunction rather than resemblance. The women are in relation with each other, without the necessity of sameness. Their relationships do not imply any form of membership or similarity. All they share is the relation itself.<sup>86</sup> They illustrate Nancy’s idea of being as singular plural. To repeat Hiddleston: “[...] There is no substance to the ‘with’, only the process of one singular being brushing against another and reinventing itself as a result of these contingent relations.”<sup>87</sup> The women at the Convent are singular plural, brushing against each other to reinvent themselves by these relations. At this point it is important to note that the creation of such a space is not necessarily an ideal space without pain or conflict. For instance, Consolata’s observation of the women is narrated as:

“Consolata looked at them [...] and saw broken girls, frightened girls, weak and lying. [...], she could tolerate them, but more and more she wanted to snap their necks. Anything to stop the badly cooked indigestible food, the greedy hammering music, the fights, the raucous empty laughter, the claims. But especially the drift.” (*Paradise*, p. 222).

The strategy of democracy of narrative participation shows Consolata’s negative observation of the group, while Billie Delia expresses a positive experience at the Convent. The writing

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<sup>86</sup> Jane Hiddleston. “The specific plurality of Assia Djebar” 2004. p. 374.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibidem*.

strategies in the novel do not only dismantle the traditional space determined by political and genealogical boundaries, but allow for differentiation within this space as well.

*Paradise* creates a diversity of people living together at a fictitious site of the United States. The writing strategies present in the novel complicate matters as identity and community to dismantle the idea of a fixed position determined by race in case of individuals and the idea of a homogenised totality in case of communities. Toni Morrison's literary achievement is not supposed to reinvent a perfect place in which the racial gaze is completely absent. In "Home" Morrison says that in her literary works she "tempted to convert it [the racial house, SB] into a palace where racism didn't hurt so much; to crouch in one of its many rooms where coexistence offered the delusion of agency."<sup>88</sup> With the strategy of enunciation and eclipse Morrison creates a space in which race is articulated and present, though at the same time this space aims at being less racist. This strategy of writing differentiates the characters by focussing on multiple other issues than just the issue of race. The strategy of differentiating communities dismantles the representation of the black community as a homogenised totality. Within the community of the Ruby town-members the strategy exposes the conflict between resemblance and coexistence despite of different perspectives. The town-members are situated, but not yet free. The Convent is not free of conflicts, though these are not based on questions of similarity and diversity. With the Convent, Morrison rediscovers a space, or 'home', that is situated, race-specific yet free, nonracist. Both strategies of writing rely on the act of imagination that has the potential to expose such complex issues.

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<sup>88</sup> <<http://www.time.com/time/community/transcripts/chattr012198.html>> 25/09/2010 "Toni Morrison", 21/01/1998.

## Conclusion

This thesis attempted to demonstrate how the strategies of writing in the literary works of two authors, Assia Djébar and Toni Morrison, have the potential to show a larger complexity of depictions of otherness than other forms of writing, such as historical, political or theoretical writings. While the historical, political and theoretical discourses have a tendency to generalize and reduce the other, this thesis has shown how the discourse of literature allows for a plurality of perspectives and differentiation of otherness. Djébar and Morrison rediscovered the trajectory of their nation and its inhabitants in their literary works. Djébar is particularly concerned with the representation of women in Algeria and the perspectives on Algeria's history. Toni Morrison deals with the depictions of African Americans in the United States throughout its history. Often these groups are generalized, reduced or left out of the official narrative of the nation and its history altogether. Djébar and Morrison have taken up the task of the poet as defined by Aristotle to explore the possible world, to imagine what may have been possible to the law of probability and necessity. They applied particular strategies of writing that allow for a plurality of perspectives and differentiation of depictions of otherness. Furthermore, these writing strategies represented in Assia Djébar's and Toni Morrison's literature dismantle the official narrative of a nation's history and goes beyond the traditional idea of the nation determined by political, social, genealogical and geographical boundaries.

In *Fantasia, an Algerian Cavalcade* and *Women of Algiers in their Apartment*, I proposed particular strategies of writing present in the literary works of Assia Djébar that rediscover and differentiate the trajectory of Algeria and its inhabitants. In the chapter on *Fantasia*, I analysed three strategies present in the novel. The *strategy of semi-autobiography* allows for differentiation of Algerian women by showing the different perspectives they have of the situation at home and towards the world outside. These descriptions of different perspectives question the depiction of Algerian women as a homogenised totality. The *strategy of differentiating documentation* allows for differentiation of the War of Colonization in the first half of the nineteenth century. The strategy lays bare the presence of official French reports, less official one's from the French side and the absence of documentation from Algerian perspectives. The *strategy of recording* is as effective as the strategy of differentiating documentation to expose a plurality of perspectives of another part of Algeria's history, the War of Decolonization between 1954 and 1962. The testimonies of Algerian women on the War of Decolonization expose experiences of Algerian women that were never part of the official story of the war, which is dominated by the documented French reports. While the representations of the Algerian perspectives of the past are reduced in the discourse of history, the discourse of literature is able to differentiate the reports and

testimonies by drawing these perspectives from the shadows. In Djébar's collection of short stories, *Women of Algiers in their Apartment*, I proposed one main strategy of writing as central to the stories, the *strategy of restoration of conversation*. The strategy restores conversations between Algerian women in the present and conversations between women from the past and the present to express several versions of Algeria's past. The strategy reveals the obstacles for Algerian women within Algerian society, but also dismantles the representation of Algerian women as homogenised totality and the official narrative of Algerian history based on a unified male dominated perspective. The paintings of Delacroix and Picasso worked as a reflexive background for Djébar's stories in the collection. Through the strategy of restoration of conversation she creates a trajectory for Algerian women to make the transformation from the traditional cloistered harem represented in Delacroix's painting to the dismantling of the harem and setting free of the Algerian women as expressed by Picasso. All four writing strategies of Djébar are in their own manner effective to allow for a plurality of perspectives and differentiation of the representation of Algeria's history and in particular of Algerian women. The problematic issues of determination and homogenisation within the Algerian context are dismantled by these writing strategies.

In the analyses of Morrison's *A Mercy* and *Paradise* I proposed writing strategies that have proved to allow for a plurality of perspectives and differentiation of African Americans in the United States throughout its history. With the *strategy of the recreation of early history* in *A Mercy*, Morrison imagines more than one possible world at a site in the late seventeenth century. She recreates a dynamic place based on diversity and individuality, in which everyone is in the process of development of the New World together, before the laws of segregation were constructed. At the same time this fluid space falls apart. The strategy differentiates within the rediscovered space to stress the tension between individuality and belonging to a community, such as a religion, tribe or family. The second strategy of writing that I proposed as present in *A Mercy* is the *strategy of democracy of narrative participation and poetic imagination*. This strategy exposes the interior world of each character in the novel, which offers a plurality of perspectives on the situation in the late seventeenth century. Moreover, it prevents the possibility of a unified view of the characters. The act of imagination is crucial for this strategy, because imagination provides access to the mind of both major and minor figures. This results in an equal participation of the characters not only in *A Mercy*, but also in *Paradise*. Besides the *strategy of democracy of narrative participation and poetic imagination* in *Paradise*, Morrison uses two other strategies. With the *strategy of enunciation and eclipse* of the racial gaze, the novel differentiates the characters by focussing on multiple other issues than just the issue of race. Morrison rediscovers a territory that is not based on a determined unity and in particular not on people's race, but on plurality and differentiation within the groups and individuals belonging to it. The *strategy of*

*differentiating communities* dismantles the representation of the black community as a homogenised totality. Moreover, it opens up the tension between a community based on unity and resemblance and a community based on coexistence despite of different perspectives. As Djebars's strategies, the writing strategies of Morrison have all in their own manner proved their effectiveness to allow for a plurality of perspectives and differentiation of the representation of African Americans throughout the history of the United States.

I think that it is important to stress once more in this conclusion that both authors did not create a unified and determined counterview of their nation's history in contrast to the official narrative. With their strategies of writing they trouble their own counterview of for instance the feminine identity or the rediscovered space in history by differentiating within this identity or space, to avoid new forms of determination and homogenisation. Hence, I have argued in this thesis that the writing strategies in the works of Djebbar and Morrison illustrate Reda Bensmaïa's notion of the experimental nation. Both authors do not imagine a new nation determined once again by geographical, social or political boundaries, but they rediscover a territory that goes beyond this traditional idea of the nation. This experimental nation can be interpreted as a "plane of consistency"<sup>89</sup>, a space in which they explore a plurality of perspectives of the history and society of Algeria or the United States. These perspectives do not become fixed, but float around freely with the possibility to change and to add new ones. The characters of the novels circulate within these rediscovered territories. They often turned out to fruitfully illustrate Jean-Luc Nancy's notion of the singular plural, in which the mode of Being is based on 'with' and in multiple relations and combinations without the existence of inherited conditions. The strategies of writing do not only illustrate these notions of the experimental nation and the singular plural, but show as well the obstacles of some of the characters or communities to be in such a space or position. This emphasises once more the potential of literature, because the power of imagination is able to open up certain tensions and complexities.

Writers have the potential to give us diversity and lay bare complexities. Although the material for Djebbar's and Morrison's writing strategies consists of images, documentation and testimonies among other things, the crucial aspect of their works is the *act of imagination*. This allows them to rewrite the unwritten interior lives of people throughout history. As defined by Aristotle, the imaginative power of the poet relates to what may happen and what may have been possible to the law of probability or necessity, which distinguishes the writing of literature from other forms of writing, such as historical, political or theoretical writings.

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<sup>89</sup> Reda Bensmaïa. *Experimental Nations Or, an Invention of the Maghreb* 2003. p. 8.

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## Appendix I

*Femmes d'Alger dans leur appartement*, Eugène Delacroix, 1834.



<<http://peintres.celebres.free.fr/DELACROIX/index-05.php>> 07/10/2010

Appendix II

*Les femmes d'Alger*, Pablo Picasso, 1954.



Pablo Picasso - Les femmes d'Alger - courtesy Succession Picasso, 2008

<<http://www.artknowledgenews.com/louvreexhibitspicassoandhismastershtml.html>> 07/10/2010