

‘HURT RIGHT DOWN THE MIDDLE... BUT ALIVE AND WELL’: HEALING IN TONI MORRISON’S *HOME*

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Abstract: Toni Morrison’s novels can be read as stories of trauma and healing. In *Home*, Morrison wants to demystify the 1950s, a time when blacks still suffered extreme violence and racial hatred. African Americans underwent both personal and collective traumas dated back to the time of slavery. Morrison depicts the restorative journeys of her characters from damaged victims towards self-sufficient and whole individuals. She deploys key elements of their recuperative process, such as storytelling, re-memorizing, a supportive community, nature, etc. By the end of the novel, Frank and Cee, who carry the burden of an ominous past, experience healing and change.

Key words: African Americans, healing, trauma, memory, community

Título en español: “‘Herido justo en el centro...pero vivo y entero’: Curación en *Volver* de Toni Morrison”

Resumen: Las novelas de Toni Morrison pueden ser interpretadas como historias de trauma y curación. En *Home*, Morrison desmitifica los años 1950, cuando los negros todavía sufrían extrema violencia y odio racial. Los traumas personales y colectivos de los afro-americanos remontan a los tiempos de la esclavitud. Morrison describe los viajes curativos de sus personajes, de víctimas dañadas a la auto-suficiencia e integridad, utilizando elementos claves de esta recuperación, como son el relato, la re-memoria, una comunidad acogedora, la naturaleza, etc. Al final de la novela, Frank and Cee, que arrastran la carga de un pasado ominoso, experimentan cambio y curación.

Palabras clave: afro-americanos, curación, trauma, memoria, comunidad

This home [...] is both about being healed and continuing to heal the social, as a man and as a woman. It is about moving forward together with resilience and power of tradition, and with healing communities at their backs. LAURA CASTOR, “This House is Strange: Digging for American Memory of Trauma or Healing the ‘Social’ in Toni Morrison’s Home.”

Home, like Toni Morrison’s other novels, can be read as “trauma fiction,” which focuses on recovering African Americans’ daunting history from the blacks’ point of view. In fact, trauma fiction is closely related to post-modern and postcolonial narratives (Whitehead 2011:

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3) and “trauma theory can prove to be useful in analyzing and understanding colonial traumas such as forced migration, sexual, racial and political violence, dispossession, segregation, genocide, and the intergenerational transmission of trauma, to mention but some” (Herrero and Baelo-Allue 2011: xvii). In *Home*, Morrison tries to depict the 1950s, a violent time for blacks that she wants to demystify. In those “wonderful” days, African Americans still bear the brunt of indiscriminate violence, injustice and racial prejudice. The legacy of slavery has brought about distressing and disturbing situations: “The people in this story live with the daily reality of prejudice—not with the impossible ordeals of slavery, as in *Beloved*, but with the bigotry, injustice and violence that endured in the 1950s” (Kakutani 2012). Even if slavery has ended, as Avery Gordon states, “something of it continues to live on, in the social geography of where peoples reside, in the authority of collective wisdom and shared benightedness, in the veins of the contradictory formation we call New World modernity” (1997: 139). African Americans carry the burden of both personal and collective cultural traumas, inherited from the times of slavery and the Middle Passage, which are at the core of their communal memory and identity (Eyerman 2004: 60). Its generational transmission lingers and shapes the present, perpetuating blacks’ feelings of self-loathing and rejection. As Cathy Caruth claims, the story of trauma, a ‘wound of the mind’, “attests to its endless impact on life” (1996: 100)

Home, as a historical trauma narrative, deals with the fragmented identities and collective hauntings of African Americans, which have to do with slavery and its legacy, but also with the Korean War. The siblings Frank and Cee Money are plagued by the ghosts of the past, which refuse to be forgotten. They have undergone appalling childhood violations, racial prejudice and humiliation, family dysfunction, etc. Moreover, Morrison exposes the excruciating ordeals of those black soldiers who have been deployed to an armed conflict. Frank, terribly traumatized and suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder, PTSD, returns home from the Korean War to cope with the harsh life of other ordinary black people.

In *Home*, harrowing experiences are paralleled by those healing modes that African American individuals and their community bring into play in their endeavors to ensure their survival. Morrison actively engages in the narrative analysis of the many forms of healing: psychological, social, historical, etc. She unveils the strong and complex link between the psychological and social recovery of the black individuals and the healing of collective traumas. Morrison also discloses the amelioration of war veterans’ emotional and mental disorders, their struggle for manhood and need to come to terms with their role as victimizers. Besides, as the title of the book reflects, *Home* deals with the siblings’ redeeming journey back home, to a nurturing community that can provide these uprooted “orphans” with support and care. Furthermore, Morrison delves into the restorative powers of love and nature for African Americans.

This essay puts the spotlight on the healing elements and mechanisms that the author uses so as to illustrate Frank and Cee’s recovery process, as well as the regenerative potentiality that both black individuals and their community possess. In *Home*, coming to terms with traumatic experiences is represented by two interconnected modes that Dominick LaCapra calls “acting out,” which stands for the crippling and weakening effects of trauma (Freudian approach that Caruth emphasizes), and “working through,” “an articulatory practice” that makes it possible for the traumatized subject “to recall in memory that something happened

to one (or one's people) back then while realizing that one is living here and now with openings to the future" (2001: 22). Morrison is not interested in depicting characters who are suspended in "the timeless space of trauma," as Colleen Lye says, but "in the resumption of developmental possibility in ways that at first seem trite and simplistically redemptive, but that are also, in the context of Morrison's oeuvre, perverse and bold" (2013).

In her novels, Morrison connects healing from personal and communal psychological wounds with remembering the traumatic past. If the past episodes of your life are not embraced, "redemption becomes impossible" (Nutting 1997). That is why Morrison wants her characters to remember and tell the tragic past, making their ordeals significant for present generations. For that, Morrison resorts to the storytelling tradition, "the pathway to health" (Visser 2014: 8) of the black community, thus incorporating the lived happenings of the dead into the present. As a storyteller, she

is able to create the dialectical images that bring those smashed voices into the present and re-mem- bers the dead, thus opening up the possibility of redemption for the oppressed [...] the creator of images, dialectical images, that can break the continuity of white history which threatens to bury slave history, leaving the survivors with a choice between forgetting and madness (Nutting 1997).

Traumatized victims need to tell their story so as to face the feelings attached to their ghastly memories, which are creating havoc in their daily life: "suffering can heal and humanize, provided that one can reorganize the painful events of the past and retell them in one's own language" (Boudreau 1998: 105). Storytelling helped African Americans fight back extreme and unspeakable past situations, and to narrate their history, since official culture had ignored it.

Michiko Kakutani postulates that, in *Home*, Morrison "has found a new, angular voice and straight-ahead story telling style" (2012). Even though most of the story comes to us from "a transparent narrator" (Charles 2012), she deploys a special narrative technique, the "therapeutic encounter" between Frank, who tells his experiences in a "raw, first-person," and the listener/scribe, who becomes "a second person's empathic and literary consciousness" (Visser 2014: 8).² Through this dialogue, Morrison seems to question the capacity to tell torturing adversities using an external narrator. The damaged soldier criticizes the listener's inability to put his tribulations into language. When Frank, "a bearer of collective memory of racial violence and persecution" (Visser 2014: 7), recalls his family expulsion from their home in Texas, he rebukes the scribe: "*You can't come up with words that can catch it [...]. Describe that if you know how*" (41, italics in original). This assertive listener helps the Korean veteran control and put together his remembrances:

The presence of somebody willing to bear witness and to assist in the recovery of those memories is crucial for the victim's reconstruction of a sense of self. But the witness/scribe must show the kind of empathy necessary to become a 'true sharer' of the traumatic memories (Ibarrola 2014: 117).

² As Vickroy points out, Morrison, among other writers, "ha[s] created a number of narrative strategies to represent conflicted or incomplete relation to memory" to represent trauma (2002: 29)

Remembering becomes a kind of catharsis which cures the emotional and psychological injuries inflicted by the tormenting past, hence black individuals can escape the numbness and ghostly state in which traumatic events leave them: “For healing to take place, dissociation must give way to the full reclaiming of that wounded self, the reintegration of that denied self as part of the core of one’s being” (Koolish 2001: 173).³ The unspeakable recollections of the siblings stem from their infancy. Since Frank was a child, he has felt the devastating effects of racial hatred. His family, the Moneys, and other black households, were forced to abandon their home in Bandera County, Texas, by most likely the Ku Klux Klan, a very distressing episode that has perturbed him his entire life.

In their childhood, both siblings, but especially Cee, put up with the abuse and neglect of their step-grandmother, their surrogate mother. They are bereft of the nurturing care that infants need to grow to their full potential. The lack of nourishing parenting results in Cee’s low self-esteem and self-loathing, which lead her to a failed marriage and into the predacious hands of the evil eugenicist, Dr. Beau, her employer. Cee has to go back to her infancy recollections to understand the true reasons for her self-contempt and the ensuing adversities she has had to struggle through in her bitter existence. Citing Marx, Ron Eyer-man highlights how “Memory provides individuals and collectives with a cognitive map, helping orient who they are, why they are here and where they are going” (2004: 161).

In *Home*, nature, with which African Americans have traditionally had a special bond, has strong recuperative powers, which contrasts to the Western male concept of nature as something to be controlled and owned, to pass on from heir to heir. Baby Suggs’ rituals, “a collective act of self-appreciation” (Fitzgerald 1998: 120), are held in the Clearing, where a sort of communion between African Americans and the wild is created in “a process of cleansing and rebirth” (Krumholz 1997: 111). In nature, blacks could find liberation during slavery and in its aftermath, bringing them to their ancestral origins. There, African Americans were far from the political and cultural domain of the white people who ruled their destiny.

Trees have a compelling and preeminent restorative role in Morrison’s oeuvre: “markers of freedom, transformation, healing, and rebirth [...] the possibility of life beyond slavery’s wasteland” (Wilson 2008: 81-2). They are connected to ancestry, as well as to life and death: “the most salient feature of the tree is that it is identified with Life—a sign of the influence of African religion, which holds that trees concentrate within themselves the vital force that flows through and animates the universe” (qtd. in Bonnet 1997).⁴ When the Moneys and other black households are expelled from their houses, an elderly man named Crawford refuses to leave. He is killed and tied to the oldest magnolia tree that grew in his yard. Morrison says that “Maybe it was loving that tree which [...] his great-grandmother had planted, that made him so stubborn” (10). This tree, as Vega argues, stands for endurance and life, as well as a culture-bearer, forging ties with ancestors, as the old man’s great-grandmother (2013: 208). His neighbors buried him beneath his beloved magnolia.⁵ As Visser notes, “If

3 As David Krell points out, memory leads a double life, as it is both “the source of the malady with which it is concerned and the *therapy* it proffers” (qtd. in Nicholls 1998: 135).

4 Louis V. Thomas and Rene Luneau’s words. Susana Vega claims that trees are the abode of spirits, thus connecting the world of the living and the dead (2013: 207).

5 Vega talks about blacks’ tradition of planting trees next to graves and mentions Robert Thompson: “Trees

this tree symbolizes the importance of heritage and freedom, Frank's memory foregrounds their destruction by white racism [...] trees in Morrison's work symbolize not only racist violence and inhumanity, but also the forces of resilience and regeneration" (2014: 15).

The countryside is a compelling part of Frank and Cee's dear and soothing memories. While their parents worked sixteen hours, brother and sister invented escapades. They loved the herd of horses that were kept in the farmland. The siblings used to sit by a stream leaning on a lightning-blasted sweet bay tree with two huge branches that extended like arms. Its embracing form has a clear symbolism: it protects and nourishes the little children that grow up like orphans. Vega's contention is that "trees stand for mother figures, spreading their branches 'like arms' to comfort and provide roots to those uprooted and alienated" (2013: 207).

Frank leaves his hometown, which is asphyxiating him, with his friends to serve in the Korean War. Back home, he is tortured by acutely distressful recollections from his war ordeals, such as his friends' deaths. The most critical part of the recovery of PTSD victims, like Frank, is re-memorying: the "confrontation with the original trauma and feeling the pain again" (Bowers 2004: 104). Unnerving war memories recur, through short flashbacks, so broken soldiers can deal with them, make them hark back to the origin of trauma, so as to face it. Their shattered remembrances are mirrored by the dismembered pieces of their split identities. Morrison shows the contradictory effects of being at war for blacks. On the one hand, in the Korean War, the desegregated military allowed African Americans to achieve some racial equality and the reaffirmation of their manhood.⁶ Nevertheless, this war made them racial "killers." It is especially harsh for Frank, in his victimizer role, to surpass the shame (at having been aroused) and the guilt he experiences when he kills the scavenging Korean girl. On the other hand, Morrison exposes the disconnection between the institutionally desegregated army and a socially segregated home where these black soldiers return, becoming themselves racial victims.

Morrison emphasizes the collective quality of the characters' healing process, which would not be possible without the specially supportive social network that the black community provides, giving African Americans the human connection and love that they need to rebuild their traumatized selves. Mending from psychological wounds can only succeed with the full backing of the community, since cultural trauma leaves indelible marks in the individual, but also in the communal consciousness and identity. Cooperation among blacks is necessary to let go of the disturbing past, and come up against the racial prejudice and violence they have to endure on daily basis. When Frank is released from the military hospital despite his acute mental disorder, he finds himself in an urban setting where he lacks the caring environment he requires. He has a tough time adapting to civilian life. Being stripped of warm and regardful relationships drags the Korean veteran into isolation and alcoholism.

Frank's restorative cross-country odyssey goes through various women, who give him the affection he lacks not to succumb to complete insanity. *Home's* Asian-African encounters

planted on graves also signify the spirit, their roots literally journey to the other world [...] the tree stands sentinel above the grave as the immortal presence of the spirit" (2013: 208).

6 The Korean war, the first US war under military desegregation (directed by executive order in 1943), was uneven and slow to be implemented (Lye 2013).

are associated with traumatic, but also with curative experiences. With his Asian girlfriend, Lily, who has a medicinal influence on him, Frank feels that he has finally come home: she “helps stitch his life together” (Bancroft 2012) and makes him “want to be good enough for her” (61). Frank can keep sober and his nightmares stop, and yet, “neither drink nor Lily is enough to heal his [Frank’s] fractured sense of self” (Thomas 2012). The damaged soldier, who is still haunted by the specter of war, has no goals or hopes. He cannot conceive a future, a symptom of trauma victims called “sense of a foreshortened future.” His only concern is staying alive. As Susan Brison writes, one of the major effects of trauma is the annihilation of the victim’s identity due to “a radical disruption of memory, a severing of past from present and, typically, an inability to envision a future” (2002: 39). Only by incorporating his appalling memories and atoning for his actions can Frank develop a new sense of self. The Korean veteran realizes that love is not enough and departs to rescue his sister.

Some good Samaritans, “remnants of an underground railroad of kindness” (Charles 2012), Reverend Locke, Billy Watson and some others, generously, offer Frank material and emotional assistance, advice or hospitality, which he truly needs to make it to Georgia and salvage Cee. These are different times from those of slavery when the Underground Railroad aided fugitive black slaves. However, the 1950s are still arduous years for African Americans, since Jim Crow laws and racial segregation are in full swing, especially in southern states. At that time, blacks are often treated like criminals: they could be easily accused of vagrancy or routinely subjected to a random stop-and-frisk.⁷

Female relationships also provide emotional support and care that facilitate women’s healing, allowing them to create new female selves that escape patriarchal conventions. A rejection of the imposed gendered socially-sanctioned construction of female identity is required if women want to define themselves. Morrison stresses the pivotal restorative role of sisterhood and female companionship in the black community through Cee’s friends, Thelma and Sarah, as she did with Amy in *Beloved*, depicting a “moment of transcendent female solidarity” (Crouch 1998: 28). Thelma assists Cee to find a better job and Sarah’s aid and her letter to Frank actually saves her.

In Morrison’s novel, spiritual guides and helpers abet and encourage the siblings on their journey from trauma to recovery. Frank himself is a “healer” with regenerating properties, who has a soothing influence on his sister. The brother-sister relationship is of cardinal importance in the novel. From their infancy, they have to rely on their mutual love and sheltering, inasmuch as they have been deprived of them by their parents and grandparents. They are raised like “orphans,” without the caring and nurturing atmosphere children need. Conversely, Frank makes his sister feel safe. After the episode of the man who attempts to abuse Cee, his fingers are “like balm.” Frank becomes his sister’s protective and affectionate surrogate father, while Cee is “the beacon that pulls him onward, the lodestar for the journey, both interior and exterior” (Ulin 2012). Eventually, Frank manages to rescue Cee from the villainous Dr. Beau. The siblings’ destinies are inevitably intertwined: only together can they achieve redemption.

Ethel and the other town’s women, who have their ancestors’ wisdom, also play a paramount part as healing agents. Nevertheless, unlike other matriarchs in Morrison’s fiction,

⁷ Thus *Home* unveils “the potential for a sweeping picaresque of mid-20th-century America” (Charles 2012).

their powers are not magical, as with Connie or Pilate, in *Paradise* and *Song of Solomon*, respectively. Morrison's older women stand for the importance of forebears in identity and communal rebuilding.⁸ Like Baby Suggs, in *Beloved*, who fosters "the selfhood which racism has denied to each of the ex-slaves" (Fitzgerald 1998: 120), Ethel and the other "seen-it-all eyes" females of the community take "responsibility for their lives, and for whatever, whoever else needed them" (123). In "Mothering and Healing in Recent Black Women's Fiction," Carole Boyce Davies writes:

Mothering and healing are intricately connected and of central thematic importance in recent novels by Black women [...]. These writers reveal that Black women, at certain junctures in their lives, require healing and renewal and that Black women themselves must be the healers/mothers for each other when there is such a need (1985: 41).

In *Sisters of the Yam: Black Women and Self-Recovery*, bell hooks also delves into how the maternal figure, "other mother," such as Ethel, can aid and guide young girls, improving their self-image and building up their feelings of self-worth. hooks underscores the relevance of a space that allows one to "[be] in touch with [one's] healing powers," and "know how to 'draw up the powers from the deep'." Within this space, it is possible to identify the sources of pain and begin to heal (1993: 13). In *Home*, this healing space is Lotus and its welcoming community. Evelyn Schreiber argues that the influence of family and community is a critical factor in helping trauma victims cope with their scarring memories and "moderate trauma, and, as a result, self-esteem" (2010: 9). Ethel and the other black females cure Cee and mentor her in the path of self-appreciation and self-love.⁹ In their ancestral wisdom, these matriarchs know that the girl necessitates to be healed not just physically, but also mentally. These women take care of Cee and nurse her to life. They help her develop her sense of self and embolden her to struggle for self-definition:

Look to yourself. You free. Nothing and nobody is obliged to save you but you. See your own land. You young and a woman and there's serious limitation in both, but you a person too. Don't let Lenore or some trifling boyfriend and certainly no devil doctor decide who you are. That's slavery. Somewhere inside you is that free person I'm talking about. Locate her and let her do some good in the world (126).

During her curative process, Cee gains self-assurance and self-reliance. She had been "Branded early as an unlovable, barely tolerated 'gutter child'" and "agreed with the label and believed herself worthless" (129), but the community spiritual healers assist her in moving beyond victimization into self-respect and self-determination, providing her with a counter-narrative of empowerment. At the end of the story, the girl has undergone a metamorphosis from an insecure and powerless infant into a mature young woman.

Ethel and the other females' natural restorative practices, rooted in black traditions, are contrasted to Western patriarchal medicine techniques, as for example in the failure

⁸ Morrison herself depicts forefathers as "a sort of timeless people whose relationships to the characters are benevolent, instructive, and protective, and they provide a certain kind of wisdom" (1984: 343).

⁹ Ethel also nurtures her garden, which is also connected, according to Patricia Klindienst, with "keeping memory alive and protecting their cultural heritage" (Vega 2013: 208).

of the Western medical system in curing Frank or Dr. Beau's eugenic research. In spite of his severe mental disorder, the doctors that treat the Korean veteran just send him home, informing him that "the craziness would leave in time. They knew all about it, but assured him it would pass. Just stay away from alcohol, they said" (18). By way of Dr. Beau, who uses Cee as guinea pig in his barbaric eugenic experiments, Morrison opposes the distanced disembodied "objective" view of science linked to the Law-of-the-Father with the black women's ancestral, more humane and close to nature approach to healing.

The black matriarchs of Lotus—name which symbolizes rebirth and enlightenment (Vega 2013: 204)—are representative of the community Frank and Cee need to return to so as to reconstruct their fractured selves. There is a contrast between the cold and loveless home they lived in when they were children and the warm and welcoming home that these women offer them. As in the words of the song at the beginning of the narrative, the siblings are amazed to see that the town they hated, abandoned at the first opportunity, and now come back to reluctantly is in fact their true home and "its lock" fits their key: "the characters' return to a hometown that was once left and their rebuilding a home there, seeking a place of safety and growth, whilst attempting to live with (literally) or come to terms with the ghosts of the past" (Visser 2014: 5). Frank and Cee's healing journeys, as the title says, are journeys home.

In *Home*, crying is cathartic, an extremely potent curative experience, which mends psychic wounds because it helps release painful emotions and process frightful hurting memories. As a numbing defense mechanism, individuals shut their hearts in order not to feel. And yet, keeping buried or restraining emotions are coping strategies that do not lead to redemption. However, the ability of crying, usually associated with weakness and females, brings about trauma recovery and transformation. Frank and Cee can finally cry when they are in Lotus. Cee opens her heart when she confesses to her brother that she cannot have a baby. She believes that there is a baby girl that had picked her as her mother, but now she has to find another. By the end of the novel, Cee's growth is manifest in her strength to acquiesce to her barrenness and move on with her life. When Frank hears his sister's revelation, he also cries, which he had not done since he was a child, not even when he saw his friends die at war. The characters finally embrace their suffering and start confronting the traumatic recollections they have tried to keep at bay for a long time. Facing their ghosts is the only thing that can give them back their whole selfhood.

In her work of fiction, Morrison has used the quilt as a powerful symbol of healing and regeneration. Quilts for African Americans helped identify safe homes for runaway slaves (for instance, the quilt displayed in a window). Many also believed that a break in a pattern helped keep evil spirits away. In *Home*, the quilt suggests, through scraps of cloth, the assemblage of the characters' past life events or memories, creating patterns of meaning: "Quilts—factual or fictitious—clearly have the capacity to encapsulate stories within the fabrics and designs of their squares" (Daniel 2000).¹⁰ It implies the presence of the past in the present and the need to recall to cope with traumatic recollections. More-

10 According to Catherine Rainwater, through the patchwork, all of the characters' voices become one intelligible story: "If one cannot tell a single diachronic story [...] then one must tell many stories that, held together synchronically in the readers' mind, might consequently illuminate one another" (qtd. in Daniel 2000).

over, quilt making intimates the act of figuring out how to put together the dismembered pieces of a shattered identity. After her cure, the women of the community teach Cee how to quilt, signaling not only the reconstruction of her split self, but also the fact that she has finally found a safe home. Cee has changed: she might be infertile, but not broken. She has accepted her predicament.¹¹ Besides, by means of the patchwork, Morrison establishes “a parallel between the individual processes of psychological recovery and a historical or national process” (Krumholz 1997: 107).

Re-memory’s healing effect is not only related with the remembrance of the traumatic event that initiates the haunting, but also with its reenactment: “Cure comes through the reproduction of the primal scene of trauma” (Parker 2001), which releases its traumatic force (Nicholls 1998: 135). In the last chapter of *Home*, Morrison pays homage to the revenants of racist violence, which are everywhere. She reproduces the primal scene in a final redemptive act that takes place in the siblings’ hometown, when Frank and Cee Money tackle an appalling episode of their infancy. In one of their escapades, they witness, terrified, a burial. The herd of horses are there, “so beautiful. So brutal. And they stood like men” (5). Their dignity contrasts with the iniquity of how the unknown black is buried, like an “animal.” It is not until brother and sister are stitching together their sundered selves that they start wondering what happened back then. They learn from their grandfather Salem that, at the horse farm, whites organized “men-treated-like-dog fights” to the death between black individuals. The corpse belonged to a man who had been murdered by his own son, Jerome. His father had insisted that he killed him so as to save his life. As Vega writes,

The opening image of the two fighting horses standing up “like men” turns into real men fighting at the end of the novel. The parallelism between men and horses, or the animalization of men, black men, is clearly used by the author to underscore the dehumanization of blacks in a white racist society. (2013: 213-4)¹²

In her novel, Morrison seems to affirm that African Americans need to reconnect with their past so that their personal and collective wounds can heal, but also to prevent the erasure of their communal identity and history. Frank and Cee conjure up the spirits of the blacks’ racial past, which empowers them and all African Americans. The siblings celebrate a ritualistic ceremony for the dead black male, whose “connotation is of restored dignity and regained vitality, signifying a celebration of transformation” (Visser 2014: 15). Morrison wants to fight what Arnold Rampersad, discussing Du Bois’s theory of the double consciousness, calls “cultural amnesia” (Grewal 1998: 61): “American culture demands of its blacks amnesia concerning slavery and Africa, just as it encourages amnesia of a different kind in whites” (1998: 61).¹³ It is necessary to remember not only as a recuperative and

11 The quilt also symbolizes the conciliation with womanhood.

12 Morrison talks in her interview with Emma Brockes about how Morrison realizes that to understand an illogical feeling such as white racism she has to “go outside the species.” She has to imagine horses in the place of black people, thus emphasizing “the idea of dehumanization enclosed in the concept of racism.” Morrison also claims that horses as symbols of power, strength, masculinity, and consequently related to war, prefigure Frank’s involvement in the Korean War (Vega 2013: 214).

13 Eyerman classifies identity reconstructions in “the progressive and the redemptive.” In the progressive reconstruction, the individual attempts to forget the past and move on to the future, whereas in the redemptive,

cathartic action, but also to reclaim African American culture, which might easily vanish, forasmuch as blacks are submitted to the white Western culture. John Wideman argues in the preface to his novel *Sent For You Yesterday*: “past lives in us, through us. Each of us harbours the spirits of the people who walked the earth before we did, and those spirits depend on us for continuing existence, just as we depend on their presence to live our lives to the fullest” (qtd. in Rushdy 1998: 140).

The reenactment of the original trauma is a healing ritual that transmutes the characters making it possible for them to imagine a future and take destiny in their hands. Frank and Cee choose the sweet bay tree for the black man’s burial ceremony. Its symbolism of victory and accomplishment makes it “proleptic of the protagonists’ final catharsis and regeneration” (Vega 2013: 207). The siblings pay homage to their ancestors, a funeral rite that suggests the need for reconciliation with the haunting racial. The dead man’s bones are arranged into Cee’s quilt and then put under the sweet bay tree, hence, the allegorical meaning of the quilt (identity reconstruction) and that of trees (ancestry, life and death) are combined in the interment the siblings perform. As Colette Bancroft writes: “Lotus is still no paradise but in a clumsy quilt and the bank of a peaceful stream, there’s redemption” (2012). The wooden marker nailed to the sweet bay tree reads “Here Stands A Man” (145). In this epitaph, Morrison emphasizes the manhood of the dead black man in contrast with the animalistic connotations of his previous burial.

In *Home*, Morrison deals with the recovery from collective and personal trauma. Despite the siblings’ terrible childhood and appalling experiences away from home, at the end of the novel, both achieve significant transmogrification and regeneration. During his trip back home, which reverses blacks’ journey north in search of a better life, Frank, the broken soldier, shows visible signs of improvement in spite of his deep psychological wounds: “For Frank, though, the healing isn’t easy. He must confront his demons—secrets about the war’s brutalities that he hasn’t been able to acknowledge. His manhood and his sanity are at stake until he does” (Thomas 2012). The Korean veteran is getting rid of his ghosts and his unsettling recollections do not crush or paralyze him anymore. His non-violent liberation of Cee from the wicked doctor finally gives him back part of his dignity and manliness. Ever since Frank came from the war, he has been haunted by the ghost of a zoot-suited man, hinting at his struggle for maleness. In the last scene, however, only his sister can see him, which Aitor Ibarrola regards as a harbinger of his regained sense of manhood (2014: 118). Unlike *Beloved’s* ghost, “*Home* ends with the implication that aggrieved ghost can be dispersed with finality and given peace, as the result of the psychological catharsis that burial rites provide the living” (Lye 2013).¹⁴

Cee, on the other hand, has been partially physically and psychologically cured by the healing females of Lotus. Visser underlines that “While in the initial setting, Frank’s scribe has the role of the silent therapist, at the end of the narrative the women ‘who loved mean’

Frank and Cee’s, the traumatized victims try to incorporate the past into the present before going ahead (2004: 165).

14 In Morrison’s interview with Christopher Bollen, she claims that the zoot-suit man that hovers her narrative is a symbol of manhood, and lastly of how to be a human. During the post war 1940s and early 1950s, the zoot-suit guys “were asserting a kind of maleness, and it agitated people. The police used to shoot them [...] I wanted this figure of a fashion-statement male to just hover there” (2012).

[...] provide a stronger therapeutic, communal environment” (2014: 9). Cee has survived her heavy injuries, which have, nevertheless, taken a toll on her: she cannot be a mother. The young woman has started to address the problem of her low self-esteem and comes to see she was wrong to give credence to those who denigrated her. The matriarchs’ demanding love and self-assuring counsels bolster her struggle for self-sufficiency. Cee begins to learn how to be a self-reliant and independent woman, who “would never again need his [Frank’s] hand over her eyes or his arms to stop her murmuring bones” (128).

In *Home*, Morrison engages in the narration of the traumas of slavery and racism as well as in African Americans’ various modes of healing and recovery. She explores the unique network of care, support and solidarity that the black community provides so as to help traumatized black individuals to overcome their psychological and emotional wounds. In spite of the trials and tribulations Frank and Cee undergo as children, as Schreiber says, home and community are still “the psychic support for the ‘self’ or subjectivity” and “a space of security and comfort lodged in memory [...] embedded in the unconscious” (2010: 2, 160). According to Ibarrola, in this psychic space “where the memory of the self dwells,” some elements connected with their collective identity can be recognized (at least in the case of Frank Money), which “may also be of some assistance in their [the siblings’] recovery process” (2013: 121). In the midst of these nurturing communities, individuals can eventually heal their fragmented stories and mend the broken bonds with their ancestors and their cultural heritage, from which they have been exiled as a result of the white-dominated society they live in. As Vega states, the keys to recovery, healing and empowerment remain together with and within the concept of home, love and nature. Lotus is a place of hope that “has grown from the muddy waters of stagnation into transformation and renewal” (2013: 217). Love is best illustrated by Frank’s journey to save his sister. Finally, nature, with the sweet-bay tree that goes wild in “the glow of a fat cherry-red sun” (145), encloses “the idea of potentiality and the healing power of love” (2013: 217).

On the other hand, Morrison’s exploration of the mystified fifties discloses overwhelming evidence of the traumas of the past: racial oppression, “the cycle of (self-)abuse and violation [which] is still playing itself out in black communities across the United States,” (Durrant 2004: 83). Morrison reminds us that the African American racial past must be remembered before blacks can move on, since amnesia can only impair the victims’ existence both in the present and future. Blacks are forced to face the haunting ghosts, whose traces can be tracked down to the times of slavery and the Middle Passage. To build a better future, the haunting specters of the racist past must be laid to rest and ancestors must be paid homage. Nevertheless, the trauma of slavery and racism resists an easy closure: “Morrison’s work refuses to close the wound of African American history in recognition of the impossibility of ever fully coming to terms with the history of racism, the impossibility of abreacting an ‘event’ that did not take place at a singular, historically specific moment in time” (Durrant 2004: 83).

And yet, despite the difficulties in overcoming and healing the wounds of racism and discrimination, Morrison stresses the possibility of personal recovery, of individuals’ work through traumatic experiences. A few reviewers have seen in *Home* “a daringly hopeful story about the possibility of healing” (Charles 2012). Morrison seems to say that “The best defense against the destructiveness of racism [...] is the formation of a cultural identity

derived from an understanding of history” (Wall 2005: 5, 6) and, withal, the reconciliation with the ominous past. Frank and Cee start their recovery by turning their traumatic remembrances into what Susan Brison calls “narrative memory,” “that can then be integrated into the survivor’s sense of self and view of the world [...] (and) also by reintegrating the survivor into a community, reestablishing connections essential to selfhood” (2002: 39-40). Both siblings have partially come to terms with those terrible memories that have haunted them their whole lives.

At the end of the narrative, on their circular journeys of renewal, both Frank and Cee experience a change, signaling the awakening of a new man and woman. In the exequies, *Home* comes full circle when Morrison ends up the story going back to the opening scene, hence, intimating the siblings’ self-reshaping process, along with the link between scarring personal, but also historical racial memories, and the present. According to Vega, in their return to their community and Frank’s different vision of it, “the process has been completed, the circle has been closed.” The image of the circle signals that “the scattered patches have been gathered and put together into that inner unity which constitutes Frank’s and Cee’s renewed selves” (2013: 216). Brother and sister are no longer defenseless and frail little children watching a disturbing episode of history. Now they are active agents of transformation, who restore some balance in the world with their funeral ritual. Through Frank and Cee Money, Morrison sheds light on African Americans’ ability to recuperate after traumatic life events in their healing journeys towards self-actualization and wholeness. Notwithstanding, their trauma recovery is far from complete, even if the zoot-suited ghost has vanished, much harder will be for the siblings to get rid of the haunting ghosts of the scavenging Korean girl and the never-to-be-born baby. As Judith Herman, among other researchers, has highlighted “Resolution of trauma is never final; recovery is never complete. The impact of the traumatic event continues to reverberate throughout the survivor’s lifecycle” (1992: 211).

Home is a hopeful story about the possibility of recovery and transformation for African Americans. The siblings’ sweet bay tree, as a striking metaphor for trauma and healing, illustrates the regeneration of the traumatized black self. The sweet bay tree has a hollow space at its center, but it has two strong branches that reach out and it keeps growing:

*It looked so strong
So beautiful.
Hurt right down the middle
But alive and well.*

Trauma has also left an ineradicable void at the characters’ center: Cee’s mutilated womb and Frank’s “hook” in his chest (Visser 2014: 17). And yet, the siblings have achieved substantial bettering and advancement.

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