

## LITERARY MONUMENTS: *HOME* AS A COMMEMORATIVE NOVEL

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### ABSTRACT

When asked about the genesis of her novel *Home*, Toni Morrison argues that it was her intention to “take the scab off the 50s” in the United States, dig underneath and bring to the fore the silenced (hi)stories concerning African Americans. In the fashion of a true archeologist—a literary one—Morrison, once again, rips the veil of enforced deliberate oblivion and commemorates the lives, ordeals and achievements of the historically and socially dispossessed. This essay aims to explore and analyze such commemoration and how it is undertaken. *Home*, and its (re)creation, is an important object of remembrance and commemoration in this novel but it is not the only one. War veterans, Jim Crow victims, female culture bearers, quilters, love, self-love, agency, identity, survival and nature are all paid tribute to and celebrated. As she did in previous works such as *Beloved* or *Jazz*, from succinct glimpses of a historical event Morrison creates a literary work in which history, imagination and memory intermingle. In *Home*, commemoration occurs against the backdrop of the Korean War, racism and segregation in the pre-Civil Rights Movement, but the main focus is placed on how those events affect characters and their lives. In the commemorative literary project that Morrison’s *oeuvre* represent, *Home* stands—like its man and its horses—as a true beautifully crafted literary monument.

### RESUMEN

Al referirse al origen de su novela *Home*, Toni Morrison explica que su intención era “levantar la costra que recubre la década de los 50” en los Estados Unidos, hurgar y rescatar las historias silenciadas de la comunidad y población afroamericanas. Al igual que una verdadera arqueóloga literaria, Morrison de nuevo arranca el velo del olvido deliberadamente impuesto y conmemora las vidas, sufrimientos y logros de quienes habían sido desposeídos tanto a nivel histórico como social. Este artículo pretende explorar y analizar dicha conmemoración y cómo se lleva a cabo. El concepto de “casa/hogar”, y su (re)creación, es un significativo objeto de recuerdo y conmemoración en esta obra, pero no el único. Los veteranos de la Guerra de Corea, las víctimas de Jim Crow, las mujeres portadoras de una sabiduría ancestral, las “quilters” o tejedoras, el amor (el ajeno y

el propio), la posibilidad de acción, la identidad, la supervivencia y la naturaleza son los objetivos en los que la autora centra su conmemoración literaria. Al igual que en obras anteriores como *Beloved* o *Jazz*, partiendo de pinceladas históricas Morrison crea una obra literaria en la que la historia, la imaginación y la memoria interactúan. En *Home*, la conmemoración tiene como trasfondo la Guerra de Corea (1950-53), el racismo y la segregación en la época previa al Movimiento de Derechos Civiles, pero más que en los acontecimientos históricos, la autora centra su atención en cómo dichos acontecimientos afectan a los personajes y sus vidas. Dentro del proyecto literario-conmemorativo que la narrativa de Morrison representa, y al igual que sus caballos y la elocuente imagen del hombre erguido del final, *Home* se erige cual monumento conmemorativo, un monumento literario bellamente diseñado y esculpido.

*Certain kinds of trauma visited on peoples are so deep, so cruel, that unlike money, unlike vengeance, even unlike justice, or rights, or the goodwill of others, only writers can translate such trauma and turn sorrow into meaning, sharpening the moral imagination. A writer's life and work are not a gift to mankind; they are its necessity.*

Toni Morrison (*Burn this book*)

When we talk about commemoration, monuments or memorials we are talking about memory and paying tribute through memory. All these words have Latin roots which mean either “memory” or “to remind.” To commemorate is to bring to mind, to remember, to bring something to the fore through memory. When asked about the genesis of her novel *Home*, Toni Morrison argues that it was her intention to “take the scab off the 50s” in the United States, dig underneath and bring to the fore the silenced (hi)stories concerning African Americans (Bollen). In a process which Morrison herself terms “literary archeology” (“Site” 111), memory and recollections are one of the keystones of her writing and appear intrinsically connected to the workings of imagination. In the fashion of a true archeologist—a literary one—Morrison, once again, rips the veil of enforced deliberate oblivion and commemorates the lives, ordeals and achievements of the historically and socially dispossessed.

*Home* is set against the backdrop of the Korean War (1950-53), racism and segregation in the pre-Civil Rights Movement—the Jim Crow era—and anti-communism. The commemorative dimension of *Home* is manifold: it commemorates black Korean War veterans, Jim Crow victims, African American communities and their “ancient properties,” the healing power of love, the possibility of re-birth and survival and the life-giving force of nature, especially for the dispossessed and oppressed. This commemoration is undertaken through memory and historical events, of which Morrison provides glimpses and hints. In

her novel Morrison includes, in passing, significant historical facts of the 1940s and 1950s pertaining to McCarthyism and anticommunism, medical experimentation, racism and segregation. The mysterious ghost-like zoot suit man who appears several times is a clear reference to the Los Angeles Zoot Suit Riots of 1943, which in turn represented a kind of “style warfare” (Peiss 4). About the presence of this ghostly appearance, Morrison contends that her inclusion of the zoot-suit man in her novel is related to the reconceptualization of masculinity, which she also portrays through Frank Money and the masculine idea of war. As she argues,

a lot of the book confronts the question of how to be a man, which is really how to be a human [...] And he is struggling with that, and there’s certain pro forma ways in which you can prove you are a man. War is one. But the zoot-suit guys, postwar, in the late ‘40s, early ‘50s, they were outrageous—they were asserting a kind of maleness, and it agitated people. The police used to shoot them.” (Bollen)

But this is not the only reading of the zoot-suited man. In her groundbreaking study of *Home*, Justine Baillie interestingly contends that this intriguing figure represents a guiding ancestor “crucial for Frank’s ascent from the subterranean to self-realization” (195). Indeed, at the end of the journey towards recovery, Frank is unable to see the final appearance of the man, whose grin might well be read as an agreeable sign of complacency at Frank’s final catharsis.

The theatre which closes down in chapter 6 and in which a banned play, *The Morrison Case* (1952), had been rehearsed but never performed, is a direct reference to Albert Maltz’s play, which was never performed in any theatre nor published, due to suspected communist ties (Wertheim 216). The ordeal Cee Money goes through at the hands of a white eugenicist doctor, who uses her body for his medical experiments, is a direct allusion to scientific racism of works like *The Passing of the Great Race* (1916) and medical experimentation on ethnic people. Finally, the protagonist’s very surname, Money, can be read as an allusion to fourteen-year-old Emmett Till and his racist murder in 1955, in Money, Mississippi.

Not only is commemoration present in the content of the novel but it is also ingrained in its structure. The circular structure of the novel reinforces its reading as a commemorative work, taking into account that in Morrison “structure is meaning” as Jan Furman reminds us (231). The story begins with the word “home” in the title and ends with the same word; on the other hand, the action starts in Lotus and ends in the same place, with the same images in a clear circular narrative line. This structure encloses a performative ceremonial function, which is also connected to the African Kongo symbol of the circle. And within the circle intrinsically appears the symbol of the cross represented by the tree. The shape of a trunk with spread branches like arms is a clear reference to the African Kongo symbol of the tree or cross within a circle (from West and Central Africa), which stands for rebirth, “the circular motion of human souls” and “the four moments of the sun: rising (birth,

beginning, or regrowth), ascendancy (maturity and responsibility), setting (death and transformation), and midnight (existence in the other world and eventual rebirth)” (Thompson 103; Holloway 81; Stuckey 13; Jennings 2-3). The story comes full circle at the end, when the healing process of its characters is completed.

The 1950s was the time of the pre-Civil Rights Movement and it was in that decade that some landmarks in African American history acted as catalysts for the Civil Rights Movement. In 1955 Rosa Parks refused to leave her seat to a white man on a bus in Montgomery (Alabama); the same year, 1955, was witness to the Montgomery Bus Boycott and the assassination of Emmett Till. At a social level, Jim Crow was still thriving in the United States in the 50s. Nonetheless, in that period steps were taken towards the end of segregation in the armed forces. President Truman’s Executive Order 9981, signed on July 26, 1948, called for the end of military segregation in the armed services (Packard 225). In 1950 the Committee on Equality of Treatment and Opportunity in the Armed Services enforced the complete end to “every vestige of segregation” in the Army, Navy, and Air Force (Quarles 273). However, although as a Korean War soldier Frank fought in the first desegregated army in the United States, back home racism and segregation remained. A direct reference to this paradoxical situation is made in the scene in which the reverend who helps Frank in his journey South after escaping from the mental hospital warns him, “you from Georgia and you been in a desegregated army and maybe you think up North is way different from down South. Don’t believe it and don’t count on it. Custom is just as real as law and can be just as dangerous” (19).

Indeed Jim Crow is present throughout the country in all aspects of society, education, transport and housing. Instances of this are described in the novel, such as Lily’s inability to buy a house in Seattle because she is not white. The so-called “restrictive deed covenants” (Packard 105, 221; Painter 247, 394) were created to prevent blacks from becoming owners of houses in white areas or neighborhoods. Frank’s lover, Lily, is kindly turned down when she intends to buy a house: “No part of said property hereby conveyed shall ever be used or occupied by any Hebrew or by any person of the Ethiopian, Malay or Asiatic race excepting only employees in domestic service” (73).

Memory, remembering and forgetting in the context of trauma are crucial in *Home*. Cathy Caruth’s definition of “trauma” as “the story of a wound that cries out, that addresses us in the attempt to tell us of a reality or truth that is not otherwise available” (4) is highly relevant for this analysis. After returning to the United States suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder, Frank sets off on a journey South to rescue his sister, whose life is in danger back in Georgia. Through his return home, Frank begins both a physical and a psychological journey, to come to terms with the consequences of a fragmentation he had experienced from childhood and through the displacement of his own family. After being run out of their Texas house, the

Money family settles in Lotus, a small Georgia town without sidewalks or indoor plumbing (46-47). But Lotus does not feel like home to the young Frank. It is instead a stagnant suffocating place, so Frank ends up joining the army as a kind of way out of that place. He “hated Lotus. Its unforgiving population, its isolation, and especially its indifference to the future were tolerable only if his buddies were there with him” (16). Not even after being discharged does Frank want to return to Lotus, which to his eyes was “the worst place in the world, worse than any battlefield” (83). Scarred by the war, alienated in a hometown he does not perceive as welcoming, having lacked the love and care by parents beaten by long working hours, Frank is presented to us as a homeless fragmented character. Indeed, the term “home” encloses a contested space of contradictory feelings and visions, “an ideal hankered after but definitely absent” (Vega-González 204).

By making Frank travel South and find his salvation there, Morrison commemorates African Americans’ first home in the US, in her own words: “home [...] in the sense that it [the South] was the first stop when they left the ancient home” (Denard 20, qtd in Wall 56). Frank and Cee’s physical and psychological healing takes place in the South, in their childhood community. As Gay Wilentz further contends, “[t]he American South [...] is where Afro-America began and where the relationship to one’s African roots is the strongest” (124). Frank’s physical journey South goes hand in hand with his gradual departure from internal fragmentation. War memories constantly haunt him, especially the deaths of his two best friends and the death of a little Korean girl he had shot. Such fragmentation is also reflected in the non-linear and circular narrative line of *Home*, where past and present intermingle. Chronological disruption is a characteristic of trauma fiction, as Ann Whitehead argues: “Novelists have frequently found that the impact of trauma can only adequately be represented by mimicking its forms and symptoms, so that temporality and chronology collapse, and narratives are characterised by repetition and indirection (3). As Frank approaches the South (Atlanta) he realizes that he is entering a world in which time slows down and is suspended. The suspension of time is symbolized also by the Bulova watch Frank finds in a matchbox at his parents’ house: “no stem, no hands—the way time functioned in Lotus, pure and subject to anybody’s interpretation” (120). On the other hand, on his way South, the effect of war memories is diminished as if foreshadowing the power enclosed in the re-connection to Lotus: “Sitting on the train to Atlanta, Frank suddenly realized that those memories, powerful as they were, did not crush him anymore or throw him into paralyzing despair. He could recall every detail, every sorrow, without needing alcohol to steady him” (100). Frank’s perception of Lotus changes. His initial negative image of the town turns now into a lush, welcoming, protective place:

It was so bright, brighter than he remembered...children still laughed, ran, shouted their games; women sang in their backyards [...] There were no sidewalks, but every

front yard and backyard sported flowers protecting vegetables from disease and predators [...] Had these trees always been this deep, deep green? (117)

While in *Lotus*, Frank finally releases his pent-up anguish caused by his memories of the helpless girl he had shot at war. Opening up and telling that story in the first-person voice, to himself and to the narrator, proves a necessary step in his final recovery and atonement. As Ashraf Rushdy aptly states, “In individual experience, memory is painful. In shared experience, memory is healing, as everyone in Morrison’s narrative discovers” (321-322). Frank moves from rejection, hiding the truth from himself and others and forgetting to acceptance and verbalization: “His sister was gutted, infertile, but not beaten. She could know the truth, accept it, and keep on quilting. Frank tried to sort out what else was troubling him and what to do about it [...] I have to say something [...] I have to tell the whole truth” (132-133). There is a movement from traumatic memory to narrative memory. Narrative memory implies a revision of things past and their verbalization. Frank’s traumatic images of the girl he had killed come back to him when he sees a girl or when he is told his sister will not be able to have babies. Finally, Frank realises that he has to tell his true story, deal with the pain and accept it in order to heal, since “memories of trauma should not be avoided, but should instead be processed in order to understand their impact” (Meyer 242). On the next page, we can read the first-person heartrending statement “I shot the Korean girl in her face. I am the one [...]” (133), which he tells the narrator. Thus this is the necessary step Frank had to take in order to come to terms with himself. As Pierre Janet contends,

A situation has not been [...] fully assimilated until we have achieved, not merely an outward reaction through our movements, but also an inward reaction through the words we address to ourselves, through the organisation of the recital of the event to others and to ourselves. (Janet, qtd. in Brogan 79-80)

*Lotus*, the Georgia hometown in which beginning and end coalesce is a loaded name with spiritual overtones. The traditional symbolism of the lotus flower points to the idea of re-birth and enlightenment. In Ancient Egyptian lore the lotus flower represents “the sun, creation, and rebirth” because of its life cycle: “The lotus starts as a seed in a muddy environment and the bottom of a water source. As the flower grows, it moves towards the sun until it floats to the top of the water and blooms [...] moving toward the sun is the process of gaining clarity” (Brown Green 27). As it happens through Frank’s journey, the lotus flower is a “metaphor for the journey of the soul from the primeval mud of suffering, through the waters of spiritual practice, into the bright sunshine of enlightenment” (Gauding 307).

It is in *Lotus* as well that Cee recovers from her physical and psychological wounds at the hands of a white doctor who experiments on her. Although Cee was already “broken down, down into her separate parts” (54) after her frustrated

marriage and bereft of her brother's protection, she is even more fragmented in her new job as the doctor's live-in assistant. As it happens with her brother, Cee is restored and healed in the Lotus community, among a group of women led by Ms Ethel. These women resort to their mother wit and wisdom to heal what eugenics and scientific malpractice had damaged. Through these women's natural and traditional remedies but also through their dedication and affection, Cee is renewed, reborn. Not only do her wounds heal but she also attains a new, strong, more independent identity: "So it was just herself. In this world with these people she wanted to be the person who would never again need rescue [...] she wanted to be the one who rescued her own self" (129). Her new condition makes her realize that she does not need her brother for protection any more (131).

The importance of community and communal activities such as quilting and storytelling prove invaluable to Cee's recovery. And above all, love from others, to others and to herself. Miss Ethel's encouraging words to Cee tellingly reinforce the healing process:

Look to yourself. You free. Nothing and nobody is obliged to save you but you. Seed 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 evil 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)

Morrison commemorates the black community as a repository of mother wit, storytelling, quilting, gardening and folk beliefs and wisdom. The female community is presided over by Ms Ethel, whose house was a kind of "quilting center" (122): "Ignoring those who preferred new, soft blankets, they practiced what they had been taught by their mothers [...] listening to their talk, their songs, following their instructions, Cee had nothing to do but pay them the attention she had never given them before" (122). The fragmentation that Frank and Cee undergo is metaphorically restored to unity at the end of the novel. The craft of quilting thus conveys the "opportunity to rework the outmoded, whether it be in clothing, novel structures, or conceptions of the self" (Kelley 66). The quilt Cee makes at the end also provides her with a sense of newly gained autonomous agency and self-empowerment: "Cee refused to give up the quilt [...] The quilt was the first one she had made by herself" (141).

Chapter 13 is entirely devoted to the female community in Lotus and Cee's healing. In this chapter Lotus is also described in positive terms, through images of nature, life and nourishment, and it is so perceived by Frank. Throughout the novel Frank's first-person italicized voice comes to the foreground in odd chapters, until we reach chapter 13. The absence of the italicized first-person narrative in this case emphasizes the idea of female community but it also parallels the absence of Cee's fertility in that chapter, as a result of distortion and abuse. When taking care of Cee,

Frank is told to wait outside. This female sphere of healing and female agency is thus connected to number 13, a number traditionally related to the idea of fertility and potency, since there are thirteen lunar and menstrual cycles in a year.

By telling Cee to “seed your own land,” Miss Ethel taps into the healing power of nature. She is one of the artist mothers and grandmothers whose art forms are, for instance, their stories, their home-made remedies and their gardens. As Alice Walker states in her seminal work *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens* when dealing with her mother's artistry, “whatever rocky soil she landed on, she turned into a garden. A garden so brilliant with colors, so original in its design, so magnificent with life and creativity...” (241). Likewise, Miss Ethel's garden “was not Eden; it was so much more than that” (130). There is a profusion of vocabulary from the natural world in Morrison's novel as well as in her previous works. Nature, and in particular trees, function as a kind of home and haven. In her study of ethnic gardens, Patricia Klindienst contends that the land and cultivating the land represents a way of taking action rather than being acted upon (54). The design of gardens also represents the connection to nature as well as an outlet for creativity. In the ancestral West and Central African cultures from which slaves in the United States came, nature and the spiritual world are closely connected. And such elements are pre-eminent in Morrison's fiction. As Philip Page argues, “[t]he emphasis on the intersubjective web in African American culture stems in part from the belief in West African cultures that individual fulfilment only occurs through harmony with the community and the cosmos” (26). All throughout this novel, trees acquire a relevant multidimensional role. When the Moneys are forced to leave Texas under death threats, there is an old man who refuses to leave and is therefore “beaten to death [...] and tied to the oldest magnolia tree in the county—the one that grew in his own yard. Maybe it was loving that tree which [...] his great-grandmother had planted, that made him so stubborn” (10). The tree image conveys here the idea of endurance, life and ancestral connection. Significantly enough, the old man is later on buried beneath that tree, symbol of immortality and life.

The lack of love and affection Frank and Cee endure at home they find in a sweet bay tree on which they lean, “with two huge branches below that spread like arms. Even when Frank was with his friends Mike and Stuff, he let her tag along. The four of them were tight, the way family ought to be” (52). Trees stand for mother figures, spreading their arms to comfort and provide roots to those uprooted and alienated. Tree imagery has also strong spiritual overtones and clear connections to African cosmologies and beliefs. They are closely connected to the spiritual realm as they are the abodes of spirits and are used as sacred shrines and worship sites in many African communities (Mbiti 73).

A clear allusion to the idea of circularity can be observed in the very structure of *Home*, which is circular. Frank's escape from the hospital at the beginning of the novel takes place at 4 am, just before sunrise (10) and the end of



the story, with the reburial of the anonymous man takes place at sunset: “The sun had reddened and was about to set” (144). After some inquiries among the town people, Frank realizes that the man whose improvised burial (by white men) they had witnessed as children is the same man whose story he learns about when he returns to Lotus—a man who had been forced to fight against his own son. So Frank decides to give him a proper burial, a reburial in which two elements play an important role, the quilt his sister had made and the sweet bay tree: “Quickly they found the sweet bay tree—split down the middle, beheaded, undead—spreading its arms, one to the right one to the left. There at its base Frank placed the bone-filled quilt that was first a shroud, now a coffin” (144). This second burial is loaded with meaning and symbolism. Not only does it imply an act of respect and tribute to a victim of racism but it also embodies the final burial of Cee’s and Frank’s transcended selves. The fighting horses which open the novel give way to the fighting men whose story is told at the end. There is a clear parallelism between these two scenes, which underscores the dehumanization of blacks in a white racist society. But in reversal, at the end of *Home* it is a man and not horses the one who stands, as the epitaph Frank writes on the buried man’s grave: “Here Stands A Man” (145). Physical death is not the end. Burying the man in a vertical position transcends the limits of the physical world of the living. As Valorie Thomas argues, “Markers of sacred space in *Home* are further elaborated through Bantu-Kongo-Yoruba motifs of verticality” (197). And “This verticality is associated with horses, trees, Frank’s ‘very tall’ (22) stature, and the ‘perpendicular’ (144) burial of the remains of the lynched man” (197). The burial of the dead man closes the circle in the vertical axis of the cross within the circle, moving from sunset to the underworld of the dead.

Finally, *Home* commemorates the healing power of love. Love to be anchored and rooted and love to grow wings and fly. Miss Ethel tells Cee: “You wasn’t born in no gutter. You born into my arms. Come on over here and let me give you a hug” (129). After the hug episode we can read “If not her mother, somebody somewhere should have said those words and meant them [...] In this world with these people she wanted to be the person who would never again need rescue [...] she wanted to be the one who rescued her own self [...] If she did not respect herself, why should anybody else” (129). Morrison acknowledges love as one of the axis around which she writes, either love or its absence (Bakerman 40). Frank’s rescue of his sister is an act of love, disinterested love. And it is in acts of love rather than war and violence that a new redefined concept of masculinity resides in the end. Cultivating the art of love and working on one’s feelings and emotions is part of the process. At the end of the novel, Frank cries for the first time since he was a toddler, or so he remembers. The traditional patriarchal perception of masculinity, deeply connected to war, bravery and the absence of emotional manifestations like crying gives way to a new dimension of masculinity: “His eyes burned and he

blinked rapidly to forestall what could have become the crying he had not done since he was a toddler. Not even with Mike in his arms or whispering to Stuff had his eyes burned that way” (132).

From lack of parental love, brought up by an unloving grandmother, Frank and Cee move onto the healing love given by their community. Once again, love proves to be an essential part of the healing process. But love of oneself is crucial for complete healing. And that is what Frank has to aim at. His killing the Korean girl has much to do with the consequences of the lack and need of love and internal disruption: “How could I like myself, even be myself if I surrender to that place where I unzip my fly and let her taste me right then and there? / And again the next day and the next [...] What type of man is that?” (134). Frank needs to move from self-hatred to self-love. And the first step in that process is the recognition of his act, verbalizing it, and accepting it as well as the pain it causes. Thus, there must be a transformation from fettering pain to “pain as a catalyst for change” (hooks 215). The final reburial of the dead body also represents the metaphorical burial of Frank’s former alienated self. Like the sweet bay tree, Frank stands strong at the end of the novel, a “strong good me” (102), “hurt right down the middle / But alive and well” (147). The circle has closed.

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