

Community, Therapies, and Alternative Spiritualities in Toni Morrison's *Home*

José de Paiva dos Santos (UFMG)*

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1100-4037>

Abstract:

This article discusses the notions of home, community, and alternative spiritualities in Toni Morrison's novel *Home* as spaces of healing and empowerment of black subjects. Drawing from the field of trauma studies, cultural anthropology, and religious studies, the analysis examines the main characters' return to their hometown as a meditation on black history, the black body, and black spiritualities. It focuses especially on the rituals, local therapies, and black spiritualities black communities have developed as a means for physical and psychological healing.

Keywords: Morrison; Trauma; Spirituality; Home; Healing.

Resumo:

Comunidade, Terapias, e Espiritualidades Alternativas em *Home*, de Toni Morrison

Este artigo analisa noções de lar, comunidade e espiritualidades negras como espaços de cura e empoderamento do sujeito negro em *Home*, de Toni Morrison. Com base em conceitos do campo dos estudos do trauma, antropologia cultural e estudos da religião, a análise examina o retorno dos protagonistas Cee e Frank à cidade onde cresceram como uma reflexão sobre trauma, história negra, o corpo negro e espiritualidades negras. A análise se concentra nos rituais, terapias e manifestações negras de espiritualidade que comunidades negras têm desenvolvido como meios para se obter cura física e psicológica.

Palavras-chave: Morrison; Trauma; Espiritualidade; Lar; Cura.

Introduction

In *The Fire Next Time*, published in 1963, James Baldwin comments on the various forms of discrimination and exclusion black

families, and especially black men, endured in a nation which, in mid-twentieth century, still viewed blacks as inferior and a hurdle to

* Doutor em Literatura Comparada pela Purdue University, EUA (2001), com pós-doutorado em literatura e religião pela Faculdade Jesuíta de Filosofia e Teologia (FAJE), Belo Horizonte (2020). Atualmente, é professor associado de literaturas de língua inglesa na UFMG, com pesquisa e ensino nas seguintes áreas: literatura afro-estadunidense, literatura comparada, literatura e espiritualidade. Link Lattes: <http://lattes.cnpq.br/8788381150981867>. E-mail: josedepaivasantos@gmail.com

the country's development. He denounced the failures of racial integration policies, both at the micro and macroeconomic level, and pointed out, as an example, the specific case of war veterans who, after risking their lives to serve their country, found no support whatsoever when they returned home. He put it this way:

Home! The very word begins to have a despairing and diabolical ring. You must consider what happens to this citizen, after all he has endured, when he returns home: search, in his shoes, for a job, for a place to live; ride, in his skin, on segregated buses; see, with his eyes, the signs saying 'White' and 'Colored,' and especially the signs that say 'White Ladies' and 'Colored Women'... And this is happening in the richest and freest country in the world, and in the middle of the twentieth century. (1963, p. 74)

Here, he questioned common notions of home associated with protection, mutual support, and brotherhood, elements denied to blacks in times of either war or peace. He also pondered on the devastating effects of a racialized society upon young men and women, who since an early age saw their prospects of moving up the social ladder destroyed by ubiquitous institutional and structural racism. If blacks were to be assets and not burdens, he asked, how could they achieve it in a culture which emasculated black men and forced them to rely on their women for family support? Or, as he blatantly put it, how was it possible in a culture which believed that when they raped black women, they were doing the black population a favor by pumping precious white blood into their future generations (1963, p. 103).

Toni Morrison's *Home*, echoing Baldwin's incisive account of race relations in the United States, gives voice to some of these anxieties as she narrates the struggles of a Kore-

an War veteran named Frank Money and his attempt to reintegrate after fighting in the Korean War (1950-1953). Mirroring Baldwin's description of black experience in the 1950s and 1960s, Frank faces enormous obstacles as soon as he sets foot on his native land: segregation, unemployment, and sheer disregard for what he did as a soldier during the war. To make matters worse, whatever chances he might have had of integrating in the community is compromised by his involuntary outbursts of violence and rage, clear symptoms of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Along with Frank's predicaments, the novel also presents Ycidra, Frank's sister, also known as Cee, and her journey back home, not from a battlefield, but away from the hands of an unscrupulous doctor who deceitfully performed experiments on her uterus. As brother and sister make their way back to their place of birth – Lotus, Georgia – their story becomes a reflection on trauma, home, race and gender oppression, as well the power of communal bonds and alternative spiritualities in processes of physical and psychological healing. Responding, in many ways, to Baldwin's denunciation of the fallacies of post-World War II racial integration policies, the novel suggests that healing from personal and collective traumas take place when individuals not only confront the past but also, and, especially, when they embrace the rituals, traditions, and spiritual wisdom of their communities.

Trauma, History and the Black Body in Frank's and Cee's Journeys Back Home

Trauma, at both the individual and collective level, stands at the heart of Morrison's novel, as can be attested by the numerous

challenges the novel's main characters Frank and Ycidra (Cee) face to recover from the physical and, especially, psychological effects of their experiences of pain, fear, and hopelessness. In Frank's case, poverty and racism lead him to join the army, hoping that service for his country might somehow change his social status in the highly segregated rural community where he grew up in the state of Georgia. Yet, as soon as he is discharged from his duties in Seattle, he learns firsthand that his standing as a US citizen remains the same, if not worse, for now, besides pervasive contempt for his skin color, he has to deal also with the symptoms of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), a direct consequence of the gruesome reality he experienced in the battlefield. After fleeing from a mental institution where he had been locked up for disruption of public order, Frank asks for Reverend John Locke's help to get back to Georgia. The reverend sums up in plain words how the vast majority of US citizens views black war veterans: "An integrated army is integrated misery. You all go fight, come back, they treat you like dogs. Change that. They treat dogs better" (18). Before sending him on his way, the reverend later remarks: "Listen here, 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 and don't count on it. Custom is just as real as law and can be just as dangerous" (2012, p. 19). As he embarks on his journey to Georgia, he realizes the reverend has not exaggerated when it comes to veiled racism, hate, and violence against blacks.

Reverend Locke's warnings prove themselves true when he meets another pastor in Portland who is supposed to help him get to Chicago and, eventually, Georgia. Jessie Maynard provides him with a little money,

but nothing more: "Help, yes. But the contempt was glacial. The Reverend was devoted to the needy, apparently, but only if they were properly clothed and not a young, hale, and very tall veteran" (2012, p. 22). The excuse for not inviting him into the house is that his daughters are at home. Frank soon understands that being a war veteran does not mean much when the individual is poor and black. An incident in Chicago when Frank and his new friend Billy are randomly frisked by the police outside a store will confirm that nothing has changed since he left the country:

The younger officer noticed Frank's medal.
 "Korea?!"
 "Yes, sir."
 Hey Dick. They're vets."
 "Yeah?"
 "Yeah. Look." The officer pointed to Frank's service medal.
 "Go on. Get lost, pal." The police incident was not worth comment so
 Frank and Billy walked off in silence. (2012, p. 37)

The police officers' remarks reflect the general view that his services to the country are not guarantee of either safety or respect.

However, Frank's encounters with structural racism look small in comparison to the challenges he faces when fear and rage seize him unexpectedly, sometimes throwing him on the ground, other times making him weep before strangers, pick fights in barrooms or simply feel at loss in places otherwise familiar. The more he tries to understand what is taking place, the more memories from the battlefield keep coming back to haunt him. When describing the manifestation of PTSD, Cathy Caruth's definition is enlightening:

While the precise definition of post-traumatic stress disorder is contested, most descriptions generally agree that there is a response, sometimes delayed, to an over-

whelming event or events, which takes the form of repeated, intrusive hallucinations, dreams, thoughts or behaviors stemming from the event, along with numbing that may have begun during or after the experience, and possibly also increased arousal to (and avoidance of) stimuli recalling the event. (1995, p. 4)

Caruth's explanation underscores two important elements in PTSD symptoms: the delay in the response to a traumatic event and the numbing effects that accompany it. Since the emotional shock that caused the event is so overwhelming, the mind cannot process it at the moment; consequently, it buries the emotions that will surface later, normally as a response to a stimulus similar to the traumatic event. In other words, because the subject has not fully assimilated the experience of trauma, the experience itself does not become a coherent narrative and thus comes back to haunt the individual.

Caruth's views regarding the belatedness of the manifestation of trauma symptoms shed light on Frank's involuntary outbursts of rage after his discharge from the army. In Frank's case, the surges are preceded by the discoloration of people and objects around him. The first time it happened, Frank remembers, "all color disappeared and the world became a black-and-white movie screen" (2012, p. 23) and what he experienced next was an unmanageable anxiety, "a free-floating rage, the self-loathing disguised as somebody else's fault" (2012, p. 15). Frank sometimes has difficulty remembering what takes place next, but it generally involves violent acts against strangers or himself. While trying to recall a recent episode in which the police arrested and locked him up in hospital, he is utterly lost:

Other than that B-29 roar, exactly what he was doing to attract police attention was long gone. He couldn't explain it to himself, let alone to gentle couple offering help. If he wasn't in a fight was he peeing on the sidewalk? Hollering curses at some passerby, some schoolchildren? Was he banging his head on a wall or hiding behind bushes in somebody's backyard? (2012, p. 15).

Anne Whitehead explains that since trauma is not absorbed entirely or sufficiently at the time it first occurs, the individual does not possess it, cannot control and recount it at will. For this reason, trauma "acts as a haunting or possessive influence," insisting in returning and, repeatedly, plaguing the traumatized subject (2004, p. 5). It is these repetitions that drive Frank almost insane and cause him to find solace in alcohol and women, but this approach ends up worsening his condition. Scenes from the battlefield keep coming back whether he is sober or drunk: "...whatever the surroundings, he saw a boy pushing his entrails back in, holding his entrails like a fortune-teller's globe shattering with back news; or he heard a boy with only the bottom half of his face intact, the lips calling mama" (2012, p. 21). Other times scenes in which he saw his friends from Lotus, his hometown, get shot and lose their lives come to mind. He cannot conceive the idea of returning home and tell their families about how bravely they fought, but lost their lives anyway. Throughout the novel, Morrison inserts chapters in which Frank talks about, in first person, his war memories: "Korea. You can't imagine it because you weren't there.... Battle is scary, yeah, but it's alive. Orders, gut-quickening, covering buddies, killing – clear, no deep thinking needed" (2012, p. 93). The challenge for Frank is to put all these pieces together in the hope of constructing a narrative that will bring comfort and healing.

If Frank's major challenge is to put his war experiences into a more manageable perspective as an attempt to overcome, or at least deal with, the symptoms of PTSD, for his sister Cee, the issue at hand is gender and race oppression, which starts at home within the family and continues later within the community where she lives. Many of Frank's memories from childhood show how his entire family was constantly moving to escape either from hunger or from persecution by violent, racist white neighbors. In an episode when they had to hurry out of Bandera County, Texas, he remembers the heat and hunger the family had to endure: "Talk about tired. Talk about hungry. I have eaten trash in jail, Korea, hospitals, at table, from certain garbage cans. Nothing, however, compares to the leftovers at food pantries" (2012, p. 40). For Cee, all this moving around leaves an indelible mark, at least according to her grandmother Lenore, who takes every opportunity to remind her that she was not born in a house like decent people, but on the road like prostitutes and street women. For Lenore, with whom the family was forced to live after fleeing Texas, "being born in the street – or the gutter as she usually put it – was prelude to a sinful, worthless life" (2012, p. 45). Against the meanness of her grandmother and relatives, she had the protection of her brother Frank, but after Frank left town to enlist in the army, Cee sees no reason to remain in Lotus. She gets married and leaves town as soon as the opportunity appears.

It is in Atlanta that Cee will face disappointment, pain, and almost encounter death, were it not for the help of strangers and, especially, her brother Frank who comes to her rescue as soon as he learns she about to die: in fact, the note he received was short and clear: "She be dead" (2012,

p. 103). After a few weeks in Atlanta with her husband Prince, Cee quickly realizes that he married her not for love but for the old automobile her aunt owned. She is soon abandoned to her fate in a big city. Unable to return home and running out money, she takes a job as an assistant for Dr. Beauregard Scott, a man known in Atlanta as a medical doctor as well as a scientist. If at first her duties involved "cleaning instruments and equipment, tidying and keeping a schedule of patients' names, time of appointments and son on" (2012, p. 64), she later becomes the guinea pig for his experiments with eugenics. It is the housekeeper Sarah who notices that Cee's health was declining quickly and decided to write Frank and ask for help. Even though Sarah knew the doctor performed abortions and invented medicines, she was unaware that as of late he "got so interested in wombs in general, constructing instruments to see farther and farther into them. Improving the speculum" (2012, p. 113). In ways similar to what he did in the battlefield, Frank rescues his sister from the enemy's territory and takes her back to the safety of their hometown Lotus, bleeding and burning with fever, but still alive. The love and care she receives from a group of strong women will save her from death and teach her precious lessons about trust, self-esteem, and gender and racial resistance.

In her discussion of the pathology and dynamics of trauma manifestations, Caruth also makes an important connection between trauma and history. For her, what traumatized subjects manifest in outbursts of anger, fear and despair is more than the symptoms of buried or unconscious pain. As the subjects cannot entirely absorb or process the traumatic events they experience, they end up carrying this "impossi-

ble history within them,” thereby becoming “themselves the symptom of history that they cannot entirely possess” (1995, p. 5). This remark is important because it places the body, and not just the immaterial unconscious, as an important factor in the dynamics of trauma expression and development. This observation is especially relevant within the context of the African diaspora because the black body has always figured as a site of trauma at multiple levels. As slaves, blacks often had their bodies marked with a branding iron, sometimes as a form of punishment for disobedience, other times simply to designate their status as inferior, as commodity to be sold for profit. The psychological consequences of such branding cannot be measured. After slavery, the black body continues to be a site where multiple discourses intermix and leave their imprint. The black man as the potential rapist and the black woman as lascivious by nature have been enduring stereotypes with dire consequences for the black community. Thus, as Maxine L. Montgomery has rightly remarked, “Literally and symbolically, the black body functions as a text bearing witness to the...history of blacks in the New World” (2012, p. 330).

Morrison’s treatment of Cee’s and Frank’s traumatic experiences in *Home* constitutes a meditation on history, especially on the black body as a site of trauma. Their stories represent aspects of black history that have been distorted or left out of official historical accounts. Dr. Beau’s experiments on Cee’s uterus, for instance, alludes to the infamous Tuskegee Syphilis Study which started in 1932, an experiment in which six hundred black men were used as guinea pigs for a study on the development of syphilis. Even though the researchers knew who in the group was infected, they did not

provide adequate treatment and many of them died, lost their eyesight, went insane or developed other health problems. It took decades for reparations to be made to the families of those involved in the experiment. In the novel, Cee is a victim of not only racial but gender oppression, which makes her an easy prey for the unscrupulous Dr. Beau. No wonder the black community that aids Cee to recover is very suspicious of traditional medical care: “– nothing made them change their minds about the medical industry” (2012, p. 122). Morrison also revisits history by bringing the participation of blacks in wars, hoping that they would gain respect and achieve social equality. Frank’s disappointments after his discharge from the army show how such a project was no more than a fantasy. In *Home*, Cee’s and Frank’s bodies not only carry the symptoms of pain and trauma, but also bear witness to the traumatic history of a people that has faced slavery, racism, oppression, and generational trauma.

Rituals, Healing, and Community in Frank’s and Cee’s Paths to Recovery

The community of Lotus, Georgia, has certainly experienced its share of trials and hardships, so when Frank hurries Cee, on the brink of death, into Miss Ethel’s house, she immediately gathers the women in the community to provide the much needed help. The novel describes them as more than simply caring people, as years of toiling in a hostile land has taught them to handle “sickness as though it were an affront, an illegal, invading braggart who needed whipping” (2012, p. 121). They cannot stand laziness and lack of common sense, either. For them, “sleep was not for dreaming; it

was for gathering strength for the coming day” and “conversation was accompanied by tasks: ironing, peeling, shucking, sorting, sewing, mending, washing, or nursing” (2012, p. 123). This is the environment that will strengthen and lead Cee in the path of physical and psychological recovery. As Cee recovers, Frank will also find ways to heal from his childhood and war traumas. In contrast to the rhetoric and instruments of conventional science, vital in this therapeutic process are the rituals, medicines, and folk beliefs the black community of Lotus has nurtured over the years as a strategy to face sickness, pain, trauma, and death.

Albert J. Raboteau in his seminal work on slave religion in the antebellum South remarks that African-based religious beliefs did not disappear after blacks landed in the New World and got in touch with new forms of spirituality. He comments that “African styles of worship, forms of rituals, systems of belief, and fundamental perspectives have remained vital on this side of the Atlantic, not because they were preserved in a “pure” orthodoxy but because they were transformed” (2004, p. 4). Raboteau’s observations emphasize the strategies of resistance blacks developed to maintain their worldviews in an environment that disdained their origins and demonized their religions. Christianity was certainly imposed on them, but the black community learned to filter and transform what they were taught, thereby adapting the Christian faith into a religion of their own. In this process of transformation, their former rituals, beliefs, and indigenous traditions gained different forms and purposes in the New World. In the novel, the women in Lotus draw from this syncretic repertoire of folk beliefs and rituals when Cee and Frank come back in search of spiritual protection and physical

treatment. The syncretic aspects of these rituals can be perceived in the combination of Christian ethics and symbolism with indigenous beliefs and therapeutic medicines.

Scholars have provided numerous definitions and assessed the various effects of rituals on social groups and individuals. Some of these definitions have religious undertones while others a more secular, sociological twist. Victor W. Turner, for example, defines ritual as “a stereotyped sequence of activities involving gestures, words, and objects, performed in a sequestered place, and designed to influence preternatural entities or forces on behalf of the actors’ goals and interests” (1973, p. 1100). As an anthropologist, Turner views rituals from a more religious perspective. Others such as Émile Durkheim see rituals as social acts whose goals are “to strengthen the bonds attaching the individual to the society of which he is a member” (2008, p. 226), even when practiced in religious contexts. Another aspect is the connection to memory, since ritual is linked to the act of remembering and dramatizing in a safe environment that which is considered taboo, scary and disturbing within a particular social group. The goal is to prevent chaos from setting in by providing, as Joseph Campbell comments in *Myths to Live By*, a coherent, organized picture of the cosmos (1972, p. 114-115). Despite the differences in emphases and contexts, the agreement seems to be that rituals, be they religious or secular, have the power to bring people together by fostering feelings of belonging, camaraderie, and confidence when chaos is expected or is already in place. As individuals take part in ritualistic, repetitive behaviors such as chants, melodies, dances, worship rites, food preparation, and medicine ceremonies, to mention a few, they hope to reestablish order and keep individ-

ual and communal fears, frustrations, and hate under control.

In *Home*, decisive in Cee's process of recovery are the use of local medicines and the rituals of physical healing to which Cee is introduced as soon as she is brought into Miss Ethel's home. The novel shows that one of the first procedures to rid her of the pain and infection in her uterus is to avoid anything industrially manufactured. The narrator remarks how nothing could convince Miss Ethel and the other women about the benefits of the medical industry, even when Cee mentioned Dr. Beau's intentions, which for her seemed noble at the time she went through his experimental practices. As soon as they find out "she had been working for a doctor, the eye rolling and tooth sucking was enough to make clear their scorn" (2012, p. 121). To revert what the doctor had performed, their first strategy is to resort to the indigenous treatments "they had been taught by their mothers" (2012, p. 122). Surrounded by what Cee's remembers "as women who loved mean," she takes various sorts of concoctions to stop the infection and have whatever had been "packed into her vagina...douched out" (2012, p. 121). She has no say in what they make her eat or drink. If it hurts, they tell her, it is because it is healing; if she vomits it, she will have to take it again. The treatment culminates in a procedure she finds the most embarrassing – to have her private parts exposed for several days to the sun heat: "The final stage of Cee's healing had been, for her, the worst. She was to be sun-smacked, which meant spending at least one hour a day with her legs spread open to the blazing sun. Each woman agreed that the embrace would rid her of any remaining womb sickness"; although Cee hesitated, out of shame and fear that others might see her unclothed,

the women assured it was necessary: "The important thing is to get a permanent cure. The kind beyond human power" (2012, p. 124). The women's confidence in the natural powers of the sun to permanently cure the infection suggests a total rejection of synthetic medicines and valorization of long-held ancestral knowledge about the relation between individuals and the natural world. More than that, as Laura Castor comments, it shows that "genuine healing does not happen in the houses and institutions of the medical establishment" (2014, p. 146). The therapeutic procedure lasted for ten days, after which Cee is allowed to interact more openly with the women around her.

Despite Cee's health improvement, Miss Ethel and her neighbors know that for Cee to recover fully, she needs more than physical health. Being aware of her history of family abuse and low self-esteem, they provide the environment for the kind of psychological strength she needs in order to face the world as a black woman and never again be the victim of another doctor. The transformation that takes place during the weeks she spends with Miss Ethel and the women from Lotus's community surprises even Frank, as "they delivered unto him a Cee who would never again need his hand over her eyes or his arms to stop her murmuring bones" (2012, p. 128). This time, critical in this process are the rituals of spiritual cleansing and emotional bonding Cee experiments during her sojourn with the Ethel and her friends.

To be able to stand for herself, Cee needs to rid herself of all the negative input she has absorbed over the years from both family and social institutions. To gain spiritual strength and boost her self-confidence, an important piece of advice Cee receives from Miss Ethel is to see herself as a worthy, free human being born with the strength to

lift herself up. Cee later ponders on how it “was the demanding love of Ethel Fordham, which soothed and strengthened her the most” (2012, p. 125). Neglect and family abuse had turned her into a fragile, insecure woman unable to defend herself and fight for rights as a black woman. Miss Ethel’s words for her are kind but firm: “Don’t let [your grandmother] 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” (2012, p. 126). The rituals of emotional bonding and spiritual strengthening Cee is exposed to day in day out in Miss Ethel’s company have the purpose to tap this inner power society and family has suppressed over the years.

Important in this process of emotional cleansing and bonding is the practice of quilting, an activity the women of Lotus cultivate to make some money, but, more importantly, to maintain the traditions and knowledge that has been passed on from generation to generation. The narrative tells that as Cee heals, the women transform Ethel’s home in a sort of quilting center, a place where they share ancestral experience and communal knowledge: “Ignoring those who preferred new, soft blankets, they practiced what they had been taught by their mothers during the period that rich people called Depression and they called life” (2012, p. 122). On discussing the role quilting has played in African American culture, Floris Barnett Cash remarks that more than a means to increase the family’s income, quilts have played a symbolic role in African American communities in that they constitute “a record of their cultural and political past...The voices of black women are stitched within their quilts” (1995, p. 30). For black cul-

tural critics such as Cash, the act of stitching pieces of cloth in different shapes and sizes stands for restoration, a shout of resistance amidst the chaos of a fragmented black history. In the novel, the act of stitching assorted pieces of cloth points to the reconstruction of African American women’s black experience, a symbolic feature Morrison is very much aware of in the narrative. As Olga Idriss Davis remarks, in Morrison’s novels, she “present[s] the quilt in ways which conceptualize identity and redefine history, setting in place a dialectical tension between traditional learning and critical literacy” (1998, p. 67). As Cee becomes more involved with the women’s activities and hear their stories, songs, and life experiences, her personal history begins to be, likewise, reconfigured, redirected, this time by her own hands. Frank’s response to Salem, Cee’s grandfather, about how Cee is doing, attests to the connection between the quilt metaphor and Cee’s recovery: “Salem, impatient to get back to the chessboard, changed the subject: ‘Say, how’s your sister?’ ‘Mended,’ Frank answered” (2012, p. 140). When Frank says that Cee has been mended, he suggests that what has taken place in past weeks has been more than physical recovery – she has reconnected with the past so as to be better equipped to face the uncertainties of the future.

As Cee is spiritually and physically treated under the care of Ethel and her neighbors, Frank is left “to sort out what else was troubling him and what to do about it” (2012, p. 132). Once again, the community provides Frank with the atmosphere to reconnect with his origins and find ways to heal from both past and present wounds. Frank’s childhood disappointments, expectations, and fears as well as painful memories of the Korean War appear, as mentioned before, in

italics and are interposed among the chapters, as an internal monologue, challenging the narrator's ability to put it all down into words. One episode in particular was when he shot a Korean child who used to crawl into camp at night scavenging for food leftovers in the trash can. The image of the little girl's hand going through the trash and later touching his private parts in return for the favor does not leave his mind: "*A child. A wee little girl. I didn't think. I didn't have to. Better she should die. How could I like myself, even be myself if I surrendered to that place where I unzip my fly and let her taste me right then and there*" (2012, p. 134. Italics in the original). Thoughts such as these have haunted Frank since the day he landed on home soil. On discussing the tensions between home and displacement in the novel, Mark A. Tabone remarks that Cee's and Frank's return to Lotus constitute, above all, a search for a true home amidst a life of constant, forced moving. It is "not until the pair's embattled return to Lotus [that] they finally 'arrive'"; in other words, Lotus becomes "an affirmative 'beloved community' that enables healing, belonging, and self-determination" (2018, p. 292; p. 301). In Frank's case, this is especially relevant, for he is been literally everywhere in his search for a home – the war in Korea, the arms of strange women, bars, even a mental institution.

While he waits for Cee to recover, Frank visits places and old friends in Lotus. In a way, this time with the community turns into an opportunity to reconnect with himself, his people, and the land. Aside from the moments when he is battling past memories and the symptoms of PTSD, the burial ritual he performs in the outskirts of Lotus with the help of his sister is certainly the most emblematic moment in Frank's journey towards healing. In the beginning of the novel,

the narrator mentions an episode in which, when children, Frank and Cee witnessed a group of men on horses throwing the body of a black man into a hole. Frank remembers that he and his sister had sneaked into the property to see the wild horses that used to play in the fields. Yet, they are petrified at what they see:

We could not see the faces of the men doing the burying, only their trousers, but we saw the edge of a spade drive the jerking foot down to join the rest of itself. When she saw the black foot with its creamy pink and mud-streaked sole being whacked into the grave, her whole body began to shake" (2012, p. 4. Italics in the original).

In bits and pieces, Frank has learned that the owners of the stud farm into which they crawled used to kidnap black men and have them fight each other till one of them died. Salem and his friends even recall the day a young man wandered into Lotus covered in blood saying he was forced to kill his own father during one of these competitions. These gatherings were publicized for the community as dog fights, but everyone knew what really took place over at the farm: "You want to know about them dogfights?...More like men-treated-like-dog fights" (2012, p. 139).

Having found out that what they saw being discarded like an object had most probably been the boy's father, Frank decides to disinter whatever is left of the body and provide the man a proper burial. The re-burial gains a symbolic dimension in that the act of disinterring the bones of an unknown man becomes the act of opening up the tombs he has constructed to hide his fears, shame, rage, and other traumatic memories. Once again, the quilt becomes a significant symbol in a ritual with the power to connect different generations of black people. When they reach the place where the body had been

buried, Frank picks up the shovel and digs up the bones and skull: "Carefully, carefully, Frank placed the bones on Cee's quilt, doing his level best to arrange them the way they once were in life. The quilt became a shroud of lilac, crimson, yellow, and dark navy blue" (2012, p. 143). After that, Frank carries the man's wrapped bones in his arms to be buried properly under a tree nearby. While Frank digs a hole in the ground, Cee has the impression she sees a man standing on the opposite side of the river watching the whole ritual. When she asks Frank who the gentleman might be and Frank turns around to check on him, the man is no longer there. The novel does not elaborate on this sighting, simply leaving up to the reader to imagine the importance of the ritual to connect different generations of black people. Frank then pays final homage to the man by nailing a sign on a tree: "Here Stands a Man" (2012, p. 145). In these final rites, the quilt serving as the man's coffin becomes more than his last shelter; it points to the rejoining of the living and the dead, an important aspect of the African religious heritage alive in black communities. For Frank, the quilt is even more meaningful, as it stands for survival, protection, and care at the home he is been searching for so long and that he has finally found; it stands also for mending and stitching together in a more coherent whole the pieces of his fragmented history. And the sign "Here Stands a Man" nailed on the tree becomes the representation of his resistance towards a history of exploitation and emasculation of black subjects. Home becomes the starting point of a new journey for both Cee and Frank.

Final Remarks

Toni Morrison's rendering of Cee's and Frank's journey of healing and recovery

are marked by an emphasis on the role folk beliefs and indigenous rituals play in keeping black communities strong and united, especially in times of adversity and social hostility. In times such as these, they create strategies of resistance to face white supremacist practices of racial discrimination and social exclusion. In *Home*, the notion of home as trumpeted by mainstream U.S. culture in the context of the 1950s is challenged when race is added to the equation. In the novel, Frank's personal battle against PTSD and racial discrimination shows the sordid side of Jim Laws, which give blacks hopes of integration and acceptance when they are recruited to join the army, but deny their rights as war veterans when they return from the battlefield. Frank's struggles to remain alive and, later, to save his sister from the hands of Dr. Beau, testifies to the indifference of U.S. social policies towards black minorities. In Cee's case, besides race, gender becomes a key component in the fight for justice and social acceptance. Having lost the protection of her brother, she becomes the victim of both black men who take advantage of her social vulnerability, and white supremacist groups who see in her a potential asset for their unscrupulous eugenic experiments. By placing Cee's and Frank's psychological recovery in the hands of a small group of women living in a black rural community, Morrison wants to rescue important values, customs, and indigenous religious beliefs that have protected and given black communities a sense of identity for decades.

References

- BALDWIN, James. *The Fire Next Time*. New York: Vintage: 1963.
- CAMPBELL, Joseph. *Myths to Live By*. New York: Viking Press, 1972.

CARUTH, Kathy. Introduction. In: **Trauma: Explorations in Memory**, CARUTH, Kathy (Ed.). Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1995, p. 3-12.

CASH, Floris Barnett. Kinship and Quilting: an Examination of an African American Tradition, **The Journal of Negro History**, v. 80, n. 1, p. 30-431, Winter 1995.

CASTOR, Laura. "This house is strange": Digging for American Memory of Trauma, or Healing the "Social" in Toni Morrison's *Home*. In: SHANDS, Kerstin W; MIKRUT, Giulia G. (Eds.). **Living Language Living Memory: Essays on the Works of Toni Morrison**. English Studies 4. Sweden: Elanders, 2014, p. 5-153.

DAVIS, Olga Idriss. The Rhetoric of Quilts: Creating Identity in African American Children's Literature, **African American Review** v. 32, n.1, p. 67-76, Spring 1998.

DURKHEIM, Émile. **The Elementary Forms of Religious Life**. Trans. Joseph W. Swain. Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 2008 [1915].

MONTGOMERY, Maxine L. Remembering the Forgotten War: Memory, History, and the Body in Toni Morrison's *Home*, **CLA Journal**, v. 55, n. 4, p. 320-334, 2012.

MORRISON, Toni. **Home**. New York: Vintage, 2012.

RABOTEAU, Albert J. **Slave Religion: The "Invisible Institution" in the Antebellum South**. Updated Version. New York: Oxford University Press, 2004.

TABONE, Mark A. Dystopia, Utopia, and "Home", in Toni Morrison's *Home*, **Utopian Studies**, v. 29, n. 3, p. 291-308, 2018.

TURNER, Victor W. Symbols in African Ritual, **Science**, New Series, v. 179, n. 4078, p. 1100-1105, Mar. 1973.

WHITEHEAD, Anne. **Trauma Fiction**. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004.

Recebido em: 14/04/2021

Aprovado em: 11/06/2021



Esta obra está licenciada com uma Licença Creative Commons Atribuição 4.0 Internacional.