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## Shifting Masculinities and Evolving Feminine Power: Progressive Gender Roles in Toni Morrison's *Home*

IN A JULY 2012 INTERVIEW IN THE *TELEGRAPH*, TONI MORRISON STATES that black male writers often write books about white oppressors. She implicitly evokes W. E. B. Du Bois's definition of double consciousness and the continuing presence of the color line (or the division of society into the separate worldview and experiences of black and white citizens) as a defining aspect of African American experience ("Souls" 359). Double consciousness is the psychological distress that occurs with the experience of being defined through the eyes of an Other (364). Indeed, according to Morrison, black male authors reveal how "the person who defines you . . . is a white mind [who]—tells you whether you're worthy or what have you. And as long as that's your preoccupation, you're defending yourself against that. Reacting to it. Reacting to the definition—saying it's not true." As an African American *woman*, she does not want to waste her energy "refuting that gaze" (Leve). These remarks are indicative of Morrison's consistent position that male and female gender roles are interdependent and intertwined, and in her novel *Home* (2012) she focuses on the need for black men and women to become aware of how such roles are formed and maintained, knowledge of which might allow for change.

Indeed, *Home* acknowledges yet moves past a traumatic sense of double consciousness for both men and women, and honors (even as it refigures) the sense of womanhood that Du Bois evokes in "The Damnation of Women" (1920), where women are fundamental to the progress of democracy.<sup>1</sup> Du Bois argues that women are implicitly part

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<sup>1</sup>This essay, published in *Darkwater: Voices from Within the Veil*, considers the damaging effects of disenfranchising women, and many of the volume's intertexts reference a woman's struggle with racism (Rowe 160). *Darkwater* is part of the developmental arc of Du Bois's work, whereby he expanded his original concepts of the color line and double consciousness. As Rowe remarks, "Du Bois was one of the first U.S.

of the “talented tenth” and promotes the idea of a powerful black woman, one who is not reduced to the role of Madonna or whore, mother or virgin (“Damnation” 953). This woman is politically active, economically independent, and a vital part of her community, particularly in raising the next generation.<sup>2</sup> In *Home*, even as Morrison grapples with the historical development of gender roles for black men and women, which are inextricably coupled with the history of institutionalized racism, she redefines African American gender roles by writing about 1950s America, showing that there are ways in which individuals can surpass the roles society assigns to them. Critics have focused on the novel’s narration (Furman); issues of identity (Andrès); trauma (Harack and Ibarrola); place, diaspora, and memory connected to home (Thomas; Schindler; Wall); and the maternal (Wagner-Martin). In contrast, my analysis examines race, gender, and trauma in the novel, as Morrison reveals the power of facing traumatic memory, the healing ability of community, and the deconstruction of traditional gender roles. Morrison postulates a progressive model of race and gender, emphasizing the importance of personal responsibility in confronting one’s own past in order to become a productive member of the community who can care for others, pass on knowledge, and aid in the self-actualization of the next generation. Ultimately, she rejects a model of rampant individualism along with white, hegemonic, male ideologies of progress, and instead celebrates the communal, productive, healing power of women and men who have faced the past, celebrate the present, and look forward to a future that is not rigidly defined by existing race and gender ideologies.

To reveal this transformation, Morrison creates a novelistic structure that is less convoluted than that of her earlier works, with fewer narrative voices and flashbacks. However, she still circles around traumas and delays full disclosure of characters’ memories. She tells the story of Frank Money and his younger sister Cee, who grow up together

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intellectuals to challenge Euroamerican imperialism as a system of racial and gender, as well as class, hierarchies” (164). Ironically, as Rowe points out, Du Bois would later become mired in the oppressive politics of Stalinism (146).

<sup>2</sup>Morrison has praised “W. E. B. Du Bois’s intelligence” (“To Be a Black Woman” 102) and referred to him in her earlier novels, so she is well aware of his work, though *Home* also implicitly engages with the limited nature of his feminism from today’s perspective. Both authors do view women as significant agents of change, and both acknowledge the difficulties black men and women face in a hegemonic white society.

in Lotus, Georgia, and experience a childhood trauma that influences their gender roles. From the first chapter, with Frank's flashback to this trauma, certain gender roles are introduced only to be questioned later. The children witness the burial of a black man who has been killed in a fight to the death with his own son, a fight instigated by white gamblers. Frank's impulse, from that moment on, is to regain a sense of empowerment in a racist society by creating his identity as a masculine protector, relegating Cee to the position of the weak female. Trying to assert a sense of self, he also becomes a good "homeboy" to his friends, a soldier, and an ineffectual boyfriend to Lily. She is his girlfriend after he returns from the Korean War suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder. With these characters, Morrison underscores the inter-relatedness of male and female gender roles, as well as the psychological damage that results from feeling weak in relation to one's gender. She also highlights emerging changes to gender-based norms, and the immutability of certain limitations to black male and female behavior, due to public perception. Frank's and Cee's evolving gender roles show how Morrison postulates ways of performing gender that are alternative to the social norms of the 1950s and to older traditions of black masculinity and femininity, allowing partial healing for her characters, a new way of viewing gender roles of the time, and a means of questioning how those roles may have been perpetuated today.

#### **"Here Stands a Man": Negotiating Conventional Masculinity**

Black masculinity in early to mid-twentieth century America is inherently tied to the traumatic legacy of the color line, which itself originates in slavery. The black male gender role in America has always involved complex power relations. Black men were valued by slaveowners for their strength, physicality, and virility, masculine characteristics also valued within the white patriarchy, but they were simultaneously denied recognition of their intelligence and even humanity. Necessity led to the "masking" of intelligence, producing the constant awareness of being watched by an Other. This sense of double consciousness was not alleviated by emancipation or Jim Crow, and in 1903 Du Bois pronounced the color line the problem of the twentieth century, as he focused on "training men for life" ("Souls" 425). According to Du Bois, the black male gender role includes the qualities of uprightness, strength, power, intelligence, and action. He anticipates a

manhood that celebrates black achievement without depending on the oppression of others, being based instead on self-actualization. At the same time, he reveals the difficulties faced by black men, who experience double consciousness because of the white community's gaze, making them constantly aware of external judgment. These conditions still existed in the 1950s, the period examined in *Home*.

This painful condition of double consciousness sometimes resulted in black men adopting a white hegemonic view of masculinity, including its regressive treatment of women.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, as Linda M. Perkins remarks, when black men "sought to obtain education and positions similar to that of white men in society, many adopted the prevailing notion of white society, of the natural subordination of women" (24). Morrison examines the continuing effects of such gender dynamics through the figure of Frank Money, who has difficulty viewing women as autonomous. As Morrison addresses the fraught nature of masculinity, double consciousness, and repressive gender roles in 1950s America, she extends the exploration of masculinity begun in *Song of Solomon*, and to a lesser extent, *Beloved* (Civil War and Reconstruction period emasculation), *A Mercy* (black and white masculinity before race was entrenched in American law), and *Love* (a twentieth-century patriarch and a young man, Romen). As Susan Neal Mayberry comments regarding Morrison's novels through *A Mercy*, "Morrison's male characters suggest that issues of race, class, gender, sexuality (and religion) cannot be segregated and that conflicts between African American men and women result not from sexual disease but from cultural dis-ease" ("Visions" 167). Such is also the case in *Home*, and although Morrison indicates that some societal change regarding race and gender roles is happening, she shows how black men still need to foster a progressive masculinity beyond that figured by Du Bois; they need a concept of masculinity that is not dependent on white male definitions, is not exploitative of women, and that allows for strength *and* vulnerability while taking responsibility for their lives. Although women's lives are the focus of most of Morrison's

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<sup>3</sup>Ironically, while Du Bois criticizes this tendency in "Damnation of Women," he himself demonstrated a masculinist position and what McKay calls "a romantic idealization of women, particularly of the black mother" (251). Gary L. Lemons also argues that Du Bois's relationship with his daughter was such "that even as a man who embraced feminism, writing extensively in support of woman suffrage, the liberatory nature of his discursive practice, more often than not, in the context of the familial, worked to reinscribe patriarchal privilege and practice" (194).

novels, these examples and *Home* show how Morrison's fiction frequently explores the intertwined characteristics of masculinity and femininity in relation to race.

One of the most powerful ways in which Morrison demonstrates the need for a progressive masculinity is by illustrating how childhood experiences formulate gendered identities. *Home* begins with the traumatic memory that reveals why Frank connects masculinity with power and violence, how he becomes aware of the dangers faced by black men, and how he compensates by focusing on the beauty of horses. He recalls that the horses "*were so beautiful. So brutal. And they stood like men*" (5). The phrase "*they stood like men*" echoes the opening description, "*They rose up like men. . . . Like men they stood*" (3), and there is an emphasis on the horses as upright, battling, and showing the power of their hooves and legs. These horses embody masculinity, power, beauty, and strength at the very moment when Cee and Frank witness the burial of a murdered black man. Frank sees the man's foot that sticks out of the grave "*and quivered, as though it could get out, as though with a little effort it could break through the dirt being shoveled in.*" This metaphor for the position of black men in American society is further emphasized with the "*black foot . . . being whacked into the grave*" (4), in extreme disregard for the black man's body. Cee and Frank are justifiably terrified, and Frank wishes to protect his sister, deciding that "*if they found us or touched her I would kill*" (104). As Jan Furman remarks, for Frank this moment may have "set up false ambitions of bravery, honor, and duty" (236). The reality is that as a child, Frank would not be able to overpower these men. Faced with knowledge of the dead black man, and by extension his own racialized worthlessness, he focuses on the horses, who stand for freedom and strength. He insists that the horse that is "*deep black*" triumphs over a "*rust-colored*" horse. The black figure's triumph *instead* of the man's foot remains dominant in his memory. The protective screen memory and act of repression, as well as Frank's adoption of a protective role towards Cee, are formative aspects of his masculine identity.<sup>4</sup>

Another formative childhood memory concerns Frank's viewing of an older black man being evicted from his home, an event that shows the limitations of agency for black men at that time. The eviction was

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<sup>4</sup>For a full discussion of the traumatic effects of this moment and the functioning of screen memories and mourning in *Home*, see Harack and Ibarrola.

perpetrated by white men “both hooded and not” (10), and clearly none of the families had any power in the face of these white supremacists. Frank particularly remembers how an elderly black man, Crawford, refused to leave his home: “he waited the whole night. Just after dawn at the twenty-fourth hour he was beaten to death with pipes and rifle butts and tied to the oldest magnolia tree in the county—the one that grew in his own yard” (10). Here, the emphasis on the words “in his own yard” is coupled with the vision of a man who is denied any such ownership and is beaten to death. Although Crawford might be seen as a model of black masculinity for young Frank—in the sense that he acts as an elder, faces his oppressors, and demands his rights to his own home—his experience also demonstrates how this is not a society that forgives black men’s attempts to assert their own rights. This may be why Frank later recognizes (when he and Cee witness the burial) that they should not act but hide.

Morrison also reveals the importance of mothering and affirmation for black children, for without these boons children may form unhealthy race-based and gender-based psychological tendencies. Indeed, Frank’s early experiences with women make it difficult for him to relate to them, for he was essentially abandoned by his parents and left with an abusive grandmother, Lenore. This makes him overly protective of Cee, and hinders his ability to trust women. As Andrea O’Reilly has shown in her analysis of motherwork in African American communities, the main role of the mother is to “preserve, protect, and more generally empower black children so that they may resist racist practices that seek to harm them and grow into adulthood whole and complete” (4). Frank has never been mothered, and so he lacks the resilience to form a protective sense of self, creating a sense of powerlessness that translates into a dysfunctional relationship with women. He views women as vulnerable and needing protection, as sexualized beings, or as abusers and abandoning mothers. A pervasive stereotype of the time was the “dangerous” woman who could emasculate men, and Morrison’s work denies that strong women are destructive even as she discredits the idea that their only value is as mothers. As David Ikard remarks, referencing the work of Patricia Hill Collins, often “the failings of black men as men are attributable to having women that are too strong and men that are too weak” (210). This perception of the black woman as potential enemy or “too powerful” is deconstructed by Morrison through Frank’s journey toward a new masculinity. He begins on shaky ground: when he finds himself in a

patrol car in Seattle, his thoughts echo the territorial behavior of the horses who “stood like men,” and he feels helpless because he “had never been in this neighborhood” and “Central City was his territory” (9). After managing an escape from the psychiatric hospital, he feels that it would “shame him” (11) to ask his ex-girlfriend, Lily, for help. These incidents show Frank’s concept of the male as strong, territorial, and independent—a self-perception rooted in his childhood experiences and lack of mothering.

This self-concept breaks down only in relation to Lily, who provides refuge and love. However, in their relationship unnerving aspects of Frank’s masculine identity are revealed, and Morrison shows how trauma can reinforce traditional gender roles. Although Lily appears in relatively few pages, she is an important character as she facilitates Frank’s healing and foregrounds the role of an economically independent woman. Their breakup occurs largely because of Frank’s PTSD, but there are also disturbing mentions of what he values in her: she is the first person with whom he feels safe, for the “pictures” (20) of the war “move behind a screen in his brain” (21) when he is with her. She initially represents his “ideal” female who is vulnerable, nurturing, and loving. Frank falls in love with her as she reaches toward a high shelf, exposing the back of her knees and revealing “ooo-so-vulnerable flesh.” This vulnerability produces “Love plain, simple, and so fast it shattered him” (22). At this point, Frank is in desperate need of the affirmation Lily can provide, as his experiences in the war have broken him. This moment also showcases his continued self-definition as protector.

The progression in this section of the novel is disturbing, however, indicating the need for a change in Frank’s concepts of masculinity. Morrison moves from Frank’s wartime memories of “the killing” he did, including that of “Women running, dragging children along” (21), to a cryptic reference to a girl who did not deserve what happened to her, to his falling in love so suddenly with Lily, to his time spent with Jessie Maynard’s family. Reverend Maynard, part of the network aiding Frank in his travels to the South, keeps Frank outside of his home and smiles “as he said, by way of apology, ‘My daughters are inside the house’” (22). In this way, Frank’s masculinity is figured as inescapable, dangerous, and constitutive of a cycle of violence, threats, and dominance concerning women, even when he is experiencing positive events such as falling in love or receiving aid from the black community. And yet, this is a cycle that can be broken with the next generation, if a new model of

masculinity is permitted. As Hill Collins remarks, a concept of progressive masculinity would mean that black men would need to reject the “structural power relations” that construct images of black masculinity, as well as “uncoupl[e] ideas about strength from ideas about dominance” (“A Telling” 75). Morrison illustrates this need quite vividly. For example, when Frank meets an eleven-year-old black boy who had been shot by white policemen at eight years old, he asks the boy what he wants to be when he grows up. This question comes after the two have shared masculine banter centered on sports and sexuality, followed by Frank’s admission that killing men in the war was traumatic. In response, the boy replies that he wants to be “A man” (33). The boy’s ability to control the conversation with Frank, and his questioning of the glory of killing in combat, along with the mention of his “scholarships” (31) and ability in math, show that he may be headed toward a progressive black masculinity, one that will lead toward the civil rights movement.

First, however, Morrison makes the dangers Frank faces as a black man in the 1950s very clear, highlighting the continual interplay between race and gender roles. The contemporary storyline begins with Frank in a mental asylum. Because he is black, no one bothers to explain to him why he is being held. As Morrison reveals his experiences in the war, the difficulties he has in traveling across America, and the prejudice he encounters, his definition of masculinity is in conflict with his permitted societal role. In the beginning, he feels a “free-floating rage, the self-loathing disguised as somebody else’s fault” (15). With his quest to find Cee in Atlanta, he begins to face his self-loathing, weaning himself off the alcohol he used to numb his emotions, and moving toward a confrontation with his childhood trauma.<sup>5</sup> During Frank’s quest, he faces many challenges.<sup>6</sup> As he leaves Seattle, Reverend Locke tells Frank that down South, even if Jim Crow is over, “Custom is just as real as law and can be just as dangerous” (19). Frank mentions segregation curtains on the train and a “sign on the door” (23) at the gas

<sup>5</sup>Notably, his quest includes geographical movement that is the opposite of the slave narratives; instead of finding freedom and self-knowledge in the North, Frank must travel from Seattle to the small town of Lotus, Georgia, to find himself.

<sup>6</sup>Cynthia Willett argues that in *Song of Solomon*, Morrison shows how “the flight to freedom of the black man is bound up with forces that pull him back down” (221). What is significant in both of these novels is the fact that despite these challenges, a new masculinity is, just barely, shown to be possible.

station, as well as “White sheets” (28).<sup>7</sup> At such moments, Morrison shows how “black Americans do not need to leave the home front to be shell-shocked” (Wall 62).

As he travels south, Frank follows an underground network of contacts, depending on a sense of race-based fellowship to reach his sister. Although he is a black man in the 1950s, he continues to face archaic representations of the black male gender role. While on the train, Frank sees a male ghost in a zoot suit, and he notes that these suits were once seen as “signals of manhood” that were powerful enough to “interest riot cops on each coast.” The wearing of zoot suits was an urban trend, enacted by black men who wished to display their urbanity, empowerment, style, and public visibility.<sup>8</sup> Frank has never seen one worn in person, and calls it a “costume,” showing awareness that zoot-suiters manipulated traditional white male clothing, creating a display of masculine power in a society that made black men invisible. However, Frank knows that this trend of the 1930s did not change the prejudicial customs in the South, and that to wear such clothing would still be seen as an act of provocation. Instead, he conjures up the image of an African male warrior, with “a loincloth and some white paint artfully smeared on forehead and cheeks. Holding a spear, of course” (34). The preference for African primitivism may reflect Frank’s rural roots, and his desire for a masculinity based on protecting one’s tribe, physical power, and the artistry of rural and tribal markings, as well as a longing for male ancestors to emulate. Morrison has frequently discussed the need for elders to teach black men and women how to survive in a racist world. Unfortunately, Frank, unlike Cee, never finds an ancestral line to connect to, but these contrasting images of masculinity demonstrate Frank’s preoccupation with issues of manhood and race, and how he desires a connection to the past. By the end of the novel he is at least more capable of serving as an elder to future

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<sup>7</sup>Emmanuelle Andrès argues that on Frank’s trip south on the train, when he experiences moments of color blindness (where his surroundings drain of color), he is experiencing traumatic symptoms that “force[] him to see things in black and white” (112), and that this is a sign of his struggle with Du Bois’s double consciousness.

<sup>8</sup>Monica L. Miller shows in *Slaves to Fashion: Black Dandyism and the Styling of Black Diasporic Identity* that such performances of dandyism were “a highly readable performative text that is subject to interpretation and translation and more often than not functions as a challenge” (16).

generations and changing the trajectory of race-based and gender-based struggles.

However, Frank's initial version of masculinity, which focuses on physicality, courage, and protectiveness, is based on the hegemonic white view of masculinity. He follows this role in self-defense against the view of black men as threatening, criminal, or inhuman, a view which lasted even with the New Negro movement. Frank needs to push past these versions of masculinity into a more flexible male identity.<sup>9</sup> He displays his childish perspective on masculinity as he leaves to fight in the Korean War with his "homeboys" (8), friends who will soon die in his arms; goes on a killing rampage; and, we later discover, kills a young Korean girl. When he returns, he has been traumatized by war, and despite fighting for his country he finds that his race still forms the basis of his treatment in America: "You all go fight, come back, they treat you like dogs. Change that. They treat dogs better" (18). Once again, Morrison applies animalistic imagery to the situation of black men in America. Altogether, the initial chapters establish Frank as a man who is struggling with his identity, as well as the trauma of war. They reveal the danger noted by Rebecca Hope Ferguson: that in Morrison's work "self-definition by negation (that is, the denial of one's connection to others, the illusion of self-development as a purely individual, autonomous process) and the rejection of community almost always signal disaster" (17). The remainder of the book illustrates these dangers in terms of both race and gender.

In order for progressive masculinity to manifest in Frank, he must confront his childhood trauma, his actions in war, and his distorted views of women. Throughout the novel Frank represses the memory of killing a very young girl in Korea who offered him sexual favors. He shoots her in the face, killing her because she genuinely tempts him, because she reminds him explicitly of Cee and triggers an incest taboo,

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<sup>9</sup>The New Negro figure of the early twentieth century gave young black men a potential sense of empowerment, showing how "Despite urban temptations and institutional racism, he succeeds both educationally and professionally" (Patterson 56). However, it simultaneously led to fears in white society of the "New Negro Crime," wherein black men might pursue white women sexually, which, as Martha H. Patterson notes, "helped to legitimate systemic disenfranchisement, Jim Crow laws, and mob violence by reiterating a narrative of emboldened black men eager to ravish helpless white women" (54). These systemic forms of prejudice continued into the 1950s, resulting in regressive gender norms for both black men and black women.

and because he cannot face a deviant side of his personality, having always been a protector of women. Frank falls into the trap of viewing women as saviors of men (as with his initial interactions with Lily, who made him feel safe), innocents, or weak figures needing physical protection, but this means he is unable to live in a healthy relationship to them. He most relates to those who have a “small breakable thing” (67) inside them that allows him some measure of power. For instance, when Cee is left behind in Lotus and is taken advantage of by her boyfriend, she wants to write to Frank and tell him what happened, but she resists because “he would not laugh at her, quarrel, or condemn. He would, as always, protect her from a bad situation” (51). Frank solves such problems for Cee, but this does not allow Cee to learn how to defend herself, which is damaging.<sup>10</sup>

Morrison also reveals the damaging effects of repressed trauma in romantic relationships, even as she highlights the emerging economically independent women of the time. In this sense, she presents the potential for women to live up to Du Bois’s ideal from “The Damnation of Women,” in that they might earn respect for their contributions, even if this remains largely an unrealized ideal in the 1950s. Lily, whom Frank falls in love with due to her perceived vulnerability, becomes the breadwinner in their relationship, and she is the one with ambition. Revealing a shift in traditional gender roles, Frank states that with Lily, the breakable “*little wishbone V took up residence in my own chest and made itself at home. It was her forefinger that kept me on edge*” (68; emphasis added). Appropriating the feminine role allows him to feel safely vulnerable, but he is still unable to function in the real world, or to talk to Lily about the war. Thus, Lily gradually adopts the masculine role in the relationship to counter Frank’s PTSD, alcoholism, and unwillingness to face his memories. Their relationship continues a trend from Morrison’s earlier novels such that, as Mayberry suggests, “not only have black men successfully retained their special vitality in spite of white male resistance; their connections to black women have saved their lives” (“Something Other” 1). Such is the case when Frank retains at least some agency through his protection of Cee and his feelings of safety with Lily. Only by facing his traumatic memories, however, can

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<sup>10</sup>Valorie Thomas states that in such moments “Frank’s habit of covering her eyes is protective but resembles closing a corpse’s eyes, suggesting that her dependence perpetuates social death” (196).

he begin to understand what prompted his actions in the past, and in so doing begin to consider what type of man he wishes to become.

The moment when Frank recalls shooting the Korean girl is one that highlights her helplessness and showcases his threatened male identity. She is weak, malnourished, and innocent, making his reaction to her sexual proposition more violent. Frank sees a “*child’s hand sticking out and patting the ground*” (94), searching for food, and he immediately thinks of himself and Cee stealing peaches as children. The Korean girl has “*two missing teeth*” and “*eager eyes*” (95), and then is shot in the face by the “*guard*,” whom we later learn is Frank. The description of her childishness is linked to Frank’s admission that he knew there were men in Korea “*marketing children*”—clearly, females are particularly vulnerable in that time and place. Reacting to the fact that “*he felt tempted*” (96), Frank attacks her very identity as female and as a human by shooting her “*in her face*” (133), removing the threatening gaze of the Other. He then embraces the act of killing Koreans, pretending that he is acting solely in retribution for the death of his friends. He clings to the glorification of masculine brutality, saying to his friend Stuff that Mike’s last words, “Don’t tell Mama,” which reveal potential weakness, were actually “Kill the fuckers” (97). Morrison makes it clear that this retaliation allows Frank to repress his own crime, since “before that, before the deaths of his homeys, he had witnessed the other one” (99). This “other” death is that of the Korean girl, which is the source of his self-hatred. Only as he begins to face these memories does the healing process begin, one which requires him to dislodge his entrenched notions of masculinity.

Ultimately, Morrison does not present the reader with a fixed view of masculinity. Frank is allowed to “speak back” to the narrator of the story (not necessarily Morrison herself), challenging his/her authority. One notable example of this “speaking back” concerns gender roles as well as racial prejudice, when Frank encounters the aftermath of a “riot” (24) where a black man tried to get a cup of coffee and was prevented by white patrons. His wife tried to defend him, and both were hurt. The narrator claims that Frank’s internal response was, “He will beat her when he they get home. . . . And who wouldn’t? . . . What was intolerable was the witness of a woman, a wife, who not only saw it, but had dared to try to rescue—rescue!—him. He couldn’t protect himself and he couldn’t protect her either” (26). The narrator emphasizes the protective masculine role, the humiliation of emasculation, and the

resulting violence against black women. However, Frank contradicts this interpretation. He says that he thought the man was proud of his wife, but just couldn't show it in front of other men (69). While the narrator wishes to highlight a male role asserting power through violence, Frank's statement counteracts this view, although he acknowledges the power of peer pressure.<sup>11</sup> As Ikard argues regarding Morrison's presentation of masculinity in *Beloved*, here too

Morrison approaches black male accountability as it concerns reinforcing white male hegemony and subjugating black women as an organically complex and confounding issue—complex and confounding, that is, precisely because of the untold scars of black oppression across gender lines and the unspeakable pathology that is white male hegemony. (203-04)

Thus, Frank is accountable for his actions (many of which are reprehensible, such as killing the Korean girl), yet also oddly sympathetic, since Morrison highlights America's systems of racial oppression and how the white patriarchy has impacted concepts of black masculinity. Frank's case is "complex and confounding" (204) because while he sometimes resists concepts of violent masculinity, as when he speaks back to the narrator about the riot, he also reverts to the role of the strong (or violent) protector as the core of his identity. For Frank, the change to a more progressive masculinity involves facing the impact of trauma on his identity, and realizing the power that memory and history have to shape one's future.

The journey from struggling with white hegemonic notions of masculinity to a progressive black masculinity is fraught with difficulty. Until Frank finds Cee and heals their relationship, he is doomed to remain in a cycle of violent and overprotective treatment of women, and to remain in denial of his own act of murder. Consequently, Morrison engages Du Bois's dictum that one of the most important challenges for black men is to achieve a "self-conscious manhood" ("Souls" 365), even as she reveals the challenges facing any black man seeking that goal in mid-century America. As Frank returns to the South, his outdated concepts of masculinity appear immovable. Before arriving in Atlanta,

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<sup>11</sup>Yvette Christiansë links Frank's "speaking back" to the narrator here as a corrective move but one that is somewhat limited: he "makes or remakes the fictive figuring of history's resistance to narration. In excess, like history, he is the characterological form of resistance to dominant narratives but also the sign of a limit to the corrective simplifications of oppositional narratives" (4).

he witnesses a pimp unemotionally watching two prostitutes fight and violently intervenes, “Unable to stop and unwilling to” (101). He reverts to physical strength as a vindication of his masculine identity, despite the fact that his aid is unwanted. While his rage in Korea is impersonal, fueling killing sprees that are “fierce but mindless, anonymous,” this encounter is described as “personal in its delight” (102), perhaps because he associates the vulnerability of the whores with his sister, whom he is desperate to protect in order to preserve his original identity. Ultimately, Morrison elaborates upon a pattern that Danielle Russell identifies: instead of presenting reified gender categories, Morrison explores “counter definitions and alternative terrains,” revealing a “hybrid territory of connection which incorporates both feminine and masculine characteristics” (3). Both Frank and Cee come to embody this “hybrid territory of connection” in terms of gender—one which, over time, will foster healing. Healing is made possible in part by the creation of a “homeplace,” as defined by bell hooks—“a safe place where black people could affirm one another and by so doing heal many of the wounds inflicted by racist domination” (42). It is also facilitated by the confrontation of traumatic memory and by a return to ancestral and traditional knowledge through community mothering.

#### **“you a person, too”: The Female Ancestor and Recovering Feminine Agency**

Morrison’s challenging of gender roles works by underscoring traditional gender roles for black men and women and then showing how changes are possible, if not imminent. As Linda Wagner-Martin remarks, *Home* “becomes a kind of gendered prolegomenon, a look into what a successful black man’s life might be. . . . [as well as] the successful life of a black woman” (161). Morrison gives credit to the knowledge of black women and the power of community while acknowledging the changes of the twentieth century that allowed women more agency. Du Bois states in “The Damnation of Women” that, in the early twentieth century, black women had circumscribed roles that were to the detriment of society at large, and that these roles originated in the degradation of black women throughout history. He says that “Only at the sacrifice of intelligence and the chance to do their best work can the majority of modern women bear children” (953). Thus, women are not fully respected as workers or as mothers, a fact that continued to haunt

them into the 1950s, when this novel is set. Morrison also shows that the absence of the “advising, benevolent, protective, wise Black ancestor” (“City Limits” 39) has been extremely detrimental.<sup>12</sup> The ancestor is one who “values racial connection, racial memory over individual fulfillment” (43). In *Home* the ancestor figures are female and rural, and they influence the formation of the civil rights movement and black masculinity and femininity in the early- to mid-twentieth century.

In examining the position of women in the 1950s, their repressively defined roles, and the need for guiding ancestors, Morrison showcases the societal dictates faced by the New Negro woman, who was defined as socially correct, asexual, and active in the church and community.<sup>13</sup> While black women were encouraged to fulfill this role, they were denied access to the newly independent roles granted to white women. Catherine Rottenberg states that the “New Woman,” an independent, professional, and more sexualized figure, emerged in the early twentieth century. However, this category “precluded black women by its very definition” (94), and black women were instead expected to live up to the New Negro female ideal, an asexual and politically active role. As Rottenberg remarks, the New Negro woman is supposed to “*dedicate herself to the advancement of the race*” (99) and not to self-exploration or self-empowerment.<sup>14</sup> A concomitant trend was the separation of female space from male space within the African American community:

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<sup>12</sup>This figure, in fiction by black authors, is found “in the village but not in the city,” and the country is shown as “healing because more often than not, such an ancestor is there” (39). *Anders* shows how the return to Lotus (and the rural) could be linked to the pastoral genre, which “allows the reader to focus on the very meaning of place—the place that has been left and returned to” (118).

<sup>13</sup>Morrison also examines the position of women in relation to the New Negro in *Jazz*, where Dorcas is critiqued by various women for her “loose” behavior. Dorcas’s aunt, Alice Manfred, enforces the asexuality of the New Negro woman in *Jazz*, much like Cee’s grandmother Lenore does in *Home*.

<sup>14</sup>The New Negro woman was also decidedly middle class, for as Patterson notes, “as black women perform dominant middle-class identities—becoming New Negro Women—they not only inspire their mates to embrace a bourgeois production ethic, but they inspire white Americans to recognize their fitness for inclusion in such national rhetorics of progress” (51). There were contested views of how such inclusion was to be accomplished for both black men and women. In the 1920s, for instance, authors like Langston Hughes and Zora Neale Hurston promoted a pastoral, sensualist, vernacular, non-institutional concept of progress, while Du Bois and Claude McKay took a socio-historical approach, based heavily on education and masculinist rhetoric.

Hill Collins shows how “racial segregation delimited African Americans from white physical space” after urban migration, and “gender relations within black communities delimited female from male space” (“Work, Family” 127). Respectable women stayed within their designated “female” spaces, which were often ruled by the women themselves. In such places, as Cee’s grandmother Lenore reflects, “Mamas are supposed to spank and rule you so you grow up knowing right from wrong” (43), and “Decent women” (44) do not behave sexually, go against societal norms, or speak up when they are wronged.<sup>15</sup> Overall, Morrison acknowledges the sociological realities faced by men and women of the 1950s, who encountered systemic racism and antiquated gender roles, even as she advocates a return to valuing the rural, the vernacular, and power over one’s own body.

She does so through Cee’s journey to strength and independence. In the beginning, Cee is trained by her grandmother to view herself as inadequate and voiceless. She does not receive othermothering (mothering of someone who is not one’s own child) from Lenore, so she is not given the “maps” of experience that would inform her of her heritage and empower her (O’Reilly 12). Nor is Cee exposed to othermothering in Lotus, due to the community’s dislike for Lenore (5). Morrison shows how, as O’Reilly notes, “mothering . . . is profoundly a political act with social and public connections and consequences” (30). Indeed, children like Cee and Frank spend most of their lives feeling worthless. However, as Melissa Schindler argues, Morrison still creates a sense of the homeplace as a “*constructive* space,” even if it is “rife with sexism, racism, and contradiction” (75). Cee eventually experiences a constructive home, though she initially exemplifies the weak female caught in a doomed romance. Feeling “broken down” (54), uneducated,

<sup>15</sup>This is of course reflecting the “Cult of True Womanhood” dominant for white women during the nineteenth century. As Perkins remarks, black women initially had no access to claims of being a “lady” because “The emphasis upon women’s purity, submissiveness and natural fragility was the antithesis of the reality of most black women’s lives during slavery and for many years thereafter” (18). After emancipation, as black women gained greater access to education and freedom, “many elite blacks . . . embraced the Victorian ‘true womanhood’ ideal of the 1820’s and 1830’s” (24). In the later part of the nineteenth century and into the twentieth century, the focus shifted to racial uplift and education of the next generations, but sexual norms relating to purity remained. As Patterson clarifies, “Instead of the ‘selfish’ attributes of the white ‘New Woman’—sexual freedom and individual accomplishment—the black expression of New Womanhood epitomized refinement, domestic accomplishment, and race progress” (59).

and desperate to find a job, she turns to Dr. Beauregard, who, unbeknownst to her, practices eugenics on black women. Because he is a doctor, a white man, and her employer, Cee allows his invasive gynecological procedures, which leave her barren and near death. Morrison ominously mentions other girls who have quit or been fired from Dr. Beauregard's employ. In one of the book's most poignant metaphors, Morrison describes how Cee and Sarah, the other woman working for Dr. Beauregard, sit in the kitchen seeking out female melons to eat, purportedly the "sweetest" and "juiciest" (66). This reference to female physicality and fertility is ironic given that Cee's ability to bear children will be stolen. Because the doctor's experiments leave her deathly ill, this moment is insidious in its glee at the ingestion of the female.<sup>16</sup> Like the melons, the women treated by Dr. Beauregard are "cut . . . in two" (66). Psychologically speaking, Cee is also cut in two—she yearns for an education and independence, but she has been taught that she cannot stand alone. Here, Morrison reveals a focus on the body as related to larger issues that, as Ferguson remarks, is present in many of her works: it is "subject to the changes of growth and injury, to exchanges with others (through the nature of community, through shared pleasure, inflicted pain, or degradation), and—on both the material and psychological levels—to the ways in which it is perceived and defined by others" (20). Through Cee, Morrison illustrates how the body is related to identity, as Cee's race, gender, and age work together to form limitations that she must learn to negotiate if she is to survive.

Despite this ominous demonstration of Cee's naïveté, which is based on her rural and uneducated background, as well as her role as the stereotypical female, Morrison also emphasizes the power, strength, and knowledge of women in the country, and the persistent presence of traditional gender roles. The women of Lotus serve as ancestor figures who could have helped to raise Cee and Frank effectively, had they not been repelled by Lenore. Lenore is not entirely unsympathetic as a character—she lost her husband when white men shot him, and she now lives with a dismissive man whose grandchildren destroy "her haven" (88). However, she is also a model of judgmental femininity, policing the

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<sup>16</sup>This moment may also include an oblique reference to Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and the protagonist, Janie. Upon returning to her village with an accumulation of wisdom regarding independence and the power of love, Janie is described as having "firm buttocks like she had grape fruits in her hip pockets" (2). The community objectifies her and reduces her to her physical appearance out of jealousy.

actions of other women and making sure they knew “their level and hers” (92), such as when she calls Cee worthless and implies that she is over-sexualized. Overall, Lenore fails to do the work of creating the homeplace “as a site of resistance” (O’Reilly 33), where children are taught to love and value themselves, a teaching that has political ramifications for black children growing up in a racist society. Lenore especially judges Mrs. K, a hairdresser in Lotus who sleeps with teenage boys. Though a minor character, Mrs. K emerges as one of the book’s few examples of an empowered black woman: she seeks her own pleasure, does not depend on a man, is economically independent, and provides a sexual outlet that does not threaten any marriages. The women of Lotus conclude that “their own daughters were safer” (90) if the young men slept with Mrs. K.<sup>17</sup> Ultimately, Lenore’s model of womanhood is shown as ineffective, for it creates boundaries rather than community. When Lenore has a stroke, she receives dutiful charity from the women in Lotus, but they believe that she has gotten what she deserved. These women do help Frank save Cee, for although they may be uneducated in many ways, they are also strong, and rich in ancestral wisdom. They waste nothing, take responsibility for their actions, and pass on wisdom to the next generation.

Ultimately, Cee and Lily emerge as heroines of the novel, revealing a new possibility for female gender roles. Lily portrays the ideal New Negro woman, showing respectability in profession and appearance.<sup>18</sup> Still, she goes against the gender norms of her time by prioritizing her ambition at the expense of a man. Although she loves Frank, she is unwilling to live as his caretaker. As with the black male gender role, Morrison shows how Lily faces societal limitations because of her race. Even with “how neatly dressed she was and how perfect her straightened hair” (73), she cannot buy her own home. However, this obstacle does

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<sup>17</sup>Mrs. K is of course reminiscent of Sula, one of Morrison’s earlier representations of an empowered and sexually adventurous woman. However, while Sula is explored as a character full of complexity and contradictions, Mrs. K remains an undeveloped character in *Home*, perhaps indicating her unique status as a sexually free woman in a rural area during this time period.

<sup>18</sup>Thomas shows how with this mention of Lily’s work in the theatre, and mention of the real-life play *The Morrison Case* by Albert Maltz (who was imprisoned for his communist sympathies), Morrison may be highlighting resonances with contemporary gender inequities, thereby “signifying on, and closing the distance between, similarities in Cee’s gender landscape and the one we continue to inhabit” (201-02).

not defeat her. Upon leaving Frank, she feels “a shiver of freedom, of earned solitude, of choosing the wall she wanted to break through, minus the burden of shouldering a tilted man. Unobstructed and undistracted, she could get serious and develop a plan to match her ambition and succeed.” Lily’s freedom is something that she has earned, and her success does not seem to be in doubt. She will follow the lead of her grandmother, who also fought for the right to “choose . . . and not ever be moved” (80). In this way, Morrison shows how strong black women have passed on such qualities to subsequent generations, in a chain of power that goes straight through the twentieth century and confronts its particular forms of racism. This is what is known as the motherline—“the ancestral memory and the ancient properties of traditional black culture” (O’Reilly 35)—that empowers young women. And yet, Lily’s choice is not without sacrifice—for her, the coin purse Frank leaves behind is “a perfectly fair trade” (81) for his presence, suggesting that he is equivalent in value to the money he forgets, but also that she has to choose one or the other. Morrison thereby indicates that in the 1950s the option to have love *and* economic independence was not realized for women.<sup>19</sup>

Morrison illustrates how, for young black women in rural areas, challenging gender roles remains difficult but essential. Raised in Lotus, Cee learned that women were often characterized as domestic or physically weak. Lenore admires her hired girl because her “ironing was flawless,” and she has her use an ineffective rag mop rather than have to see her scrub the floor with her “little girl body bent down on all fours” (85, 86). In addition, Lenore remembers that Frank protected Cee in such a way that her weakness was exacerbated, “soothing her as though she were his pet kitten” (88). Frank in turn reflects that Cee “*was a shadow for most of my life*” and that she “*was the first person I ever took responsibility for*” (103, 104). Overall, Morrison shows that both men and women need to take responsibility for their own lives, and not depend on the other for self-realization. The women in Lotus tell Cee that she let herself be mistreated, that “Men know a slop jar when they

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<sup>19</sup>While male authors like Du Bois tended to reinforce a middle-class vision of respectable femininity, Morrison uses Lily as something of a counter-example—she is a woman who is untethered from traditional male guidance, and she sees her grandmother as her primary exemplar of behavior. As Balfour notes, Du Bois’s examples of women “are often put to the service of a typology that reinforces prevailing class and gender norms” (131), but Morrison avoids this typology.

see one,” and “You ain’t a mule to be pulling some evil doctor’s wagon” (122). These statements recall Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, in which Janie’s grandmother teaches her that “De nigger woman is de mule uh de world so fur as Ah can see” (14). Here, Morrison aligns her vision of the future for black women in America with that of Hurston, who shows Janie taking control of her own happiness. Cee shows progress toward this goal as she absorbs female ancestral knowledge. She learns that it is her responsibility to manage her life, just as these women “took responsibility for their lives and for whatever, whoever else needed them” (123). In this small village, Cee is healed by women who “loved mean” (121). She is told,

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. . . . Somewhere inside you is that free person I’m talking about. Locate her and let her do some good in the world. (126)<sup>20</sup>

This statement foregrounds the importance of self-empowerment, coupled with a frank assessment of the limitations of being black, young, and a woman.

By the end of the novel, Cee’s progress toward a new version of femininity is clear. O’Reilly notes that in Morrison’s novels, healing takes place when children denied proper mothering “finally acquire self-love and achieve selfhood by being remothered as adults” (40). Such is the case with Cee, as she learns from her elders, elects to stay in Lotus and earn money by sewing quilts, and welcomes her brother into their home as an equal, not as a protector. The quilting indicates how Cee is piecing together the fragments of her identity and creating art that is a means of self-expression as well as of economic independence. Both Aoi Mori and Hill Collins have noted that quilting symbolized power and freedom for black women, and a womanist theory of “individual freedom and collective solidarity” might be seen in the metaphor of quilting (Mori 18).<sup>21</sup> Having decided that “This is where I belong” (126), Cee

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<sup>20</sup>This moment reflects the blacksmith’s instructions to Florens in *A Mercy*, when he tells her to stop acting like a slave and to “Own yourself, woman, and let us be” (166). It also echoes Paul D’s statement to Sethe in *Beloved* that “You your best thing, Sethe. You are” (258).

<sup>21</sup>Alice Walker also indicates the power of quilting in her short story “Everyday Use” and her novel *The Color Purple*, as well as in her interviews and criticism.

chooses a life that interweaves independence and community, modeled on the women who heal her. In the book's conclusion, Frank takes the first quilt she has made and uses it to re-bury the unearthed body of the murdered black man, symbolically burying the roles that once confined them. This act also shows his newfound respect for Cee, who wants "to be the one who rescued her own self" (129). Suffering with her infertility, Cee demands her right to cry if she wishes, refusing to "hide from what's true just because it hurts" (131). Cee's progress demonstrates a movement beyond traditional affiliations of the female with motherhood, as she is empowered despite her loss of fertility. Frank, after witnessing her transformation, is finally moved to his own, as he is freed from the burden of carrying her.

#### **"Let's go home": Potential Progress and Change**

While traditionally women have been viewed as the "weaker sex," Morrison applies the same potential for weakness to men. Only by witnessing Cee's willingness to mourn for her losses is Frank able to begin facing his memories. Seeing that his sister is "gutted, infertile, but not beaten" (132) allows Frank to move toward a more nuanced definition of masculinity. First, he admits that "*I shot the Korean girl in her face*" (133). He confronts "*what's true*" (134), but only after Cee shows him the way. Progressive masculinity becomes a possibility for Frank as they return to the tree that serves as a symbol of home throughout the novel, bury the skeleton of the murdered man upright, and attach a wooden marker that says "Here Stands a Man" (145). This moment signifies Frank's movement toward a masculinity based on dignity and integrity, but most significantly, it is a shift that is *not* dependent on the fragility of a female counterpart. Through this act of recuperation and self-redefinition, Frank is able to envision a new future. Like the tree itself, the two siblings are both "*Hurt right down the middle / But alive and well*" (147). In the end, despite the pressure to "prove himself" as a black man, Frank learns "another way to be an adult, to be a man" (Brown). Also critical is the fact that Cee takes on the leadership role in the final moments of the novel, saying "*Come on brother. Let's go home*" and leading Frank back to their shared home. Her directive does not signal closure but rather the beginning of a journey—one that, as Yvette Christiansë notes, shows how "both community and home are destinations still to be reached" (251).

*Home* shows the kind of progress that Morrison evokes when she says that she sees not simply the repetition of white abuse and black trauma but “the signs of irrevocable and permanent change” (“A Slow Walk” 5). Though racial prejudice has negatively affected gender roles, and individual trauma further complicates prospects for healing, Morrison shows progress in African American male and female roles. She states that we need to guard against the “disability” of examining only one gendered point of view, for “the female who reproduces the female who reproduces the female” (“Rootedness” 63) is not a healthy system. And yet, she also seems to be intrigued by Du Bois’s argument that “The uplift of women is, next to the problem of the color line and the peace movement, our greatest modern cause” (“Damnation” 965). Unfortunately, because Du Bois postulates the recognition of women as something that has to take place by men, his is a feminist argument only to an extent. Morrison clarifies that women have always taken responsibility for themselves, and that they need to teach that ability to the next generation. Not only that, but both men and women need to find a home in themselves that eclipses the condition of double consciousness. As Morrison stated in her exhibit for the Louvre, “The Foreigner’s Home,” home is a place beyond double consciousness where “one can imagine safety without walls, can iterate difference that is prized but unprivileged” (Schreiber 162). This is the vision for the future that she presents in this novel, which evokes the safety of home in one’s own recuperated body and in a community that nurtures the strength of men and women who, as Morrison demonstrates, will face the racial prejudices of the twentieth century with strength and dignity born out of active choice and responsibility.

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