

# *Home* as a Rosetta Stone for Toni Morrison's Decryptions of the Masculine

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This essay not only provides an original investigation of Toni Morrison's 2012 novel, *Home*, but it carries on the examination of Morrison and the masculine that Susan Neal Mayberry began in her 2007 book published by the University of Georgia Press: *Can't I Love What I Criticize?* Reflecting Morrison's adroit ability to engage imaginatively with several subjects simultaneously, *Home* encapsulates most of the themes that have fueled her fiction, establishing itself, in *New York Times* reviewer Michiko Kakutani's words, as "a kind of tiny Rosetta Stone to Toni Morrison's entire oeuvre". The novel continues to track such well-known paths as white male houses versus black male homes, the disruption of classical and popular masculine myths, the free black male, the traveling Ulysses scene, African American trauma, and the possibility of redemption via unmotivated respect. It also explores some new directions such as a brother/sister partnership and the fiction of gender unveiled by masculine sartorial performance. Since her tenth book undeniably becomes a kind of tiny Rosetta Stone to Morrison and the masculine, "*Home* as a Rosetta Stone for Toni Morrison's Decryptions of the Masculine" contributes to gender studies and to American/African American cultural studies.

*Keywords:* *Home*, Toni Morrison, African American culture, black masculinity, gender studies

## Introduction

Toni Morrison's serious reviewers caught on quickly to the astonishingly taut prose of her tenth novel along with its links to the previous nine: "This scarily quiet tale packs all the thundering themes Morrison has explored before" (Charles, 2012, *The Washington Post*); "A hallmark of Morrison's magic is the way that her imagination engages critically with several subjects simultaneously, but *Home* is particularly intriguing because it also seems to be a reflection on the author's previous works" (Jones, 2012, *San Francisco Chronicle*); Encapsulating "all the themes that have fueled her fiction", this "haunting, slender novel is a kind of tiny Rosetta Stone to Toni Morrison's entire oeuvre" (Kakutani, 2012, *The New York Times*).<sup>1</sup>

Ironically enough, not one of the primarily male-edited "thought-leader publications" cited above caught on to the distinctively male slant of *Home* (2012), which essentially "put[s] his story next to hers" in celebration of the black collective (*Beloved*, 1988, p. 273). "Thought-leader publication" alludes to a recent Internet, Cable News Network, and print media debate about whether what women's magazines publish is as influential or important as what men's and general interest magazines and newspapers publish: in other words,

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<sup>1</sup> See promotional blubs for the 2013 Vintage paperback edition of *Home*.

can women's magazines do serious journalism?<sup>2</sup> The editors-in-chief of thought-leader publications have overwhelmingly been and continue to be white males. As Morrison pointed out in "What the Black Woman Thinks about Women's Lib" (1971), however, critiques of black masculinity and unwavering support for feminist issues, viewed by many African American women and men alike as a predominantly white "family quarrel", remain hard to pin down in all sorts of publications because relationships between black men and black women have been historically different from the majority of their white counterparts.

Without ignoring the masterful portraits of the females in protagonist Frank Money's life, it was Oprah Winfrey's popular *O Magazine* for women that homed in on *Home*'s particular approach to "a man struggling to reclaim his roots and his manhood". A distinguished feminist colleague concurrently emailed me out of left field: "*Home* is right up your male alley".<sup>3</sup> The reprinted 2013 edition of the book offers a jacket cover that focuses readers' attention on a man's wide-brimmed, black-banded straw hat hooked jauntily on the corner of an armless, straight-backed, dark wood chair. The story proper opens with a trope analogous to Billie Delia's portrait of the New Fathers in *Paradise* (1997): stallions rising up to fight over the mares and foals "like men" (p. 3). Hence, *Home* undeniably becomes a kind of tiny Rosetta Stone to Toni Morrison and the masculine.

While its brief but complicated title reflects the broader subject of the novel, its dedication, also a single word with multiple echoes ("*Slade*"), may tell us more narrowly what Morrison had on her mind. *Home*'s introduction to the public occurred during the Toni Morrison Society's 2008 conference on "Toni Morrison and Modernism", where its author read the opening chapter from her work-in-progress at the College of Charleston's historic Sottile Theater. She shelved that half-finished project for months after the December 2010 death of her younger son, forty-five-year-old Slade, of, according to her, pancreatic cancer and a crazy proclivity for Chinese medicine. Inspired by this co-author of several children's books, Morrison was already thinking seriously about the concept of home in 2005 when she announced at a TMS conference that supercilious Louvre directors had requested she guest curate an exhibit, which she tentatively planned to call "Home". Dryly attributing the administrators' selection of an African American artist to the current unrest in Paris of former colonials, she also chuckled that Slade half-jokingly suggested she incorporate a sample pyramid into her show since, outfitted by Egyptian royalty right down to the slaves deemed requisite to insure civilized life after death, live burial of others certainly confirms the extremes to which people will go to get home. Fear of death and feelings of alienation inevitably accompanied by a mostly futile desire for safety have long been associated in Morrison's mind with black sons. Allowing that, "Home is an idea rather than a place. It's where you feel safe", when asked which one of her three homes is her favorite, she enables homeboy Frank Money to come to this conclusion himself (Leve, 2012).<sup>4</sup>

<sup>2</sup> See *The New Republic* (Grose, 2013, June 17).

<sup>3</sup> See Mayberry, S. N. (2007). *Can't I Love What I Criticize: The Masculine and Morrison*. Athens, GA: U of Georgia P. This analysis of Morrison's oeuvre tracks her ideas about American masculinity from circa Bacon's Rebellion (1676) to the 1990s—over three hundred years. Examining virtually all the male characters she creates prior to its publication, the study demonstrates that even as her novels affirm the "free black male", they also celebrate the balance between the masculine and the feminine and welcome the androgyny endorsed by black male feminism, a flexible black masculinity that eschews homophobia and encourages gender equality. Viewed collectively, Morrison's men 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, the cure for which includes radical social surgery.

<sup>4</sup> Morrison finally named her multidisciplinary initiative exploring displacement, immigration, and exile, on display at the Louvre November 6-29, 2006, *The Foreigner's Home*, which in typical Morrison fashion can also be read as *The Foreigner is Home*. The first line of *Tar Baby*, spoken by the narrator about the black male protagonist named Son, reads forebodingly: "He believed he was safe" (p. 3).

### White Male Houses Versus Black Male Homes

*Home*'s Frank (nicknamed "Smart") Money discovers what it means to be a man as he engages his creator's ongoing truths about home. In her previous novel, *A Mercy* (2008), for example, Morrison introduces the connection between building houses and the construction of American masculinity with her concept of the New World white male: the "ratty orphan become landowner, making a place out of no place, a temperate living from raw life" (p. 12). She actually began this conversation in 1992 with the publication of her singular work of literary criticism, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (1992). As she argued in that series of lectures that "cultural identities are formed and informed by a nation's literature" and theorized how "the image of reined-in, bound, suppressed, and repressed darkness became objectified in American literature as an Africanist persona", she outlined what has been on the "mind" of US literature since Emerson's 1837 Phi Beta Kappa speech, *The American Scholar*: the "self-conscious but highly problematic construction of the American as a new white man" (pp. 38-39).

Collective hardship in unmarked territory compels displaced Europeans to establish solidarity in spite of difference. A rebellious but serviceable black slave population, more accessible than the nonwhite indigenous population, handily enables these otherwise disconnected white men to create bonds of privilege based on differences. This largely explains, according to Morrison, why "that word nigger" became one of the first expressions a newcomer assimilated after "getting off the boat" (Moyers, 1994). In other words, a common skin color and need for New World manhood transform disparate European immigrants into a new American male. Whatever his social status or reputation elsewhere, the white male immigrant becomes more of a "gentleman" in the New World. He manages to constitute an American Africanism as darkness and savagery, a characterization that shapes and makes possible white desires for autonomy, authority, and absolute power. Moreover, shared guilt about being invigorated by rawness as he struggles to survive in a hostile environment, that is, "collective needs to allay internal fears and to rationalize external exploitation" convinces him that dark savagery is "out there" and that his house makes him the Man (*Playing in the Dark*, pp. 38-45).

The association of pristine White Houses with American masculinity, apparent from the onset of Morrison's work, is imprinted tragi-comically into *Home* with Dr. Beauregard Scott's 1950s Buckhead house. She examines the source most explicitly, however, during the New World span before institutionalized racism. In *A Mercy* (2008), we observe Dutch/English immigrant Jacob Vaark acculturated by Portuguese Catholic landowner D'Ortega during the course of Jacob's money-brokering expedition to Maryland's Jublio Plantation. Despite the biblical passages that Jacob had to memorize in the children's quarter of a London poorhouse, which mandated contempt toward the vain, voluptuous "cunning of the Papists", enterprise persuades the American moneylender to set aside his Protestant primer and his disdain for that "arrant whore of Rome" (p. 15). Guilty pleasure ensues. Before beholding Jublio, Jacob could not have been prepared for its honey-colored, iron-gated manor, more like a palace or House of Parliament than a home. If he starts to ascend his American ladder by following D'Ortega's three yellow brick steps, the new English Adam ultimately goes the effete European one step further with Vaark's even more tempting version of frontier masculinity.<sup>5</sup>

Michael K. Johnson defines the frontier narrative's chronicle of conquest as a story of male identity formation, which rests upon the belief that an encounter with otherness transforms the subjectivity of the hero.

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<sup>5</sup> Named after the Old Testament Jacob yet looking a lot like a new English Adam, Jacob Vaark finds himself treading "the edge of an immense Eden" (Updike, 2008, p. 112).

The hero in effect becomes a new man and the representative of a new manhood. His masculinity outranks both the putative savagery of the American Indian and the ultracivilized maleness of the European because American manhood combines the best elements of both. Thus, Vaark's encounter with D'Ortega, the upper-class, supercilious, yet superfluous son, validates for the new white male that neither bloodlines nor character makes the Man. When he identifies the only things in the New World separating the worthiness of the Portuguese third son from that of the Anglo-Dutch orphan to be the degree of their things and the death of his sons, Jacob locates the wellspring of white American masculinity—the fusion of sophisticated negotiator with savage street kid consolidated in a patrilineal house. In concord with the Pilgrims' City upon a Hill, however, his New York estate would be purer and nobler than the houses of the decadent European sons further south. In contemporary street terms, Jacob Vaark turns his testosterone into constructing a home that enriches white male Protestant virility. But, rationalizing that “there was a profound difference between the intimacy of slave bodies at Jublio and a remote labor force in Barbados” which provides the cane sugar for his profitable rum-dealing, he sells his soul in doing so.

Decoding *Home*'s shorthand reveals that Morrison has employed many variations on the huge house/tiny phallus theme in order to question American white male materialism. The figurative disruption of the pretty green-and-white house described at the beginning of *The Bluest Eye*'s (1970) Dick and Jane primer leads us indirectly into Pauline Breedlove's literal devastation of her own daughter in favor of hail-fellow Mr. Fisher's well-met lakefront property. We wince at Mrs. Garner's striking misjudgment in handing over Garner's nice-Nazi kind of Sweet Kentucky Home to *Beloved*'s big-hatted, small-minded schoolteacher. We chuckle at Circe's dark determination to see Rhett Butler's rendition of Tara not only gone with the wind, but so rife with stink that people dare not go anywhere downwind of it. Morrison's cutting irony hums ominously along with the sleek, handsome, obedient but barely contained German Weimaraners as *Song of Solomon*'s (1977) shape-shifting witch/midwife describes how the Butlers loved, stole, lied, and killed for their house, how Circe will never again clean it or one thing in it, and how she delivers the vicious, steel-gray dogs to destroy it and to ensure that no one can enter it to rebuild.

We laugh outright when *Tar Baby*'s (1981) adroit black butler, Sydney Childs, takes over Valerian Street's temperature-controlled hilltop hothouse, having already assimilated smoothly into the calculated artifice of a winter home designed impressively enough to warrant its own name. The not too overdone main house a not completely disguised façade for its wealthy owner's studiously casual, inadvertently repressive *sprezzatura*, the greenhouse to which this Candy King retreats becomes a trope for the impossibly pristine permanence idealized by white male American dreamers made viable by the washhouse containing their black American scapegoat. Witness to Valerian's willful innocence having reduced him to a petit prince waving his hands vaguely in the conditioned air of his fantasy island, resolved that if L'Arbe de la Croix is not the Childs's home, then “nothing is but the grave”, Sydney retorts when his wife warns they will have to bury themselves: “Well, in that case the shroud may as well be comfy” (pp. 283-284).

We do not know whether to laugh or cry when we meet *Home*'s Dr. Beauregard Scott of Buckhead, a beautiful, chic, still uptown district of 1950s Atlanta. A strangely obnoxious mixture of *Beloved*'s [un]Enlightened schoolteacher and its Scots Quaker radical, Edward Bodwin, Dr. Beau keeps his own counsel in the “large two-story house rising above a church-neat lawn” bought with Mrs. Beauregard Scott's money (p. 58). Comprising approximately the northern fifth of the city, Buckhead remains the third-largest business district in Atlanta behind Downtown and Midtown and represents a major commercial and financial center of

the Southeast. The district's hotels, condominiums, and high-rise office buildings form a distinctly urbanized center along Peachtree Road. Surrounding this dense core are Buckhead's elite suburban neighborhoods, which feature large single-family homes situated among thick forests and rolling hills. A reflection of its dual neighborhoods, Morrison's Buckhead house certainly depicts two very different versions of American masculinity.

One account censures the Man. As they do in *Beloved's* depictions of pretentious white intellectuals, tropes of thick heads and high ends signify *Home's* most inflated male ego. Morrison describes her latest pigheaded anti-social Scotsman as a "small man with lots of silver hair", sitting "stiffly [in his home office] behind a wide neat desk". His camouflage of a kind doctor disguises a fanatically racist eugenicist similar to starchily-collared schoolteacher and masks a vain misogynist who fancies himself a feisty champion of knightly causes like Brother Bodwin.<sup>6</sup> Self-righteous Dr. Scott relies on his "heavyweight Confederate" heritage and a locked but fully stocked bomb shelter to protect his righteous self-image (pp. 62-64).

All these male predators have managed to survive by tiptoeing carefully around the potentially more powerful women whose voices they have, so far, succeeded in stifling: Lillian Garner made literally and metaphorically speechless by the malignant lump in her throat; the various dying females Cincinnati's lifelong abolitionist has fended off; Dr. Scott's peignoir-wearing, laudanum-loving lady of the house, who never leaves it, and his two hydrocephalic daughters whose swollen heads prohibit laughter and provoke his lethal eugenics research on black "assistants" like Cee Money. If we anticipate the fate of *Beloved's* Sethe as sealed when Baby Suggs senses a dark and coming thing in the form of high-topped shoes she did not like the look of at all, Sarah Williams confirms the bleak prognosis for Dr. Beau's promising assistant when the Scotts' housekeeper answers Cee's request to remove her new white slippers: "Whoever invented high heels won't be happy till they cripple us" (p. 58). Said inventor would be an authentic Middle Eastern rider requiring elevated shoes for his own functionality unlike would-be Confederate warrior Beauregard Scott who is, indeed, quite willing to handicap women to honor his chivalric ideals.<sup>7</sup>

Savagely satiric touches heighten the horror behind Dr. Beau's laboratory, making it crucial in decrypting the tragic results of disallowing the feminine. Morrison encapsulates Mrs. Scott's puerile, self-destructive essence as well as the stout housekeeper Sarah's benignly sturdy nature with brief but emphatically ironic details. Called upon to care for all her finicky employer's needs, Sarah explains Mrs. Scott as having a "tiny" laudanum craving. Aside from dabbling in delicate watercolors of flowers, the lady of the house spends her time watching the family-oriented television shows so popular in the fifties. Contemporary scholarship cautions us against turning the socially whitewashed 1950s into a "nostalgia trap". With research that contributes significantly to the current debate on family values, sociologist Stephanie Coontz cuts through the kind of sentimental, ahistorical thinking that has created unrealistic expectations of the ideal family as she illustrates how "these myths distort the diverse experiences of other groups in America" and argues that they "don't even describe most white, middle-class families accurately" (p. 6).<sup>8</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Morrison's name for *Beloved's* "Bodwin" recalls the urban insult for an egghead who has no social life.

<sup>7</sup> Tracing the elevated shoe to male horse-riding warriors in the 9th-century Middle East, Elizabeth Semmelhack (2008), curator for the Bata Shoe Museum in Toronto, explains that the high heels helped to hold the rider's foot in his stirrup.

<sup>8</sup> *The Way We Never Were* concludes that "there is no one family form that has ever protected people from poverty or social disruption, and no traditional arrangement that provides a workable model for how we might organize family relations in the modern world" (Coontz, 1992, p. 5).

With Mrs. Scott's line-up of family-friendly programs, Morrison chooses her particulars carefully. The doctor's wife thoroughly enjoys *Milton Berle* and *The Honeymooners* but cannot continue her flirtation with *I Love Lucy* because she "hated Ricky Ricardo too much to watch it" (p. 65). A Jewish child-actor turned comedian, chosen as permanent host of NBC's *Texaco Star Theater* in 1948, "Mr. Television" (Berle) risked his newfound stardom at its zenith to challenge Texaco when the sponsor tried to prevent black performers from appearing on his stage. *The Honeymooners* was one of the first US television shows to portray the grittier, non-idyllic side of working-class married couples: the Kramdens and the Nortons struggle to survive in a rundown Brooklyn apartment complex. If privately foul-mouthed and reputedly big-phallic Uncle Miltie "worked clean" on air but consciously broke TV's color line and if Irish American Jackie Gleason played a blustering bus driver quietly devoted to his wife and best friend (and provided future inspiration for the soft-hearted, animated Fred Flintstone), the lovably excitable Latin band leader and beleaguered husband of Lucy Ricardo was actually Desi Arnez: flashy, explosive, hard-drinking, tough-dealing, womanizing husband of Lucille Ball. Unaware of their liberal takes on race, class, and gender, politically conservative and willfully innocent Mrs. Scott loves Milton Berle and Jackie Gleason. But she overlooks Ball's superior comedic talents and despises the fictional Ricky Ricardo for all the wrong reasons: his race and presumed lack of class. Buckhead's reigning junkie remains blissfully ignorant of the real upper-crust Cuban alcoholic's abusive disdain for American women like her.

She also opts to ignore her husband's truly depraved proclivities. When Cee asks what all she has to do, Sarah responds that "Mrs. Scott will tell you some, but the doctor himself is the only one who really knows". Upon confirming Cee's name and carefully asking her where she was born; if she has children, is married, or belongs to a church congregation that jumps around; whether or not she graduated from high school and can read or count, the belle with Daisy Buchanan's kind of money but a "voice...like music" cavalierly informs her non-comprehending applicant: "I don't really understand my husband's work—or care to. He is more than a doctor; he is a scientist and conducts very important experiments. His inventions help people. He's no Dr. Frankenstein" (pp. 59-60). In case we miss the significance of that offhand allusion to Mary Shelley's toxic researcher or Cee's bewildered "Dr. who", Morrison reemphasizes twice more that Dr. Beau "invents things". After Sarah explains that he "Tries to get patents for a lot of them" and warns against loud laughter on account of the two hydrocephalic daughters, Cee naively concludes: "I guess that's why he invents things—he wants to help other folks" (pp. 61-63).

### **Disrupting Classical and Popular Masculine Myths**

While a full account of the associations between *Home* and the British fictions of *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus* and *Doctor Who* calls for a separate essay, the tiny Rosetta Stone that is *Home* highlights Morrison's habit of inverting the details of classical and popular masculine myths. For example, Mary Shelley wrote her romantic novel in epistolary form, framing it by documenting a realistically detailed correspondence between failed writer turned naval explorer Captain Robert Walton and his sister, Margaret Walton Saville; Morrison bows to her vernacular culture by combining the powerful echoes of a brief, awkwardly written letter to an army private from his younger sister's current protector with Frank Money's direct addresses to the writer of Morrison's book. Even literate highbrow readers like Edith Wharton have widely misused the name of Shelley's creature, increasing his disaffection by mistaking him for Frankenstein; illiterate folks affectionately screaming with laughter about "Smart" Money's name serves to diminish Frank's estrangement, becoming

“enough to keep a friendship going way after it’s dried up just so they can make lame jokes” (p. 67). Finally, Dr. Frankenstein has to make his creature roughly eight feet tall because of the difficulty in replicating the minute parts of the human body; his creation, which he had hoped would be beautiful, turns out to be hideous. Although the short form of spiritually foul Beaugard Scott’s forename is the French word for “beautiful”, it is Morrison’s Frank [enstein] who is uncommonly physically attractive—and exceptionally tall. Especially when we remember that Morrison has consistently attempted to remove linguistic control by the “white gaze” from all her books, the full meaning of “Beaugard” accentuates her disruption of *Frankenstein* in *Home* when we translate “Beaugard” as “beautiful gaze”.

Further thematic inversions can be found in these female novelists’ warnings about hubristic males who stoop to conquer by overreaching natural and moral boundaries. When “Victor” Frankenstein witnesses lightning splitting an oak tree in two, he attempts like Prometheus to emulate the gods and harness its power. Flirting with fire to enable mankind, he abandons what he creates and is destroyed by his own work. The creature demands that Frankenstein design for him a female companion like the creature. Fearful that creating a mate for the outcast might lead to an entire race of creatures that could plague mankind, Frankenstein destroys the unfinished female creature, after which the monster kills Frankenstein. His creator’s death, however, does not bring the monster peace. Instead, his crimes have increased his misery and alienation, and his final words mirror Victor’s own in describing his regret. If *Home*’s Miss Ethel Fordham responds to the near fatal results of Beaugard Scott’s racist reproductive experiments on Cee with “Have mercy.... She’s on fire”, the Lotus country women who “loved mean” see to it that a “sun-smacked” Cee gets home to Frank, and *Home*’s most powerful last impression focuses on a sweet bay tree, split straight down the middle but still alive, well, and providing its environs with shade (p. 116).

*Home*’s Beaugard e[a]ffects his white male daemon by projecting his fears onto Frank. *Beloved*’s Stamp Paid prepares us for “the secret spread of this new kind of whitefolks’ jungle”: “White people believed that whatever the manners, under every dark skin was a jungle. Swift unnavigable waters, swinging screaming baboons, sleeping snakes, red gums ready for their sweet white blood” (p. 198). Noting the perniciousness of such a self-fulfilling prophesy, that the more

colored people spent their strength trying to convince [whites] how gentle [blacks] were, how clever and loving, how human, the more they used themselves up to persuade whites of something Negroes believed could not be questioned, the deeper and more tangled the jungle grew inside. (p. 198)

African Americans, however, do not import this wilderness; it sprouts from “the jungle white folks planted in [black folks]”. Growing

In, through and after life... it invaded the whites who had made it. Touched them every one. Changed and altered them. Made them bloody, silly, worse than even they wanted to be, so scared were they of the jungle they had made. The screaming baboon lived under their own white skin; the red gums were their own. (pp. 198-199)

When Frank Money spots the MD sign on the Buckhead lawn and is directed downstairs by Sarah, he trusts that educated instinct will balance violence with caution because he “couldn’t let things get so out of control that it would endanger Cee”. Responding to Beaugard Scott’s threat to call the police by knocking the telephone from his hand, Frank calmly notes the kind of gun the smaller man pulls out of his desk drawer: “A.38.... Clean and light. But the hand that held it shook”. Scott points the pistol at what “in his fear ought to have been flaring nostrils, foaming lips, and the red-rimmed eyes of a savage. Instead he saw the quiet, even

serene, face of a man not to be fooled with". After he pulls the trigger on an empty chamber, he runs for another phone but comes up short against Sarah purposefully pressing down its cradle while she locks his gaze "in an undecipherable stare" (pp. 109-112). The Confederate's cowardice is clear—as are Morrison's double entendres. Relieved by the absence of violence or theft (to Scott's mind merely the kidnapping of an easily replaceable employee), the sham with no shame (or sexual potency) turns his aggression toward yet another black woman, one whom, since Sarah looks after his wife, he dares not dismiss yet, though he warns his housekeeper not to overplay her hand. Hiding behind his eugenics, exposed for a henpecked husband, Morrison's great scientist grows fearful that Frank (enstein) is savage. As with a previous *Beloved* schoolteacher, the good doctor's insecurities about white male supremacy and his fear of women transform him into a monster.

### The Free Black Male

Like Frankenstein's monster, Frank must realize that revenge will not set him free. Integrated with the ex-soldier's longtime concern for his sister's wellbeing is "the deep satisfaction that the rescue brought, not only because it was successful but also how markedly nonviolent it had been...not having to beat up the enemy to get what he wanted was somehow superior—sort of, well, smart" (p. 114). Twenty-four-year-old decorated Korean War veteran "Smart" Money becomes Morrison's Rosetta Stone for deciphering her earlier black male characters who refuse vengeful power in order to protect the living and for exposing those that do not. If *Tar Baby's* Sydney, for example, becomes an easy target for accusations of Uncle Tomism, Morrison confesses to "enormous respect" for his fluid reliability (McKay, 1983, p. 405); some might commend with Faulkner the fact that Sydney endured.

Whatever our judgment of Sydney's pride in his long standing position as Du Bois's "Phil-a-delphia Negro mentioned in the book of the very same name", Morrison certainly depicts other descendants of freed black slaves who are more severely distorted by their poor imitations of white male capitalists attempting to secure their home in the rock (p. 163). We are reminded that *Song of Solomon's* Macon Dead fondles the keys to his Southside shacks for the courage to access Doctor Foster's big house on Not Doctor Street via its lion's paw door knocker and the lone[ly] daughter who lives there. Appropriating a mask of white-collar professionalism, perceiving Guitar's tearful grandmother as merely overdue rent, Macon Dead reduces all of life to linear time and money. A dried-up Mrs. Bains speaks for all the residents of Southside's Blood Bank when she tells her grandsons: "A nigger in business is a terrible thing to see" (p. 22). If the grand but solitary states of Deacon's townhouse and Steward's ranch are not enough to convince us of the sterility of rigid romantic visions, in other words that the more *Paradise's* Morgan twins acquire to ensure their safety and that of Ruby's women, the more they visibly lose, we can turn to the two equally destructive manifestations of the most detailed of Morrison's houses—*Paradise's* embezzler's mansion converted to convent school. In *Love* (2003), Morrison's descriptions of Bill Cosey's Hotel and Resort at Sooner Bay and his Number 1 Monarch Street house clarify any man's dream of perfect autonomy as merely a "nightmare with lipstick" (p. 201).

All of these notions come together when *Home* confirms for Frank Money that home is, ultimately, how we live with others before we go to the grave.<sup>9</sup> Whether she is fashioning Frank's testimony or the narrative of the novel per se, Morrison reserves the word *home* for special use: Center City is "territory (p. 9); Bandera County, Texas, and Buckhead are "neighborhoods" (p. 10; p. 58). Back "safe" from "Korea, Kentucky, San

<sup>9</sup> As he "queers [*Home's*] ghost", Juda Bennett examines Morrison's efforts to tie "issues of visibility to a radical refashioning of the idea of home" (pp. 148-149).

Diego, Seattle, Georgia”, Frank cannot bring himself to return home to Lotus without his homeboys (p. 28). Too ashamed to “stand before Mike’s folks or Stuff’s”, dealing with “the flee-floating rage, the self-loathing disguised as somebody else’s fault”, he wanders until his sister helps him overcome survivor’s guilt (p. 15). By cataloguing the various places Frank has lived and pointing out the absence of friendship in the only one he once called home, Morrison shows us that the missing element is a human one. In so doing, she demonstrates that home depends on the people in a place and their practiced belief in the right to pursue freedom. Distortions occur when people unbalance spiritual and elemental, exchanging futile gestures toward an ephemeral permanence for the peace gained in the ongoing search for possibility. Morrison’s concept of home provides comfort when partners locate the path to life via death’s door.

### African American Comrades

*Home*’s unique masculine focus includes its twist on partnership. At her 2008 Sottile Theater reading, Morrison commented that she had planned for some time to write a book about the relationship between a brother and his sister. In her May 8th address marking Vanderbilt University’s “Senior Day”, she took as her subject the metaphor of money as mistress:

It is precisely because service is such a part of this university’s DNA [deoxyribonucleic acid] that I want to talk to this class of 2013 about a subject that influences and in many cases distresses us all... a subject that is an appropriate theme delivered to students in these provocative times of uncertainty. And that subject is money.... Money is the not-so-secret mistress of all our lives. And like all mistresses, you certainly know if she has not already seduced you. Whether she has or not, she is on your mind. (Toni Morrison Society website)

Addressing this obsessive American partnership with money, *Home* rejects the seductive mistress of materialism in favor of simple caring for between members of a trust, the kind of “comrades” that Morrison recalls with her parents and the sort she creates with the MacTeers; the Childs; Marie Therese Foucault and her nephew Gideon; Joe and Violet Trace; Alice Manfred and a woman who may need a few things; Sandler and Vida Gibbons; Scully and Mr. Bond (McKay, p. 398). Perhaps Richard Misner and Anna Flood say it best at the end of *Paradise* when the former opts for ministering to Ruby as he senses the presence of a window and the other decides to stand by her man only after she perceives a door. As is the way with *Jazz* (1992), *Home* abandons the white male’s Big House for a place both “snug and wide open” (*Jazz*, p. 221).

Morrison refuses, however, to let matriarchy replace patriarchy in a no-win game of who gets what.<sup>10</sup> If *Home*’s non-veteran Salem Money has placidly outlasted Lenore to take over her house and handle her money, he sees to her needs even as he satisfies his own, playing chess on Fish Eye’s porch perpetually surrounded by empty pop bottles, newspapers, and fishing poles—“all the gatherings that made men comfortable”. When Frank criticizes Salem’s query about the status of “his” car, “That would be the last thing on [Cee’s] mind, Grandpappy. And it should be the last thing on yours”, the craftily flexible old crow quoth not “Nevermore”: ““Yeah, well’. Salem moved his queen” (p. 140). Having exposed himself a veteran at standing on the bank of the sometimes stream/sometimes mud Wretched, “Smart” Money makes a far less antagonistic home with a

<sup>10</sup> Morrison declares her position about feminism in an interview with Zia Jaffrey (1998): “In order to be as free as I possibly can, in my own imagination, I can’t take positions that are closed. Everything I’ve ever done, in the writing world, has been to expand articulation, rather than to close it, to open doors, sometimes, not even closing the book—leaving the endings open for reinterpretation, revisitation, a little ambiguity. I detest and loathe [those categories]. I think it’s off-putting to some readers, who may feel that I’m involved in writing some kind of feminist tract. I don’t subscribe to patriarchy, and I don’t think it should be substituted with matriarchy. I think it’s a question of equitable access, and opening doors to all sorts of things”.

sister who is “guttled, infertile, but not beaten”... one who “could know the truth, accept it, and keep on quilting” (p. 132). He must now chase down the daemons that haunt him about the kind of man who could kill a little girl after she took him down to a place he did not know was in him.

### The Traveling Ulysses Scene

While the black male’s efforts to get home may take up the most masculine space in *Home*, the text acts as a Rosetta Stone for some of Morrison’s other ideas about African American manhood as well. Several of her novels, for example, define black masculinity via tropes of flight and song, what she calls in *Song of Solomon* the traveling Ulysses scene. If *Sula* (1973) introduces us to the motif of trains and planes that suggests Ajax’s longing for freedom, *Tar Baby* shows Son’s desire to jump ship; *Beloved* presents Paul D as a singing man who “never stayed uncaught” (p. 268); *Jazz* has that hunter’s hunter Joe Trace train dance on into the City; *Paradise* contains Old Fathers who walk and New Fathers that drive; *Love* associates Bill Cosey’s tender side with L’s sweet tenor man, the constantly moving sea; and the blacksmith in *A Mercy* puts his art and his son above anyone who would enslave him or herself, reflecting Morrison’s long expressed delight in the “interesting magic” of black men who will “split in a minute” (Stepito, 1994, pp. 391-392).

*Song of Solomon* connects black male locomotion to songs about ancestry, including the ramifications of enslavement and its denial of transcendence. Morrison specifically juxtaposes the sighting of a white male peacock with a myth of the flying African. If her introduction to the peacock associates it with white male vanity, she also uses her symbol to forecast Milkman Dead’s rebirth. The minute the white creature appears, it flashes a “tail full of jewelry” that allows Guitar both to identify it as male and mock it as earthbound: “Can’t nobody fly with all that shit”. We are reminded that Milkman has adopted his father’s white-is-right mentality and re[as]signed himself to a money-grubbing existence. However, his decrypting of the flying African and newly gained appreciation of preliterate culture along with instruction from his black American brothers allow Macon Dead III to be reborn. When Guitar says, “Wanna fly, you got to give up the shit that weighs you down”, he does not overlook the hard stuff like your pilot/Pilate and your living life. Although readers criticize, justifiably, the destructiveness endorsed by Guitar’s character, we must concede that Morrison’s white peacock soars away only to light on the hood of a blue Buick whereas the old men of Shalimar mark Milkman’s initiation into manhood when he eats of the raw heart of a slain bobcat reminiscent of Guitar. Being forced to figure out and rely solely on his own instincts to survive is the only sure way for Milkman to become the “lodestar” of racial guidance and black masculinity that Guitar knows he can be. And this coup can only be completed when an already lost Guitar kills Milkman’s Pilate, hence compelling Milkman to confront the brother who would both save and take his Dead life, Guitar himself.

Morrison explores these paradoxes again in her second African American Odyssey. But in *Home* a brother and his sister leave the presumably deadening fields of Lotus and confront their individual challenges to return to a collectively reconfigured home. *Home*’s modern black Odysseus learns that the performance of an effective private takes two to tango. His path to self-knowledge starts with locating Lily but finally depends on his journey to C[s]jee, which discloses what *Paradise* would term *in-sight*.<sup>11</sup> Frank Money has been on guard duty

<sup>11</sup> The name of the siblings’ hometown represents one of *Home*’s many allusions to Homer’s *Odyssey*. Frank confesses that only his sister in serious trouble could compel him to overcome his dread of returning to Lotus; he regards his attachment to Lily as “medicinal, like swallowing aspirin” (p. 84; p. 107). Recent studies suggest that the blue water-lily of the Nile, already known to the Greeks as the blue lotus, was used as a soporific and in some processes took on psychotropic properties.

his entire life, protecting his younger sister's vulnerabilities from a sun-smacking world—or his military comrades from a Korean enemy. The “*third woman*”, Lily Jones, however, causes him to shift his focus from the small breakable thing inside others, “*Like a bird's breastbone, shaped and chosen to wish on*”, that he “*could break with a forefinger if he wanted to, but never did*”, to the something soft he discerns in his personal treasure trove: “*In her company the little wishbone V took up residence in my own chest and made itself at home.... I must have looked the fool, but I didn't feel like one. I felt like I'd come home*” (p. 68).<sup>12</sup>

In Morrison's *Odyssey*, it is Lily who acts as lotus. Before a discharged but still shell-shocked Frank can fight off the immobilizing shot of morphine dispensed by the sanatorium orderly, he has to wean himself from Lily's emergency food. Living on bread that comes from a kind of flower, he who eats “the honey-sweet fruit of the lotus”, according to Homer, has “no more wish to bring tidings nor to come back, but there he chose to abide with the lotus-eating men, ever feeding on the lotus and forgetful of his homeward way” (pp. 128-129). Despite, perhaps because of the ruinous winds disrupting that “ocean-lapped city” of Seattle, life with fastidious Lily makes Frank aware of his emotional vulnerabilities but also enables him to acclimate to his inadequacies (p. 68). He grows reliant on the apathy, and rather than being restorative, their relationship further degrades his development. Morrison makes it clear that Frank's feelings for Lily are somewhat specious—“[he] *felt like [he'd] come home*”—yet he discovers that letting someone else do the dirty work can occasionally be a good thing. It is, in fact, desolation triggered by thoughts of drowning alone that reconstitutes Frank's willingness to clean up his act via the woman who works at the cleaner's, Lily-cum-lotus.

Following Morrison's description of his surrender to Lily, Frank recalls his reason for dry-cleaning his filthy clothes and attempting to dry-out in the first place. As he nears a bridge, he sees a rescued drowning victim, a little girl whose body is refusing to let her die. This image combined with a recurrent dream of himself solitary on a battlefield cause Frank to want to make his dead homeboys proud. Additionally, he recognizes a comparable sinking occurring within himself, though his is psychological and self-inflicted.<sup>13</sup> The girl's resilience despite her fragile state and the emotional connections she causes him to make with his sister inspire Frank to change one kind of addictive behavior for another, ending his retreat into alcohol but rendering him “*wide open*” for Lily (p. 69). He leaves Lily only because she cannot compete with Sarah Williams's tidings about Cee. If “[Lily] *had no competition in [his] mind except for the horses, a man's foot, and Ycidra trembling under [his] arm*”, Sarah's brief letter, “Come fast. [Cee] be dead if you tarry”, spurs Frank's *Odyssey* home (p. 69; p. 8).

### African American Trauma

*Home* acts here as a Rosetta Stone for the behavior of Morrison's many variations on black male trauma victims. Focusing in *Dangerous Freedom* on the double-consciousness and division imposed upon African American males by American culture, Philip Page (1995) catalogues both devastation and preservation. In *The Bluest Eye*, Cholly Breedlove's love turns fatal when the boy is placed by his mother on a junk heap, emasculated by white hunters, and cursed by the father he turns to; Junior's mother's racial self-hatred turns

<sup>12</sup> Morrison uses italics to distinguish and emphasize Frank Money's interior monologue. When Frank talks back to the talking book that *Home* becomes, Morrison further complicates his character (as she does with even the most dislikeable of her black men, for example, Cholly Breedlove, Soaphead Church, Macon Dead, and Bill Cooney) by using the technique she designed in *Jazz* with Golden Gray and the African trope of the Talking Book.

<sup>13</sup> In *Tar Baby*, Morrison creates a white son singing to himself beneath his father's bathroom sink to cope with being abused. His mother turns abusive as she sinks under the willful innocence of the controlling husband/father.

this boy into a woman-hating bully. Defeat in the stalk of Boy-Boy's neck stimulates a liquid trail of lifetime hatred in *Sula's* Eva while Guitar's lively loathing of white people in *Song of Solomon* and his Seven Days disgust with anything sweet result from a father "sliced in half and boxed backward" by the boss's machine and the gratuitous gratitude in the eyes of his mother (pp. 224-225).

If Morrison notes these active manifestations of trauma caused by abuse or violence, she also offers us examples of passive or passive aggressive suffering in the form of black male "crazies". We chuckle at shell-shocked, unequivocally black Shadrack's benignly organized form of madness, his attempt to contain in one annual National Suicide Day all the chaos he witnessed during World War I, even as we are horrified at self-declared "Reader, Adviser, and Interpreter of Dreams" Soaphead Church's malignant reaction to his racial self-hatred. Convinced by his father's abuse and his West Indian background—"a kind of English, colonial, Victorian thing drilled into his head which he could not escape"—light-skinned Soaphead believes that "if black people were more like white people they would be better off" and, so, sends a little black girl over the edge by supposedly investing her with blue eyes (Stepito, p. 388).

Morrison brings Frank Money's rendition of post-traumatic stress disorder to us in living color. Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is a mental health condition triggered by experiencing or witnessing a terrifying occurrence. Symptoms may include flashbacks, nightmares, and severe anxiety as well as uncontrollable thoughts about the event.<sup>14</sup> *Home's* ex-soldier can predict the onset of an attack by observing when "the scene slid from everyday color to black-and-white" (*Paradise*, p. 94). The first time it happens, he is boarding a bus near Fort Lawton after his discharge from Korea. The flowered skirt of a brightly dressed woman begins to blacken and her red blouse drains of color "until it was white as milk. Then everybody, everything.... All color disappeared and the world became a black-and-white movie screen". When the grass turns green, he knows the fit has finished for the time being, relieved that, as long as "the signs of draining color gave notice, he would have time to hurry up and hide" (*Home*, pp. 23-24). Even as Elder Morgan, returning from World War I service only to see "that white man's fist in that colored woman's face", prevents shaming himself with further spontaneous violence by preserving his ripped uniform as a symbolic hair shirt, "Smart" Money is learning to control his fury (*Paradise*, p. 94).

In point of fact, most of Morrison's traumatized black men contain their aggression, converting it into ritual, song, and laughter. In the midst of his own fanaticism, Guitar reasons with Milkman that a natural black man would refuse to join any lynch mob:

I know I wouldn't join one no matter how drunk I was or how bored, and I know you wouldn't either, nor any black man I know or ever heard tell of. Ever. In any world, at any time, just get up and go find somebody white to slice up. (*Song of Solomon*, p. 156)

*Sula* depicts an entire Bottom Community fully acknowledging that the purpose of evil was to survive it: "They knew anger well but not despair, and they didn't stone sinners for the same reason they didn't commit suicide—it was beneath them" (p. 90).

But staying cool comes at a price—and it is not always possible. Like Deacon Morgan and Bill Cosey, Frank Money falls down on his guard duty. Now the sister he has always protected must pick him up. After she undergoes the humility of being "sun-smacked", daily exposing the most vulnerable parts of her body to the eyes of the world during one of the most defenseless times of her life, Cee develops a resolution and

<sup>14</sup> See scholarship by Shoshana Felman, Cathy Caruth, DomicLe Capra, and Roger Luckhurst.

independence to rival that of Lotus's women with seen-it-all eyes. When Miss Ethel Fordham tells her that her "womb can never bear fruit", the woman passes along this news without sorrow or alarm, "as though she'd examined a Burpee seedling overcome by marauding rabbits" (p. 128). Having to learn to feel anger, Cee must also come to accept her sterility and somehow keep on living. Because she learns to quilt and because she outright rejects her brother's pity, he can let his guard down in a good way, knowing she can fend for herself: Frank "had literally saved her life, but she neither missed nor wanted his fingers at the nape of her neck, telling her not to cry, that everything would be all right". Because Cee is "not going to hide from what's true just because it hurts", neither can Frank.<sup>15</sup> In this way, she figuratively saves his life.

Frank can then articulate what Morrison's readers may have suspected. He admits his guilt over shooting a Korean girl scavenging for food in the American camp dump, after she arouses and he lets her service him. Whether or not his of[de]fense is instinctual, Frank no longer lets himself off the hook with "big-time mourning for his dead buddies", but can at last "*step up and say how*" the child died (p. 135; p. 133). After Cee tells Miss Ethel, "This is where I belong", Cee helps Frank confront what he has been avoiding and comprehend how to take his final steps toward making Lotus his home again, too: "Waving occasionally at passing neighbors or those doing chores on their porches, he could not believe how much he had once hated this place. Now it seemed both fresh and ancient, safe and demanding" (p. 132).

### Redemption via Unmotivated Respect

*Home* finally reveals what may be its most important Rosetta Stone impression regarding Toni Morrison's masculine: the possibility of redemption by way of tough love, meaning unmotivated respect. Cee helps her brother see it and a blue zoot suit allows him to extricate his shame. Since Frank has managed to dislodge "*Ycidra trembling under [his] arm*", he has only the images of a man's foot and the horses left to deal with. The foot comes back to life in the form of a mindful zombie, whose outfit Frank initially scoffs at.<sup>16</sup> Morrison calls on her readers to determine the history of this iconic dress, associated as it has been with power, danger, and the exotic and to historically specific clashes between people of color and white racists: "It had been enough of a fashion statement to interest riot cops on each coast" (p. 34). Frank's sightings uncover a diminutive man wearing a style exaggerated and aggressive enough to act as signals of manhood, inviting "Smart" Money's questions about what it means to be a man. His-story, as relayed by the old uncles on Fish Eye's porch, inspires Frank's memory.

Reinventing *Invisible Man*'s Battle Royal and anticipating a brutal scene depicted in the 2012 film *Django Unchained*, *Home* recalls white men at the stud farm where the horses stood like men abducting a black father and son, gambling on them to fight to the death. Instead of egregious violence, however, Morrison focuses on the psychological scarring of the participants. When the father commands his son to commit patricide, saying "Obey me, son, this one last time" and the son says "I can't take your life", the father rejoins: "This ain't life" (p. 139). Despite that being "a devil's decision-making. Any way you decide is a sure trip to his hell", the son does it—and local blacks have to lead him out on a mule. Fish Eye informs Frank that the stallions he and Cee saw as children were sold to the slaughter house.

<sup>15</sup> In a 2012 interview titled "I want to feel what I feel. Even if it's not happiness", Morrison does not flinch from questions about being a single mother, the death of her son, and why love doesn't last (Brockes, 2012).

<sup>16</sup> Bennett maintains that this scene-stealing character is "arguably the most important ghost of Morrison's career in being born from the author's greatest loss [of Slade]" and that "[t]his figure—as much as the protagonist—gives meaning to the title of the novel, tying issues of visibility to a radical refashioning of the idea of home" (pp. 148-149).

With her royal battle, Morrison finds “the heroism in a father’s sacrifice, transforming him from passive victim to agent of his and his son’s destiny”. Like Sethe’s hard choice in *Beloved*, “the father refuses to let the white racists wrest agency from him”, and his ghost becomes a ghost to be reckoned with (Bennett, 2014, p. 153). Morrison puts her Moneys where her mouth is: “The purpose of education is to distill facts into wisdom” (Morrison, 2013, *Senior Day Address*). No longer mere witnesses of a single quivering, pink-colored sole/soul sticking up like an Achilles heel to suggest live burial, a brother and sister act to honor the man and the home that have haunted them both.

### The Fiction of Gender

*Home* not only provides a Rosetta Stone for Morrison’s past manifestations of black male redemption, but it looks forward to something else she has never done before. Juda Bennett argues that the blue-suited figure unveils a sartorial performance of masculinity even as it resists sexual and political labels by remaining a cipher of gender, in this case a ghost. Because Frank no longer sees the ghost by the end of the novel while it appears to Cee for the first time, Morrison ensures that her hero’s journey emphasizes both genders yet simultaneously exposes gender itself as a constructed fiction. When Cee thinks she sees a “small man in a funny suit swinging a watch chain. And grinning”, we trust that a man’s humanity has been restored, especially since his bones are carefully arranged in Cee’s multicolored quilt so that he is interred upright and Frank’s sanded wooden marker provides the tribute: “Here Stands A Man” (p. 145). However, when we connect the grinning, watch-swinging ghost to Father Time, note its petite size and voiceless-ness, and confirm that Frank’s perspective conflates the sacrificing black father, the sacrificed Korean girl, and Cee’s never-to-be-born daughter into one figure, we may read the zoot-suited zombie as the “transgendered manifestation of the Korean girl” (Bennett, p. 158).

### Conclusion

If *Home* begins with Frank’s deification of battling male studs, it ends on a peaceably androgynous trope since Morrison has referred to trees as both feminine (*Tar Baby*’s champion daisy trees) and masculine (Sixo’s “Brother” in *Beloved*). Moreover, if the book opens with a poem in which an unidentified speaker demands, “Whose house is this?” it concludes with another where a sister requests, “Come on, brother. Let’s go home” (p. 147). Until men learn to respect zoot-suited zombies and women who quilt, “*Lotus, Georgia, is...worse than any battlefield*” (p. 83). Like Milkman, Paul D, Joe Trace, Deacon, and Romen, Frank Money has to get to that non-gendered place where he can embrace the men and the women who love mean. If Cee discovers that slavery is letting somebody else decide who you are, Frank finds out that home is not merely where you hang your hat, but “the pleasure of being among those who do not want to degrade or destroy you” (p. 118). Like the nails in the marker that recognizes the black father’s newly risen bones, one bent uselessly but the other holding fine, the tiny Rosetta Stone encrypted in *Home* applauds Morrison’s men, and her women, as they continue to stand on the bank of Wretched alongside the sweet bay tree: strong and beautiful, “*Hurt right down the middle/ But alive and well*” (p. 147).

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