A Topography of Violence in *Home* by Toni Morrison

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Home, Toni Morrison's latest novel is about the difficulties in finding a place to call home for blacks displaced by the racial violence in the United States of the 1950s, in the social climate framed by the Korean war and the Vietnam war[1]. Only apparently less complex than her other novels, *Home* is evocative and haunting, with a circular narrative that aptly describes the sense of inescapability typical of the black experience in 1950s United States. One reviewer describes it as an archetypal story: "It is an archetypal postwar homecoming story, reminiscent of *The Odyssey*. But it's really about the upheavals that took Frank away from home in the first place, along with a generation of Korean War veterans and southern black migrants, during a supposedly tranquil and homey decade that was, for them, anything but."[2] In the novel, in fact, the two concepts of "home" and "war" sometimes clash, but more often are combined, and they overlap.

Differently from her other war veteran character in *Sula* (Shadrack, a World War I veteran) who was only one in a chorus of secondary figures animating the background,[3] in *Home* the Korean war veteran

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[1] On the erasure of the Korean war from the U.S. collective memory, and its relation with the Vietnam war, see M. Young, "'La lunga marcia' fino a "Il grande Lebowski": Il ri-emergere della Guerra di Corea", in *Le parole e le armi. Saggi su guerra e violenza nella cultura e letteratura degli Stati Uniti d'America*, a cura di Giorgio Mariani, Milano, Marcos y Marcos, 1999, pp. 391-415.

[2] B. Kacka, "Who is the Author of Toni Morrison?", *New York Magazine*, online edition, 29 April 2012, accessed 15 September 2013.

[3] For a discussion of the war veteran character in *Sula*, see P. Hunt , "War and Peace: Transfigured Categories and the Politics of *Sula*", *African American Review*, 27, 3, Women's Culture Issue (1993), pp. 443-459; C. Jackson "A 'Headless Display': *Sula*, Soldiers, and Lynching, *MFS. Modern Fiction Studies*, 52, 2 (2006), pp. 374-392. For a more general discussion about black veterans, see C. L. Williams, "Vanguards of the New Negro: African American Veterans and Post-World War I Racial

topography of violence, as a way to analyze how for the black characters – all of whom are victims, and some of whom are also perpetrators – a way out is possible. Or, as the novel's title hints, what this "home" can be, and where is located. In so doing, I will mostly draw from the work of historical and cultural sociologist Orlando Patterson, and geographer Cindi Katz. Because "topography is both the detailed description of a particular location and the totality of the features that comprise the place itself"[6], I believe that the practice of delineating a topography of violence in the novel might contribute to unveil some of the more implicit links between these acts.

The novel starts right off with the description of a scene of violence, a fight between horses, witnessed by the protagonist, Frank Money, and his sister Ycidra – Cee – as kids. Since their parents are working multiple jobs in a typical black town of the South (in this case named Lotus, and located in Georgia) the children are left to their own devices:

> They rose up like men. We saw them. Like men they stood. We shouldn't have been anywhere near that place. [...] But when we saw a crawl space that some animal had dug – a coyote maybe, or a coon dog – we couldn't resist. Just kids we were. [...]The reward was worth the harm grass juice and clouds of gnats did to our eyes, because there right in front of us, about fifty yards off, they stood like men. Their raised hooves crashing and striking, their manes tossing back from wild white eyes. They bit each other like dogs, but when they stood, reared up on their hind legs, their forelegs around the withers of the other, we held our breath in wonder"[7].

The first thing Frank notices and mentions is the dignity of the horses, conveyed by their way of fighting as if they were humans, the fact that they "*rose*" and "*stood*". After reading the first sentences one cannot fail to juxtapose them to one of the most famous descriptions of the condition of the black slave in 19th century United States, provided by Frederick Douglass, who, at the beginning of his

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[6] C. KATZ, "Vagabond Capitalism and the Necessity of Social Reproduction", *Antipode*, 33 (2001), p. 720. About the usefulness of topographies and counter-topographies, see C. KATZ, "On the Grounds of Globalization: A Topography for Feminist Political Engagement", *Signs. Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 26.4 (2001), pp. 1213-34.

[7] T. MORRISON, *Home*, p. 4.

autobiography states: "By far the larger part of the slaves know as little as their ages as horses know of them."[8] As a common *topos*, black slaves first, and black people in general, have made some comparisons between their life experience and that of some animals, but in *Home* the point of connection between the scene with the horses and the one immediately following – the burial of a black man about whom we will know more later on – is the dignity and honor in one case, and the lack thereof in the other. This is how Frank describes what happened next:

> Although it took forever to re-sight the fence, neither of us panicked until we heard voices, urgent but low. I grabbed her arm and put a finger to my lips. Never lifting our heads, just peeping through the grass, we saw them pull a body from a wheelbarrow and throw it into a hole already waiting. One foot stuck over the edge and quivered, as though it could get out, as though with a little effort it could break through the dirt being shoveled in. We could not see the faces of the men doing the burying, only their trousers; but we saw the edge of a spade drive the jerking foot down to join the rest of itself. When she saw that black foot with its creamy pink and mud-streaked sole being whacked into the grave, her whole body began to shake.[9]

The nameless black man, symbol of the countless black men hastily buried by their killers with no ceremony or dignity, is obviously deprived not only of his life, but he is cut off from any social relations, made to disappear in an unmarked grave. If the horses evoke a strong masculine affirmation, an open fight for dominion in a group of peers, the burying of the black man suggests the currents of underlying violence present everywhere, sometimes witnessed, other times hidden from view, of which blacks were the recurrent victims.

From the very beginning the novel depicts the web of violence readers will encounter throughout the book, and provides the starting point to which the story will return at the end. The episode of violence against a black man is the first, but, as mentioned before, there are many others. Toni Morrison's novel, in fact, is a complex and integrated web of war violence, racial violence, gender violence, and violence against children. Through these acts of violence carried out

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[8] F. DOUGLASS, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave* [1845], Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1999, p. 15.
[9] T. MORRISON, *Home*, p. 4.

both during the Korean war, but also at home in the United States, the cycles of natural growth, of production, sexual reproduction and social reproduction[10] are methodically and brutally interrupted. Frank, as a black child first, a soldier afterwards, and a veteran later, is always connected to these acts. As a child, he witnesses the burial of the man, being forced to observe, along with his sister, the results of racial violence. As a soldier in Korea, he witnesses the death of his two "homeboys", Frank's friends from Lotus, with whom he shared the experiences of being chased away from their homes in Texas during a racial raid, relocating in Georgia, growing up there, and enlisting to go to war. Differently from Frank, who survives the war, they both die in Korea, leaving Frank to bear witness and to assume part of the responsibility to narrate the story.

In Korea, though, Frank is also responsible for a brutal act of violence, which he only reveals to the narrator after he originally attributed it to another soldier. The soldier Frank confesses to have killed a young Korean girl who was offering him sexual satisfaction, presumably in exchange for food: "*I have to say something to you right now. I have to tell you the whole truth. I lied to you and I lied to me. [...] I felt so proud grieving over my dead friends. How I loved them. How much I cared about them, missed them. My mourning was so thick it completely covered my shame.*"[11] In a previous chapter Frank spoke of this episode as if it had happened to somebody else, whereas later he starts to reveal the truth. Only after he succeeds in rescuing his sister Cee, the victim of eugenics experiments conducted by a doctor she was working for, experiments that almost leave her dead[12], and that certainly render impossible for

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[10] I borrow the term from Cindi Katz: "social reproduction is the fleshy, messy, and indeterminate stuff of everyday life. It is also a set of structured practices that unfold in dialectical relation with production, with which it is mutually constitutive and in tension. Social reproduction encompasses daily and long term reproduction, both of the means of production and the labor power to make them work. At its most basic, it hinges upon the biological reproduction of the labor force, both generationally and on a daily basis, through the acquisition and distribution of the means of existence, including food, shelter, clothing, and health care." C. KATZ, "Vagabond Capitalism and the Necessity of Social Reproduction", p. 711

[11] T. MORRISON, *Home*, p. 133.

[12] "A small man with lot of silver hair, Dr. Beau sat stiffly behind a wide, neat desk. The first question he put to her was whether she had children or had been with a man. Cee told him she had been married for a spell, but had not gotten pregnant . He seemed pleased to hear that." T. MORRISON, *Home*, p. 64

her to have children, Frank is able to confess what before was unspeakable:

> I shot the Korean girl in her face.
> I am the one she touched.
> I am the one who saw her smile.
> I am the one she said "Yum-yum" to.
> I am the one she aroused.
> A child. A wee little girl.
> I didn't think. I didn't have to.
> Better she should die.
> How could I let her live after she took me down to a place I didn't know was in me?[13]

In both cases the women, the Korean girl and Cee, are victims of a larger web of male exploitation, somewhat linked to sexual violence, where the reproductive rights, and often the lives too, are taken away from them. They are victims of different aspects of the manipulative desires of men, as it is made obvious by the connection in the story, and in Frank's mind, between the two acts. As it is often the case with violence against women, both acts are performed in an intimate sphere, by adult men who maintain power over the women. Furthermore, it is significant that, although they occur in two different geographical locations, Korea and Georgia, USA, they belong to the same set of globalized violence against women and children.

If in Cee's case the experiments conducted on her are one of the expressions of a widespread scientific racism often resulting in death, in the Korean's girl case the act of violence is the ultimate outcome of a combination of multiple factors. The Korean girl is not only the victim of the global exploitation of children, of a global sex trade that finds in war and similar circumstances a favorable context. When still speaking of the action as if somebody else had performed it Frank claims: "*Every civilian I ever met in that country would (and did) die to defend their children. Parents threw themselves in front of their kids without a pause. Still, I knew there were a few corrupt ones who were not content with the usual girls for sale and took to marketing children.*"[14] While eager to dispel his responsibility for the act, Frank denounces a global market of sex

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[13] T. MORRISON, *Home*, p. 134.
[14] *Ini*, p. 96.

trade, but when he finally uncovers his role, the episode acquires a more intimate dimension, and the object of adult male desire pays the price for that desire: "*How could I let her live after she took me down to a place I didn't know was in me? How could I like myself, even* be *myself if I surrendered to that place where I unzip my fly and let her taste me right then and there? And again the next day and the next as long as she came scavenging. And what type of man is that?*"[15] According to Frank, in order to preserve the purity of his masculinity, the man has to kill the temptation, in an act of annihilation and erasure, characterized by the shot in her face. The girl, therefore, is the victim of a complex overlapping of a system of global marketing of children, combined with the more personal assertion of the black soldier's masculinity.

Although not a murder, another episode of violence against a woman can be similarly related to the complicated search for black masculinity, connected with gender and racial violence. During the train trip to reach Georgia and his sister, Frank sees a young woman injured, and he learns that her husband and herself have been the victims of racial violence: "That there is the husband. He got off at Elko to buy some coffee or something back there. [...] The owner or customers or both kicked him out. Actually. Put their feet in his butt and knocked him down, kicked some more, and when his lady came to help, she got a rock thrown in her face."[16] After Frank hears the story, he seems to know exactly what will happen next, and what are going to be the gender dynamics between husband and wife:

> The abused couple whispered to each other, she softly, pleadingly, he with urgency. He will beat her when they get home, thought Frank. And who wouldn't? It's one thing to be publicly humiliated. A man could move on from that. 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, as the rock in her face proved. She would have to pay for that broken nose. Over and over again."[17]

Siding with the woman's husband, Frank seems to believe that after black men are deprived of their civil and human rights, and left in the

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[15] *Ini*, p. 34
[16] *Ini*, p. 25.
[17] *Ini*, p. 26.

condition that Orlando Patterson defines as "social death," a status in which the slave – but in this case also black people in segregated United States – is "alienated from all 'rights' or claims of birth, [when] he ceased to belong in his own right to any legitimate order,"[18] they need to re-affirm their masculinity through acts of gender violence.[19]

All the acts of violence examined so far are perpetrated both in the United States and in Korea, thus stressing how they are all moments that only apparently seem circumscribed or disconnected: they are in fact all linked in an inescapable cycle of violence that has already started. The war, therefore, is only another context for violence, in the words of Frank, better than Lotus, Georgia: "*Lotus, Georgia, is the worst place in the world, worse than any battlefield. At least on the field there is a goal, excitement, daring, and some chance of winning along with many chances of losing. Death is a sure thing, but life is just as certain.*"[20] And maybe in the battlefield a black soldier can get away with killing a young girl.

The origin of this cycle of violence, at least in one reading of the novel, can reside in the dispossession of the houses of the fifteen families – Frank's being one of them – that occurred when Frank was a child:

> You could be inside, living in your own house for years, and still, men with or without badges but always with guns could force you, your family, your neighbors to pack up and move – with or without shoes. Twenty years ago, as a four-years-old, he had a pair, though the sole of one flapped with every step. Residents of fifteen houses had been ordered to leave their little neighborhood on the edge of town. Twenty-four hours, they were told, or else. "Else" meaning "die"[21]

The displacement, the uprooting are clear denials of any right to stability, to the concept of home, and to the right to own property. Not so different from the slave condition, these black families could

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[18] O. PATTERSON, *Slavery and Social Death. A Comparative Study*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1982, p. 5

[19] For a discussion of gender politics in the black family, see, among others, the seminal essay by H. SPILLER, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe. An American Grammar Book", *Diacritics*, 17, 1(1987), pp. 65-81.

[20] T. MORRISON, *Home*, p. 83

[21] *Ivi*, p. 10.

not claim public honor[22], or independent choices. When one of them refuses to become another vagrant human in the geographical expanse of the United States, his choice is met by death:

> Yet, in spite of the threats from men, both hooded and not, and pleadings from neighbors, one elderly man, named Crawford sat on his porch steps and refused to vacate. Elbows on knees, hands clasped, chewing tobacco, 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. Maybe it was loving that tree, which, he used to brag, his great-grandmother had planted, that made him so stubborn. In the dark of night, some of the fleeing neighbors snuck back to untie him and bury him beneath his beloved magnolia.[23]

The tree in this case aptly symbolizes the attachment to the land, the sense of rootedness, but also the constant threat that decades of violence against blacks, and a history of lynching make vividly present. It is relevant that it is an elderly man who wants to stay. Following what Toni Morrison in her essay "Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation"[24], defines as the constant staple of black literature, that is the constant presence of ancestors in every text, I believe that this man, Crawford, represents the ancestor, maybe the ancestral victim of racial violence, who, despite everything, remains connected to the land through the magnolia tree his great-grandmother planted.

After having examined the numerous aggressions – domestic, racial, public, private – let us return to the nameless black man with whom the novel starts. When Frank returns to Lotus, after having rescued his sister, and during Cee's recovery for her almost dying in the hands of the doctor, the veteran finally learns the horrible backstory of the buried man. The old men of the town tell Frank that what he believed were dog fights were "more like men-treated-like-dog fights". They explain that one boy told them how "they brought him and his daddy from Alabama. Roped up. Made them fight each

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[22] "The slave, as we already indicated, could have no honor because he had no power and no independent social existence, hence no public worth. He had no name of his own to defend." O. PATTERSON, *Slavery and Social Death. A Comparative Study*, p. 14.
[23] T. MORRISON, *Home*, p. 10.
[24] T. MORRISON, "Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation", in *What Moves at the Margin*, Jackson, The University Press of Mississippi, 2008, pp. 56-64.

other. With knives"[25]. In an extreme version of displacement combined with exploitation and racial violence, the two black men have to fight against each other, while white men are betting on the outcome. The two black men are forced to perform themselves the killing, in a suicidal version of generational violence, where the father sacrifices himself in order to provide his son with what he describes as not a life: " 'Obey me son, this one last time. Do it.' [...] 'I can't take your life.' And his daddy told him, 'This ain't life'"[26]. Frank learns then, that what he unwittingly witnessed many years ago was the burial of the father, to whom he now wants to offer a more honorable burial and remembrance. The novel in fact concludes with Frank and Cee going to move the corpse to a more apt place: "Back down the wagon road they went, then turned away from the edge of Lotus toward the stream. Quickly they found the sweet bay tree – split down the middle, beheaded, undead – spreading its arms, one to the right, one to the left."[27] The resting place they choose is another tree, which, similarly to the magnolia tree under which Crawford was buried, has survived the violence of the elements and it is "undead". There they proceed with the burial, and Frank leaves a marker: "Frank took two nails and the sanded piece of wood from his pocket. With a rock he pounded it into the tree trunk. One nail bent uselessly, but the other held well enough to expose the words he had painted on the wooden marker. Here Stands a Man."[28]

By performing the rite of burial and by establishing the dignity and general humanity of the black man ("Here stands a man"), Frank claims this man as his own, in a reconstruction of social ties and interpersonal connections that assert a social "undeath". The topography of violence, therefore, points to a refuge in a nature that, although "split down the middle", is "undead", a nature that bears the memory of violence, while at the same time reinstating the personal dignity and the social honor. Frank's conclusive words are the moment of his own standing up along with the tree, thus coming full circle:

> I stood there a long while, staring at that tree.

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[25] T. MORRISON, *Home*, p. 138.
[26] Ivi, p. 139.
[27] *Ivi*, p. 144.
[28] *Ivi*, p. 145.

It looked so strong.
So beautiful.
Hurt down the middle
But alive and well.[29]

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[29] *Ivi*, p. 147