

# Repairing Police Action after the Korean War in Toni Morrison's *Home*

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Care is the antidote to violence.

—Saidiya Hartman, comment at “In the Wake: A Salon in Honor of Christina Sharpe”

The passing of Toni Morrison on August 5, 2019, opened up a newfound collective reckoning with her transformational work and legacy. In one appraisal, the poet Tracy K. Smith writes, “Black life is the canvas for Ms. Morrison’s body of work. . . . But I believe her subject is America, this place founded upon conflict.”<sup>1</sup> This essay, completed just after Morrison’s passing, seeks to highlight and explore an underappreciated aspect of Morrison’s portrayal of black life and American conflict: her vision of a world free of policing. In her short novel *Home*, published in 2012, Morrison depicts policing and militarism as linked forces that protect and propel racism and liberal empire, and in this article, I argue that this work invites readers to imagine forms of justice beyond the state’s destructive systems. *Home* portrays acts of violence carried out on multiple scales: the novel’s main character, Frank Money, has recently returned from serving as a soldier in the newly desegregated troops of the Korean War, where he recalls killing countless enemy soldiers and civilians. Meanwhile, at home, his younger sister Ycidra, or Cee, survives abuse by her employer, a white supremacist doctor who forcibly sterilizes her as a part of his genocidal project of antiblack misogyny. As children, the siblings experience acts of racist mob violence and terror against their family and community, formative

*Radical History Review*

Issue 137 (May 2020) DOI 10.1215/01636545-8092810

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traumas that shape their shared upbringing and inform their relationship to violence as adults. *Home* unambiguously shows that policing, punishment, and retribution cannot repair the harm done by these acts of violence. Instead, in the novel, to quote Saidiya Hartman, “care is the antidote to violence.”<sup>2</sup> As Frank and Cee confront and work to undo the linked traumas they have survived, they must turn to each other and their community to build autonomous systems of care, recognize and mourn their shared losses, and, in Frank’s case, work to become accountable for perpetrating past harm. Through this narrative of violence on a global scale, generational trauma, and the difficult work of repair, I argue, Morrison places the contemporary idioms of police and prison abolition and transformative justice in a broader historical and imaginative frame.<sup>3</sup>

*Home* begins with an irresolvable structural contradiction: in his civilian life, as an African American man, Frank is routinely targeted by state violence in the form of policing, while as a soldier in the Korean War, he was tasked with carrying it out. In fact, the Korean War was itself described by President Truman as an international “police action.” I argue that it is precisely this contradiction that forms Frank’s trauma in *Home*, and in this essay, I explore how Frank’s process of recovering from trauma requires him, and the novel’s readers, to confront, examine, and ultimately reject the racialized violence he willingly carried out as a soldier. *Home*’s portrayal of the traumas of soldiering refuses any patriotic recuperation of America’s wars. Instead, I argue, the novel focuses on the fraught figure of the black veteran to link the lethal violence of liberal racism to the lethal violence of liberal empire. By juxtaposing the foundational antiblackness of American policing with the dehumanizing impulses of American soldiering in US wars of intervention, *Home* reveals important continuities between these two linked forms of violence work that have sustained US power, at home and around the globe.<sup>4</sup>

Shortly after *Home*’s publication in 2012, Morrison explained that she chose to focus on the Korean War moment because she was interested in “taking the skin or the scab off” the idealized American view of the 1950s as a happy and prosperous time for the nation.<sup>5</sup> In the novel, she brings together narratives of imperial soldiering, sexual violence, antiblack racism, and the dangers of policing to puncture two enduring triumphalist myths whose origins lay in the 1950s: the myth of a peaceful domestic “color-blind” society and the myth of heroic US military intervention abroad. *Home* traces these myths of US liberal racism and liberal empire, which crucially come together in the desegregated Korean War, and it utterly dismantles them. In this sense, I suggest, we can read this text as part of a growing body of contemporary creative and critical work that is revisiting what anthropologist Heonik Kwon has called the “other” Cold War—not the Cold War as a “long peace” or liberal progress or postwar prosperity, but the Cold War as an unprecedented global project of world-making violence.<sup>6</sup> The Korean War began in 1950, but Morrison notes in an interview that it is a war that “we’re still fighting” today, along with America’s wars in

Iraq and Afghanistan and its many other military conflicts, occupations, and ongoing “police actions.” In what follows, I read Morrison’s critical rewriting of the Korean War in *Home* as an intervention that reveals as much about the present historical moment as it does about the 1950s, offering readers a valuable allegory of what it looks like to refuse the racial logic of liberal empire in everyday life.

In what follows, I present a close reading of *Home* in three linked sections. First, I examine the novel’s portrayal of the Korean War as an experience of what one character calls “integrated misery” and a key site in the development of US discourses of color-blindness. Second, I consider the vexed predicament of Frank as a figure who uneasily occupies both sides of the state’s projects of racialized violence, an untenable position that builds to a crisis. Finally, in the third section, I argue that the novel responds to Frank’s and Cee’s experiences of violence and trauma by rejecting both the project of color-blindness and the statist framework of punishment and retribution as ways to redress the harms of racist violence. Instead, I propose, the novel’s conclusion offers a parable of the ways that care and community work can create new conditions for justice.

#### “Integrated Misery”: Color-Blindness and the Korean War

In an early scene in *Home*, Frank Money experiences a sudden, disorienting episode of color-blindness soon after his return from combat in Korea. Boarding a bus near Fort Lawton in Seattle with his discharge papers in hand, Frank sits next to a brightly dressed woman whose “flowered skirt was a world’s worth of color, her blouse a loud red”:

Frank watched the flowers at the hem of her skirt blackening and her red blouse draining of color until it was white as milk. Then everybody, everything. Outside the window—trees, sky, a boy on a scooter, grass, hedges. All color disappeared and the world became a black-and-white movie screen. He didn’t yell then because he thought something bad was happening to his eyes. Bad, but fixable. He wondered if this was how dogs or cats or wolves saw the world. Or was he becoming color-blind?<sup>7</sup>

The narration of Frank’s loss of color in his vision here evokes his painful memories of combat in Korea. In private moments, he cannot help but see “a boy pushing his entrails back in” on the battlefield and remember “stepping over [him] . . . to keep his own face from dissolving, his own colorful guts under that oh-so-thin sheet of flesh. Against the black and white of that winter landscape, blood red took center stage.”<sup>8</sup> In this memory, too, color stands out against a black-and-white screen, and the “blood red” that Frank remembers from the battlefield serves as an unmistakable referent for the red that drains out of the black-and-white world around him on the bus back in Seattle.<sup>9</sup> As Frank attempts to settle back into civilian life, color-blindness becomes the primary physical symptom of his war trauma.

Frank's visually draining the world of red symbolically recapitulates the political logic that brought him and his fellow soldiers to Korea: after all, the given rationale for US military intervention in Korea was to rid the world of "red" communism. But it is the racial metaphor of color-blindness that motivates our understanding of how this character, a black veteran, could serve in the newly desegregated US troops overseas. In July 1948, President Truman signed Executive Order 9981, declaring it to be "the policy of the President that there shall be equality of treatment and opportunity for all persons in the armed services without regard to race, color, religion, or national origin," to be implemented "as rapidly as possible, having due regard to the time required to effectuate any necessary changes without impairing efficiency or morale."<sup>10</sup> In 1950, the United States' foray into the Korean War made Korea an early, experimental site for the implementation of this color-blind policy. Over the course of the second half of the twentieth century, as policies of desegregation and formal equality became the legal norm across major institutions, color-blindness would become the dominant mode of managing race in America.<sup>11</sup> In *Home*, I argue, we can read Frank Money's debilitating color-blindness not just as a symptom of the bodily and psychic trauma that the soldier experiences in combat, but as a refracted representation of the emerging postwar racial regime of color-blindness—and of the profound damage it inflicted on its supposed beneficiaries.

In American legal discourses, color-blindness has been persistently mobilized as a flawed analogy for antiracism. In 1896, the Supreme Court famously ruled in *Plessy v. Ferguson* that racial segregation was constitutional as long as segregated facilities were "separate but equal"; in his dissent, John Marshall Harlan claimed instead that "our Constitution is color-blind, and neither knows nor tolerates classes among citizens." When the Supreme Court overturned separate-but-equal in the 1954 case *Brown v. Board of Education*, a "color-blind" interpretation of the Constitution prevailed, setting a new and purportedly more equitable standard for the Court's future rulings regarding racial discrimination. However, as Neil Gotanda explains, by treating racial identities as formal ("neutral, apolitical descriptions, reflecting merely 'skin color' or country of ancestral origin") and evacuating race of its historical, cultural, and social meanings, the color-blind "nonrecognition" of race ultimately has the effect of maintaining the status quo, entrenching rather than redressing racial disparities.<sup>12</sup> Critical race theorist Kimberlé Crenshaw argues further that in the absence of active redistribution in conditions of inequality, "formal equality . . . becomes a tool of domination, reinforcing that system and insulating it from attack."<sup>13</sup> In this way, Crenshaw argues, color-blindness since *Brown v. Board* "has been deployed to do the ideological work of legitimating racial hierarchy," marking not a break with white supremacy, but its continuation under new terms.<sup>14</sup>

In *Home*, Morrison engages and rewrites the history of color-blindness through both the novel's content and its form. By shifting the origin story of formal

desegregation from the public schools of Kansas to the battlefields of Korea three years earlier, she punctures the singular, celebratory narrative of a victorious color-blindness that *Brown* has provided in the American imagination. Instead, she portrays desegregation as an unevenly unfolding event that is bound up in the failures of US military empire. *Home* begins with its protagonist experiencing a literalized color-blindness as a material crisis and bodily and psychic trauma. As I will discuss below, healing from that trauma requires the opposite of the color-blind “nonrecognition” of race: an active, collective remembering and contending with the histories and legacies of racist violence.

At the same time that *Home* allegorizes the failures of color-blindness through its narrative, Morrison also deploys a strategic form of color-blindness in the novel through her descriptive prose. Throughout the novel, Morrison does not use racial markers such as “white” or “black” to describe characters. Instead, the narration leads readers to perceive or assume characters’ racial identities based on the way that these characters are able to move within a social field. For example, in the scene in which Frank first loses his color vision, the narrator tells us that he exits the bus and wants to use a public bathroom to check on his eyes in the mirror, “but the sign on the door stopped him.”<sup>15</sup> The economy of this description requires readers to draw on their knowledge of the history of Jim Crow racism to make sense of how and why Frank’s movements are constrained in this moment. In another example, late in the novel, a group of older men in Frank’s hometown collaborate in narrating a horrific event from Frank’s childhood in which a young boy named Jerome “told us they brought him and his daddy from Alabama. Roped up. Made them fight each other. With knives.”<sup>16</sup> “They” took bets on father and son and made them fight to the death; after the father sacrificed himself, the son found temporary refuge in Lotus, where the people of the town gathered money and clothing for him and helped him escape. One character recalls, “If the sheriff had seen him dripping in blood, he’d be in prison this very day.”<sup>17</sup> Here, Morrison’s withholding of racial markers reveals the explanatory power that racism holds: only racism allows us to understand why one group of men (“they”) would be able to treat other humans this way, and why another group would come to the son’s aid, and why the victim of an act of brutality would be the one to be punished by the law for his actions.

Morrison’s choice to avoid using racial markers throughout *Home* recalls a claim from her 1992 work *Playing in the Dark* that she has sought in her writing to “maneuver ways to free up the language from its sinister, frequently lazy, almost always predictable employment of racially informed and determined chains.”<sup>18</sup> Here, Morrison cites her short story, “Recitatif,” in which she removed racial codes in describing characters, deliberately leaving the reader uncertain of each character’s racial identity. In the much later *Home*, racial markers are likewise removed, but the racial identities of the novel’s characters become clear through the way they treat and are treated by others, and the way they wield or face power.

She treats each character with a careful formal equality—a reverend who helps Frank avoid the police at the novel's opening appears as “a gray-haired man in a flannel robe,” while the eugenicist doctor who abuses Cee is first described as “a small man with lots of silver hair”—that makes readers “see” race through the way these characters interact.<sup>19</sup> What we might call Morrison's color-blind narration thus exposes rather than entrenching, reinforcing, or insulating racism. If, as Crenshaw argues, formal equality under the law becomes a tool of domination, then here, Morrison brilliantly deploys a literary formal equality to expose domination.

In *Home*'s extended opening scene, as readers become acclimated to this narrative strategy, one character explicitly critiques the failures of military color-blindness. When we first meet Frank at the opening of *Home*, he is planning his escape from the psychiatric ward of the hospital in the Pacific Northwest where he has been involuntarily confined. Once he escapes in the middle of the night, wearing his military uniform but shoeless and penniless, he seeks refuge in a black church, where he explains to the pastor that the police “just hustled me up and put me in the crazy ward,” although he cannot remember why.<sup>20</sup> To this, the pastor wryly replies, “They must have thought you was dangerous. If you was just sick they'd never let you in.”<sup>21</sup> In other words, in this scenario, Frank has been hospitalized not to receive needed care, but to be sedated and incarcerated through a collaborative effort between the police and the hospital. We learn that he plans to travel across the country to Georgia to find and rescue his younger sister Cee after receiving a mysterious note that reads, “Come fast. She be dead if you tarry.”<sup>22</sup> To help Frank reach his destination safely, the pastor, named Reverend Locke, plots out an itinerary of black churches along his route and gives him provisions and funds. Calling Frank “another one,” Reverend Locke laments the unhappy state of the many black veterans he has encountered, declaring that “an integrated army is integrated misery. You all go fight, come back, they treat you like dogs. Change that. They treat dogs better.”<sup>23</sup> Locke also advises him to be careful along his journey: “Listen here, you from Georgia and you been in a desegregated army and maybe you think up North is way different from down South. Don't believe it and don't count on it. Custom is just as real as law and can be just as dangerous.”<sup>24</sup>

Locke's pithy comment here articulates a critique of military desegregation on a few levels. In observing that “you all go fight, come back, they treat you like dogs,” he names the way that the military's apparently benevolent and progressive experiment with desegregation in Korea failed to secure improved conditions for black veterans who returned to the unmitigated dangers of racism at home. Indeed, in the Cold War, military desegregation was a policy that primarily benefited the state, rather than the integrated black soldiers who were its supposed beneficiaries. As Christine Hong notes, the desegregation of US troops presented the state with an opportunity “to advertise the ‘liberal’ renovation of the US war machine” in the United States' ideological battle against communism.<sup>25</sup> But the policy also helped

to materially power the expansion of US empire across the Asia-Pacific region by providing the military with a way to recruit new soldiers for the war effort and more efficiently manage their labor once they enlisted.<sup>26</sup> The implementation of military desegregation in Korea in 1951 thus benefited the United States in the Cold War both ideologically and materially.

Reverend Locke's comments to Frank at the novel's opening voice the critical point that military desegregation in the Korean War exploited and harmed black soldiers rather than aiding or uplifting them. However, in this scene, *Home* offers its most incisive critique of the harms of military desegregation by portraying Frank's military service not as a successful path to upward mobility or full citizenship, but rather as an experience of "integrated misery." When Reverend Locke states that "an integrated army is integrated misery," this formulation equates the army with misery. But what about the army is miserable? And is it good to integrate a miserable thing? Locke's declaration suggests that the problem with military desegregation is not just that integration failed to deliver on its promises of progress. Rather, it is that the mission of the army is itself a miserable mission. If Reverend Locke's words reveal the failure of formal desegregation to achieve genuine progress in the treatment of black soldiers, the novel's depiction of what the militarization of desegregation asks black soldiers to do in the name of US power overseas also challenges the very nature of that progress, suggesting a more radical, if simple, critique: military desegregation is harmful not only because an integrated military fails to truly support black soldiers, but also because it advances the project of US imperial domination and racialized violence around the globe.

### **Police Actions at Home and at War**

In this opening scene, as Frank seeks refuge from the police in Reverend Locke's church, *Home* presents a palimpsest of the dangers of policing, connecting his vulnerability in the present to formative childhood experiences of racist violence as well as his time serving as a soldier in Korea. Standing outside the hospital after his escape, Frank worries about being arrested for vagrancy—an "interesting law," as the narrator points out, "meaning standing outside or walking without clear purpose anywhere."<sup>27</sup> In not specifying the kinds of bodies and subjects that are criminalized for vagrancy, this definition gestures to the way that custom informs law, and vice versa: while the letter of the law may be color-blind, its enforcement clearly is not.<sup>28</sup> The novel draws an explicit connection between the formal policing of vagrancy and traditions of white supremacist violence, however, by expanding the frame to recall Frank's past experience being targeted by the latter. "Better than most," the narrator informs us, "he knew that being outside wasn't necessary for legal or illegal disruption. 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."<sup>29</sup> We learn that when Frank was four,

his family and fifteen others in Texas were threatened by white men, “both hooded and not,” and “ordered to leave their little neighborhood on the edge of town.”<sup>30</sup> It is this incident that, I suggest, turns the Money family into internal refugees, forced to flee Texas on foot and resettle in Georgia; it is this incident that gives Frank an intimate knowledge of the dangers of racist violence, whether “legal or illegal,” “with or without badges,” that he carries with him through adulthood.

The notion that “men . . . with guns could force you, your family, your neighbors to pack up and move—with or without shoes” resonates with the novel’s depiction of Frank’s experience of serving in the Korean War, when he was part of an army subjecting millions of Korean civilians to precisely this situation. Indeed, as we learn later in the novel, the epicenter of Frank’s trauma from the war lies not in the memories of his own pain, harm, or losses in combat, but in the repressed truth of his own role as a perpetrator of racialized violence against innocent civilians as a member of the US military in Korea. As the narrator puts it bluntly at one point, in Korea, “There were not enough dead gooks or Chinks in the world to satisfy him.”<sup>31</sup> The jarring use of racist epithets via free indirect discourse here underscores the extent to which Frank-as-soldier channeled his emotions into committing state-sanctioned violence against a racialized population designated as the enemy other. After Frank’s return stateside, as he struggles with dissociative episodes, his mind replays images of himself shooting not just enemy soldiers, but civilian women, children, and the elderly as they fled. Transported to the US imperial setting of Korea as a member of an occupying army, Frank has been mobilized to join the side of state power in containing and suppressing a different racial enemy. It is only after his return home that Frank begins to question his experience of being authorized to kill for the state as a soldier in an international “police action.”

When US troops first began fighting in Korea in June 1950, President Truman claimed that the United States was not “at war” in Korea but rather was engaged in a “police action under the United Nations.”<sup>32</sup> The Korean War is associated with the buildup of the US security state, and with it, what is frequently described as the militarization of the police.<sup>33</sup> The framing of the Korean War as a “police action” suggests the inverse of that formulation—that is, the police-ification of the military. Rhetorically, such a framing works to confer a moral authority on US military intervention. Micol Seigel notes that according to the prevailing legal consensus in the United States, “any action identified as a *police action* is inherently legitimate.”<sup>34</sup> Seigel explains that the power of the police “is formulated as an empty vessel” that rests upon the abstractions of “order” and “the public good.”<sup>35</sup> As such, she explains, the realm of policing is “potentially infinite” and requires no justification outside of itself.<sup>36</sup> Identifying military force as a “police action,” then, conveys an unquestionable authority—an apparently inherent legitimacy—to that use of force.

Whereas the word *war* traditionally suggests either conquest or self-defense, a *police action* suggests sacrifice and service in preserving order on behalf of the

global good.<sup>37</sup> But just as everyday policing tends to establish the rules and regulations it purports to merely enforce, US military intervention in Korea aimed not to maintain an existing order but to *create* a new order for the region and for the world. The language of the “police action” helps to obscure those ambitions for power by portraying the US military as a force subordinated to, and carrying out, the will of the international community as represented by the United Nations. Preserving order for the public good, of course, also requires catching and punishing perpetrators of the “bad”: wrongdoers, lawbreakers, and criminals. In this sense, the language of the police action also naturalizes the role of North Korean and Chinese communism as a (racialized) threat to be contained for the good of the rest of the world.

Through its portrayal of Frank's horrific actions in combat, I argue, *Home* contests the carefully constructed moral legitimacy of the Korean War. Morrison's choice to narrate what I have described as Frank's refugee past against the backdrop of his traumatized return from soldiering in Korea evokes an unexpected structural similarity between the wartime experiences from which he is still reeling and his long-standing experiences of racist violence at home—but crucially, in Korea, Frank has switched sides. It is precisely this disjunction between his experiences with being policed at home and his willingness to carry out a “police action” overseas, I argue, that generates irresolvable trauma within Frank after his return home. Put simply, in Korea, Frank became part of the American police. As such, he was given the power to kill a population of racialized others, and he did so with impunity: as the narrator describes, the “rage that had accompanied killing in Korea” fueled “sprees [that] were fierce but mindless, anonymous.”<sup>38</sup> What constitutes the “misery” of the “integrated misery” that was the Korean War for Frank, then, is not just the harshness of the conditions or the dangers of combat but his willing transformation into a weapon for white supremacy and US empire in Korea.

Another encounter with police that takes place along Frank's journey to Georgia over the course of the novel illustrates the heightened contradiction between his status as a military veteran and his vulnerable position as an African American man in the United States. At a stop in Chicago, Frank befriends a man named Billy who offers to house him for the night. They go out shopping in the city to replace Frank's worn military uniform with civilian clothing, and when he finds a suitable jacket at the Goodwill, he feels “proud enough to take his medal from his army pants and pin it to his breast pocket.”<sup>39</sup> However, outside a shoe store, Frank, Billy, and two other men are subject to a “random search” by the police. All four men are forced to “lay their hands on the hood of the patrol car parked at the curb,” but as the police confiscate the personal items of two other men, one officer notices Frank's medal. He verbally confirms that Frank served in Korea before commenting to his partner, “They're vets.” His partner then dismisses Frank and Billy, addressing Frank with a curt “Get lost, pal.”<sup>40</sup>

The narrator concludes this scene by writing, “The police incident was not worth comment so Frank and Billy walked off in silence.”<sup>41</sup> Indeed, police violence is depicted as a normal part of daily life for these characters: for example, Billy shares that his young son was shot by a police officer—“some redneck rookie”—when he was playing with a toy gun on the sidewalk at age eight, leaving his arm permanently disabled.<sup>42</sup> When recounting this story to Frank, Billy comments, “Cops shoot anything they want. This here’s a mob city.”<sup>43</sup> What is noteworthy in Billy and Frank’s stop-and-frisk “police incident,” however, is the way that Frank’s visibility as a veteran interrupts normal policing procedures. Symbolically, the policeman’s confusion over how to perceive Frank occurs while he is on a shopping trip to replace his worn-out army jacket and pants with regular clothing. His outward transition back into a civilian role coincides with his increased vulnerability to police violence.

This routine “police incident” highlights the instability inherent to Frank’s dual position as a military veteran of an integrated war and as an African American civilian. Frank now occupies a liminal position in relation to the police and the power they wield on behalf of the state. Frank and Billy are interpellated and criminalized as black men first, and it is only after Frank’s medal reveals that he has received an honor from the state for his service that he is grudgingly given different treatment as a veteran.<sup>44</sup> While this recognition on the part of the police allows him and his friend to escape further harassment and potential violence, it also marks the way that enlisting as a soldier has changed his subject position. In this moment, Frank’s own subjectivity is compromised. Given his own intimate knowledge of the terror that racist policing inflicts, how can he now account for his actions as a soldier carrying out a police action, using and abusing his power to inflict suffering on racialized enemies? In his one interaction with Billy’s son Thomas, who was maimed by a police officer, Thomas asks if Frank killed anybody in the war. When Frank responds, “Had to,” Thomas asks, “How did it feel?” Frank answers, “Bad. Real bad,” and Thomas responds, “That’s good. That it made you feel bad. I’m glad.”<sup>45</sup> In this straightforward exchange, we can see Frank struggle with the meaning and consequences of enlisting to become a soldier who “had to” kill for the state. In the wake of taking on that role, he must seek ways to account for his actions, contend with their consequences, and attempt to make amends.

### **Seeking Repair in Color**

The pivotal scene in which Frank arrives at his destination in Georgia to find his sister Cee marks the beginning of a transformation in Frank’s relationship to past violence. In chapters narrating Cee’s story, we learn that she, like Frank, leaves Lotus at the first available opportunity and moves to Atlanta. There, she finds a job as a live-in domestic worker for a wealthy white doctor in the suburbs who practices gynecology out of his home. The doctor is revealed to be a proponent of eugenics, and he performs medical procedures and experiments on Cee without her

consent that leave her ill and forcibly sterilized. It is Cee's fellow domestic worker, Sarah, who sends Frank the note that brings him back to Georgia to find and rescue his sister.

The situation that Frank enters in the doctor's home is tense and dangerous: Sarah secretly lets him into the house, but when the doctor discovers Frank there, his first response is to pick up the phone to call the police. Frank immediately knocks the phone out of his hand. The doctor then orders Sarah to call the police, but he looks up to find her with "her hand pressed firmly on the [telephone] cradle. There was no mistaking her purpose."<sup>46</sup> When the doctor next pulls out a gun and tries, but fails, to shoot Frank, he is surprised to see in Frank "the quiet, even serene, face of a man not to be fooled with."<sup>47</sup> On their way back to Lotus, Frank marvels at "how markedly nonviolent" the rescue had been. He realizes that "the doctor had felt threatened as soon as he walked in the door. Yet not having to beat up the enemy to get what he wanted was somehow superior—sort of, well, smart."<sup>48</sup>

This characterization of Frank's actions stands in stark contrast to his actions as a soldier in Korea, when he killed those who looked like the enemy with impunity. Here, against a different kind of enemy, Frank works to prevent violence rather than seeking retribution. In this situation, Frank knows he cannot rely on the police to help his sister or arrest the doctor for his crimes against her and other young black women; the arrival of the police would only place the two of them in danger. Although Cee is ill and on the verge of death, he cannot bring her to a hospital and expect that she will be cared for; at a hospital, she would still be vulnerable to the same structural racism and gendered violence that allowed a white medical doctor to harm her in the first place. The crisis the siblings face here echoes the one from the novel's opening, when Frank was himself escaping from a hospital where he had been held against his will and hiding from the police. At that moment, Frank found refuge in a black church and material support from its reverend. Now, he and his sister must again seek alternatives to existing institutions that harm rather than help them. With nowhere else to turn, they opt to return to their fictional hometown of Lotus in rural Georgia and in it, a community that is equipped to provide care outside of the state's harmful systems.

Frank and Cee's return to Lotus is rendered in rich color that presents a vivid contrast to the scenes of Frank's isolating color-blindness after his return from the war. Describing Frank's return to Lotus, the narrator writes, "Color, silence, and music enveloped him."<sup>49</sup> Indeed, Morrison's description of life in Lotus at this moment of the Moneys' return home is suffused with color: "every front yard and backyard sported flowers . . . marigolds, nasturtiums, dahlias. Crimson, purple, pink, and China blue. Had these trees always been this deep, deep green?"<sup>50</sup> The sun, which "sucked away the blue from the sky," "could not scorch the yellow butterflies away from scarlet rosebushes."<sup>51</sup> In the cotton fields, Frank watches "acres of pink blossoms . . . turn red," precisely the color that he had previously been

horrified to find disappearing from his field of vision earlier in the novel; in a matchbox he finds in the kitchen of their old house, he finds Cee's baby teeth along with "his winning marbles: a bright blue one, an ebony one, and his favorite, a rainbow mix."<sup>52</sup>

Color envelops Frank in Lotus, too, in that his return there represents a restorative return to a black community after his experience of "integrated misery" in the military. In returning to Lotus, Frank and Cee can take refuge in "the pleasure of being among those who do not want to degrade or destroy you."<sup>53</sup> For both siblings, this sense of belonging represents a new relationship to their home community. As children, they grew up in the shadow of the trauma and economic insecurity their family faced in having to flee their original home in Texas. In particular, Cee, who was born on the side of the road during that journey, was "branded early as an unlovable, barely tolerated 'gutter child'" by her step-grandmother, who unhappily hosted the family when they first arrived in Lotus.<sup>54</sup> When both siblings left home, they each entered institutions that needed their labor and bodies but did not value their lives. Earlier in the novel, Frank had described Lotus as "*the worst place in the world, worse than any battlefield*," but now, returning there for the first time since Korea, he finds himself basking in a "feeling of safety and goodwill."<sup>55</sup>

*Home* thus imagines the resolution of trauma for Frank and Cee in the language of color, in both senses of the word. In its portrayal of Cee's healing process, the novel champions the forms of knowledge produced within her community. It is black women who save her life and shepherd her to recovery, from Sarah at the doctor's house to the women who provide care for her in Lotus. She spends two months confined to her neighbor Miss Ethel Fordham's house, surrounded and cared for by women from the neighborhood. As the narrator explains, these women "knew how to repair what an educated bandit doctor had plundered."<sup>56</sup> To combat the damage done by the "devil doctor," they put Cee under constant, watchful care and administer a variety of herbs, medicines, and treatments to rid her of fever and infection. Once she is well enough to be on her own again, Cee proclaims, "I ain't going nowhere. . . . This is where I belong."<sup>57</sup>

Frank's own process of healing from trauma is sparked by witnessing and participating in Cee's healing process. After Cee learns that she has been rendered infertile, she mourns her loss of potential future children, confiding in Frank, "I didn't feel anything at first when Miss Ethel told me but now I think about it all the time. It's like there's a baby girl down here waiting to be born."<sup>58</sup> She describes seeing a baby's smile in the world around her: "I saw it in a green pepper once. Another time a cloud curved in such a way it looked like . . . ' Cee didn't finish the list."<sup>59</sup> Surprisingly, Cee's haunting visions of a baby girl trigger Frank's own memory and subsequent confession of wrongdoing in Korea.

Throughout the novel, Frank has referenced a particularly disturbing memory of his time in Korea: as a young Korean child scavenges for trash, she reaches out

her hand and touches a soldier's crotch. The soldier, disgusted by his feelings of temptation, shoots and kills her on the spot. The novel's narrator initially describes Frank as a "witness" to this death.<sup>60</sup> However, Frank's reaction when Cee tells him about her visions is a "fluttering in his chest" as he wonders, "Who would do that to a young girl? . . . What the hell for?"<sup>61</sup> Immediately after this scene, he addresses the reader directly to confess that he was not a witness, but the perpetrator of the abuse and murder of the Korean girl:

Then Cee told me about seeing a baby girl smile all through the house, in the air, the clouds. It hit me. Maybe that little girl wasn't waiting around to be born to her. Maybe it was already dead, waiting for me to step up and say how.

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.<sup>62</sup>

Here, the repetition of "I am the one" underscores Frank's culpability as well as his feelings of guilt. His realization and confession that he was the one who committed this atrocity also entails that his process of healing must become a process of accountability.

As Mary Dudziak notes in a short essay on *Home*, Frank's "nightmares and rage" throughout the novel reflect his utter isolation in a society in which "the experience of war itself is far away and largely inaccessible" for the nonveteran.<sup>63</sup> She reads the novel as a tale of the "profound limits of empathy," in which the narrator's failure to "capture Frank's experience with language, nor even understand it" represents "society's inability to fully empathize with the soldier." As Dudziak points out, Frank suffers from what readers today would name post-traumatic stress disorder. Still, she argues that the PTSD designation, although it "might earn a contemporary Frank our sympathy," cannot provide a solution to the limits of empathy between civilian society and the war veteran. Here, she speaks to the emotional distance that the experience of war creates between the veteran and the civilian. But as Mimi Thi Nguyen observes, the diagnosis of PTSD—a phenomenon peculiarly tied to wars of American empire—also "underscores the ways in which historical events of imperial violation, especially those brutal acts continually committed against racial, colonial others, are transfigured into unimaginable pain for their perpetrators."<sup>64</sup> She explains that the PTSD diagnosis emerged from psychiatrists' conjecture that soldiers, themselves "war victims," "might present disturbances identical with those of their victims, and argues that "the genealogy of [PTSD] and, concomitantly, the sidelining of the dead that evinces this disorder buttress an imperial project that declares its own innocence."<sup>65</sup> Nguyen shows that the diagnosis of post-traumatic stress disorder for the "self-traumatized perpetrator" underscores the

humanity of the soldier, even the soldier who commits heinous acts, against the dehumanization of the soldier's victims, whose pain and suffering are not considered. Her discussion of the PTSD paradigm suggests that Dudziak's concept of the "limits of empathy" for the soldier with regard to Frank's predicament in *Home* is one-sided. Frank's climactic self-recognition as a perpetrator of violence, rather than merely a witness or victim, elicits horror at his actions rather than empathy for what he went through. More than with the breakdown in empathy between Frank and the civilian world after the war, *Home* is concerned with the breakdown in empathy between Frank and the Korean girl who was his victim—indeed, between the many perpetrators of violence in the novel and their victims.

Frank's initial narration of the Korean girl's death aligns with the classic account of PTSD that Nguyen presents: he substitutes the Korean girl's suffering with his own pain. When he actively thinks of her, his mind turns to his friends dying on the battlefield, and when he remembers his friends' deaths, he thinks of the girl. He remembers channeling his anger into the retaliatory killing of his sanctioned enemies ("There were not enough dead gooks or Chinks in the world to satisfy him"). Frank's eventual revelation of his own guilt, in contrast, is sparked by the horizontal connection he stumbles upon between the suffering of a member of his own family and the girl's death. This connection forces him to understand that in this situation, he was not the victim but the perpetrator. From there, he understands that he must contend with not just the pain of his personal losses but also his guilt at having taken an innocent life. "*I hid it from you because I hid it from me,*" Frank claims before sharing his realization. "*My mourning was so thick it completely covered my shame.*"<sup>66</sup> He spends the following night "churning and entangled in thoughts relentless and troubling. How he had covered his guilt and shame with mourning for his dead buddies. Day and night he had held on to that suffering because it let him off the hook, kept the Korean child hidden."<sup>67</sup> Here, the narrator takes up Frank's own language to explain his prolonged forgetting and sudden remembering: mourning what he witnessed in Korea (the death of his beloved friends) was more socially acceptable and psychically manageable than facing up to what he did there (killed a child point-blank).

Frank's moment of revelation and confession becomes the key to the novel's accelerated resolution. Articulating his culpability for the girl's death in turn unlocks for Frank the memory of another unresolved trauma alluded to in the novel's opening pages, in which Frank and Cee as young children in their new hometown of Lotus secretly witness a stranger's body being thrown from a wheelbarrow into a makeshift grave. Throughout the novel, barely repressed memories related to this incident haunt Frank, but when Frank recounts the initial scene in a fragmented first person, he insists that he "really forgot" and remembered only scattered visual details: horses rearing, the sole of the dead man's shoe.<sup>68</sup> This formative incident has remained unresolved in Frank's adult life. But after Frank admits to the reader

that he was the one who shot the Korean girl, he immediately and unexpectedly goes to his estranged grandfather and other town elders to ask about the “dogfights” that happened in the past.<sup>69</sup> They recount to him the details of the incident when a group of white men forced a young boy to fight his father to the death with a switchblade. In this manner, Frank finally learns the truth behind the burial he and Cee witnessed as children.

After finding out where the man was buried, Frank asks Cee to come with him to the site of the old horse farm, which has since burned down, and he requests that she bring the multicolored quilt she has just finished sewing. At the site where Frank remembers seeing the man being buried, they unearth his skeleton. Frank arranges the bones on the quilt, which becomes “a shroud of lilac, crimson, yellow, and dark navy blue.”<sup>70</sup> Together, they wrap his bones in this shroud and place it into a grave that Frank digs underneath a splintered old tree. As Frank testifies in his last words to the reader, the tree, like he and his sister, is “*Hurt right down the middle / But alive and well.*”<sup>71</sup> The natural world around them in this moment mirrors the vibrancy of the quilt’s colors: Frank puts up a grave marker underneath the tree that reads, “Here Stands a Man,” and “he could have sworn the sweet bay was pleased to agree. Its olive-green leaves went wild in the glow of a fat cherry-red sun.”<sup>72</sup>

This concluding ritual of reburial is portrayed as a joyful, restorative act that marks an important step in Frank and Cee’s movement toward recovery. In giving the anonymous man a proper burial, they are also symbolically laying to rest the ghosts of three apparently disconnected incidents of extrajudicial violence—Cee’s forced sterilization, Frank’s killing of the Korean girl, and their joint childhood witnessing of the aftermath of a murder—that, crucially, cannot be resolved through police work. Instead of shoring up the criminal justice system as the only form of justice, *Home* reminds us that survivors and perpetrators of violence can create meaningful alternatives to policing, punishment, and retribution that allow for a different kind of resolution. In centering the shared impact of these three incidents on these characters, this scene also demonstrates how thinking across discrete historical contexts can transform our politics. Recognizing Cee’s abuse and mourning its consequences leads Frank to articulate his own culpability in committing abuse, which in turn leads him to investigate and mourn a historical atrocity that took place and was ignored for decades within his own home community. In its simple act of symbolically mourning Korean victims of US troops in the Korean War together with American victims of US structural racial violence, *Home* trespasses the traditional boundaries of national war remembrance, placing victims of American racial and imperial violence across national borders on the same plane.

## Conclusion

In *Home*’s concluding scene, Cee and Frank return to the site of a formative trauma, digging into the past in search of a way to move forward from it. In publishing *Home*

in 2012, Morrison, I suggest, performs a parallel gesture: some sixty years after the fact, she returns to the world of the desegregated Korean War not only to examine past trauma—the traumatic violence of racism, empire, and war that built the American world order—but also to recapture a historical moment of uncertainty and possibility that holds lessons for us in a similar present. In this story of America’s “forgotten war,” Morrison narrates a soldier’s acts of brutality followed by a period of enforced forgetting, in which he misremembers his own act of violence as someone else’s mistake. For him to heal from his trauma, he must not only remember and admit the harm that he did to others, but also contend with the ways his actions were linked to the unresolved generational trauma that comes from America’s foundational history of racialized violence, and try to work toward repair by investing in his community.

Through its portrayal of these characters’ processes of coming to terms with past harm, *Home* suggests that care and community support can provide a path to addressing violence that circumvents existing systems of policing and punishment. Put simply, *Home* models the transformation that comes from hanging up the phone that dials the police and instead seeking methods for addressing harm that do not rely on or reinvest in the state and its violent systems. Frank is transformed by supporting his sister through a process of healing after abuse, a process that forces him to recognize the abuse that he committed himself in the past. He is further transformed by the act of acknowledging and mourning his own violent actions instead of burying, disavowing, or celebrating them. And if we read *Home* as an allegory, as I propose here, it is instructive that Frank’s immediate next step after acknowledging the violence he carried out as a soldier in Korea is to investigate and memorialize the unacknowledged violence that has shaped his own community—to connect his own actions to the effects of abuse and violence that he sees around him, and to try to intervene from where he is situated.

However, the care work that Frank, Cee, and their community engage in together represents only a first step in what must be a longer process of working toward justice. The ritual of reburial that Frank and Cee perform together symbolizes the transformative potential of digging up the past in order to properly lay it to rest, but performing a restorative ritual cannot hold Cee’s former employer accountable for his abuses, nor does it locate the white mobs who terrorized Frank’s family or community members in the past, nor does it entail justice for the Korean girl whom Frank murdered or her own family and community. In this, the novel mirrors the history it narrates: after all, the United States has never made itself accountable for what it has destroyed through its wars of intervention, nor has white supremacy been accountable for the generational harm that racism has inflicted on communities of color. Instead of looking to power to provide an easy resolution, *Home* suggests that we might start to enact justice by looking at what’s happening in our own communities—that is, at home.

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## Notes

I would like to thank Monica Kim, A. Naomi Paik, Amy Chazkel, the anonymous reviewers, and the *RHR* editorial collective and staff for their labor and guidance on this piece, as well as Golnar Nikpour and Jean Lutes for reading drafts and offering invaluable feedback and support. I also acknowledge and thank the friends whose collective work to enact a feminist politics of care has informed the writing of this essay, including Bidita Choudhury, Talya Cooper, Golnar Nikpour, Mimi Nguyen, and Thera Webb.

1. Smith, "Toni Morrison's Song of America."
2. Saidiya Hartman, comments given at "In the Wake: A Salon in Honor of Christina Sharpe" (February 2, 2017).
3. For a helpful resource that introduces the concepts of transformative justice and prison abolition, see [www.transformharm.org](http://www.transformharm.org), which offers the following description of transformative justice from the organization Generation 5: "Transformative justice [is] a liberatory approach to violence . . . [which] seeks safety and accountability without relying on alienation, punishment, or State or systemic violence, including incarceration or policing" ([transformharm.org/transformative-justice/](http://transformharm.org/transformative-justice/)). It also cites the following description of abolition from the organization Critical Resistance: "Prison Industrial Complex [PIC] abolition is a political vision with the goal of eliminating imprisonment, policing, and surveillance and creating lasting alternatives to punishment and imprisonment" ([transformharm.org/abolition/](http://transformharm.org/abolition/)). Megan Sweeney has also argued that Morrison's later works, including *Paradise* and *Love*, "[contribute] to the work of contemporary prison abolitionism" ("Racial House," 41).
4. I borrow this phrase from Micol Seigel, who astutely observes that policing and soldiering operate as "twinning vehicles of state violence" (*Violence Work*, 53).
5. "Talks at Google." See Joseph Darda's "The Literary Afterlife of the Korean War" for an analysis of Morrison's *Home* as Korean War literature in relation to permanent war that includes a discussion of this quote and interview from Morrison.
6. Kwon, *The Other Cold War*, 9.
7. Morrison, *Home*, 23.
8. Morrison, *Home*, 20.
9. In an article on *Beloved*, Florian Bast argues that the significance of color has been overlooked in Morrison scholarship. He proposes that *Beloved* "negotiates issues of trauma using the color red" ("Reading Red," 1070) and argues that by using the color red to mark trauma, Morrison "performs the inability to use everyday language to portray a traumatic event" ("Reading Red," 1082). Melissa Schindler also notes that Morrison "uses descriptions of color to delimit a discursive space" around certain places and events in *Home* ("Home, or the Limits of the Black Atlantic," 85).
10. "Executive Order 9981."
11. As Jodi Melamed puts it, the racial "break" of the World War II moment "instantiated a new worldwide racial project that . . . supplemented and displaced its predecessor: a formally antiracist, liberal-capitalist modernity articulated under conditions of US global ascendancy" (*Represent and Destroy*, 4). For Melamed, the advance of this new racial

- project signaled a new era in white supremacy in which the US state came to embrace “official antiracisms”—prominently featuring narratives of color-blindness and diversity—in its administrative workings.
12. Gotanda, “A Critique of ‘Our Constitution Is Color-Blind,’” 2.
  13. Crenshaw, “Color Blindness, History, and the Law,” 285.
  14. Crenshaw, “Color Blindness, History, and the Law,” 281.
  15. Morrison, *Home*, 23.
  16. Morrison, *Home*, 118.
  17. Morrison, *Home*, 119.
  18. Morrison, *Playing in the Dark*, xi.
  19. Morrison, *Home*, 21, 64.
  20. Morrison, *Home*, 14.
  21. Morrison, *Home*, 13.
  22. Morrison, *Home*, 8.
  23. Morrison, *Home*, 17.
  24. Morrison, *Home*, 19.
  25. Hong, “The Unending Korean War,” 606.
  26. For studies of desegregation and the Korean War, see Phillips, *War! What Is It Good For?*, and Mershon and Schlossman, *Foxholes and Color Lines*. For an analysis of black troops in the Korean War, see Widener, “Seoul City Sue.”
  27. Morrison, *Home*, 9.
  28. As Lisa Cacho explains, criminalization describes a process distinct from mere stereotyping, as these two processes “have different relationships to US law. To be stereotyped as a criminal is to be misrecognized as someone who committed a crime, but to be criminalized is to be prevented from being law-abiding” (*Social Death*, 4).
  29. Morrison, *Home*, 9.
  30. Morrison, *Home*, 9.
  31. Morrison, *Home*, 98.
  32. “The President’s News Conference.”
  33. In particular, the Korean War is credited by American Cold War policy makers for helping to launch the vision of the US national security state laid out in the policy paper NSC-68. For a close analysis of NSC-68, see Jodi Kim’s *Ends of Empire*.
  34. Seigel, *Violence Work*, 10, my emphasis. Here, Seigel cites the 1905 Supreme Court case *Lochner v. New York*.
  35. Seigel, *Violence Work*, 8.
  36. Seigel, *Violence Work*, 10.
  37. As Monica Kim notes, wars are fought by recognized states, and so violence in colonies and former colonies has historically “received other monikers—insurgency, riot, rebellion, among others” (*The Interrogation Rooms of the Korean War*, 4). At the time of the outbreak of the Korean War, as a global wave of decolonization was upending reigning understandings of sovereignty, she argues, “the vocabulary to frame military action quickly multiplied: police action, intervention, occupation” (4). This proliferation of terms reflects the American tendency to cast its military actions around the world since 1945 as benevolent help rather than conquest.
  38. Morrison, *Home*, 102.
  39. Morrison, *Home*, 36.

40. Morrison, *Home*, 36.
41. Morrison, *Home*, 36.
42. Morrison, *Home*, 31.
43. Morrison, *Home*, 31.
44. The novel specifies elsewhere that the medal is a Combat Infantryman Badge, a military award given to those who have fought in active combat since World War II (*Home*, 17).
45. Morrison, *Home*, 32.
46. Morrison, *Home*, 111.
47. Morrison, *Home*, 111.
48. Morrison, *Home*, 114.
49. Morrison, *Home*, 118.
50. Morrison, *Home*, 117.
51. Morrison, *Home*, 118.
52. Morrison, *Home*, 120. Schindler notes that Morrison has explained that she “withheld all the color from the book until [Frank] gets close to home’ to make his homecoming stand out” (“Home, or the Limits of the Black Atlantic,” 85, citing “Talks at Google”).
53. Morrison, *Home*, 118.
54. Morrison, *Home*, 128.
55. Morrison, *Home*, 83, 118.
56. Morrison, *Home*, 128.
57. Morrison, *Home*, 126.
58. Morrison, *Home*, 131.
59. Morrison, *Home*, 132.
60. Morrison, *Home*, 99.
61. Morrison, *Home*, 132.
62. Morrison, *Home*, 133.
63. Dudziak, “The Limits of Empathy in Toni Morrison’s *Home*.”
64. Nguyen, *The Gift of Freedom*, 116.
65. Nguyen, *The Gift of Freedom*, 114–15.
66. Morrison, *Home*, 133.
67. Morrison, *Home*, 135.
68. Morrison, *Home*, 5.
69. Morrison, *Home*, 138.
70. Morrison, *Home*, 143. As Janice Barnes Daniel describes in “Function or Frill,” the patchwork quilt, along with other metaphors related to sewing and weaving, is a frequent trope in feminist literary criticism. See her article for an analysis of Morrison’s use of the quilt as narrative device in *Beloved*. The image of wrapping the bones in a cloth here (“Together they folded the fabric and knotted its ends”) also evokes the Korean *pojagi*, a traditional Korean wrapping cloth made of fabric scraps used to carry and transport items. Like the quilt, the *pojagi* has been used as a metaphor for storytelling and women’s work; for example, Elaine H. Kim and Eui-Young Yu employ the metaphor of the *pojagi* and emphasize its importance as an art form made by ordinary women to introduce their collection of Korean American oral histories (*East to America*, xviii).
71. Morrison, *Home*, 145.
72. Morrison, *Home*, 145.

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