

# Spaces of Resistance: Heterotopia and Dystopia in Toni Morrison's *Home*

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## Abstract

The following paper aims to show that Toni Morrison's *Home* (2012) can be read and analyzed as a novel in which the spaces of black people in American society can be seen as both heterotopic and dystopian according to spatiality studies. The objective of this essay is to prove that it would be accurate to apply those concepts by developing an argument that focuses on how the spaces of the mind, of the body and the physical spaces affect the course of the novel and its characters, as well as the way in which the relationship between these spaces is meaningful to that reading. It is important to offer this reading of the novel, not only because the social dimension of the racial conflict in the USA is still very intense, but also because it provides a point of view that is relevant for social and cultural studies. At the end of the article, it can be noticed that a close reading of the novel applying the concepts of heterotopia - developed by Foucault in the 1960s and published 20 years later -, dystopia and spatiality studies enriches its analysis and interpretation, by offering alternatives to the more common and mainstream approaches to this work.

**Keywords:** dystopia; heterotopia; African-American; spatiality; racism.

## Resumo

O presente trabalho pretende demonstrar que *Home* (2012), de Toni Morrison, pode ser analisado como um romance no qual os espaços dos negros na sociedade Americana são heterotópicos e distópicos com base nos estudos do espaço. O objetivo deste artigo é provar que é possível aplicar estes conceitos ao desenvolver um argumento que se foque em como os espaços físicos, mentais e corporais afetam o desenrolar da narrativa, os seus personagens e como a relação entre estes espaços é significativa para a análise da obra. É importante ter essa possível interpretação não só porque a dimensão social do conflito racial nos EUA ainda é muito intensa, mas também porque isso oferece um ponto de vista que é relevante para os estudos

sociais e culturais. Concluindo, pode-se notar que uma leitura atenta da obra, aplicando os conceitos de heterotopia - desenvolvido por Foucault na década de 1960 e publicado 20 anos depois -, distopia e estudos do espaço, enriquece as suas possibilidades de análise e interpretação ao oferecer alternativas às abordagens mais comuns a este romance.

**Palavras chave:** distopia; heterotopia; afro-americana; espacialidade; racismo.

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Toni Morrison's *Home*, first published in 2012, tells the story of Frank, a war veteran who fought in the Korean war with his childhood friends Mike and Stuff. The novel focuses especially on the time after his release from the hospital to which he was sent after the end of the war, when he crosses the United States to help his sister Cee. Frank gets a letter from a co-worker of Cee telling him his sister is very ill and needs to be rescued. In fact, she is not ill at all, but being used for scientific experiments. Throughout Frank's journey through America, Morrison explores the effect of the war on him, the prejudice and discrimination against Afro-Americans, the meaning of the word that gives name to her novel (home), while looking back at Frank's past and those to whom he relates, especially Cee and his ex-girlfriend Lily. In order to reconstruct and represent the past of the black community in the USA, Morrison uses throughout the narrative the strategy of exploring the character's past.

The book is usually read and analyzed mainly as a trauma novel. Another reading which is also very common among scholars is one that focuses on what the concept of home truly means for the characters of the novel and how the concept is represented there. Furthermore, studies around the role of memory in the construction of the meaning of home are also recurrent among the interpretations of this novel.

In this article, however, I would like to offer a different reading seeking neither of the approaches mentioned above. Instead, I intend to promote a close reading that highlights - through the conceptual tools of Spatiality Studies<sup>1</sup> and Utopian Studies - how the spaces of African-Americans can be considered both heterotopic and dystopian in relation to the society of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in the United States. I believe that studies of space are crucial for our understanding of how society functions, to point out its flaws and to think about possible solutions for them. According to Michel Foucault, "the anxiety of our era has to do fundamentally with space, no doubt a great deal more than with time" (23).

Thus, it is not surprising that it was also Foucault who developed one of the key concepts related to space that shall be used in this article: the concept of heterotopia. He first envisioned and described it in his text *Of Other Spaces* (1984):

There are also, probably in every culture, in every civilization, real places - places that do exist and that are formed in the very founding of society - which are something like counter-sites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted. Places of this kind are outside of all places, even though it may be possible to indicate their location in reality. Because these places are absolutely different from all the sites that they reflect and speak about, I shall call them, by way of contrast to utopias, heterotopias. (24)

Considering heterotopia<sup>2</sup> as a space of otherness and a space of difference, we shall consider the African-American spaces represented in the novel as heterotopic, because they are outside hegemony, which belongs to white people.

In spite of the characteristics that make the space of the black community in the society heterotopic, it becomes evident throughout the novel that this space is also dystopian, if we take into consideration the disparity between the social spaces<sup>3</sup> which black and white people are allowed to be part of, how they are arranged, and the quality of life in such spaces. The fact that they do have a space of their own, the space of affirmation of difference and resistance, does not exclude the fact that these spaces include scenarios where people have to go through extreme experiences. Moreover, it is also important to mention that the space of Afro-Americans is always subjected to the space of white people and that, in a society with an intense racial conflict, it can lead to a dystopian environment.

*Home* offers us several examples allowing one to read the novel under the lenses of dystopia. One of them is a completely hopeless environment in an apocalyptical scenario - represented by Lotus, the city where Frank and the community of which he is part live - as is stated in the novel:

*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. Problem is you can't know in advance.*

*In Lotus you did know in advance since there was no future, just long stretches of killing time. There was no goal other than breathing, nothing to win and, save for somebody else's quiet death, nothing to survive or worth surviving for. (Morrison 83)*

In addition to the city, there are also other elements, such as: war (the Korean War); madness and instable states of mind, represented by Frank's condition (PTSD); scientific experiments conducted by a racist doctor on Cee's body; extreme poverty, exemplified in the following excerpt, "they practiced what they had been taught by their mothers during the period that rich people called Depression and they called life" (122); agents of the law promoting violence, as is clear in the following example, "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" (9); lack of respect for the lives of some (usually poor and/or black people) to the benefit of others (usually rich and/or white), as in the following passage, "Well, you know, doctors need to work on the dead poor so they can help the live rich" (12); and men fighting each other to death as a spectacle, as we can see in this passage:

Can you beat that? Pitting father against son? (...)

That's a devil's decision-making. Any way you decide is a sure trip to his Hell. Then, when he kept on saying no, his daddy told him, "Obey me, son, this one last time. Do it." Said he told his daddy, "I can't take your life." And his daddy told him, "This ain't life." Meantime the crowd, drunk and all fired up, was going crazier and crazier, shouting, "Stop yapping. Fight! God damn it! Fight!" (139)

The aspects mentioned above are commonly found in the most famous and most critically acclaimed dystopias. In *Brave New World*, for example, we can find scientific experiments and agents of the law promoting violence and madness; in *1984*, we can find war; in *The Hunger Games*, we can find the apocalyptic scenario, extreme poverty and the spectacularization of men fighting each other to death. So, taking into consideration those similar aspects, it becomes clear that Morrison's novel does have a dystopian dimension.

However, to say that *Home* is a dystopian novel would not be accurate, because even though it presents several dystopian elements, it also lacks a few of them. For example, dystopian novels are usually set in the future, in an imaginary society seen as a place where life is worse than it is now.<sup>4</sup> To say that Morrison's novel is dystopian is inaccurate, in this context, since it refers to the past, and problematic, because it would mean that the society of the novel is imaginary and, thus, that so is the racial tension and prejudice represented in it. Therefore, the fact that it portrays the experiences of the African-American community in the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century makes it impossible for us to say that the novel is a dystopia. The dystopian elements

presented there were, at that time and for that people, part of their reality. Furthermore, by the time the novel was published, although the reality of the black community in the United States had changed, racism still manifested itself tenaciously through discrimination and violence, and now, six years later, it still does. These aspects and their impact on the characters can be seen in different instances of space in the novel: the physical space, the space of the body and, finally, the space of the mind.

As the most concrete dimension of space, the physical space in Morrison's novel is crucial, because it impacts on the characters and makes evident that there is a clear separation between black and white, showing that the space of the former is always subjected to the space of the latter. We can observe a variety of levels to be worked with and analyzed. Firstly, the most obvious aspect in the novel is the dimension of prohibition, spaces of which black people are not allowed to be part and to which they cannot have access, as in the following example:

The agent dropped her eyes, then decided not to lie. "Well, no, but there are restrictions."

(...) Turning a page, she showed Lily an underlined passage. Lily traced the lines of print with her forefinger:

No part of said property hereby conveyed shall ever be used or occupied by any Hebrew or any person of the Ethiopian, Malay or Asiatic race excepting only employees in domestic service. (73)

This aspect of the space makes the characters go through a transformation and end up creating spaces of their own - heterotopic ones. This process leads to something crucial as far as heterotopias are concerned, namely the sense of community and resistance that the physical spaces create, as is noticeable in the following passage:

*Mama was pregnant when we walked out of Bandera County, Texas. Three or four families had trucks or cars and loaded all they could. But remember, nobody could load their land (...). Most families, like mine, walked for miles until Mr. Gardener came back for a few more of us after dropping his own people at the state line.* (39)

However, in spite of the heterotopic dimension of the space created by that community, in which resistance and solidarity can be highlighted, there is also a dystopian dimension, since the WASP society is always turning the space of the black people - directly or indirectly - into a space of rejection, dislocation and poverty. This becomes evident throughout the novel with the descriptions of the town where the black community is settled - Lotus - and also with the descriptions of the prohibitions

that whites impose on the African-American population, throwing them out of their homes, for example.

Another dimension of spatiality that is essential to this interpretation is the one of the body. It is through the body that people relate to other physical spaces and it is also a space common to every human being. Moreover, in theory, a person's body is their responsibility, as far as the decisions towards it are concerned; that power remains with the individual, or at least it should.

Starting with Frank's friends, Mike and Stuff, it is important to note that both had their bodies destroyed in the Korean war. They fought for a WASP society to which their bodies never truly belonged and lost them following white people's orders and desires. Their bodies were a property of a white society and were used according to its needs. As far as Frank is concerned, his body is preserved from the annihilation of the war. However, it suffers several injuries during the war and after his release from the army. Throughout the novel, there are several examples of Frank's body being subjected to violence from white people and of him getting involved in fights, during which he usually manages to defeat the rival. Unlike what happens to his friends, it seems that the whites never manage to destroy or possess in any way the space of his body.

The most striking and dystopian dimension of the space of the body, however, is seen through the main character's sister (Cee). There are different layers in which we can perceive the lack of control that Cee has over her own body: firstly, in terms of her relationships and, secondly and mainly, in terms of the power the doctor for whom she works has over her body. He uses her reproductive system to conduct experiments with the aim of finding out the role of wombs, as Sarah notices:

What she didn't know was when he got so interested in wombs in general, constructing instruments to see farther and farther into them. Improving the speculum. But when she noticed Cee's loss of weight, her fatigue, and how long her periods were lasting, she became frightened enough to write the only relative Cee had an address for. (113)

The doctor uses a black woman because he follows a racist ideology which claims white superiority. This dystopian element of the narrative can only happen to an Afro-American character, because its basis is racism. Furthermore, the fact that her body is a possession of others clearly displays an analogy to slavery.

Furthermore, it is not by chance that the character who struggles the most to possess and control her own body is a woman, because, at the time - and even nowadays - women usually did not have a say on what to do with it, especially concerning their reproductive system. As Angela Davis has stated in her book *Women, Race and Class*, “women’s desire to control their reproductive system is probably as old as human history itself” (229). In Morrison’s work, it is rare to find a male main character; most of her protagonists are female. In *Home* the protagonism of the female figure is not cast aside: Cee is the character who makes the narrative happen; it is because of her that Frank crosses America and that we get to know his story.

Another important aspect of the novel concerning the bodies of black people is the fights that oblige men to kill one another. Those events show the lack of humanity which is attributed to them and how they undergo a process of reification and bestialization.<sup>5</sup> Their bodies are a possession of other people and they do what they are told to, which is also what happens with Cee, for she obeys the doctor who also bestializes and dehumanizes her, as a follower of theoretical racism: “She was always in awe with the crowded bookshelves. Now she examined the medical books closely, running her finger over some of the titles: *Out of the Night*. Must be a mystery, she thought. Then, *The Passing of the Great Race*, and next to it, *Heredity, Race and Society*” (Morrison 65). All these titles, which are part of the doctor’s personal library are works which declare that the white race is superior to the black and which promote what is called scientific racism.

The heterotopic dimension reinforced by the analysis of the space of the body shows that this instance of spatiality offers those people a place of their own - the place of Otherness, as established by Foucault - a space in which they can resist, with the exception of Cee’s case, as her body is constantly violated by white people. This space, though, is not heterotopic and utopian; on the contrary, it is a heterotopic dystopian space. The scientific experiments on Cee, the war - that annihilates the body - and the fights between men that, as well as leading to death, signify an apocalyptic scenario in which death is seen as a spectacle, reinforce this characteristic of the heterotopic spaces in the novel and also bring up the dystopian dimension of the novel.

The last space to be analyzed in this article is the space of the mind. This is an example of the heterotopic space *par excellence* because it is a space of difference, that accommodates what is outside of the hegemonic and promotes resistance.

However, if not owned by the individual to which it belongs, it is the worst form of subjugation that someone might face.

Concerning this specific space, there are two characters who deserve special attention: Frank and Cee. Frank uses his mind as the one place to which no one can have access, especially the white; if there are physical spaces of which he is not allowed to be a part, no one is allowed to be a part of what happens in the space of his mind. This difficulty in getting to know Frank, which is highlighted by the fact that his own sister does not actually know him, may also have to do with the fact that he has a disturbed and confused mind, because he suffers from PTSD. Cee, on the other hand, shows us the complete opposite of what happens to Frank: everyone knows what is on her mind.

Frank's sister is never able to have access to other people's minds and is constantly being fooled and diminished by them - for example, by her boyfriend, her grandmother Lenore and the doctor. Unlike other characters, she is not able to see beyond appearances. Furthermore, if on one hand she is never able to access the spaces of other people's minds, on the other, her mind is a space to which everyone has access. She is often manipulated into believing what other people tell her, not only concerning their intentions, but also her identity. This lack of ability to own her mind is, again, an analogy to slavery. This is made clear in the following passage, towards the end of the book: "Look to yourself. You free. (...) Don't let Lenore or some trifling boyfriend and certainly no devil doctor decide who you are. That's slavery" (126).

Sexism and racism both turn subjugated individuals into alienated people, capable of very little self-awareness. Therefore, Cee, as the most important female character, appears in the novel so we can go further in the analysis of issues concerning feminism and gender, in addition to race. African-American women always had to deal with the disruptive effects of both racism and patriarchy. The "racial suicide" theory, which was very common until the 20<sup>th</sup> century in America, as Angela Davis explains in detail in her book *Woman, Race and Class*, is a good example of what black women have dealt with.<sup>6</sup>

Thus, after performing a close reading of the novel, through the use of conceptual tools, it is shown that, even though *Home* is neither a utopian or dystopian novel, Morrison makes it possible to find several dystopian elements in her novel. It is also important to conduct this analysis in order to show that, if we were to read such a



novel and what is represented there as happening to white people, we would not hesitate to consider it as a dystopia. However, as we are dealing with the black community, the situations which they go through, as the ones represented in Morrison's novel, which are constantly underestimated and neglected by the WASP society, are only too true and historically based to be dystopian. Moreover, if that scenario is only possible in white people's imagination, for the Afro-American community that is daily life.

Therefore, I hope that this essay will help to raise awareness concerning the need to read Afro-American literature, especially Morrison's, through a point of view that shows that one cannot detach it from the context of intense racism that has been established as a form of politics by white society, especially in the USA. Furthermore, I hope that it also becomes clear that, in order to understand such conflicts, it is important to adopt spatiality studies as a tool for analyzing social relations and their impact.

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<sup>1</sup> For more information see: *Spatiality* by Robert T. Tally Jr. and *The Production of Space* by Henri Lefebvre.

<sup>2</sup> According to Kevin Hetherington in his text “Two Castles” from the book *The Badlands of Modernity*, “Heterotopia signify not through resemblance, as in the way a metaphor works - one being used to resemble the other - but through similitude, more an example of metonym” (42).

<sup>3</sup> See Henri Lefebvre’s *The Production of Space*: “In reality, social space ‘incorporates’ social actions, the actions of subjects both individual and collective who are born and who die, who suffer and who act. From the point of view of these subjects, the behaviour of their space is at once vital and mortal: within it they develop, give expression to themselves, and encounter prohibitions; then they perish, and that same space contains their graves. From the point of view of knowing (*connaissance*), social space works (along with its concept) as a tool for the analysis of society” (33-34).

<sup>4</sup> For more on this topic, see Baccolini and Moylan.

<sup>5</sup> “Man’s animality, animality within and against man - hence the systematic ‘bestialization’ of individuals and racialized human groups - is thus the means specific to theoretical racism for conceptualizing human historicity” (Balibar 57).

<sup>6</sup> The theory of racial suicide was used by some of the movements of the African American community against the right of black women to use contraceptive methods, claiming that this would provoke a racial suicide of the community. Davis was one of the most active militants of this right for women, though.