

## Toni Morrison's *Home* and Dolen Perkins-Valdez's *Take My Hand* as Counter-Sterilization Narratives

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33806/ijaes912>

Sabrina Saleh and Mahmoud Zidan  
*The University of Jordan, Jordan*

Received: 29.9.2024

Accepted: 20.4.2025

Published: 2.1.2026

**Abstract:** This paper examines and contextualizes eugenic sterilization as depicted in two African American narratives, namely Toni Morrison's *Home* (2012) and Dolen Perkins-Valdez's *Take My Hand* (2022). We refer to the aforementioned novels as "counter-sterilization narratives," as they expose the history of eugenic sterilization in the United States and propose counter-hegemonic healing strategies. Such strategies, the two narratives show, help preserve and maintain the physical and psychic well-being of African Americans. Moreover, those strategies manifest themselves by means of both content and form, facilitating characters' significant progress towards healing and wholeness; such progress is enabled by two specific venues for healing: Othermothering and the protagonists' journeys of return. By responding to medical racism, Morrison and Valdez, we suggest, contribute to the field of the Critical Medical Humanities and take part in the battle for survival in a context which hinges on "survival for the fittest" and deems African Americans "unfit."

**Keywords:** healing, Morrison, othermothering, sterilization, Valdez, wholeness

### 1. Introduction

The United States' notorious involvement in initiating, legitimizing, and institutionalizing eugenic sterilization is beyond question. Whereas it is commonly believed that practices of eugenic sterilization started in Nazi Germany, eugenics was a deeply-rooted logic in the U.S. way before any other place. In *A Century of Eugenics*, Gregory Michael Dorr (2011: 171) states that "[b]y June 1933, when the Nazis passed their eugenics laws, thousands of Americans had already undergone eugenic sterilization." In fact, one of the most influential publications at the time that had an impact on the eugenic movement in Germany was *The Passing of the Great Race* (1916) by the American lawyer and eugenicist Madison Grants. In the early decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Grants theorized about the inherent superiority of the "Nordic race" and advocated the sterilization of inferior stock. His book was commended and celebrated not only by white supremacists in the United States but also by Hitler and other Nazis, who believed in the pressing need to purify and preserve the genes of the "Nordic race" by limiting miscegenation and restricting immigration.

Several books and articles mention the United States' contribution to pioneering the eugenic movement, stressing that eugenic sterilization was a common practice in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in the US. In "Bad Blood and

Better Babies” and *Better for All the World: The Secret History of Forced Sterilization and America's Quest for Racial Purity*, Beth Widmaier Capo and Harry Bruinius (respectively) trace the origins and history of eugenics, stating that the dawn of the twentieth century represents the peak of the eugenic movement (Bruinius 2007: 9; Capo 2018: 103). Dorr (2011: 171) maintains that “[c]onstitutional precedent for the eugenic sterilization of the mentally retarded . . . originated with Justice Holmes’s 1927 ruling in *Buck v. Bell*.” However, the *Buck v. Bell* decision of the Supreme Court in 1927 which allowed compulsory sterilization of the “feeble-minded” in Virginia was not the starting point. According to Bruinius (2007: 9), Indiana is considered the first state to pass and implement sterilization laws in 1907. In the following decades, “[f]ifteen other states also passed [sterilization] laws before 1927” (Bruinius 2007: 10), and many other countries followed the United States’ lead.

The malevolence of the eugenic movement in the U.S. is associated with the origins of the term “eugenics” in the nineteenth century. According to Capo (2018: 103), “[i]n 1883, Sir Francis Galton coined the word ‘eugenic’ from the Greek for ‘good in birth’.” Capo (2018: 103) argues that the “[e]ugenic ideology” refers to “the belief that humanity could be improved through controlled reproduction.” Accordingly, eugenic sterilization refers to the practice of improving humankind by encouraging the “superior” racial stock to reproduce and proliferate while discouraging the propagation of people who have “undesirable” heritable traits which would “taint” the white genetic pool. Indeed, eugenicists adopted two approaches: “positive eugenics encouraging the ‘fit’ to dutifully reproduce, and negative eugenics discouraging or preventing the ‘unfit’ from breeding” (Capo 2018: 104).

While such definitions are supposedly based on scientific grounds, they are inherently racist. Bruinius (2007:12) states that nineteenth-century scientific discourse replaced religious discourse, as “Darwin’s ‘natural selection,’ Herbert Spencer’s ‘survival of the fittest’ and Galton’s ‘nature versus nurture’—shattered the foundations of human identity, the idea that human nature was immutable and akin to the divine”; therefore, “the ‘unfit’ were now determined by their genes” (Bruinius 2007: 12). Despite attempts to promote eugenics as “emphasiz[ing] progress” and representing “a key to the transition to modernity” (Capo 2018: 104), practices of eugenics were later exposed as a form of scientific racism and the epitome of racial genocide in the medical field. For the purposes of this paper, our focus is on the racial genocide of African Americans through sterilization practices, which is based on the racist belief in white supremacy and inferiority of African Americans. In this regard, Harriet Washington (2006: 191-192) writes, “In a refinement of earlier scientific racism, eugenics was appropriated to label black women as sexually indiscriminate and as bad mothers who were constrained by biology to give birth to defective children.” In other words, eugenics scientifically pathologized blackness, rendering African Americans’ women/mothers targets of forced sterilization.

Despite the abundance in research on the topic of sterilization in historical, medical, and legal records, very few studies are conducted on the literary depiction

of this movement, especially in African American literature. Moreover, novels that tackle the topic in African American literature are very few and far between. That is, whether in fiction or literary criticism, the topic has not been widely explored as an African American experience. Therefore, this paper examines Toni Morrison's *Home* and Dolen Perkins-Valdez's *Take My Hand* as literary depictions that highlight the contours of the eugenic movement in the U.S. and its deleterious effects on African Americans. By examining the intersection of medicine and race in the aforementioned novels, as well as the effective healing strategies proposed by Morrison and Valdez in response to medical racism, we aim to show how these narratives contribute to the field of the Critical Medical Humanities.

The field of the Critical Medical Humanities has received limited attention as a theoretical framework for analyzing African American literature, despite its adequacy for addressing issues of race, healthcare disparities, and injustices within the healthcare system. The Critical Medical Humanities is an interdisciplinary field that integrates insights from medicine and the humanities to critically examine and challenge medical knowledge and practices, which are shaped by historical contexts and power dynamics. *The Edinburgh Companion to the Critical Medical Humanities* (Whitehead and Woods 2016: 14) introduces the field as an interdisciplinary one in constant flux, referring to it as “a field that is at a crucial point or nexus of growth, shift and change.” Part of the field's interdisciplinarity, the book shows, is its attention to factors like class, race, and gender—which the Medical Humanities tends to overlook (Whitehead and Woods 2016 :2). Literature plays an important role in revealing how these factors influence access to healthcare and shape experiences of illness. Furthermore, pertinent to the needs of this paper, *The Edinburgh Companion* (Whitehead and Woods 2016:560) also underscores the powerful influence of medical narratives, the importance of storytelling, and the necessity of diverse perspectives for understanding medical experiences. In this context, the novels in question contribute to the field by critiquing the power dynamics inherent in medical institutions and doctor-patient relationships, portraying the perspectives of marginalized patients and caregivers, and challenging normative understandings of illness and healing. In so doing, the novels' authors and characters provide alternative medical narratives that resist the dominant biomedical model. Moreover, by depicting individuals navigating illness and medical treatment, they provide valuable insights into the emotional, psychological, and social complexities that shape the African American experience of illness, healing, and caregiving.

Whereas *Home* tackles the topic of eugenic sterilization in the 1950s through Cee's sterilization (which constitutes a relatively small but significant part in the novel), *Take My Hand* represents a more recent and expanded literary incarnation of eugenic sterilization in the 1970s. Morrison is a well-recognized African American novelist who was awarded the Nobel Prize for her brilliant literary depiction of the African American (especially female) experience. *Home* revolves around Frank Money, a traumatized veteran of the Korean war, and his journey back home upon receiving a mysterious plea to rescue his sister, Cee, who is coerced into eugenic sterilization. Likewise, Valdez—the *New York Times*

bestselling novelist of *Wench*, *Balm*, and *Take My Hand*—highlights the black female experience in her novels. *Take My Hand* is a historical novel which provides a fictional account of a true story of the Relf sisters who were sterilized without their approval in Montgomery, Alabama in 1973<sup>1</sup>. The story is told by a black nurse named Civil who aspires to make a difference in the African American community through her job at Montgomery Family Planning Clinic.

We aim to explore the abovementioned novels as “counter-sterilization narratives,” as they debunk the history of eugenic sterilization and propose healing and survival strategies for maintaining the physical and psychic well-being of their African American characters and preserving their communities. By so doing, we suggest that Morrison and Valdez respond to medical injustices by taking part in the war against sterilization through their novels.

## 2. The war against sterilization

Concerned about their racial “impurity,” some white politicians, legislators, social activists, scientists, and physicians in the twentieth century collaborated to achieve the mission of “purifying” the land of those who are “unfit” in order to create a utopia and attain scientific and medical progress. Eugenic sterilization was believed to be one important path towards that progress and a “weapon” in the war against overpopulation, poverty, and “feble-mindedness.” Despite its malicious intentions, the movement’s logic and practices were justified in the name of science and medical progress. Bruinius (2007: 8) contends that the physicians performing the surgeries, most notably Dr. John H. Bell, believed that they had a noble mission and “civic duty” so as “to purify the human race through genetic engineering” as part of what they deemed as “a battle of genetic survival” (Bruinius 2007: 11, 6)<sup>2</sup>.

*Home* and *Take My Hand* portray that genetic engineering as a process which constitutes part of an unethical medical, scientific, and political war. Therefore, the two novels perceive eugenic sterilization as a war waged against the black body and family as well as their reproductive rights and autonomy. Set in the 50s and 70s, *Home* and *Take My Hand*, we argue, should be viewed along a Civil-Rights-Movement continuum. In other words, we contend that the novels extend the Civil Rights Movement by respectively going back to the 50s in a pre-Civil Rights Movement America and moving forward to the 70s to reflect on the aftermath of the Civil Rights Movement. As such, the novels do not view the Civil Rights Movement as a point in history but as a historical continuum despite the fact that “[t]he temporal markers of the civil rights movement traditionally move from the Montgomery Bus Boycott (1955–56) to either the Voting Rights Act of 1965 or Martin Luther King’s assassination in 1968” (Edwards, Ferguson and Ogbar 2018:47). Doing so, the novels suggest that despite the Civil Rights Movement, little has been done regarding African Americans’ reproductive rights.

More specifically, the Civil Rights Movement coincided with the emergence of “neo-eugenics” in the second half of the twentieth century. In *Fit to be Tied*, Rebecca Kluchin (2011: 5) highlights the “transition from [first-half 20<sup>th</sup> century] eugenics to [second-half 20<sup>th</sup> century] neo-eugenics.” Kluchin (2011: 1) makes clear that whereas “early eugenicists endorsed a rather crude notion of biological

determinism that deemed mental, physical, and behavioral ‘defects’ to be genetic and unalterable,” “neo-eugenicists recognized the role of environment in shaping behavior, but they argued that the most effective means of preventing the cultural transmission of defects was to surgically prevent the ‘unfit’ from bearing children in the first place” (Kluchin 2011: 4). That is, sterilization’s goal of restricting the reproduction of the “unfit” had not changed, but the understanding of what Kluchin’s book refers to as “reproductive ‘fitness’” (2011: 2) started to be attributed to culture in addition to genes. This shift took place due to the fact that white supremacists construed “blacks’ demands for racial equality” as “new ‘threats’ to white power and privilege” (Kluchin 2011: 3). Accordingly, the fact that African Americans started asking for equal rights fostered further resentment on the part of white eugenicists.

Sterilization’s racist notions remained prevalent in the second half of the twentieth century despite the revolutionary advancements on both the political and medical levels. That is, “[w]hile the civil rights movement drew national attention to racial discrimination, the rise of the women’s health movement articulated the notion that women have reproductive rights” (Schoen 2005: 17). In the 1960s, new contraception methods were introduced (Washington 2006: 198); however, sterilization remained the most popular birth control method. Although sterilization was later medically legalized as a permanent contraceptive method, its notorious connection to racism and eugenics has not disappeared. In this regard, Zite and Borrero (2011: 339) in “Female Sterilisation in the United States” highlight that racialization, among other demographic factors, is responsible for the high rates of sterilization that remained “common among racial and ethnic minorities.”

Morrison’s and Valdez’s novels respond to this disparity not only by exposing the medical abuse their characters are subject to due to eugenic sterilization but also by taking part in the war against sterilization through offering effective healing strategies that would help in preserving African American communities. Despite their depiction of the extreme violence practiced against African American bodies, the novels entertain the possibility of healing in the context of war by showcasing peaceful protest against denied reproductive rights and legitimate endeavors to preserve African American communities against medical attempts to erase them. Whereas *Home* redefines masculinity absent violence, *Take My Hand* uses law to prove that violence should not be met with violence. Thus, the healing strategies the novels offer, namely othermothering and the protagonists’ journeys of return, harken back to Martin Luther King’s legacy of civil protest and nonviolent resistance.

In addition, we aim to show that the aforementioned healing strategies facilitate the characters’ growth and important progress towards healing (wholeness). The protagonists’ journeys, however, do not culminate in their complete healing, as their past experiences have left an ongoing impact and lasting scars that persist beyond the narratives’ endings. That is, although the protagonists’ cyclical journeys suggest closure, the novels’ endings reflect growth and transformation simultaneous with the incompleteness of healing. In this regard, we contend that the two novels perceive healing as a constant and “dynamic process

rather than a finished product” (Saleh and Zidan 2024: 1288). Consequently, we suggest that wholeness in the African American context acquires a special meaning by making use of the pun/wordplay of the word wholeness to clarify what the term means in the two novels.<sup>3</sup> The word “whole-ness” suggests that a “hole,” gap, or void is always concomitant to healing in the African American context. The cyclical movement of the main characters which is projected on the circularity in the novels’ form reflects this conception, as circularity indicates closure but at the same time a “hole” inside. Moreover, wholeness in the context of the novels proves to have different versions, as it is defined according to character. Whereas wholeness for Frank and Cee means overcoming their fragmentation on different levels, it represents redemption for Civil. All in all, wholeness implies acceptance of human vulnerability as well as the strong will that the characters acquire, enabling them to move on with life despite their wounds and traumas.

### 3. Othermothers as caregivers

While the two novels provide many examples of racial violence, they dwell on the violence committed against African American women, especially their right to motherhood. Indeed, the involuntary sterilization practiced against African American women denies them the right to mothering and destroys the African American family. However, through the practice of othermothering, African American characters in the novels under discussion resist sterilization by deconstructing the traditional meaning of family and mothering and establishing alternative ways of perceiving them. Through non-biological ties and alternative mother figures (othermothers), the characters heal and build their communities.

The tradition of othermothering is essential for African Americans’ survival, as it facilitates their healing processes. A frequently quoted definition of othermothering is the one provided by Stanlie M. James (1993: 45) as the “acceptance of responsibility for a child not one’s own, in an arrangement that may or may not be formal.” Naomi Mercer (2016: 39-40) states that we need othermothering for “the desired outcomes of healing, preservation, nurturance, and training, all of which psychologically equips [sic] members of the community with the resilience to withstand systemic racism.” Likewise, Andrea O’Reilly (2004: 6) asserts that “[t]he practice of othermothering, as it developed from West African traditions, became in African American culture a strategy of survival.”

Through that survival strategy, the novels redefine and expand the meaning of motherhood by making it racial and communal, and thus opening it up to go beyond biology. The novels represent attempts to redefine the African American mother and family by introducing the figure of the othermother and, in the process, challenging stereotypes linked to black women/mothers. In this regard, Mercer (2016: 37) refers to Patricia Hill Collins to elaborate on the same idea, stating that since othermothering does not necessitate “biological ties,” it “disrupts the nuclear family model of who constitutes a family,” as it provides “alternative familial models” (Mercer 2016: 48) and “fosters fluid family dynamics” (Mercer 2016: 49). The absent(ed) real mother figures of the sterilized female characters in both novels is substituted by othermother figures like other family or

community members. Therefore, we attempt to show that the main characters in both novels heal either by being othermothered or by othermothering other figures, the two of which facilitate their and other characters' progress towards wholeness.

Morrison was always interested in mother figures in her fiction. *Toni Morrison: On Mothers and Motherhood* explores othermothering as one of the different forms of mothering in Morrison's work. *Home* perfectly exemplifies Morrison's perception of othermothering, as it showcases Morrison's philosophy of othermothering through multiple othermother figures. In this regard, Susan Neal Mayberry (2017: 13) underscores how othermothering has different forms in *Home*, namely "community mothering" and "masculine othermothering."

Frank's healing is achieved through othermothering his sister, Cee, which facilitates his journey toward wholeness. However, Frank's violent past, including his acts of aggression on his way home and his killing of the Korean child, complicates his role as an othermother to Cee and underscores the dark side of his identity and the duality of his personality as both a victim and a perpetrator of violence. These violent actions mirror the destructive masculinity embedded in American war-making, where soldiers like Frank are turned into killers to suppress guilt and trauma. Therefore, Frank's realization that masculinity should be divorced from violence is a pivotal moment on his journey towards healing. Frank begins to recognize that violence does not define manhood. For instance, he shows a desire to break the cycle of violence by refraining from inflicting further violence toward Dr. Beau. Put differently, Frank's healing process is associated with getting in touch with his feminine side and maintaining balance between the feminine and masculine. Mayberry (2017: 13) highlights the fact that Frank manages to become an "effective othermother" by referring to Hortense Spillers, who "views their [black men's] embrace of the feminine as a way for males to achieve *wholeness* and self-actualization" (Mayberry 2017:22, emphasis added). That is, only by "[e]mbracing the mother within" (Mayberry 2017: 23) does Frank understand the true meaning of masculinity. Thus, the novel attempts at "disrupting normative narratives of masculinity" (Mayberry 2017: 16) which thrive on violence.

Likewise, Cee's path to wholeness is initiated through being othermothered by Frank and other women in the community. Tosha K. Sampson-Choma (2019: 267-268) argues that although Cee will never bear children, she "is only beginning her journey toward wholeness" with the help of her "brothermother" and "othermothers." Cee's path to healing and empowerment—like Frank's, we suggest—challenges racialized gender roles, as she progresses towards her wholeness by incorporating traits into her identity that result in empowerment and self-esteem. According to Spillers (1987: 80), in her renowned article "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," not only should African American men embrace feminine aspects of their identities to achieve wholeness, but African American women should also achieve agency and empowerment through "claiming the monstrosity." Spillers (1987: 66) maintains that women's empowerment is not a "pathology" which deprives men of their masculinity or retards the progress of the African American family.

Therefore, Cee's empowerment facilitates rather than hinders Frank's healing. Cee's emotional and physical recovery represents a catalyst for Frank's recovery and an important step in his healing process. His confession at the end of Chapter Fourteen, in which he admits killing the Korean girl, is a significant moment of reconciliation, taking place only after Cee regains her strength and agency. This shift of focus—from his sister's suffering to confronting his own guilt—showcases Frank's emotional growth, as Frank begins to face his trauma and acknowledge the vulnerabilities he had long suppressed. In Chapter Fifteen, Morrison (2012: 135) writes: "Day and night he had held on to that suffering because it let him off the hook, kept the Korean child hidden. Now the hook was deep inside his chest and nothing would dislodge it. The best he could hope for was time to work it loose. Meantime there were worthwhile things that needed doing." This passage represents a turning point in Frank's and Cee's shared path to healing, as it leads them to confronting the traumas of their formative years through the reburial of the dead body covered by the quilt made by Cee.

In this sense, Frank and Cee represent a perfect embodiment of Morrison's othermother figure by undermining and problematizing racialized gender roles, and thus disrupting what Spillers refers to as the American Grammar book (the symbolic order). In other words, the African American othermother, whether male or female, stands as a perfect manifestation of Spiller's vision. Both Cee and Frank challenge the constraints of racialized gender roles in different, yet complementary, ways. Cee's journey toward empowerment and Frank's rejection of the hyper-masculine ideal demonstrate how Morrison critiques and subverts societal expectations. Both characters find a middle ground between the masculine and the feminine. Frank accepts his nurturing role as an othermother, which does not conflict with his masculinity, while still avoiding the harm of excessive love and protection, as he realizes that "[w]hile his devotion shielded her, it did not strengthen her" (Morrison 2012: 129). Cee, on the other hand, embraces her newfound strength and independence, finding comfort in her brother's presence but rejecting his over-protectiveness. She reflects: "her brother was there with her, which was very comforting, but she didn't need him as she had before. He had literally saved her life, but she neither missed nor wanted his fingers at the nape of her neck telling her not to cry, that everything would be all right" (Morrison 2012: 131). Through their experiences, both characters push against the boundaries placed on them by race and gender, ultimately forging their own paths to healing and self-realization by integrating elements of both the masculine and the feminine.

*Take My Hand*, likewise, utilizes othermothering in the face of that racialized grammar. In an interview, Valdez states that "the book has some sort of ruminations of what it means to mother, what it means to desire motherhood, and what it means to have that taken away from you" (Arizona's Family 2022). She adds that "instead of just making it a sort of thing about the sterilization of these girls, I tried to create . . . various layers of mothering" (Arizona's Family 2022). In other words, Valdez shows interest not only in the Relf sisters' tragedy but also in providing solutions and healing strategies. Just like *Home*, the novel provides an alternative meaning to mothering through othermothering, and thus disassociates maternity from biology.

*Take My Hand* is replete with othermother figures who compensate for the absence of biological mothers. Most prominently, Civil represents an othermother to Erica and India (the two sterilized girls in the novel) who are also othermothered by their grandmother after their mother's death. Moreover, Erica plays the role of an othermother to her sister India. Through multiple othermother figures, the novel redefines mothering, and by extension the black family, by associating it with community, shared history, and affiliation rather than filiation. Valdez punctuates her narrative with Civil directly addressing her adopted child Anne at the beginning and at the end of the novel, telling her that what connects them together or to the Williams sisters is a family that "defies biology" (Valdez 2022: 4) and a history that is "more powerful than blood" (Valdez 2022: 352).

Civil's path to wholeness relates to her redefinition of mothering as an empowering choice that transcends biology rather than a burden or a traditional role attributed to her by virtue of her gender. In other words, similar to Cee and Frank, othermothering helps Civil to seek wholeness through challenging racialized gender roles. Initially, her belief that she "was supposed to be more than a wife and mother" (Valdez 2022: 13) results in her abandonment of motherhood, as it restricts her role in society. However, towards the end of the novel, Civil expresses her new perspective on mothering: "I no longer viewed motherhood as a trap or punishment. I no longer owed it to those girls never to have children. I was not my mother, whose mothering was affected by her illness" (Valdez 2022: 339). Through othermothering Erica, India, and her adopted child Anne, Civil starts to think that biology is irrelevant, and that a woman without biological children is still capable of mothering. In other words, mothering is a matter of choice that even a mother with biological children, like her mother, might choose to abandon. In this sense, othermothering represents a middle ground for Civil, for it helps her define her identity as a powerful othermother who is capable of making a difference in society without abandoning her role as a mother. Similar to Frank and Cee in *Home*, othermothering enables Civil to combine the masculine and feminine by being an empowered and nurturing person at the same time, aspiring wholeness.

On the one hand, the two novels underscore the perils of taking othermothering to an extreme, as it would fail to attain its desired goal as a healing strategy. In this regard, Mayberry (2017: 19) refers to two extremes in relation to Cee's othermothering, namely Lenore's (Cee's step-grandmother's) "destructive othermothering," which "causes Cee's low self-esteem, [and] the brother's alternative method of 'too much' love." Frank finds his way to healing and helps his sister heal only after he learns to stop being overprotective of Cee. Likewise, Civil's excessive empathy with the Williams family is destructive for both parties. Civil takes full responsibility for their suffering and starts tormenting herself for their misfortune. Thus, she refers to the girls' experience of sterilization at the hospital as "the greatest hurt of my life" (Valdez 2022: 141). Civil heals when she realizes that "good intentions could be just as destructive as bad ones" (Valdez 2022: 254). Eventually, she learns to let go of the girls' hands, as her overprotectiveness retards Erica and India's path to healing and self-empowerment. On the other hand, the two novels also reveal the complexities of othermothering

and the limitations of care and protection. For instance, Civil and Frank fail to prevent the sterilization of the girls they protect and nurture, despite their roles as othermothers. Additionally, Frank abandons Cee for much of the novel, leaving her to confronting her trauma and fate alone. His eventual return to help her comes nearly too late, underscoring the flaws in his attempts at nurturing. However, these flaws do not render the characters bad othermothers; rather, they highlight the challenges and limitations of providing care and protection in a world governed by systemic forces beyond their control.

Othermothering in both novels suggests that healing from physical and psychological wounds on the individual level or the collective level is a communal responsibility. The healing powers of the community facilitate Frank's and particularly Cee's healing. Miss Ethel Fordham and the other women from Lotus provide home remedy to Cee and thus help her heal through their own healing methods, which are counter-hegemonic, as they challenge Western medical strategies<sup>4</sup>. The community's support in Lotus plays a vital role in both characters' journeys of recovery, as their paths are deeply influenced by the support and care they receive from the people around them. Frank's journey toward redemption is facilitated by his reconnection with his roots and the people he left behind, as he recognizes the value of community as a means of support and redemption. "[H]e could not believe how much he had once hated this place. Now it seemed both fresh and ancient, safe and demanding" (Morrison 2012: 132). Cee's recovery is directly tied to the community's care. After her abuse and near-death experience, Cee is cared for by the local healer, Miss Ethel, and others in the neighborhood who provide emotional and physical support. "[W]ith these people she [Cee] wanted to be the person who would never again need rescue" (Morrison 2012: 129). Frank and Cee's paths to healing demonstrate the significance of communal bonds in overcoming individual trauma. Morrison's depiction of African American characters' communal efforts to challenge Western medical supremacy through alternative healthcare solutions and folk remedies goes hand in hand with a long African American tradition which critiques and resists racism in medical settings, a tradition which Jess Waggoner (2017) studies in depth.

*Take My Hand* highlights the significance of similar alternative solutions like community othermothering in the healing process. Several characters like Ty, Civil, and their families extend help in different ways. Civil is well aware of her medical and social role towards her community due to her being a nurse, "[c]oming from a family of doctors" (Valdez 2022: 256), and belonging to a well-to-do family. Through her medical profession at Montgomery Family Planning Clinic, Civil aspires to make a difference and participate in the collective healing of her African American community by serving poor black women. Moreover, she believes that she is capable of offering more help as a nurse rather than a doctor, as nurses are "the real caregivers" (Valdez 2022: 277) and that her job is a "perfect platform" to "uplift the race" (Valdez 2022: 12). In addition, the other nurses collaborate together and extend their hands to help in the girls' case. These African American characters know that the sterilization processes are irreversible, yet they also

understand that stopping such processes from happening would help preserve their community.

It is worth mentioning here that Civil is depicted as a proponent of positive eugenics, as she believes that the reproduction of the women of her community should be controlled rather than forcefully and permanently prevented. Initially, Civil “believed in the mission of family planning clinics long before I applied to work in one. I knew that the rate of pregnancy in young unwed mothers in Montgomery was terrible” (Valdez 2022: 14); “sixty-five percent of unmarried mothers in Alabama are black” (Valdez 2022: 35). While Civil’s liberal thoughts do not contradict her wish to preserve her community, they do not enable her to expose the racism of the healthcare system. When Civil discovers the malicious intentions of Mrs. Seager, the clinic’s owner and manager, she questions why the Williams sisters, India and Erica, who are still school girls (respectively eleven and thirteen) are put on needless Depo/birth control. As a result, Civil starts to investigate and expose the illegal practices of the clinic she works at. Her emerging consciousness partly prompts her journey of return.

#### **4. The therapeutic journeys of return**

The physical and psychological journeys of Frank and Civil are therapeutic, as they result in their reconciliation with a traumatic past, atonement for past mistakes, and redefinition of their identities. The protagonists’ attempts at healing other figures through othermothering lead to their own healing, as the journeys compel them to engage in a therapeutic conversation with a traumatic memory. Their journeys back home represent their path to wholeness because they facilitate the ordering of their fragmented selves through (re)telling their narratives, especially with regard to sterilization.

Frank and Civil showcase the essentiality of retelling medical narratives for healing and survival. In this regard, Schoen (2005: 15) highlights the importance of “telling medical stories,” as “[r]econstructing these stories means being mindful of the existence of parallel ‘realities,’—in this case, the reality of a medical history at odds with the self-perception of a historical subject, the reality of a subject’s medical narrative at odds with science” (Schoen 2005: 17). Schoen’s point is particularly significant in this context, as it highlights the incompatibility of African American patients’/caregivers’ narratives on the one hand and hegemonic medical stories on the other. Whereas Frank’s narrative simultaneously stands for the perspective of the patient as a traumatized subject and Cee’s caregiver, Civil’s narrative represents the vantage point of a nurse who bears witness to the injustices done against African Americans in the medical field.

Several articles highlight the importance of Frank narrating his story which his journey back home makes possible. Through telling his story, Frank overcomes his fragmentation and initiates his passage to wholeness. Schreiber (2022: 725) maintains that Frank’s “healing way of pulling fragments together” is achieved through storytelling: “In *Home*, Frank’s journey takes him from a fragmented self to an integrated subject.” Whereas some critics view Frank’s wholeness as the combination between the feminine and masculine as mentioned earlier, Schreiber

(2022: 725) argues that Frank represents what Lacan refers to as “body in pieces,” representing the psychic and physical dismemberment of African Americans as a result of the violence practiced against them and which is reflected by the images of body parts that recur in the novel (Schreiber 2022: 735). As racism results in Frank’s fragmentation and blocks his way to wholeness, his journey helps him reorder his fragmented self, attempting to achieve wholeness.

Likewise, Civil seeks wholeness through narrating the Williams sisters’ story to her adopted child Anne on her journey back to Montgomery. The Williams sisters’ story represents a traumatic experience for Civil, as the memory of every single detail remains fresh in her mind throughout her life. Civil recalls these memories on her way back to Montgomery decades after the tragic story has happened. Civil is always guilt-ridden and burdened with “so much regret” (Valdez 2022: 131) despite all her attempts to redeem herself. She explains that no matter how many lives she has saved later on as a doctor, the fact that she could not save these girls “has left its indelible mark” (Valdez 2022: 198). For this reason, Civil’s nurse friend describes her journey back to Montgomery as an “apology tour” (Valdez 2022: 83). Civil’s attainment of wholeness is connected to achieving redemption through recovering from the pains of the past. As Valdez puts it, “[t]o heal, we must remember” (Penguin’s Books USA 2022). Eventually, Civil manages to start her healing process and step towards wholeness by virtue of her journey back home in which she confronts her traumatic past.

Both Frank and Civil form a narrative of who they are and articulate their innermost ailments. Their confessions play crucial roles in their healing processes. Frank’s confession about killing the Korean girl allows him to confront his guilt and begin his journey of self-forgiveness. Cee’s more implicit confession involves recognizing the abuse she endured and her role in her suffering, culminating in her realization that “she wanted to be the one who rescued her own self” (Morrison 2012: 129). Likewise, Civil’s confession hinges on confronting her traumatic past and trying to find a way to make amends. In fact, the whole novel takes on the form of a confessional one, as Civil narrates the story to her adopted child, Anne, as she journeys back to Montgomery. For the three characters, these confessions allow them to confront their guilt, shame, and pain, and thus, open the door to healing. Despite their traumas, the novels entertain the possibility of healing, as they manage to overcome the physical and psychic violation of African American bodies. The protagonists’ spatial and temporal journeys parallel the authors’ attempts to go back in time, namely to the 50s and 70s, to tackle the issue of sterilization, stressing the fact that healing from trauma necessitates confronting it, and to de-idealize the two decades.

##### **5. The therapeutic structuring of traumatic selves**

The chronology and circularity in the narrative form reflect the protagonists’ healing attempts and the wholeness they aspire to achieve. Moreover, the narrative form of the two novels contributes to confronting medical racism through generating dialogic contexts. Whereas *Home* takes on the forms of a dialogue between Frank and the narrator, *Take My Hand* constitutes an internal conversation

between Civil the doctor and Civil the nurse. Hence, the novels facilitate a productive dialogue between two contesting voices and generate a therapeutic conversation with a traumatic memory.

*Home*'s narrative form does not reflect Frank's trauma. As Visser (2014: 6) contends, "Morrison departs from that structural pattern of disruption and non-linearity, keeping to a chronology that strengthens the progressive narrative arc of Frank Money's journey homeward." It is true, Visser (2014: 6) maintains, that the "traumatic memories frequently disrupt the flow of Frank's thinking, but they do not disrupt the novel's overall temporal progression." In other words, instead of being trapped by those memories, the novel's form moves forward towards healing. That is, the form of the novel reorders Frank's fragmented self, as the process of narration mimics his constant attempts at correcting misconceptions: "Frank interrupts the narrative's flow to correct the false first telling" (Schreiber 2022: 731). In addition, *Home*'s narrative form subscribes to the hero's journey tradition, which critics like Joseph Campbell analyze and connect to healing. When considering "the unmistakable match between the seventeen stages of Campbell's [Monomyth] and the novel's seventeen chapters" (Saleh, Saleh, and Al-Shboul 2024: 58-59), *Home*'s seventeen chapters imply Frank's steady progress towards wholeness. Likewise, *Take My Hand*'s chronological narrative form traces Civil's path to wholeness through her journey back home rather than reflects her traumatized self. The chapters that are told from the perspective of Civil the doctor represent the narrator's wise reflections on past events without disrupting the temporal linearity of the narrative.

The sterilization plotlines in both novels are framed by the protagonists' journeys of return which represent a healing strategy for the characters. Their odyssey-like journeys give circularity to the novels' narrative form, stressing the need for return to confront and consequently heal from the ills of the past. The circularity of the novels' form mirrors the wholeness that the protagonists in both novels aspire to achieve. Both protagonists, who leave home to escape racism, embark on a journey of healing by recounting their stories and confronting a traumatic past as they return home aspiring to recuperate. Upon their return, both Frank and Civil realize that they respectively consider Lotus and Montgomery home. It is worth mentioning here that the novels' narrative form could suggest a kind of closure at the end, and thus the completion of the circle of the protagonists' journey towards wholeness. In this regard, Visser (2014: 17) argues that "[u]nlike Morrison's other novels, then, this ... novel holds out the possibility of closure and healing." Similarly, in *Take My Hand*, Civil's nurse friend refers to her journey as an act of "closure" (Valdez 2022: 83). However, as we suggested earlier, since the novels' endings do not depict the complete healing of both protagonists, we contend that despite the protagonists' attempts at healing and significant progress toward wholeness, the healing they achieve at the end is limited.

Hence, while Frank and Civil manage to start their healing processes by getting more empowered and overcoming their traumas, their traumatic pasts which are both connected to the violation of the black body will continue to haunt them. The ending of *Home* makes this clear through the image of the bay tree whose

description applies to Frank: "It looked so strong/So beautiful. /Hurt right down the middle/But alive and well" (Morrison 2012: 147). Moreover, the act of reburial of the father's bones placed in Cee's quilt serves as a symbol of Frank's effort to reclaim and restore humanity where violence has plagued his life. The bay tree and the bones point to the fragmented nature of Frank's soul and the painful but necessary process of healing, where violence is confronted but not forgotten. Similarly, Civil, on the novel's last page, significantly states that "I feel protected, the whole of me, in all my broken pieces under the blue" (Valdez 2022: 352). Despite Civil's awareness of the therapeutic effect of her journey, she realizes that the harm done to her and to the Williams sisters cannot be undone. In other words, the two novels perceive healing as an ongoing process by speculating on a future in which African American characters are more empowered to resist future injustices done to their bodies.

The protagonists' attempts at healing are further reflected in the novels' form, where alternating chapters create dialogic contexts. In *Home*, the narrator and Frank take turns in narrating and negotiating Frank's history through the novel's alternating chapters. Frank's conversation with the narrator is antagonistic but therapeutic, as it gives him a chance to narrate his own story from his own perspective and to correct misconceptions about it. In this regard, Visser (2014: 12) argues that "[t]he narrative of trauma requires a listener; Morrison's listener is silent, fully attentive, and as invisible as an implied author." Likewise, *Take My Hand*'s alternating chapters correspond to the novel's two plotlines: the contemporary story told by the mature doctor Civil and the 1973 story which reflects the perspective of the enthusiastic nurse Civil. The novel goes back and forth in time, fluctuating between two different times (2016 and 1973). The conflicting narratives in the chapters reflect the two competing voices between sixty-seven-year-old Dr. Civil and twenty-three-year-old nurse Civil. That is, whereas the chapters that depict 1973 focus on Civil as an enthusiastic nurse with a harmful overprotective role and a vision that she could save the world, the 2016 chapters portray a more mature perspective of Dr. Civil who realizes that changing medical injustices requires a long journey of collaborative and communal efforts rather than individual endeavors.

Accordingly, the alternating chapters in both novels represent a war of voices that parallels the war against sterilization (which is reminiscent of call and response). In the space of these counter-sterilization novels, storytelling represents a possibility for healing and redemption. In this sense, the two novels fight against attempts to silence black voices and stories of medical experimentation on African American bodies by giving voice to the voiceless and empowering the powerless. As a result, this war of voices is a peaceful one, which represents the two novels' attempts at taking part in the fight against sterilization using non-violent methods. In *Home*, Frank contradicts Dr. Beau's expectations when he does not use violence to rescue his sister, as he breaks the cycle of violence despite all the violence directed against him, his sister, and other African American characters. Likewise, the title *Take My Hand* itself refers to a quotation by Martin Luther King, which the author

quotes on the first few pages. Therefore, Civil supports non-violence through resorting to the law to reclaim the reproductive rights of the two sterilized girls.

## **6. Conclusion**

While *Home* and *Take my Hand* fictionalize the trials and tribulations of eugenic sterilization in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, they do not stand as mere ruminations on or visceral responses to the history of sterilization, as they provide characters with healing strategies to preserve their community, mainly through the practice of othermothering and journeying into a past in which their voices were muted and their narratives were silenced. The two novels, then, not only lay bare the racialized medical injustices meted out against African American women, but they also imagine a path forward through deracialized healing strategies. Frank and Civil embark on journeys of healing and redemption, following similar paths to recovery. In this regard, this paper has demonstrated that the novels entertain the possibility of healing without providing complete resolutions, as the protagonists do not fully achieve healing or wholeness. They depict the limited healing of African American characters, suggesting that full recovery is hindered by powerful systemic forces. In this way, we have argued that the novels perceive healing as an ongoing process that requires both individual and collective efforts to be realized in the future.

By responding to medical hegemonies and condemning eugenic sterilization, Morrison and Valdez's counter-sterilization narratives call for action against white-dominated definitions of "fitness" and for creating reproductive laws that protect the reproductive rights and welfare of African Americans. Through examining racialized medicine in literature, this paper has discussed *Home* and *Take my Hand* within the framework of the Critical Medical Humanities. In turn, the paper has shown that the novels contribute to the field of the Critical Medical Humanities by addressing medical racism, challenging the racialized construction of medical knowledge, resisting racist forms of medical treatment, and featuring characters experimenting with non-Western approaches to healing.

## **Endnotes**

<sup>1</sup>The novel also refers to the notorious Tuskegee syphilis experiment, which aligns eugenic sterilization with a long history of racialized medical experimentation on the black body at the hands of white physicians supported by the American government as well as a "straightforward effort simply to reduce the number of Africans" (Reverby 2001: 23).

<sup>2</sup>These beliefs suggest that providing medical care which preserves and prolongs the life of the "unfit" represents unnecessary "economic pressures" (Lombardo 2011: 3). Ironically, in the age of slavery, slaveholders advocated the well-being and fertility of black slaves, as it meant increased production on their plantations and thus enlarged profit. In *Medicalizing Blackness: Making Racial Difference in the Atlantic World, 1780-1840*, Rana A. Hogarth (2017: 3) contends that through

“medicalizing blackness” and “pathologizing blackness” in eighteenth-century America, physicians were not mainly interested in justifying racism through constructing racial difference but prided themselves on preserving the lives of slaves and thrived on providing “race-based therapy” (Hogarth 2017: xiv), which brought them professional and financial gains.

<sup>3</sup>*The Search for Wholeness and Diaspora Literacy in Contemporary African American Literature* represents an attempt at examining the journey's significance in achieving historical and spiritual wholeness in relation to healing in African American literature.

<sup>4</sup> In this regard, see our argument on the value of the non-traditional venues for healing in Morrison's *Home* (Saleh and Zidan 2024: 1288).

Sabrina Saleh, Full-Time Lecturer  
The Language Center  
The University of Jordan, Amman, Jordan  
ORCID Number: 0000-0003-1886-8329  
Email: s\_saleh@ju.edu.jo

Mahmoud Zidan, Associate Professor- Corresponding Author  
Department of English Language and Literature  
The University of Jordan, Amman, Jordan  
ORCID Number: 0000-0002-3450-7593  
Email: m.zidan@ju.edu.jo

## References

- Arizona's Family.** (2022, August 16). 'Olivia's book club Podcast: Dolen Perkins-Valdez, 'Take My Hand' [Video]. YouTube.  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zK5gOpi-szs>
- Bruinius, Harry.** (2007). *Better for all the World: The Secret History of Forced Sterilization and America's Quest for Racial Purity*. New York: Vintage Books.
- Capo, Widmaier B.** (2018). 'Eugenics: Bad blood and better babies.' In Mark W. Van Wienen (ed.) *American Literature in Transition, 1910-1920*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Dorr, Gregory M.** (2011). 'Protection or control? Women's health, sterilization abuse, and Relf v. Weinberger.' In Paul A. Lombardo (ed.), *A Century of Eugenics in America: From the Indiana Experiment to the Human Genome Era*, 161-190. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press.
- Edwards, Erica R., Roderick A. Ferguson, Jeffrey Ogbonna and Green Ogbar (eds.).** (2018). *Keywords for African American Studies*. New York: New York University Press.
- Hogarth, Rana A.** (2017). *Medicalizing Blackness: Making Racial Difference in the Atlantic World*. Chapel Hill: UNC Press Books.
- James, Stanlie.** (1993). 'Mothering: A possible black feminist link to social transformations.' In Stanlie James and Abena Busia (eds.) *Theorizing Black Feminism: The Visionary Pragmatism of Black Women*, 44-54. New York: Routledge.
- Kluchin, Rebecca M.** (2011). *Fit to be Tied: Sterilization and Reproductive Rights in America*. London: Rutgers University Press.
- Lombardo, Paul (ed.).** (2011). *A Century of Eugenics in America: From the Indiana Experiment to the Human Genome Era*. Bloomington and Indianapolis. Indiana: Indiana University Press.
- Mayberry, Susan N.** (2017). 'Masculine othermothering in Toni Morrison's *Home*.' In Lee Baxter and Martha Satz (eds.), *Toni Morrison on Mothers and Motherhood*, 13-37. Bradford: Demeter Press.
- Mercer, Naomi.** (2016). 'Masculine expansions of othermothering in Toni Morrison's *A Mercy, Jazz, and Beloved*'. *Journal of the Motherhood Initiative for Research and Community Involvement*, 7(1): 37-51.
- Morrison, Toni.** (2012). *Home*. London: Vintage Books.
- O'Reilly, Andrea.** (2004). *Toni Morrison and Motherhood: A Politics of the Heart*. Albany. New York: State University of New York Press.
- Penguin's Books USA.** (2022, May 10). 'Dolen Perkins-Valdez talks about her new novel Take My Hand [Video].' YouTube.  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=whGkvcoiB2Y>
- Reverby, Susan M.** (2001). 'More than fact and fiction: Cultural memory and the Tuskegee syphilis study'. *Hastings Center Report*, 31(5): 22-28.

- Saleh, Lina, Sabrine Saleh and Yasser Al-Shboul.** (2024). 'Mystical and archetypal journeys in Leila Aboulela's *Bird Summons*.' *International Journal of Arabic-English Studies*, 24(2): 55-72.
- Saleh, Sabrine and Mahmoud Zidan.** (2024). 'African American literature and the critical medical humanities: Literary precedence and theoretical lag as exemplified in Toni Morrison's *Home*.' *Theory and Practice in Language Studies*, 14(4): 1284-1290.
- Sampson-Choma, Tosha K.** (2019). 'Mortifying earthly desires in Toni Morrison's *Home*'. *Humanities*, 8(156): 3-10.
- Schoen, Johanna.** (2005). *Choice and Coercion: Birth Control, Sterilization, and Abortion in Public Health and Welfare*. North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press.
- Schreiber, Evelyn J.** (2020). 'Repressed memory, testimony, and agency in Toni Morrison's *Home*'. *MFS Modern Fiction Studies*, 66(4): 724-754.
- Spillers, Hortense J.** (1987). 'Mama's baby, papa's maybe: An American grammar book'. *Diacritics*, 17(2): 65-81.
- Valdez, Dolen P.** (2022). *Take My Hand*. New York: Berkeley.
- Visser, Irene.** (2014). 'Entanglements of trauma: Relationality and Toni Morrison's *Home*'. *Postcolonial Text*, 9(2): 1-21.
- Waggoner, Jess.** (2017). "'My most humiliating Jim Crow experience": Afro-modernist critiques of eugenics and medical segregation.' *Modernism/Modernity*, 24(3): 507-525.
- Washington, Harriet A.** (2006). *Medical Apartheid: The Dark History of Medical Experimentation on Black Americans from Colonial Times to the Present*. New York: Anchor Books.
- Whitehead, Anne and Angela Woods (eds.).** (2016). *The Edinburgh Companion to the Critical Medical Humanities*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Zite, Nikki and Sonya Borrero.** (2011). 'Female sterilisation in the United States'. *The European Journal of Contraception and Reproductive Health Care*, 16(5): 336-340.