

VOICE, LANGUAGE, AND STORYTELLING: THE CRAFT OF NARRATIVE EXPERIMENTATION IN JOHN EDGAR WIDEMAN'S FICTION

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ABSTRACT

The self-assertion of marginalized people has always been made in a conscious distancing from the cultural values of the mainstream. Self-assertion usually finds its way in literature through cultural memory, language valuation, and voice. John Edgar Wideman is one of the African American authors whose literary esthetics is radically committed to African American's social and cultural redemption. His work, produced from the margins of the American society, is a forceful assertion of identity that intertwines and fuses. West African cultural strands, orality, popular arts, audiovisual arts techniques, and various English language registers, in a borderline politics of experimentation. This paper purports to bring out, through a reading based on narratology, postcolonialism, and postmodernism, that expression of the politics of identity in Wideman's aesthetics of experimentation.

KEYWORDS: *Cultural Memory, African American, Narrative, Voice & Marginalization*

RESUME

L'affirmation de soi, chez les peuples marginalisés, a toujours été faite dans une distanciation consciente vis-à-vis des valeurs de la culture dominante. En littérature, elle trouve habituellement son moyen d'expression dans la mémoire culturelle, la langue et la voix. John Edgar Wideman est l'un des auteurs afro-américains qui ont une esthétique littéraire radicalement engagée pour la rédemption sociale et culturelle des Afro-américains. Son œuvre, issue des marges de la société américaine, est une affirmation vigoureuse de l'identité noire qui mêle et fusionne courants culturels ouest-africains, arts populaires, techniques artistiques audiovisuelles et divers registres de la langue anglaise, dans une politique radicale d'expérimentation. Cet article a pour objectif de faire ressortir, à travers une lecture basée sur la narratologie, le post-colonialisme et le postmodernisme, cette expression de la politique de l'identité dans l'esthétique expérimentale de Wideman.

MOTS-CLES: *Mémoire Culturelle, Afro Américain, Narrative, Voix & Marginalisation*

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INTRODUCTION

Bonnie TuSmith writes that John Edgar Wideman's fiction narratives are among those which, in African American literature today, above all others, challenge the reader's understanding (vii). The difficulty of understanding Wideman's work with his rich and highly innovative writing style can be accounted for by his endeavor to pin down emotions, thoughts and events, as accurately as he feels or views them, in his narratives of identity. This need to use the whole gamut of tools which language offers as narrative devices makes Wideman's fiction interesting, original, and hard to understand.

The knitting of life experiences into narratives of identity usually takes place through the stories we tell ourselves. There are, however, obvious and underlying value grids through which experience is digested and internalized, some political stances which guide us in our selection of values, language, and voice, for the craft of storytelling, that need to be understood. For an informed analysis of the discourse of identity, it is essential to understand why and how we tell our stories, the voice authorized to make the discourse on identity, and the language in which these narratives must be told. The aim of the present paper is to bring up and analyze these major features of Wideman's storytelling performance as a self-conscious (making of) discourse on individual and communal identities of African Americans. This paper borrows from narratology, postcolonialism, and postmodernism to analyze language, style, voice, and politics in John Edgar Wideman's fiction.

THE STORYTELLER'S VOICE AND THE ISSUE OF LANGUAGE

Just like a painter questioning the relations s/he nurtures with his/her brush and the blank canvass, Wideman, as an author, has always expressed his concern about the relevance and accuracy of words as a tool of storytelling in conveying the message with its minutest nuances. First, the human language is an imperfect tool to capture, cage and store live images and emotions. Also, the limitations of written language, in relation to oral storytelling traditions, is another flaw Wideman finds in the writer's experience. Thirdly, Wideman stresses the status of the English language as a symbol of alienation whose adequacy as a black storytelling code is questionable, a vehicle that first has to be adapted to the shapes and the necessities of the black experience in the USA.

Wideman acknowledges that entrenching his writing techniques in the canons and traditions of mainstream American literature would make his words powerless. All this prompts him to experiment new techniques, new ways of telling stories.

I don't think that you can write a very meaningful book about a culture that's in flux, a culture that is changing all the time, and a culture that is infused with minority points of view which haven't been fully represented before – you can't write about a culture meaningfully and use the conventions and traditions of narrative fiction which have existed and grew out of attempts to describe that culture in other times and places so that the connection between form and meaning is organic and in a book like *Reuben* if I want to tell the truth I have to invent new nets for it, the old nets don't work. And so each book has to be an adventure in that sense. Each book has to be a redefinition of what counts and how it counts and how you can capture it. (TuSmith 77)

Words do not promise the storyteller to do anything more than default him in the middle of a sentence, with their weakness to bear the weight of a feeling, or resurrecting a lived experience. The translation of human sensory and internal experience into verbal expression makes the thought, feeling or emotion loses its accuracy when put in words. That gap between experience and its verbalization has made Wideman skeptical about the use of language in general, as well as about the use of Standard English and its writing canons.

Language is widely believed to be a tool for ordering the chaos of human experience. But as a matter of fact, Wideman thinks that language is a tool that in spite of all the endeavors of gymnastics and juggling of the "writing craftsman," is still wanting in depth and significance to convey all messages. That gap between vision (feelings, emotions,

inner Dreamscapes, thoughts, events) and the verbalization of those human experiences cannot be made up for in spite of the tricks of the art that he uses: "Between what I want to say and the saying of it, a shadow passes. A ditch opens and the words crumple and drop into it.... I'm sta-sta-starting to sta-sta-stutter" (Fever 205). In order to achieve the organic connection between form and meaning that he sees as essential to his work, Wideman resorts to a continuous experimentation.

Wideman experiments with storytelling, language through the incorporation of visual and sound effects, and also techniques of other arts such as photography, painting, sculpture, popular arts (graffiti, rap, verbal), and puns. His polyphonic style offers a mosaic of voices and reflects, in its form, the decentralization and fragmentation of the truth of identity narratives, viewed from a variety of artistic angles. In the same vein as his character Mallory the photographer (Reuben, Philadelphia Fire, and Two Cities), Wideman offers the reader personal and collective experiences as a palimpsestic approach to life. The revolving featuring of Mallory in several works by Wideman just illustrates how the latter sees his work as similar to Mallory's in the way they try to capture perceived reality. Mallory's intention is to have people see his works from several, sometimes contradictory viewpoints:

I want people to see my pictures from various angles, see the image I offer as many images, one among countless ways of seeing, so the more they look, the more there is to see..... I stack slices of light onto each square of film. Different views, each stamped with its own pattern of light and dark, but also transparent, letting through some of the light and dark layers beneath and above. Like a choir singing. Each voice distinct, but also changing the sound of the whole, changing itself as it joins other voices. (Two Cities⁸³)

While reflecting both the communal and participative nature of storytelling in African and African American traditions and the post modernist vision of historiography, Wideman's multivocal style comes in to challenge the convention of Unicity of truth¹. In the image of Mallory, Wideman stacks image after image, layer on layer, in order to throw off balance the weight of centuries of narratives of negative and limiting black identity. In various books, the same characters appear again and again, seen from various angles, "shift-teasing" a previous "appearance" with modified family connections and settings. These complex shifts of perspectives, the multiple exposures, and intertextuality work like narrative tricks that entangle the plots of the various books of Wideman in the same strands.

Dropping of quotations and question marks, forceful word coinages and puns are many devices Wideman uses to break the rules of the canons of Western literature and incorporate African American lived experiences with a characteristic voice. Wideman also borrows from cinematography techniques as in this passage in Reuben where the narrator uses the quick flash forward and flash backward cuts of movies. The narrator cuts a real/imaginary dialogue between Reuben and Wally with: "[and before this exchange, leading to it...," and returns to the beginning of the conversation, then cuts it again with "Back to the above, Reuben speaking again]"(196). That passage which features Wally's conversation with Reuben is also narrated in a dream/reality fashion. It offers no clue as to whether the conversation really takes place between Reuben and Wally, or if the latter is just imagining a conversation he would like to have with Reuben.

¹ Wideman's multivocality is expressed in his inclusion of different narrative communities occurring simultaneously in his work – the sermon, the picaresque, autobiographical writing, fiction, jazz, slave narratives, and others in his narratives.

Making the reader swim in the dream/reality atmosphere is another Wideman's forte. Wideman in his writings intersects imagination with reality, creates a true/false illusion, and alternately, tricks the reader into and out of the universe of his fiction by purposefully confounding him/her with the simultaneous use of the extradiegetic and hypodiegetic levels of narration.² He furthermore incorporates parts of his own life in the characters that he creates, blurs contours, and purposefully confounds the narrator with the author, the writer with the speaker, and the reader with the listener.

The acrobatics between various levels of diegesis occurs in *Reuben*, for instance, when the narration suggests that we [narrator/author and listener/reader] sit "imagining ourselves imagining them [the characters Kwansa and Toodles talking about Kwansa's hard times]" (208). There is another passage in *Philadelphia Fire* where the character Cudjoe becomes the writer of the novel in which he is featured, as "He is turning the pages. Perhaps asleep with a book spread-eagled on his lap, the book he wishes he was writing, the story he crossed an ocean to find [that is the story narrated in *Philadelphia Fire*]" (Wideman *Philadelphia Fire* 7). Wideman thereby brings Cudjoe out of the novel into reality, with the status of a writer. Similar to the other example in which the narrator writes a letter to the author: "Dear Mr. Wideman. On the Move! I am writing to you because I need an article in a magazine and it featured a story or a piece for you." The "trick" goes further, making the identity of "Mr. Wideman" clearer: "In this article the writer gave a brief history of your work and named some of the books you have written, including your best-known memoir: *Brothers and Keepers*..." (124).

These few examples among many other passages illustrate the violation of the author/narrator/character septums, the disembodiment and blurring of traditional generic definitions, which is characteristic of Wideman's oeuvre. And on this, he confesses that he never knows if he is writing fiction or non-fiction (TuSmith 170). These tricky and far-fetched narrative twists reflect the rejection of the definitions imposed by white writing canons, and an attempt to free black expression from the paths of Western ideologies.

As a matter of fact, storytelling, in its oral tradition, is reflexive of the historical patrimony of black people which needs to be preserved against oblivion. But with the contingencies of today's American context in which these stories are disappearing, and confronted with the conquest of European values, they need to be preserved, in a denatured medium, though: by writing. But then, only the minimal modification will be made, as required by its new form. This is what accounts for the major characteristics of orality in Wideman's writing: digression, stories within stories, repetition and alteration, interactivity, deviation from sentence structures, and forceful images. Another reading one may have of this borderline experimentation is the comparison of Wideman's narrative style to the conscious enterprise of imagination and innovation in identity construction. In this construct, re-appropriation and innovation in form and content are essential. Re-appropriation is the role the use of the African American vernacular English also plays.

AFRICAN AMERICAN VERNACULAR ENGLISH AS THE REAPPROPRIATION OF THE STORYTELLER'S VOICE

The exercise of positive self-transformation through exploratory narrative opens ways to maturity, and the centrality of cultural expression in storytelling is one of the dominant characteristics of Wideman's work since he thinks that this exercise is vital to the survival of the black people (Guzzio 8). Storytelling is par excellence a verbal exercise

²Diegesis is multi-levelled in narrative fiction. Gérard Genette distinguishes between three "diegetic levels": (1) the extradiegetic level or level of the narrative's telling; (2) the diegetic level understood as the level of the characters, their thoughts and actions; and (3) the metadiegetic level or hypodiegetic level which is that part of a diegesis that is embedded in another one and is often understood as a story within a story, as when a diegetic narrator himself/herself tells a story. (Didier Coste and John Pier)

which needs an appropriate linguistic vehicle that carries the cultural values of the group, and as taking up a given language is espousing its world view, no language other than the community's language can better carry its culture. But with the modern social context that makes writing a more efficient means of sharing stories with a larger number of people, the need of adapting into writing the African values so far carried down orally arises, and makes exploration and innovations for the adaptation of orality into a written form an essential requirement.

The linguistic identity of African Americans, and of continental Africans, as written linguist Léonard Koussouhon, is a complex one. The cultural wrench lying in the adoption of the foreign language, the language of domination. This is what Léon Laleau laments:

Ce cœur obsédant, qui ne correspond
Pas avec mon langage et mes coutumes,
Et sur lequel mordent, comme un crampon,
Des sentiments d'emprunt et des coutumes
D'Europe, sentez-vous cette souffrance
Et ce désespoir à nul autre égal
D'apprivoiser, avec des mots de France,
Ce cœur qui m'est venu du Sénégal ?

(Léon Laleau: "Trahison" qtd. in Senghor 108)

African American English vernacular (or Ebonics) has long been, and still is, looked down on, and the enterprise of re-appropriation of African American-English Vernacular as a valid language in literature started no further than at the beginning of the nineteenth century.³ In such a context, René Wellek and Austin Warren tell us, "in periods and countries where several linguistic conventions are struggling for domination, the uses, attitudes, and allegiances of a poet [here fiction writer] may be important not only for the development of the linguistic system but for the understanding of his own art" (174). To this understanding of the author's art, should be added the more encompassing, overall highly political significance of the endeavor of linguistic re-appropriation for the cultural assertion. The characteristic of exploration (of African American English vernacular) is one of the most obvious commitments of Wideman's aesthetics.

The question itself as to whether or not black (continental and diasporic African) writers should write in European languages has remained a hotly debated issue since the early 1960s. Some African writers like Chinua Achebe, in acknowledging the problems inherent in writing African literature in European languages, nonetheless plead for the reappropriation of an English "in full communion with its ancestral home but altered to suit new African surrounding" (Ngugi 8). Others like Obi Wali and NgugiwaThiong'o, underlining both the intricacies of language and identity on the one hand, and the interdependence between language and political, economic, social and cultural development, on the other hand, expressed their view that to be true to itself, African literary production must be made in African languages (Ngugi 24), arguing that foreign, viz. European languages as code for African literature, work as a most efficient tools for

³ This was mainly done through the recovery of the slave narratives through the Works Progress Administration narratives (Yetman).

imperialist mental control, harmful to African people. This is what Ngugi writes on this account:

[...] the biggest weapon wielded and actually daily unleashed by imperialism against that collective defiance is the cultural bomb. The effect of a cultural bomb is to annihilate a people's belief in their names, in their languages, in their environment, in their heritage of struggle, in their unity, in their capacities and ultimately in their past as one wasteland of non-achievement and it makes them want to distance themselves from that wasteland. It makes them want to identify with that which is furthest removed from themselves; for instance with other people's languages rather than their own. It makes them identify with that which is decadent and reactionary, all those forces which would stop their own springs of life. It even plants serious doubts about the moral rightness of struggle. (Ngugi 3)

The parameter of language comes to complement that of literature, and of writing in general, in making up what Claude Lévy-Strauss and Derrida have identified, first and foremost, as tools of exploitation (130). In the case of African Americans, we cannot speak a different language, but of the African American English vernacular, as opposed to standard American English. African American English vernacular (or Ebonics) may be defined as "a mixture of African phonosyntactic structures and English lexicon" (Koussouhon). It is a derived variety of English distinguished from standard American English by its proper pronunciation, vocabulary, grammar, and also the rhythm of speech. It is the language in which Wideman's weaves his narratives.⁴

Wideman embarks his characters in the battle of identity creation, making them conscious of the fact that they belong to a black community that borrows its language from a dominant culture. NgugiwaThiong'o relevantly points out that "The choice of language and the use to which language is put is central to a people's definition of themselves in relation to their natural and social environment, indeed in relation to the entire universe." He also deplores the fact that "[African] writers who should have been mapping paths out of that linguistic encirclement by of their continent also came to be defined and define themselves in terms of the languages of Europe" (Ngugi 4-5). Escaping the linguistic trap is not an easy task for African writers, let alone for African American writers.

Wideman works, however, at marking his understanding of the political stake of literary language. His characters have to re-appropriate this language in order to reappropriate their culture, derive a certain aesthetic pleasure from its use, and, at the same time, mock and subvert the hegemonic ideology embedded in the linguistic canon. As he thinks back about his grandmother dying, Cudjoe, one of the narrators of *Philadelphia Fire*, wonders if he could have saved her "if he knew the Greek for arm and leg" (6). Cudjoe ironizes on the pretension of the superiority of European languages, wondering if words in Greek or other Indo-European languages, viz. English, have a magic power that the so-called "sub-standard" African American vernacular which Cudjoe and his grandmother speak does not have. This ironic observation, and Cudjoe's obvious refusal to learn the Greek words that the woman on the beach is trying to teach him (6), both tackle

⁴It is noteworthy to guard against the attribution of the original use of this "piginized" version of English exclusively to African Americans since it "served the purpose of *lingua franca*" (Dillard) between black slaves and the colonial Europeans in British America, therefore spoken by both groups, and as notes linguist L. Koussouhon, "was passed on as a creole language to succeeding generations of the New World Africans, for whom it [became] the native tongue. ("Are Continental Africans and African Americans in the Same (Socio)linguistic boat?")

the language, politics issue, as they bring up and validate Ebonics as an equal language. Thus the transformation of oral stories into an innovative literary tradition of African American English vernacular which politically rejects a “world already wrapped up tight in somebody else’s words,” (Wideman *Fatheralong* 15) in order to share those stories with a larger number of people, becomes a vital necessity.

We caution against the dangers inherent in turning our backs to our native tongues by the black prophetess Nongqawuse: “Beware, she said. Beware. Beware... Do not speak with your enemy’s tongue. Do not fall asleep in your enemy’s dream” (Wideman *Cattle Killing* 147). Speaking the dominant language, according to Nongqawuse and as reflected in Wideman’s works in general, is falling asleep in the group’s narratives, and then validating the minority oppression. The avoidance of the dominant white American language, however, is not easy in practice today in a globalized world that makes intercultural communication a requirement for survival. The nausea that comes from the obligation to cherish and embrace a tool that is acknowledged as destructive, and the risk of getting trapped in its cultural net, reveal the current African American (and African) “linguistic paradox” outlined in NouriniTidjaniSerpos’s “Langue du malaise de la langue: Chinua Achebe et NgugiwaThiong’o” (17). Keeping the balance between the requirements of necessity and those of identity is a tight-rope walk in which most Africans and African Americans, especially the elites, easily lose their identity today. The phenomenon is broached in Léon Laleau’s poem “Trahison”. As the mastery, more, the functional and effective espousal of a second/foreign language, always occurs at the expense of the native tongue, this phenomenon is no less than a “necessary betrayal.”

The nature of Wideman’s prose actually renders the dichotomy lying in the African American cultural identity, the DuBoisian double consciousness, since it is a blending of the high academic English and African American English vernacular that reveals itself especially with the black elite of the US. This “polyrhythmic approach” (Guzzio18) qualifies a Wideman’s work as a cross-cultural response that borrows and blends ideas and artistic expressions found in African and African American literature and culture. The comparison of the importance of each of those two languages in Wideman’s prose informs the author’s own evolution as a writer in this way that in the author’s first novels, Ebonics has a minor importance.

Language reflecting cultural expression is one of the political and aesthetic commitments of the author who himself recognizes this: “The blackness of my writing inheres in its history, its bilingual, Creole, maroon, bastardized, miscegenated, cross-cultural acceptance of itself in the mirror only it can manufacture” (“The Language of Home”). This acceptance is rendered in Wideman’s commitment to the cultural celebration of what he calls the “deeper spirit force” whose verbalization blends the African American vernacular to the English hegemonic language for the aesthetic effects found in his stylistic prowesses of his “minstrel tongue”. It can also be asserted of Wideman that the more he writes, the more he immerses the storyteller’s voice(s) in African American vernacular English.

Another distinctive feature perceptible in Wideman’s prose is the orality. Wideman’s style is a written version of the oral expression. “For us [African Americans and Africans], Wideman declares, music, speech, and body movement are repositories for preserving history, values, dignity, a sense of ourselves as separate, whole” (“The Language of Home”). One of the social contexts in which the black “voice” reveals itself as a clearly distinct medium of communication for African Americans is religious celebrations, and homilies. African Americans have their own way of worshipping, singing and preaching. Aunt Bess attends a religious celebration which she bluntly declares boring because the “preacher didn’t know how to preach. He spoke like a white man” (Wideman *Hiding Place* 54). The cause of her finding the celebration

boring, obviously, is not the preacher's lack of eloquence, but rather a maladjustment of the communication code, the maladjustment of such elements of communication as pitch, rhythm, proxemics which are purely cultural elements of communication.

THE STORYTELLER AS EYE WITNESS

Wideman's assimilation of the storyteller to prophet Ezekiel called the "prophet watcher" informs on the duties and obligations of the storyteller as a witness to ancestral traditions and guardian of cultural identity. Ezekiel is addressed by the divine voice, trusting him with his sacred mission:

Son of man, I have made thee a watchman unto the house of Israel: therefore hear the word at my mouth, and give them warning from me. When I say unto the wicked, Thou shalt surely die; and thou givest him not warning, nor speakest to warn the wicked from his wicked way, to save his life; the same wicked man shall die in his iniquity; but his blood will I require at thine hand. Yet if thou warn the wicked, and he turn not from his wickedness, nor from his wicked way, he shall die in his iniquity; but thou hast delivered thy soul. (King James Version, Ezek. 3.17-20)

Wideman confesses to getting his inspiration from the stories told by his relatives during storytelling gatherings. In their positions as storytellers, Aunt May and Aunt Bess, respectively in Damballah and in Hiding Place, seeing their tales confronted with disbelief, call on their authority as witnesses to assert the latter's "truthfulness." These assertions are made in spite of the most obvious fact that the stories they tell have only been handed down through the tales. Aunt Bess tells Tommy, who is doubting her stories: "I am not just talking. I'm a witness and couldn't care less what you believe. Your believes is your business. I say what I know, not what I heard (emphasis mine)" (Hiding Place 82). In the same way, Aunt May corroborates her tales of the most handsome baby boy found in a watermelon by a strong "I was there and he [Grandpa] told me how it was way back then" (Damballah 103). She goes on: "...ain't I have been sitting on Grandpa's knee hearing him tell about slavery days and niggers talking to trees and stones and niggers flying like birds. And he was there. He knows. So in a manner of speaking, I was there too. He took me back" (Damballah 104-5).

The storyteller, in his/her attempt to "preach" the truth needed for empowerment, emerges both as (eye) witness for his/her people, in that sense that he/she testifies to their past, and becomes their voice as the stories of the community are passed down through him/her. The art of the storyteller reaches its goal when people assimilate and digest his/her voice as their own. And that is what happens with Aunt May's story when the narrator John mistakes the watermelon story she tells him for his own. John's story starts with him, believing that he has really been a witness to the first scene of "The Watermelon Story" in which a drunkard sitting on a watermelon stack gets his right arm chopped off: "The first time he saw somebody get their arm chopped off was in front of the A&P (Wideman Damballah 99). It is only at the end of the story that in his memory, May's voice resonates, and as "he heard May saying the words [...], remembered it was her then" (103).

So the same pattern of voice appropriation that takes place between Grandpa, on the one hand, and May and Bess, on the other, reproduce itself again between the latter and John, making the tale -teller/griot, a "reliable eyewitnesses" to the past of their people. The storyteller warns his/her people of the presence of the danger with his/her voice. This more than one-voiced narrative mode connects the narrator(s) to his/her/their people. And that is the role of the witness, whose mission is accomplished when the hearers had assimilated and digested his/her voice as their own. So the tale -teller speaks

as the collective voice of the community and commits them in their struggles for autonomy by knitting the fabrics of the tales of common aspirations. His/her first concern is to keep the watch and warn the people with his/her voice, stories. But the storyteller furthermore dissolves in this voice, as s/he is the voice, and the voice is him/her: "I start to think and then I sink into the paper like I was ink...When I'm writing, I'm trapped in between the lines" (Bey). All these attributes of teller/voice/testifier are characteristics to the designation of the storyteller as the prophet of his people.

The projection at Wideman's work of the storyteller as a prophet is an image that appears again and again and is made most articulated in another of his novels: *Cattle Killing*. The prophet/storyteller named Isaiah in *Cattle Killing* keeps his listener alive, as in Scheherazade's stories told to save a life in *The Arabian Nights*, by telling her a story. Isaiah confesses that when he hears people call his (shortened) name, he can't distinguish if what they say spells I, Eye, Ay, Aye or Aie (*Cattle Killing* 4). Jennifer Douglas says that "This immediate visual reference [to "Eye"] points to the role of storytellers as witnesses, observers, possessors of sensory acuity" (qtd in Guzzio 206). As a prophet, he/she is doomed his people to loss, if he/she does not keep the watch and give the warning, share with them stories of redemption and self-assertion, and in the same process of failing his duty, condemns himself.

As a matter of fact, the prophet, in the Bible, is warned by God that he would be held accountable, would perish if he did not warn his people by giving the warning. Wideman assigns to his storyteller the attributes of sentry/seer/guard/watcher. S/he is in charge of looking around in the night, scanning the skyline from far. This role is, at the same time, an honor, a risk, and a most binding responsibility that the storyteller can hardly hide himself from. In this vein, Aunt Bess's mission in *Hiding Place* can be understood in straight line with the title the book bears: there is no hiding place from her responsibility as a storyteller. She takes refuge and isolates herself from her people on *Bruston Hill* but her mission catches up with her. "I went to the rock to hide my face, and the rock cried out. No hiding Place." The plain and simple message that comes from *Hiding Place*, as remarks Mbalia, is "somebody has to go down there and tell the truth" (Mbalia102). Telling the truth is the role of the witness.

The same heavy, haunting, and inescapable presence of the storyteller's duty appears again in *Philadelphia Fire*. Cudjoe, in dereliction of duty, turns his back on his people by fleeing from Philadelphia with a white woman and taking refuge on the Greek island of Mykonos. But his mission catches up with him, his inner voice cries out and condemns him: "Runagate, Runagate [read renegade/traitor]. Fly away home. Your house is on fire. Your children burning" (Wideman 22). It is the surreal presence of all his people, he has failed and their footsteps that Cudjoe hears behind him: "Cudjoe hears footsteps behind him. A mob howling his name. Screaming for blood. Words come for him, cool him, stop him in his tracks. He'd known them all his life. Never again. Never again. He turns to face whatever it is rumbling over the stones of Independence Square" (110).

Also, careful attention should be given to the relations that the storyteller, as, voice, nurtures both with the community and with the author in Wideman's fiction. First, the qualification of this oeuvre as a multivocal narration finds its justification in the tale teller presented as conversationalist who knowingly engages him/herself in a ritual of call and response with the listeners. On the other hand, at the beginning of *Damballah*, John Edgar Wideman, as the author of the book, dedicates it to Robby, his younger brother in prison, as a "letter" he is sending him; and in the last story in *Damballah*, the narrator John closes the story promising to send Robby the stories of *Damballah*. The displacement of the focus from the extradiegetic to the hypodiegetic level of narration, viz. Writer/reader to narrator/listener-reader with the same message, which establishes a plain and obvious identification of the author with the narrator, makes clear that the

reader's interrogation and understanding of the complex relations between narrator and writer is most important for the clear understanding of Wideman's work.

Guzzio comments on Wideman's narration style by evoking Arnaud Krupat's definition of the "synecdochic self": "The ethnic self [of the black storyteller] cannot be realized without an understanding of itself in relation to the culture and history" (105). The voice of the storyteller, as the West African folklore has it, is not embodied in one person. It is fragmented, as the storyteller disappears and in a shape-shifting pattern, reappears alternatively as a writer, listener, diegetic narrator, omniscient narrator, all of whom, through their calls and responses, establish the disincarnated and a common voice of the people. The voice of the narrator, says Wideman, "to achieve its fullest resonance, needs the voices of the rest of the community" (TuSmith 74).

This aspect of multiperspective narration is most observable in *Philadelphia Fire*. The story in *Philadelphia Fire* is first told from the point of view of the omniscient narrator who has just left Mykonos, then by Cudjoe in a first person narrative, and again by an omniscient narrator in the second part. To all these voices, we should add the authorial voice that intersects the narration to address the reader directly, and also to reflect on the personal drama of losing a son to prison (106-107). Wideman himself observes: "The central concepts of literature to come from folklore" (TuSmith 199) in which a dialog is established between the self, culture, and history. This is where Wideman's commitment as a literary activist becomes most obvious.

The prophet watcher, by definition, is in and away from the community. As are Isaiah, Jeremy, and the "prophet watcher" Ezekiel to the Israelites, so are Doot, John, and Reuben to the Homewood community. Critic Ulrich Eschborn sees the "Wideman persona" (the author's doppelgangers in his works) as assigned an "unstable status as a literary character alongside others in the novel" (Eschborn 154). This echoes the passages in the author's oeuvre where he focuses on the collective trauma of African Americans, analyzing it through the personal lens of his own life, passages in which he hides, blends with, and disguises himself, as a character. "Why this Cudjoe then? This airy other floating into the shape of my story. Why am I him when I tell certain parts? Why am I hiding from myself? Is he mirror or black hole?" he asks (*Wideman Philadelphia Fire* 172)⁵. The ambivalent in-and-out relation, as it were, of the storyteller as the voice of his people reflects the African American intellectuals' inner battle between the commitment to their community, which is sought for, and the individuality of the parvenu, which is a natural trend of the elite in the capitalistic system. But this, by the way, to my mind, demeans in no way Wideman's commitment to his self-assigned mission.

The creation of the officially sanctioned apocryphal stories (history) of the black minority is made possible in the space offered by this post modernist creative anachronism and historical fantasy. These are the typical strategies of the post modernist revisionist historical novels. "Wideman's ateleological, a chronological, and multi narrated design symbolically redresses the brutality of Western chronology: the paradigm of race, which is linear, prescriptive, and predictive" (Coleman51).

Likewise, Wideman twins the concepts of time and progress in a post modernist way in both *Philadelphia Fire* and *Reuben*. He stresses the relativity of time, notably through the characters Cudjoe and Eadweard Muybridge. Eadweard Muybridge, in *Reuben*, is that character who undertakes to investigate animal motion by capturing each stage on a still photography. Muybridge, in reality, is one of the pioneers of motion picture who has tried to capture animal motion and

⁵ Almost word for word, he repeats in *Cattle Killing*: "And who is he anyway, interchangeable with these others, them running through him, him leaking, bleeding into them, in the fiction he's trying to write" (*CattleKilling* 13; original emphasis).

project it with a series of stills spun in a quick enough succession to create the visual illusion of motion. He is presented in Reuben trying to juxtapose time and motion, trying to break both down into their smallest components in order to dispel the visual illusions that people have always held for true.⁶ Through Muybridge, Wideman toys with the concepts of time and motion in a way reminiscent of Greek philosopher Zeno's paradox of motion.⁷ He juxtaposes time and motion, in order to deny the possibility of either. Patterning his work on Muybridge's photography, Reuben also comes to the conclusion that African Americans have made no real social, economic or political progress in the USA, contrary to what the official discourse would have everybody believe.

CONCLUSIONS

It would not be totally wrong to view Wideman's storytelling esthetics as embodying resistance to servitude. The shattering of Western narrative standards, and the exploitation of traditional West African storytelling techniques and orality offer room for self-assertion and narratives of identity. Wideman's writing does not proceed only with the intent of delivering a message, whatever this may be, using language as an instrument. Its poetics in itself already embody a political commitment, a claim of originality and difference. Words become a building material whose use, espousing the message, shapes in all possible forms the vision of the writer and builds utopias. Voice and language come at the center of this esthetics, shape shifting and moving, to incorporate the communal perspectives of the whole community. The narrator himself/herself is not the owner of his/her tales, but is rather owned and bound by the tales s/he tells to save the lives of his community. This is one of the main purports embodied in Wideman's esthetic.

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⁶Eadweard Muybridge is the photographer whose works on animal motion have evidenced the fact that in the gait of a running horse, there is a moment when the horse has all its four legs in the air. He dispelled the belief that had so far prevailed that at any moment, a running horse has at least one of its feet on the ground. Muybridge's project to investigate animal motion was underwritten by the University of Pennsylvania.

⁷The paradoxes of Zeno of Elea (ca. 490–430 BC) try to show that contrary to the evidence of one's senses, that motion is nothing but an illusion. Zeno's most known example of paradox of motion is that of the arrow in flight, which he says, is not in flight.

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