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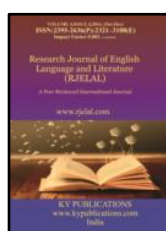
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WRITING MUSIC INTO LITERATURE: MUSIC AS A METAPHOR OF IDENTITY IN JOHN EDGAR WIDEMAN'S NARRATIVES

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ABSTRACT

Music plays a central role in the cultural expression of black people. Thus, a reflection on the cultural identity of the black person cannot discard his/or her musical identity. In setting out to be one of the literary voices of the African American and accounting for black history in the USA, the African American writer John Edgar Wideman attempts not just to incorporate black music into his writing as a major trope, but further, patterns his narrative techniques on the African American musical aesthetics. These two facets of black musical politics and aesthetics reflected and blended in Wideman's metaphor of identity fall under the scope of this paper. It analyzes John Edgar Wideman's *Homewood Trilogy* (*Hiding Place*, *Damballah*, and *Sent for You Yesterday*). Through the lens of Post colonialism and borrowing from the critical tools of narratology, it appraises Wideman's literary discourse as an idiosyncratic celebration of black identity with the vivid performative enjoyment of African American music.

Key Words: African American –identity –music – literature – blues – jazz

Résumé

La musique joue un rôle central dans l'expression culturelle des Noirs. Ainsi, une réflexion sérieuse sur l'identité culturelle du Noir ne peut se faire sans un regard sur son identité musicale. L'écrivain afro-américain John Edgar Wideman, se proposant d'être l'une des voix littéraires afro-américaines, dans sa réflexion sur l'histoire noire aux États-Unis, tente non seulement d'intégrer la musique noire comme trope majeur à son écriture, mais va plus loin en modelant sa technique narrative sur l'esthétique musicale afro-américaine.

Ces deux facettes de la politique et de l'esthétique musicales des Noirs qui se reflètent et s'épousent dans la métaphore de l'identité chez Wideman font l'objet du présent article. Il se propose d'étudier la *Homewood Trilogy* (*Hiding Place*, *Damballah*, et *Sent for You Yesterday*). A travers l'optique du postcolonialisme et l'utilisation de quelques outils d'analyse critique de la narratologie, il apprécie le discours littéraire de Wideman comme une célébration idiosyncrasique de l'identité noire à travers le vif plaisir performatif de la musique afro-américaine.

Mots clés : Afro-Américain – identité – musique – littérature – blues – jazz

INTRODUCTION

Scholars have discussed a lot how the African music, and particularly its rhythmic patterns, directly exported from Africa or made known to the

world through the African diaspora, has influenced modern music worldwide. The influence of African American music on American music in general is well known (Gioia 5-6). But African American music has

survived, evolved, and succeeded in influencing American music in general because it plays a central role in the lives of African Americans. Music lies in the chore of all the major aspects of the lives of the black slaves in the US. Most importantly, in slavery time and after, music has always served as one of the major sustaining forces that helped African Americans cope with their condition. This might account for the necessity of including music in the expression of black identity in literature in the US. This is the task that John Edgar Wideman has set out to do in his literary discourse.

Wideman's works can be called, to paraphrase Albert Murray's qualification of Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, "the literary extension of the blues" (TuSmith and Byerman 133). The author immersing his whole work in African American musical tradition, including relatively recent forms ranging from rap to hip-hop, but more particularly, less recent rhythms such as blues and jazz, is evidence that he highly values black musical expression in the US as metaphor of Africanity. African American music is indeed of paramount importance in assessing the narrativization of the black identity in the writing project of John E. Wideman. In straight line with black history in the US, Wideman's writing project first exploits the major pragmatic functionalities embedded in the use of music in the traumatic past of black people in America. Furthermore, it makes an extensive use of the black musical aesthetics, patterning his literary poetics on of black musical tradition. These two aspects of the celebration of black identity in Wideman's work is what this paper analyzes. It uses post colonialism and narratology as critical approaches to bring out and analyze the musical expression of black identity in the selected corpus of the *Homewood Trilogy*.

1. Music as Metaphor for Identity in Wideman's Trope

Musical experience, with music as a human production, is usually seen to be an artificial arrangement of sounds pleasing to the ears, as well as a major cultural artifact that not only embodies social aesthetics, but by the same token, is the expressive extension of fundamental and varied human cultural values, feelings and emotions.

Beyond the aesthetic projection of the individual self/community that music formulates, it also stands as the subjective expression of people's hopes and disappointments, emotions, the significance they give to their lives and experiences. Music is externalized through composing, playing, listening and dancing. The lack of music would then be a severe semantic deficiency of emotional expression, and in the same way that there is no people without language, there is no people without music.

Sent for You Yesterday is perhaps the book in which Wideman's attempt at writing black popular music into words appears most vividly. It comes out as Wideman's reflection on his family and community's history from the musical perspective of the blues. It is narrated from the perspectives of Albert Wilkes, Brother Tate, and Doot, three character narrators that Tracie C. Guzzio calls "blues singers," and that she describes as artists in charge of "captur[ing] the community's stories and voices" (203). Each of them, in turn, takes on the blues legacy that sustains the unity of the Homewood community which is falling apart. *Sent for You Yesterday* opens up with the most traumatic nightmare, worse than a nightmare, which the albino, Brother, has and tries to tell his friend. He realizes that his friend has also gone through the same horrific experience. This most traumatic aspect is coupled with the fact that neither has the real, appropriate words to pin down and describe what really happens in their dream. Brother is forced into a sixteen-year silence, lest he would disappear and vanish into the darkness of his scary dream. But Brother, although he remains silent for sixteen years, resorts to scat as his single language. Brother's inexpressible terror is the metaphor for the terror of all black people at grip with social oppression in the US. This terror that cannot be put into words – Brother cannot speak – finds an outlet in the music he takes to assuage his trauma:

And his silence wasn't really silence. Brother made noise all the time. Drumming his fingertips on the edge of the kitchen table till my grandmother yelled at him to stop, cracking his knuckles, patting his feet, boogeying so outrageously in the middle of the floor you'd hear the silent music making him wiggle his narrow hips and pop

his fingers and wag his head like the sanctified sisters moaning their way to heaven. If my grandmother wasn't in the kitchen, he'd sit there at the gimpy table with the checkered cloth and flip his lower lip like it was the string of a bass fiddle. He'd hum and grunt and groan, and Brother could scat sing and imitate all the instruments in a band. When Brother was around you didn't need a radio. As long as my grandmother didn't shush him or chase him out her house he would play all the good songs you'd ever heard and make all that music, all that noise, but he never said a word. Not one word in all the years I knew him. (*Sent for You Yesterday* 15-16)

Victor Hugo writes: "Music expresses that which cannot be said [put into words] and that which cannot be suppressed" (91)¹. Neither the subject (Brother) nor the object (his deep trauma) can find an outlet through words. The former is speechless and the latter inexpressible. Although Brother remains speechless, he nonetheless expresses himself through the music he is always playing.

The same fate of scare and death threat confronts Albert Wilkes, the blues singer. Albert Wilkes is forced to shoot at a police officer who is trying to kill him because he is dating a white woman. After seven years of flight, he resolves to come back to his blues music and confronts death on his piano keys. But the thread of musical tradition will not blow out since the younger character Doot takes over. At last, the new blues singer long awaited and *sent for yesterday* comes. Wideman's figurative and literal reflection on/of the blues makes black music the enacting undertaking of black identity. The blues are the musical channel through which identity is taught and learned, carried on from one generation to the other. Black music links the individual to his community, and the present to the past. The blues artist becomes the mailman who brings letters on black identity, sent from the past, to inform the present. This is the role Bill Campbell plays with his guitar:

Aida's man Bill Campbell could play [the blues on] that guitar named Corrine he brought from down home, said it was full of letters from home and he would read them when he played and you'd listen and know just what he was talking about even though you never been South yourself, never down there where Bill Campbell and John French born but you'd understand the messages when Bill Campbell played them and then your man would pick them up and whistle them to nobody but you and that was how you got a home you never been to or never saw except in that music they made. (*Wideman Hiding Place*49)

Blues music, suffused with a sad tone, is a lament rhythm which expresses a longing for a better life or money, or nostalgia over loss. It can be defined, in artist B. B. King's words as the bad deal you find yourself into when you feel "a great, great pleasure, a great, great, great, big thrill, but suddenly find you ain't got a nickel and your woman got another man" (qtd in Clark 82). The heartbreak, sorrow, or "blues" that you feel, can be released through the blues music. Blues songs are said to help overcome sadness and sorrow. They are played only with a guitar or piano, or bass, or harp, sometimes with a harmonica or drums, with the accompaniment of voice. The sadness present in blues songs is what Aunt Bess refers to when she goes: "You all don't know nothing about no blues. ... Because once was enough. Once was one time too many to watch people sing the blues and die. Once was enough to listen and then have it all go away and have nothing else but silence" (*Hiding Place* 155).

The trope of another song, the spiritual "No Hiding Place," sets the tone for the plot in *Hiding Place*. The psychological role of spirituals was to console and ease the pain of plantation work, while expressing sorrow, and a yearning for freedom and home. Some of the most known spirituals are: "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot," "Go Down, Moses," and "No Hiding Place." The latter which goes: "I went to the rock to hide my face, / But the rock cried out: 'No, / No hiding place down here,'" lends its title to Wideman's book.

¹The original quotation is : "La musique exprime ce qui ne peut pas s'exprimer avec des mots et sur quoi il est impossible de se taire."

Hiding Place stages the old Aunt Bess who shuts herself away on Bruston Hill. She turns her back on her great-grandnephew Tommy who comes to her on his run from the police. Tony also needs a hiding place. He is accused of a murder he has not committed. The murder occurs during a robbery which goes awry. Tommy is on the run, hunted by police officers. But Aunt Bess turns her back on him and tries to shut him out of her mind. However, family blood, the young man's history and recollection of the snapshots of their past encounters emerge to her consciousness, making impossible for her to deny her own implication in his fate. Whatever happens to him befalls her, since he is her blood and flesh, she has a part of her alive in him and has to take responsibility as a kinswoman. There is no way for her to escape from her responsibility as a black person, no hiding place for her.

The celebration of black identity through African ancestral gods is the main topic of the eponymous short story of the collection *Damballah*. Orion resists Judeo-Christian cultural and religious assimilation. He clings to ancient African gods, and extols his ancestors endowed with the power of "talk[ing] the fish up from their shadowy dwellings and into the woven baskets" (18). The white slave master beheads him. But fortunately, at his death, an unnamed young boy receives the power to invoke Damballah, the ancient god of the sky, and will carry on with the tradition. Family bonds, the weight of history, and the pain of coping with life in spite of all the challenges related to being black in the USA are the topics of the other short stories of *Damballah*. The overall tone is the melancholy, irony, and the black humor of the blues songs.

Wideman takes on this "griot tradition" of the blues singer by picturing his own doppelganger into *Sent for You Yesterday* as a "blues singer" under the scat² name of Doot.³ African American music

becomes more than a way of expressing black identity, more than a mere cultural construct. Black music and identity are reciprocally generative. The music generates the Homewood community in providing its people with a socio syncretic cultural expression. It "Wouldn't be Homewood if you couldn't hear Albert's music when you walking down the street" (*Sent for You Yesterday* 70). A relation of homonymy is established between blackness and Albert Wilkes's music. This point that Wideman makes in his books on music and identity is well expressed in *Christopher Waterman's* assertion that "The role of musical style in the enactment of identity makes it not merely a *reflexive* but also a potentially *constitutive* factor in the patterning of cultural values and social interaction" (Hall and du Gay 117). This is to say that musical experience helps us spin the thread of ourselves and project our identities in the future while simultaneously reflecting on the existing ones. William Yeats's metaphor of the tree and its parts, directly extended to the difficulty of telling apart the music and the body engaged in negotiating its meaning in space, dancing to its sounds, underlines the intricacies of the links between music and its maker, or listener, or dancer.

O chestnut-tree, great-rooted blossomer,
Are you the leaf, the blossom or the bole?
O body swayed to music, O brightening
glance,
How can we know the dancer from the
dance?

(William Butler Yeats. "Among School Children" qtd in Talib 65)

In point of fact, the narrative of the construct of identity is based on factors such as history, language and culture. And music is a basic cultural expression that involves sound patterns, life experience and representations, emotional expressions, and body movements, all of which come together to build social subjectivity in the individual. Music, as a channel of transmission, helps convey these aspects of culture, and in the immediate sensuous pleasure its enjoyment

² The scat is a jazz form which, contrary to the vocalese and other forms of jazz, uses onomatopoeias rather than words.

³ Although Doot is not called by any other name in the novel, it is nonetheless known to the reader that Doot is John French's grandson, Carl's nephew, and

Lizabeth's eldest son. And John E. Wideman is that firstborn son to Lizabeth (Eschborn 109).

provides to the player, listener or dancer, becomes the accomplished cultural projection of the individual or communal self. Music provides an answer to the questions we ask ourselves on our own identity:

[Carl] is always asking Brother [the albino who is known to belong to the black community] questions, questions like he asks himself, questions nobody could answer... wonders where Brother came from. ...Brother answers with his hands. They are saying the names of all the Homewood streets. But his hands change the sound. The street names are blurred like song words when somebody hums or moans them. The white [albino] hands dance up and down a keyboard. Play the blues. A fast-chugging keep-up-with-the-train blues. Brother's hands are playing (Wideman *Sent for You* 28-29)

To say who he is, Brother resorts to music. It is a channel through which Brother, and by extension, the African American, reclaims and rethinks his/her own identity.

Another important symbol of the spirit of music in *Sent for You Yesterday* is Albert Wilkes. The blues singer Albert Wilkes is forced to flee from the 1940s Homewood as it becomes publicly known that he is dating a white woman. He confronts a white police officer aiming to kill him, and makes the choice of first killing the officer. Wilkes spends seven years away during which Homewood seems to fall apart. He comes back and resumes his love affair with the white woman and is killed by the police while "playing the seven years [of his absence] away" (Wideman *Sent for You* 60). The "good old days [in Homewood are] when Albert [was] playing and Homewood hanging on every note" (Wideman *Sent for You* 68). It is the blues music played by Wilkes which sustains the balance of Homewood, and each of its notes is necessary for the community to exist.

The blues singer Albert Wilkes, in the same way the blues withstands white musical patterns, is a symbol of black resistance. Like Brother Tate later does, Wilkes lives his life unrestricted by the social norms that the Black man's subservient social status of the early 1940s' American society forces on him. Up until the end, Albert Wilkes remains untamed.

He escapes any attempt of the society at molding him into the defined roles of the African American: father, husband, subservient "Negro." In dating a white woman, he rebels against social restrictions and merges with the syncretic, all blending spirit of jazz and blues. The supportive character of the improvisational and syncopated blues Wilkes and Brother play opens new possibilities to black life⁴. The freedom of expression that comes with the 1940s and 1950s bebop, with its improvisation and free combination of harmonic structures⁵, offers those black artists, and through them, the whole Homewood community, a chance to invent their lives, defy social conventions and norms, and create utterly original identities far from the molds of socially defined roles.

The title "Sent for You Yesterday" "itself is borrowed from a blues song, "*Sent for You Yesterday* (and Here You Come Today)" first performed by African American artists Count Basie, Eddie Durham, and Jimmy Rushing in 1939 (Tenzer 233). Doot was born in 1941. He belongs to the second generation of blues singers in the line of the novel, after the Harlem Renaissance artists and storytellers represented by Wilkes. He appears to be the savior sent for since yesterday, long awaited, who only comes today. Wideman places hope on contemporary African American writers and artists who will carry on the battles for equality, and create communal identity through their arts. These artists are expected to effect the necessary changes their predecessors have failed to make. Music, in Wideman's oeuvre, does not only help in creating

⁴Musical improvisation or extemporization is a concept which expresses the spontaneous "performance given extempore without planning or preparation" as a true expression of the player's feeling during the performance.

⁵The bebop genre was created by jazz artists such as Thelonious Monk, Charlie Parker, Dizzy Gillespie and Charlie Christian. The bebop variant of jazz music enriched jazz music with a faster tempo, and unlimited freedom of improvisation, freeing jazz music from the rigid prescriptions of the swing jazz era. This parallel between musical freedom translating in freedom in life portrayed in the bebop jazz is further elaborated on in Wideman's postmodern short story "The Silence of Thelonious Monk" in *God's Gym*.

collective myths, it also sustains when individual hopes are put to grips with life's challenges.

In *Hiding Place*, Bess has always sung at church celebrations "Father along Father along, Father along, we'll know about you." But all her world falls apart the day she discovers, in a hymnal, that the very words of the old song she has always sung are not "Father along" but rather "farther along." This unfortunate discovery she makes dispels the mist shrouding her God, delays that reassuring divine presence made real through the song. She loses her intimacy with that father that she has always believed, was along (Wideman *Hiding Place* 23). It is true that Bess loses her faith partly because she has lost her husband and her one and only son. But what is even more certain is that she gives up on life, withdraws voluntarily into her old shack on Bruston Hill, and cuts herself from the world, because that protective presence she has always felt of a father by her side is dispelled by her discovery that her "father" is yet to come, farther along.

This experience leaves Aunt Bess desperate and directionless: "She thought it might be a different song, believed it had to be different from the one she'd been hearing and singing all her life, but it wasn't, so she lost her Father Along, lost his smile, his infinite forgiveness, his dance, strut, glide, stomp, gentle walk, his brown eyes and the tender sweep of his garment. She lost her God" (Wideman *Hiding Place* 23).⁶ This metaphor provided by music formulates a myth Bess clings to negotiate her own survival. The concept of myth, in this context, is the way we look at the world and make sense of it. "Farther along" deprives Bess of the substance of protective presence. In fact, "farther along" is exactly the contrary of the idea of immediacy embodied in "father along." The divine protective presence looks deferred, still too far ahead to make one resist the temptation of despair. Bess has always held on to this "myth"⁷ of the divine

presence by her side. Furthermore, "Father along" is the book in which Wideman himself analyzes his relation to his father and to his son, mourns his brother loss to prison, and the loss of the racial thread between African American fathers and sons.

Wideman signifies on Bess's experience in *Sent for You Yesterday*. The sustaining myth that Bess is said to have created with the song "Farther along" in *Hiding Place* is attributed to Freeda French in *Sent for You Yesterday*.

Sometimes the songs helped. If you loved God and loved your man and loved your children you were safe. The music would say that to her. Father Along. Everything could be taken away tomorrow and still the music made her feel how good it would be when He folded her in His arms. The music could soothe her, quiet her, and she'd see her worse fears were nothing more than a child's cry in the darkness. He'd understand, He'd snap on the light and rock her back to sleep. All that in the music. A garden in the music where she could come to Him alone, where the dew was still on the roses. And the voice she'd hear as she'd tarried there, that voice was in the music too. A place to rest, to lay her head, her burdens, she heard it all in the hymns they sang in Homewood A.M.E. Zion Church. (33).

Wideman exploits many of the various West African traditional functionalities of songs in the short story "The Songs of Reba Love Jackson" in *Damballah*. Nigerian composer Samuel Ekpé Akpabot, in *Foundation of Nigerian Traditional Music*, has identified and elaborated on as many as fourteen basic categories of songs with various functionalities and performance contexts in African cultures: (1) historical, (2) social control, (3) insult, (4) obscene, (5) praise, (6) children's, (7) funeral, (8) work, (9) war, (10) humorous, (11) communication, (12) women's, (13) philosophical, and (14) ritual songs (Austin). All these functionalities are present in artists' and griots' productions in traditional West Africa. This wide diversity of African musical cultural functionalities that African Americans inherited, in their new environment, participated in producing the spirituals, blues, jazz, whose characteristics

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⁷ Religion itself may be viewed as a kind of myth since it escapes the realm of critical thinking and probing. Furthermore, according to the postmodern theory, all grand narratives fall within the realm of myths.

Wideman exploits in his "Songs of Reba Love Jackson."

Reba Love Jackson is the successful female African American gospel singer, Wideman's "doppelganger" in fact, who embraces the cultural heritage of black musical tradition, digs in the resourcefulness of black gospel music to assuage the bleeding wounds (or "blues") of the African American. She initiates a nurturing call and response between the black artist and, among others, his/her past, musical traditions, friends, individual and collective dreams, but most of all, a call and response between the artist and his/her family and community: "The first Song Is For Mama" (*Damballah* 111) and "The Last Song Is For Homewood" (128).

Reba Love Jackson's music [read Wideman's writing] is committed to her people's advocacy. In "The Songs of Reba Love Jackson," Wideman's nine prose poems, the importance of the uniting character of music is brought to life through spiritual embrace, that community of soul that Reba Love creates between the various other black characters and herself, across distance and time. In the middle of a celebration, she receives a phone call from Brother Harris of Cleveland who has just lost his mother and needs the healing virtues of her music. Instantly, she abandons her festivities, prestigious guests, to make a "soul connection" with him (111). Reba Love dedicates another song to "Blind Willie," her spiritual father and teacher, dead years ago in abandonment down the street (113). Reba Love's various dedications kilts the members the black community together in one soul. The overall mood of the communal soul reflects the "blues", the melancholy which pervades the "black America" of the 1960's civil rights movements.

When Reba Love is asked in her radio interview why her songs are pervaded by the militant stance of the civil rights movements, she answers:

I never did understand no movement, nor no politic, nor nothing like that.... It's the songs I sing. If you listen to those songs tell stories. They got words. And I've always believed in those words. That's why I sing them. And won't sing nothing else. We's all God creatures and it ain't in the Bible to sit

in the back of no buses or bow down to any man what ain't nothing but breath and britches (Wideman *Damballah* 122).

Reba Love's [and by extension, Wideman's] commitment to consider his battle for equality not as a deliberate stance she freely chooses, but as a binding call, a cultural expression which stems from the very nature and role of West African music. Her commitment is further evidenced in the refusal to engage in any other artistic expression which overlaps this political stance of identity and protest: "And won't sing nothing else".

Black music also helps put in words and images ideas or concepts that cannot otherwise be put into words. When Tommy is asked by his son to explain to him what death is, he runs out of words. He resorts to the myths of the songs *To My Father's House, Over Jordan, One More River to Cross, There's a home far beyond the Blue, and Farther Along* to make him understand what he cannot otherwise put into words (*Hiding Place* 123). Some feelings or thoughts, in Wideman's fiction, can be conveyed only with music or with the metaphor of music, poetry, is this vein that it is the literary genre which is found to be closest to music in its expressive and emotive functions. Music and language, as a matter of fact, are distinct in this that they are mainly responsible respectively for the communication of emotive and referential meanings. This accounts for the widespread belief that music begins where words end. As the character Samantha, when she reads the encyclopedia for the explanation of blackness, does not make sense of blackness by reading the words, she looks into herself and makes meaning from the "sounds" of the words and their "dance" (Wideman *Sent for You Yesterday* 135).

Black popular music, blues, black jazz, in Wideman's work, through the messages it conveys, stands as the expression of black identity. But if it is true that Wideman uses music as the source of the political and ethical values he voices in his narratives, it is all the same obvious that his stylistic approach heavily draws on black musical aesthetics, rhythmic patterns and melodies, on which the author patterns his narrative style.

2. Black Musical Aesthetics in Wideman's Narrative Style

Wideman, in his art, does not merely attempt to reflect on the centrality of music as a tool in African Americans' negotiation of survival. He furthermore uses African American music as substratum for his narrative aesthetics, a tone setter and as narrative device. His whole writing project may be analyzed as a manifest attempt at bringing African American music, especially blues and jazz, into words, both in content and form, an attempt at pinning down into words the syncopations, off-beats, polyrhythm, blue notes, dance orientation and the whole gamut of the performance practices of blues: drunkenness, delirium, melancholy. His writings strikingly resonate the notes and silences of blues and jazz songs, with the tuneful acoustics of their sometimes joyful and sometimes lyrical poetry. Black music sets the pace and lends its colors to Wideman's poetic prose, and feeds in it with rhythm and tone. We may best understand Wideman's work as an intent endeavor to capture the spirit of the spirituals, blues, black jazz, hip hop and rap that are the dominant African American musical genres he makes use of.

Lots of attempts in the history of arts have been made to bridge the gaps between different artistic categories, as borrowing from fine arts to enrich plastic arts; between various forms of the same categories, as in the visual arts, borrowing from the characteristics unique to still photography to enrich motion picture; or using the specific features of one form for another within the same genre, as in theater, using the expressive registers of tragedy to enrich comedy. Roman poet *Horace's* attempt to exploit in his poetry the visual fusion of imagination and vividness of colors of painting, words this tradition of a somehow perilous artistic acrobatics of interdisciplinary borrowing which stands in line with the search for personal experimentation and search for new effects. His assertion that " *Utpicturapoesis* (as is painting so is poetry)" (qtd in Brink 68) eloquently expresses John Wideman's aesthetic exploitation of other arts, and particularly African-American musical aesthetics, as major metaphor that patterns his narrative.

Apart from signifying in his narratives on the subject matter or themes previously developed

in African American music, Wideman also engages in the process of writing African American popular music into literature, making of his narratives, in their aesthetics, the literary continuum of black popular rhythms, and primarily of blues and jazz. Put in other words, blues, jazz, but also hip hop and rap, lend both their underpinning themes and performance particularities, content and form, politics/ethics and aesthetics, to Wideman's narrative project.

Both the "musical text" (message) and its shape are intertwined in Wideman's narratives, and meaning is accrued from unified substance and style. The double reflection of black musical politics (messages) and acoustics (sound effects) merge together to help the author heighten his artistic effects, making his writing gain in depth and intensity. The sensual particularities of sound echo the message, implicitly repeating it for reinforcement. The effect (or trick) Wideman achieves through this artistic artifice of musical genre transposition into literature is the one found in such occurrences as the mutually nurturing dialogue between form and content in calligram poetry.⁸ This is also found in more restricted verbal occurrences such as onomatopoeias, and in some written languages which allow for ideograms such as traditional Mandarin and ancient Egyptian hieroglyphics. Similarly, drawing on the aesthetic foundations of black (oral) arts offers Wideman the cultural legitimacy to voice the African American's advocacy and celebrate black culture.

In Afro centric criticism, the practice of creative intertextuality that patterns literary production on musical themes is the one Henry Louis Gates Jr. terms "signifyin."⁹ Wideman signifies

⁸A *calligram* is a poem in which the typeface, calligraphy or handwriting is arranged in a way that creates a visual image. As such it is an attempt to "write into" poetry the visual images offered by drawing and painting, or sculpture.

⁹For Gates, the phenomenon which he terms "signifyin" manifests itself in the African-American literature in three ways: first, as in the explicit repetition of a previous theme or subject matter; second, as an implicit rhetorical strategy as is the case with Wideman's patterning his writings on jazz structures or borrowing titles and themes from

on jazz structure in his oeuvre, and again with Bess's moral obligation to assist Tommy in *Hiding Place*. The theme of "no hiding place" is a theme taken from spirituals. However, the difficulty of echoing in narrative musical aesthetics and "reproducing" the sensuous auditory enjoyment which lies in composing, performing, or in listening; the visual and kinetic enjoyment derived from watching the dancer or dancing; both lie in the inherent distinctive natures of each of these art categories. Is it possible at all to translate carving with the minutest details into fiction, or painting accurately into prose poetry, or photography, a visual art, into dancing? Wideman's art style attempts those acrobatics of using words to account for a distant piano key stroke, a streak of paint on a canvass, the dancer's contortions, an axe chop on an inform tree trunk.

Vincent Rossmeier says of Wideman's *Sent for You Yesterday*:

Any novel written with the musical lyricism and jive, stream of consciousness language Wideman employs is attempting to bridge the gap between music and literature. Wideman takes the blues out of the jazz clubs and places it squarely on the page for the readers' benefit. *Sent for You Yesterday* is a marvel to read, not only for its eloquent exposition of urban African American culture, but also simply for the beauty of Wideman's words. (Rossmeier)

The author's "minstrel tongue", a palimpsestic juxtaposition of several layers of languages, at the image of blues and jazz, skillfully juggles with two distinctive voices, African American vernacular/street slang and elevated literary English, oral and written, and his narratives are always, like dueling banjos engaged in a call and response, woven from the voices of two different narrators (Guzzio 202).

Jazz is said to blend European harmony and forms with the African musical elements of the blues such as improvisations, blue notes, polyrhythms, syncopation and the swing. Jazz performances spin out of the improvisations on popular, well known

spirituals; and third, as a principle of literary history. The term of signifyin may also describe an intertextual relationship.

songs that serve as basic structure, on which improvisations are made. Jazz is a music that includes qualities such as swing, improvisation, group interaction, the development of an 'individual voice', and the openness to different musical possibilities. Gerald Early, in his essay "Jazz and the African American Literary Tradition," outlines the history of jazz music in the US, the invaluable black input in the various styles of jazz music throughout its evolution, and the integration of jazz music to the African American narrative tradition. Early defines jazz as a music whose fundamental characteristic was experimental in the freedom it offers its players to get off the beaten track. Its major features are improvisation, syncopation, and rhythm. Jazz music is also characterized an overall harmonic polyphonic ensemble which nonetheless gives each instrument the freedom to take its improvisatory, virtuosic solo flights and each player to contribute his/her marked virtuosity

The imitation in Wideman's narrative texture and tempo of black musical rhythmic pattern goes sometimes as far as reproducing the silences that separate two notes in jazz songs, as he does in *Sent for You Yesterday*¹⁰ in discussing the importance of the silence in the music of jazz singer Thelonious Monk. Thelonious Monk is famous for his virtuosity in using silences in the bebop play style has initiated.¹¹ The utilization of silences of Monk's play, fictionalized here in Albert Wilkes, and the discontinuous melodic lines, repetitions, and rhythm breaks that characterize Thelonious Monk's bebop are reflected in Wideman's narrative, such as in the

¹⁰The same character of *Thelonious Monk* is presented also in two other works, *The Lynchers* and in the short story "The Silence of Thelonious Monk" in *God's Gym*, and his concern with the space between the notes alluded to.

¹¹ Thierry Delcourt writes in *Au risque de l'art* that Monk's style was famous for his "Son utilisation des silences, ses lignes mélodiques discontinues, ses harmonies dissonnantes, ses répétitions [et] ses ruptures de rythme (his use of silences, his discontinuous melodic lines, his dissonant harmonies, his repetitions, [and] rhythm breaks [translation mine]). (Thierry Delcourt *Au risque de l'art* 76). Wideman tries to faithfully render these musical features in his narrative.

following performative break and silence in the narrative flow: "One more time. Somebody had named the notes, but nobody had named the silence between the notes. The emptiness, the space waiting for him that night seven years ago... it was emptiness and silence and the notes they named, the notes he played were just a way of tipping across it, of pretending you knew where you were going" (*Sent for You Yesterday* 55)

The excerpt itself represents, in the description of Wilkes's journey home from exile, a sharp break from the hubbub and racket of the previous passage which goes: "Passengers helloing and good-bying, the rumble of baggage carts trundling over the cobblestones, the shouts of trainmen and porters [which] were magnified in the cavernous station and trapped under the metal canopy arching over his head" (Wideman *Sent for You* 54). The initial sentence "one more time," expression used by choir leaders for repetitions in lines, brings Wilkes back exactly to the stage of his life where he fled seven years before. This stage has to be repeated before the play can go on. The normally unnecessary period that cuts the phrase "One more time" from the sentence it is supposed to accompany occurs as a conspicuous attempt to impose a break, a silence where there should be no break. The reflection made on the meaning of silence in general, in the narrative, helps break away from Albert Wilkes' exile and begin with his fresh return to Homewood. The performativity of the silence echoes that of Monk/Wilkes playing style which is said to highly value silences between notes. Wideman's aesthetic in this part reflects the characteristic imitation of Monk's bebop style. It is the same real-life silence that the jazz and blues music translate into their own languages which is again echoed in the following passage about John French. Wideman tries to put a meaning into that silence, interpret it in a way as to make it obvious to the reader that there may be millions of categories of silences, different in their duration, which is easy to understand, but also different in their weight, color or meanings, which is less easy to grasp.

John French thinks about silence. Not the silence before things get started, not the stillness underneath things you can hear when you're peaceful and the sky is spread

out so you know you're just one little lump, one little wrinkle like everybody else under the blanket of the sky. With a mouthful of Tokay in his cheeks he squeezes his eyes shut and rinses the tobacco taste from his mouth. He thinks about the silence after things end. (Wideman *Sent for You* 68-69)

The silence after things end is that silence which will never be broken again, and therefore a silence whose *length* one can imagine. But the other obvious connotation which resides in this silence is its distinctively heavy *quality*. Another musical silence whose spirit Wideman tries to capture occurs in another novel by Wideman: *Philadelphia Fire*. Wideman (as a narrator i.e. at the extradiegetic level of the narrative), has an imaginary telephone discussion with his imprisoned son. He comes to a point where there is nothing to say. However, he sees the need to maintain the communication. This need of contact is reflected in the narratives follows: "I hope the silence will be filled for him as it is filled for me by hearing the nothing there is to say at this moment. I hope saying nothing is enough to grip the silence, twist it to our need. Which is holding on, not letting go.... This temporary contact fallen into silence, into listening for the other's silence" (Wideman *Philadelphia Fire* 103 - 4). All this excerpt amounts to the single expression of silence, a silence which nonetheless, filled by empty words which keep the contact between father and son, and between the narrator and his listener(s).

The blues sonority is reflected in the overall texture of *Sent for You Yesterday*. The main storyline of the novel is as intense and bluesy as the subplots jotted in here and there, narrated with the same tension. As if drowned under bitterness and resignation, the characters are made to evolve in the recurrent jarring changes of the storyline. Subplots surge up, cutting in the main line with sudden anger, fear or revolt, as if the major storyline were just a set-up, a make-believe, hiding other subplots with different sets of characters with more tragic stakes. All these minor climatic surges of tension, again, get all buried in the same apparent resigned bitterness and slow underlying tempo of the main plot, in the caustic irony, and bitter laughter of the blues. This pattern can be compared to the play of some artists such as Jimmy Hendrix, in "*Voodoo Chile*" with the

breathless moaning of the electric guitar's solo flight, which goes on and on, again and again, before letting up. And all this while, steadily and wearily, the bass guitar and the beat, to borrow from a jazz jargon, will be "doing their own thing," as if they did not care.¹²

Wideman's works, with its cut-ups, its scratches, breaks and samples, can be best understood not only as narrativization of the black musical heritage, but also as a new and distinctive way of creating, negotiating through the mediating voice of music the very process of narrative writing. Improvisation/Extemporization, complex polyrhythm, and syncopation, whole gamut of African American major musical practices, have been highlighted in Wideman's writing as aesthetic devices. He accounts for his use of new stylistic devices, exploration of new narrative styles far in the margins of literary tradition, saying that he wants to do with writing what Michael Jordan did with basketball: "become a standard for others to measure themselves against" (Guzzio 207).

In his experimentation, Wideman tries to transpose the pattern of songs and instruments into his narrative style. The narrative aesthetics of first pages of his novel *A Glance Away* imitates the initial crescendo of the jazz/blues song's drumbeat: "Spring ended and was forgotten, but soon again came again [note the first change in the tempo or rhythm of spring occurrences], again and again [second acceleration], repeating itself, forgetting its own way, each time imperturbable, resigned as if nothing else, no other season happened [the crescendo eventually gains momentum and spins out of control]" (10).

This literal capture of the musical crescendo is rendered not only by the poetics of the words, as shown above, but is also worded in the buttressing controlling metaphor of the crescendo tempo of a real drum beat. The excerpt above

abruptly stops with the onomatopoeia "splat" which resonates like a drumbeat. This "beat," (splat), first occurs in a one-word paragraph. It punctuates the end of the excerpt, picturing Daddy Gene splattering the soil with his tobacco juice. This "beat" first occurs on page 10, putting an end to a discussion on the weather. Then the following single occurrence of the word "splat" goes as far as two pages after, page 12, at the slow pace of the beat, "undisturbed by faster rhythm of foot and music" (Wideman *A Glance Away* 12), again putting an end to the paragraph. The crescendo then starts with the third occurrence "splat" just at the end of the following paragraph. Then the "splat" beat fully rises into a quick pace, three times punctuating a short paragraph, and lending its momentum to the description of sister Lucy's talent as a singer. Then follows the sequence where the narrative rhythm all comes to a sudden halt in a final question mark that puts an end to the paragraph.

Just as if it were a duel between two jazz instruments competing, playing with each other, teasing and spinning the music with the threads of their instruments, another punctuating onomatopoeia, "um um," takes up the musical beat of the story. The reader might then think that the "splat" beat is over, but as if to challenge him/her, it sounds again, on page 15, and then over again in one last occurrence on page 16, where it finally dies, with the first shovelful of earth on Daddy Gene's coffin. The back and forth in the melody swing is shown through the numerous stream-of-consciousness flash-forwards and flashbacks in Daddy Gene's life. The camera eye first focuses on Daddy Gene visiting his daughter at the hospital, then switches to Daddy Gene's body draped in a coffin for the obsequies. Then it flashes back again to Daddy Gene alive, singing his bawdy refrains to his grandson Eddie, and then again, moves to the same character dying in his chair. The storyline unravels back and forth no fewer than thirteen times on six pages (12-18), alternatively rendering the life and death of Daddy Gene. It should be added that the text is strewn with songs, onomatopoeias, one-sentence paragraphs, italics, etc. in a collage fashion that may be likened to the partition of various instruments entering a single

¹²The thematic comparison of Wideman's *Sent for You Yesterday* and Jimmi Hendrix's "Voodoo Chile" may also be relevant in this that an attractive blues tune which says "I stand up next to a mountain /And I chop it down with the edge of my hand cos I'm a voodoo chile" is a relevant narrative of identity that allies aesthetics, identity, and a myth of empowerment.

piece of music. The difficulty for the reader first in spotting and then again in understanding these transposed aesthetic effects of music in Wideman's work matches his/her enjoyment of its richness.

The mediation of the narrative process with metaphors drawn from music usually appears in Wideman's work when emotions are too strong or flimsy to be expressed in sheer words. The narrator John resorts to the metaphor of *Shenandoah*, theme song of the movie *Across the Wide Missouri* that makes him want to cry each time he hears it, to express the feelings his father's presence always raises in him (*Damballah* 139). The words of the song are given as title to the short story: "Across the Wide Missouri." Obviously, the emotions that the author means to convey through the tone and words of this song are the emotions of mixed longing and discomfort, pleasure and embarrassment, that suffuse the heart of the narrator-character John when he remembers once meeting his father he has never lived with. Most particularly, on that special occasion, he goes out alone with his father in a movie theater and enjoys his presence. The same emotions still fill his heart when he remembers the event. John confesses: "I'll find the way to talk to my father. About things like his presence. Like taking me to the movies once, alone" (*Damballah* 139). Wideman's pen sneaks into the magic aesthetics of music by borrowing on the deeply melancholic visual images of *Shenandoah* to account for the mixed pleasure and awkwardness involved in John meeting his father at the restaurant. He forgets the words he would use to say what he feels in his father's presence because they cannot describe his feelings as accurately as expressed by the song *Shenandoah*. "I forget all the words, says John the narrator. Words were unimportant because what counted was his presence" (137). Apart from lyricism, the backcloth of aggressiveness and bellicosity are more accurately set in Wideman through war songs.

The apocalyptic tone of war and destruction is set in *Philadelphia Fire* by the heavy rhythms of violent hard-core rap (Wideman 161-2). Rap music is the musical expression of the hip hop culture. Hip hop is a cultural, musical and artistic movement which originated in the black ghettos of New York City in the early 1970s. It incorporates rap

music, DJing, MCing, break dance, graffiti, and beat boxing. Hip-hop culture and rap have become worldwide tokens of identification, not only for the black youth in the US, but for youth culture in general. Rap is characterized by its rhythmic spoken words sometimes accompanied by a sung melody, and is usually identified with non-conformity, protest and rebellion.

Black music, especially rap, in Wideman's work, sometimes serves as substratum for battles. These battle songs seem to have the same tones as those which helped the civil rights marchers keep hope and continue with the bus boycotts. This category of revolt songs is the one that Cudjoe hears in his dream:

The words are unintelligible. Another language. But the singing gets to me anyway, right away. I can feel what they're singing about. Doesn't matter that I can't understand a word. It's a freedom song. A fighting song. Righteous as those movement anthems. Ain't gon let nothing turn me round, turn me round. Remember? Remember the tears coming to your eyes. Remember how full and scared and strong the singing made us feel? That's what I awakened to. Those feelings. That music... I couldn't see because it's pitch black middle of the night and there's a hollow in the park and that's where the singing seems to be coming from. I stand up. Start to walk toward where I hear the sound. (Wideman *Philadelphia Fire* 93)

The assertion of the uselessness of the words ("doesn't matter that I can't hear the words") points to the necessity of making meaning only with the non-verbal elements of the song, which elements the narrator relies on to implicitly evidence the magic feeling-rousing power of musical experience. It is not worthless to refer to the historical context which serves as reference to this mix of tears, power, fear and strength: the civil rights of the 1960s. The 1960s civil rights movements are a cornerstone in the (re)definition of the black identity in the US and an important step in healing the trauma of history. It is the same healing storytelling is meant to effect.

The healing role storytelling is meant to play in Wideman's narrative can be understood in knowing that Reba Love Jackson, the female gospel star of *Damballah*, calls her songs stories. The connection that is made between songs and stories underscores the intent of the storyteller to make words in storytelling produce the same effects that music does. As a matter of fact, Wideman himself confesses that the ultimate project for him is to have on the reader the same effects that music produces on the listener: "the ultimate project for me, he says, [is] figuring how language can perform the same kind of trick that music does" (Guzzio 245).¹³ Music connects souls, individuals, the past to the present and to the future, which storytelling might also attempt by unraveling and recalling the common ties to each member of the community, by recalling the bonds of blood, tenderness, and past sufferings common to the race.

CONCLUSION

The common feature in Wideman's various uses of blues music is the languor and sense of loss it reflects. The blues (and jazz to some extent) that constitute the musical identity of the African American is meant to convey the emotional intensity of the pains peculiar only to the African American's experience, the sense of loss, deprivation and oppression. It is the blues in life that has given birth to the blues in music. And it is from the acuteness and horror of that experience which goes beyond words that the blues music draws both its swansong beauty and message.

One of the first distinctive characteristics of Wideman's prose is that it carries with it the rhythms and cadences of African American music and poetics, and a pervading lyricism of loss and

deprivation. In underlining the black trauma with the lyricism of his narratives, Wideman creates a common cultural code through which African Americans can try to understand themselves.

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¹³ The full statement is: "Something connects us so that the past is alive again. The past and the present merge, and you merge with the blues singer, and the blues singer merges with other blues singers, and ultimately with the drums and Africa, and with something that transcends time and place that is more about the human capacity to turn experience into metaphor, into language, into music, into a particular way of holding and touching someone else. So that is the ultimate project for me – figuring how language can perform the same kind of trick that music does" (Guzzio 245).

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