



A STUDY OF BLACK IDENTITY CONSTRUCTS IN JOHN EDGAR WIDEMAN'S "DAMBALLAH" AND PHILADELPHIA FIRE

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Abstract

It is established today that history is mainly an ideological construct at the service of dominating social classes. By making the discourse which governs social interplays at their own advantage, these classes enhance their domination and write minorities into subservience. The awareness of the relativity which underlies historical discourse creates an opening for downtrodden black people to challenge and subvert the authority of power meta-narratives in introducing their own ideology-premised narratives of identity. This paper expounds on two instances of the African American author John Edgar Wideman's enterprise of black identity redefinition: the relations of Orion to the African ancestral god Damballah in the eponymic short-story collection, and the fictional revision of Shakespeare's *Tempest* in *Philadelphia Fire*. The study of these works is made through Afrocentric and postmodernist paradigms. It aims to justify the relevance for the oppressed, dominated and exploited black people to tell their own narratives of identity for liberation.

Key-words: black - metanarratives - identity - USA - oppression - relativity

Résumé :

Il est reconnu aujourd'hui que l'histoire est principalement une construction idéologique au service des classes sociales dominantes. En produisant le discours qui régit les rapports sociaux à leur avantage, ces dernières renforcent leur domination et repoussent par leurs écrits les minorités dans la soumission. La prise de conscience de la relativité qui sous-tend le discours historique crée une ouverture permettant aux Noirs opprimés de contester et de subvertir l'autorité des métarécits de pouvoir en introduisant leur propre discours idéologique d'identité. Le présent article se penche sur deux exemples de l'entreprise de redéfinition de l'identité noire tirés de l'œuvre de l'auteur américain John Edgar Wideman : les relations d'Orion avec le dieu ancestral africain Damballah dans la collection de nouvelles du même nom, et la révision fictive de *La Tempête* de Shakespeare dans *Philadelphia Fire*. L'analyse de ces travaux est faite à travers le paradigme de l'afrocentricité et du postmodernisme. Il vise à justifier la pertinence pour les peuples opprimés, dominés et exploités, de donner voix à leur propres récits d'identité pour leur libération.

Mots-clés : noir - grands récits - identité - USA - oppression - relativité

INTRODUCTION

Although modern genetics has firmly established that race cannot be conceived of as a biological category, the concept of race has persisted and remains one of the dominant categorizations among humans. Placing the concept of racial identity in the paradigm of self-determining discourse, one does understand that the construction of individual and communal identities foregrounds idealized references which set targets for striving. That frame of self-determining discourse resorts to myths in this regard that the "targets" defined for the striving are not usually premised on

historicity, even though the sustaining causes that gear a community toward those ideals may find their justification in past experiences. Narratives have always served as frame for the creation of revivifying myths. In his introduction to *The Best American Short Stories* (1996), Wideman identifies the "special subversive, radically democratic role" of fiction in transforming readers' way of seeing the world (Russell, 2011, p.141).

It is in this token that Wideman's narratives weave an adamant commitment to the creative rewriting of blackness into their rich poetic fabric, sometimes on the borderline of literary and political correctness. As a matter of fact, in many instances in Wideman's works does the author develop strategies of political resistance that touch, among others, on the most commonly shared opinions on black people portrayal and on image reappropriation/re-creation, stretching the limits of Africanness further in the direction of radical, subversive reconsideration. This paper, conducted in the analytical frameworks of Afrocentricity and postmodernism, interprets two of those fictional instances in Wideman's idiosyncrasy of writing as a radical politics committed to ideological demolition of metanarratives and to identity reappropriation, in *Philadelphia Fire* and *Damballah*. Its objective is the validation of the pertinence of self-recentering in the enterprise of identity (re)appropriation through narratives.

1. Literature Review

Identity is defined, in the *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary* (2016), as the condition of being oneself and not another, the condition or character as to who a person is, the sense of self which provides sameness and continuity in personality over time. This definition lays emphasis on subjectivity or self-definition, continuity and personality. Identity then embraces aspects as diverse as gender, nationality, physical appearance, or age. In modern society, however, and more so in the US today, the classification of people in groups of same identity, apart from gender, most commonly comes down under the label of "race." Racial categorization weighs heavily in the lives and destinies of all American citizens. With respect to racial considerations, the question of identity, "who am I?" is always premised on the origin or history, on "where do I come from?" Identity and history are therefore intrinsically linked in the sense that origin or history determines identity, while identity is the result of personal and collective history, genetically and sociologically. The necessity of redefining the African identity, in Wideman's view, stems from all the bias of black history. The self-defining discourse is produced to overturn the ascribed definition derived from the divisive and ungrounded social practice of race. The "biological" determinant of the concept of race was born in the Renaissance-time encounter of Europe with Africa. The Renaissance-time encounter definition, Wideman argues, places the parameters of the discourse on blackness within the

external determinant of whiteness, which accounts for the demonization of blackness:

What was happening when Africa met Europe, in those earliest encounters? It was the beginning of the Renaissance, the end of the Middle Ages, and Europe was trying to sort out certain conflicts within its psyche and history. The questions of the duality of human nature, the angelic side versus the devilish side, the flesh versus the spirit, were being discussed and argued and debated. The Renaissance was a kind of attempt to salvage a certain definition of humanity, one that is harmonized and transcendent, one that has more angel than devil in it. (TuSmith, 2011, pp.127-128)

This black identity, was first defined in Eurocentric thought, in opposition to the self, in the distancing frame of mind of otherness, contrary to the conception of identity as who you think you are, the way you think about yourself. But through the newly discovered oppositional otherness, "Europe found a way to dispose of or project those sides of itself, of its character, that it didn't want to deal with" and "Africa became a sort of rag upon which Europe cleansed its hands" (TuSmith, 2011, p.128). By embodying the negative element of their split nature, the black frees them from the responsibility for the incestuous mix of angel and devil, spirit and flesh, light and darkness.

Since "'black' has never been just there, has always been an unstable identity, physically, culturally and politically, [but is] is a narrative, story and a history, [...]constructed, told, spoken not simply found, but an identity which had to be learnt" (Jally, 1997), Wideman sees as the writer's mission the striving to discover, interpret and reappropriate that (hi)story. This necessity of reappropriation of the self is all the more important as it is the only way to subvert the status quo. History, which is mainly an ideological construct, then takes on a postmodernist multiperspectivity that stresses relativity and its contingency expressed in the Igbo saying "all stories are true". It becomes essential to tell stories since storytelling, i.e. literature, stands for the self-emancipating act that breaks the bonds of the original demonized otherness and repositions the black person at the center of his/her own history and identity. It empowers the black body and identity and delinks it from the subjection, submission and passivity of the cross-cultural encounter.

African Americans, forced into this vision of things in which race becomes the major paradigm for the perception of their identity and culture and the basis of social experience, usually fall victim to the sociological phenomenon called "stereotype threat" that makes the stereotyped minority person live down to the defining expectations of the mainstream. This justifies a new discourse of identity which occurs in the nurturing exchange between the individual and his/her community, between the storyteller/writer and their participating audience/readership. This paper analyzes this commitment that Wideman takes up through two selected symbols: the figure of Orion in *Damballah*, and Cudjoe's revision of Shakespeare's

Tempest in Philadelphia Fire. In directly confronting the sociopolitical system, they undermine its substrata, questioning the grand narratives which sustain it.

2. Orion and Damballah

In the short story "Damballah", Orion, "a crazy nigger" (Wideman, 1998, p.8) who follows his own whims, rejects the master's religion and foods, and through his lips, "not an English word has passed" (Wideman, 1998, p.22). In the short story, he stands as the figure of resistance of the African American. Orion finds the sustaining force that fuels his resistance in his communion with the supreme god of his ancestors, Damballah. Damballah is said to be the supreme god who will "gather up the family" of the sons and daughters of Africa scattered all over the world (Wideman, 1998, p.7). As a symbol, apart from serving as cultural referent, Damballah is the deity which stands for the mythic essence of blackness as well. Wideman borrows his divine representation of Damballah from the Haitian cosmology as reported in Maya Deren's book *Divine Horsemen*, and from the symbol of Orion from the Greek and Egyptian mythologies.

The origin of the deity *Damballah* is the Fon god *Dan/Danbada* or serpent god. In the Fon cosmology, *Danbada* is not the supreme god of creation but the son of *Segbo Lisa* (male) and *Mawu* (female) who, together, are the androgynous originating principle of creation, sometimes combined in *Mawu-Lisa*. The same androgynous principle is found in the combination *Damballah -Wedo* in the Haitian cosmology in which the deity *Damballah* who is, originally, in the Fon cosmology, the son, now rises into the supreme principle of creation. The deity of *Aïdo Hwèdo*, serpent entity of the Fon cosmology which is symbolized by the rainbow that rises from the symbiosis of the water element (rain), and that of the fire (sun), now merges with that of *Damballah*, and incorporates the male-female originating duality.

The eponym of Orion is the giant and handsome hunter of the Greek mythology who was transformed by Zeus into star after his death. In ancient Egyptian mythology, under the name "Unas," Orion was once associated with the sun god of rebirth and afterlife Osiris. The Greek legend of Orion has it that he was so giant that he would cross the sea with his feet at the bottom of the sea and his head above the waves. The most important traits of personality that make him appropriate to embody resistance are his extraordinary height and his final transformation into a star that would shine and show the way of resistance to cultural repression.

One logical conclusion that follows from the analysis of this deity-worshipper symbol of resistance is that the deity and its worshipper have undergone transformation, and thus the symbol is tributary to Western borrowing. Orion, guardian or living person to whom the revelation is made and who is to transmit what stands for the most precious treasure of the past, is a name borrowed from the

Greek mythology, although the figure of Orion is traced back to the Egyptian mythology in Unas. This name at first, one might say, is not fit to integrally encapsulate the essence of the origins in a counter-narrative, and thus, in the terms of Idowu, would "make the whole process futile" (1973, p.55). However, even with Orion as a borrowing from the Greek mythology, Wideman thinks that we are still within African values and that "The most important is the author's intention and the degree to which the author shares that intention with the reader" (TuSmith, 2011, p.47). He justifies his borrowing saying: "I had not learned, in a sense, to lexify that struggle in indigenous Afro-American terms. I was still reaching to other places for metaphors and symbols, and there are still valid to a certain extent. But they don't have that local force and particularity that are most appropriate for me in my works. So I had to shop around quite a bit more." (TuSmith, 2011, p. 69)

One acknowledges Wideman's appeal to the ancient gods of African cosmology and to ancient myths to embody the resistance to servitude, and also to seek the return to the original ways, since Damballah is to "gather up" the black family scattered in the four corners of the world, and create a sense of self away from the Christian tradition. Those remote, vestigial gods give a sense of historical extension to the origins of the race.¹ The centrality of the figures of Damballah and Orion underlines the importance of religious references as symbols of resistance.²

There is no agreement between the various interpretations given to the Latin word *religio* from which the word religion originates. One of the interpretations is that the word *religio* probably originates from the Latin word meaning "link," and must then be interpreted as what binds us to one another, or to the divine (Idowu, 1973, pp.22-23). Religion becomes central to human culture and identity in the regard that it defines how the community members interpret their role in the universe. Religion can then be a tool that enables one group to define and distance itself from another. Orion's distancing himself from Christianity emancipates him from the leash that binds the black slave and subordinates him to the white man in the master-slave relation defined in the biblical narrative of Ham and his brothers. Orion refuses to be defined in the terms of Christianity in which he becomes nothing but a slave. Orion's resistance further extends to the field of language.

Orion's embrace of the English language would mean an acceptance of a new world view, that of the master, opening himself up to the master's definition, and this is what Orion rejects in *Damballah*. Aunt Lissy who has resigned herself to her condition of slave takes pride in "talk(ing) Merican" (Wideman *Damballah* 1998,

¹ The transfiguration of divinities over time delineates not only a fusion of similar belief systems, but the fracturing of continuity in traditions as the need arises. This is perhaps one possible explanation for the transfiguration that occurs in Wideman's portrayal of the spirit of Damballah/Orion.

² The resistance to the white man's food and all this makes Orion/Ryan impervious to his master's orders, and punishments.

p.21). Her acceptance of the English language makes her vulnerable as it enthralls her to its worldview, and thus, opposes her to Orion who embodies that solidity which one has in rooting one's beliefs in one's native culture. Orion superbly rises above his torturers, impervious to the physical cruelty they inflict on him: "...strong as he needed to be. Nothing touch him if he don't want" (Wideman, 1998, p.20).

Orion's faithfulness to his gods which translates into his refusal to convert to Christianity, ironically, in the master's Christian paradigm, is interpreted, not only as a rejection of salvation (in Euro-Christian terms), but worse, as an identification with the devil. They look at him as if "a knot [has] poked out on [his] forehead" (Wideman, 1998, p.21). This paradigm in which the white master registers his slave gives him the choice only between entire assimilation, and total exclusion, with no middle ground. Constant ill-treatment makes Orion doubt sometimes his resolution. "His skin was becoming like that in-between place the priest scratched in the dust...he could feel the air of this strange land wearing out his skin, rubbing it thinner and thinner..." (Wideman, 1998, p.18). So the temptation lingers in his heart, of shedding his blackness. Nonetheless he keeps on clinging to his roots.

Anyhow, Orion's faithfulness endows him with that formidable and mocking superiority that makes him look down on his torturers with the remoteness of a god from the sky. In spite of his social situation, Orion feels he is in control since his gods and "ghosts had everything in they hands, even the white folks in they hands" (Wideman, 1998, p.23). The evidence that Orion is not just lost in his fancies is the extreme difficulty the overseers have in taking him to the barn to emasculate and kill him: "He didn't buck or kick but it seemed as if the four men carrying him were struggling with a giant stone rather than a black bag of bones" (Wideman, 1998, p.23). And the more powerless they get, the angrier they become. They kill him with the embittered feeling that they have lamentably failed in touching him and subduing his will. It is rather the torturers who look most affected: the master sinks into spleen and the overseer is "half-dead" (Wideman, 1998, p.25).

The contrast offered by Orion's case is heightened by the fact that, for a slave, he has that exceptional attribute of being able to "read, write, do sums and cypher" (Wideman, 1988, p.22), which reveals that he has had a former experience of opening to the Western culture with his former master, and therefore is not totally ignorant of the master's culture. This rules out the image of Orion as a stubborn ignorant who refuses to open up to new ways or foreign culture, and endows his decision with the seal of full responsibility. His attitude comes as a free choice he makes after getting an insight into both worlds. Orion could have taken some advantage in cooperating with the master to enjoy the advantages linked to his outstanding intellectual skills. However, he rejects that success in mainstream America which, Wideman sees, "demands that African Americans sacrifice identity, family, and race" (Guzzio, 2011, p. 134). Orion becomes dangerous to the white because he refuses to embrace his

religion, and culture. He is the symbol of resistance to the systematic destruction of cultures, and more specifically, here, the destruction of religions, languages, and cultural tastes.

One of the first rules the slavemaster enforces on African slaves in America is the deprivation of language and religion, and therefore, deprivation of the original cultural identity. Once the enslaved people are stripped off their languages and religion, it becomes easier for the master to subdue their will in so far as the slave has his new identity molded in the master's representation and accepts the place he is given in this new paradigm. In his master's language, Orion would have been defined as a slave, and in his language, he would have been called "nigger." These words, in Wideman's terms, "perform the same work as the killing. They extinguish connection, possibility. They enforce the reality of a world locked down by the paradigm of race. If you're not already among the dead, when you're called a nigger, you're being softened up for the killing". (Wideman, 1994, p.77-78).

The hope that Orion's legacy of African resistance culture and cultural resistance will both be preserved lies in the hands of the young unnamed boy who spies on him. The boy has never received instructions from Orion in words but falls under the spell of the spirit which finally possesses him. The boy converses with dead Orion's ghost so that the latter could pass on the secret of initiation to the fathers' way (Wideman 25). He is able to perform the burial rituals and, then on, nurtures the hope that the tradition will be preserved.

3. Caliban and *The Tempest*

The Tempest is a twenty-five-page section in *Philadelphia Fire* that elaborates on the centrality of narrative deconstruction in the act of political subversion. Cudjoe, the protagonist of *Philadelphia Fire*, a schoolteacher, has undertaken to rewrite an "authentically revised version of Willy's con [read William Shakespeare's historic scam]" (Wideman, 1990, p.131), and rehearses it with his young schoolchildren to make them perform it. The call for freedom is what can be distinctly heard in Cudjoe the schoolteacher's repositioning Caliban at the center of Shakespeare's *Tempest*. We understand why Cudjoe, the teacher in *Philadelphia Fire*, is not content with Shakespeare's narrative of Caliban, his black ancestor. The story Cudjoe passes down to his young students is the revised, "black" version of *The Tempest* dubbed in the novel the "bounty and the hub" (Wideman, 1994, p.132), that is to say the substratum, of all else written about the fire in Osage, Philadelphia, summing up the whole plot of the book into the liberating act of reappropriation of one's narrative.³

³ Philadelphia fire, that is to say the fire that was lit by the police and which burnt all the 10 Osage Avenue in 1985, is to be viewed symbolically as the license by the public power to kill, torture, jail, and disparage blackness in America.

In fact, Cudjoe's version reestablishes the "truth" ("all stories are true") which holds that Prospero is nothing less than a thief who has stolen his island that he has inherited from his mother. "Two of my fascinations are time [in the historical sense] and identity, says Wideman, [...] and those two subjects are connected" (TuSmith, 2011, p.121). One may see, through the fictionalized character of Cudjoe, the figure of the late Martinican writer and proponent of the Négritude movement Aimé Césaire. In point of fact, Aimé Césaire rewrote Shakespeare's *Tempest* from a black-centered perspective in 1969, in line with the decolonization of minds and the reconsideration of black-white relations in the postcolonial period.

From the perspective of Shakespeare's play, Caliban, the black character who stands for the black people in the play, is portrayed as a vile and servile, hypocritical black slave who attempts to steal his white master Prospero's island by scheming to kill him. But in the rewritten version of Cudjoe, the roles are reversed. The perspective changes as white Prospero becomes the usurper and villain whose greed is limitless, and Caliban, the native Prince, heir to Queen Sycorax, wrongly robbed of the island he has inherited from his mother⁴: "Who am so dirty take what him don't belong? Steal from breddar. Steal from son. Break bond. Break word... Don't be steal me again. Dis island mine. Been mine always. This mother-humping play can't end no oder way" (Wideman 1990, pp.121-22).

This play enacts an alternative vision of the foundational narrative of America, a reappropriated narrative in which, from his position of antagonist, the black man (Caliban) becomes the protagonist, denouncing the tricks that "Willy" has played unto him by writing a wrong version of the (hi)story. Wideman believes that the reinterpretation of subjects of fiction, and of history, both of which serve as major substrata for the social and political system, offers the black self an opportunity to get a hold on his/her destiny, for fiction and actual life are interwoven in an inextricable way. The enthralled black person is "the history they have manufactured" (Wideman, 2010, p.179). Since Blacks and Whites in literature are engaged "in a struggle over the nature of reality" in America (Richard Wright), in engaging and living in the white man's narrative, the black accepts the role they are assigned in it, and can be free only if they manufacture and perform their own stories.

The fact that I have the opportunity to tell it [the narrative] my way - that creates a little bit of space for me as a person, as an identity. We need to perform the stories. They'll inevitably be different because we bring different experiences to them. ..We have to feel that we have a legitimate right to perform stories...if you don't tell your own story, somebody else will tell it for you. They'll have an interest, they'll have a reason for telling it - and it won't come out quite the way you want it to come out. (TuSmith, 2011, p.122)

⁴ Note here the similarity between the name of the protagonist Caliban and that of the island Caribbean, both of which in reality have the same root. The Carib Indians, their language, the Caribbean Sea, and Cannibal were all named for *caribales* (dogs) by Columbus. Dog in Hebrew is KeLeBH (Brathwaite)

Claude Lévy-Strauss and Jacques Derrida acknowledge this harmful primary nature of writing, not as an intellectual necessity or a neutral functional or change-bearing tool of communication, but as a tool of "domination," "exploitation," "enslavement," and "perfidy": "the primary function of writing, as means of communication, is to facilitate the enslavement of the other human beings" (Lévy-Strauss qtd in Derrida, 1978, p.130). Shakespeare's *Tempest* in fact turns out to be one of the most widely read texts of the "number-one voice and people's choice, scratcher and mixer and sweet jam fixer" (Wideman, 1990, p.129), hailed by most influential literary critics like Harold Bloom, not as a simple forefront figure of Western literature, but its actual father (Bloom, 1994, p.45). Caliban's picture as a villain in the canon of European literary tradition is unmeasurably destructive to the status of the black person in Europe and America.

Cudjoe, the writer and teacher, guardian of ancient ways, whose role is to resolutely fight those commonest ideological distortions ingrained in the Western profiling of blackness, poses as the counter-voice and puts in his characters' mouth their own distinct language and worldview. This counter-balancing worldview is a claim of entitlement to the occupancy of the American territory. Those stories, Wideman calls "father stories." "Father stories, he writes, are about establishing origins and through them legitimizing claims of ownership, of occupancy and identity (Wideman, 1994, p.63).

Caliban uses the master's reappropriated s/words to dismantle the dehumanizing fallacies that links Caliban and blackness to deceitfulness and treachery. The language is a mixture of African-American, Jamaican, and Caribbean and other black diasporic varieties of English, a linguistic reappropriation of the self by the black person. "His speech queerly accented, traces of the Bronx, Merry ole England, rural Georgia, Jamaican Calypso, West Coast Krio, etc." (Wideman, 1990, p.120). The use of this language introduces the black voice and signals protest, subversion, disruption, criticism, and resistance. Nongqawuse has repeatedly warned about the use of the enemy's language: "Beware, she said. Beware. Beware... Do not speak with your enemy's tongue. Do not fall asleep in your enemy's dream" (Wideman, 1996, p.147). Cudjoe announces to his schoolchildren, clearly wording out the denunciation of historiographic treachery: "Today's lesson is about colonialism, imperialism, recidivism, the royal fucking over of weak by strong, colored by white, many by few, or, if you will, the birth of the nation's blues seen through the fish-eye lens of a fee fi foe englishmon. A mister Conrad. Earl the Pearl Shakespeare, you see" (Wideman, 1990, p.127).

The authorial metalepsis effected in the narrative's poetics, enables the "direct intervention" of the author calling himself "the fabulator,"⁵ to announce, with insistence, to the reader that this act of rewriting Shakespeare is the central event, the one sentence into which all the various, seemingly unrelated sub-plots of the novel can be boiled down into.⁶ This establishes a direct link between the new version of *The Tempest* and the black voice representation in the official discourse. Shakespeare's *Tempest* was first performed in 1611, four years after the first permanent English settlement in the new World in Virginia: Jamestown (1607). As such, it has a foundational importance in what is happening today in the USA where black people are being fire-bombed by the police. The direct relation of Caliban to African Americans on the one hand, and that of the figure of Prospero to European Americans on the other hand, are not this specious to decipher. Underlining that correspondence, revealing the connection between the two events of the performance of Shakespeare's play and Philadelphia bombing, so far apart in time (1611 - 1985), wording out the denunciation in the harshest terms, and seeking healing in the reappropriation of the image of the self, are each an act of historiographic demolition, radical subversion that puts the writer at the very core of the social struggle. Cudjoe, the protagonist of the novel, surrogate for Wideman the author outside the novel⁷, asserts his role of teacher/writer in the reinvention of the self in the following terms:

one of my jobs as model and teacher is to unteach you, help you separate the good from the bad from the ugly. Specifically, in this case, to remove de tail. Deraill de tale. Disembarrass, disabuse, disburden - demonstrate conclusively that Mr. Caliban's behind is clean and unencumbered, good as anybody else's. That the tail [understand of the African gorilla/chimpanzee man] was a tale. Nothing more or less than an ill-intentioned big fat lie. (Wideman, 1990, p.131)

Thus, in the same way the voice of the white slave master (here Shakespeare), works at creating the narrative that will serve as frame for white superiority, the black writer/teacher posits himself/herself as the voice of those who so far have been silenced into submission and inferiority. The dehumanizing representation of the black was first enforced on spirits and minds through culture (and religion), which served as legitimizing grounds for the construction of the socio political system. The

⁵ The French *fabulateur* means storyteller, and in English, the *fabuler* is someone who invents stories, tells lies. So *fabulator* is a coinage that may be understood as inveterate liar, storyteller, and most appropriately, applies to the writer himself who 'invents' fictions.

⁶ The full passage goes: "I assure you. I repeat. Whatever my assurance is worth. Being the fabulator. This is the central event, this production of *The Tempest* staged by Cudjoe in the late 1960s, outdoors, in a park in West Philly. Though it comes here, wandering like a Dutchman in and out of the narrative, many places at once, *The Tempest* sits dead center, the storm in the eye of the storm, figure within a figure, play within a play, it is the bounty and hub of all else written about the [Philadelphia] fire, though it comes here, where it is, nearer the end [of the novel] than the beginning." (Wideman, 1990, p.132)

⁷ The writer Wideman is no being conflated with the fictional characters in the work. However, the specific aspect of Wideman's writing style that consists in "writing himself" into his narrative has already been pointed out in this work. The pronounced resemblance between Wideman and the protagonists of his works makes them stand for the author's doppelganger in his fictions.

students can understand now that there is a relation between Shakespeare's play, and their condition. The image of bestial and savage being depicted of the black character Caliban in William Shakespeare's play, *The Tempest* (1611), at the time of the settlement of the American colonies (from 1607 on), is the "founding image" of the black self in America, and the image the White generally sees in his black fellow citizen.

Both plots and themes of the fictions I write, and the fictions themselves, says Wideman, are an attempt to subvert one notion of reality with others, to show that there is not simply one way of seeing things but many ways of seeing things. And as people and as individuals, if we don't jump into the breach, if we don't fight the battle of defining reality in our own terms, then somebody else will always come along and do it for us. (TuSmith, 2011, p.69)

The radicality of Wideman's denunciation can be equated to the commitment of Césaire who stages Caliban in the last scene of the play saying this:

Prospero, you are the master of illusion.
Lying is your trademark.
And you have lied so much to me
(lied about the world, lied about me)
that you have ended by imposing on me
an image of myself.
Underdeveloped, you brand me, inferior,
That is the way you have forced me to see myself
I detest that image! What's more, it's a lie!
But now I know you, you old cancer,
and I know myself as well.

(qtd. in Ritz, 1999, p.162)

In Shakespeare's version, Prospero "civilizes" Caliban just enough for him to be useful as a servant, but otherwise Caliban is depicted as subhuman, as a creature defined by and limited to his physicality and appetite - just as slaves were considered simple-minded subhuman creatures of mere physicality and appetite. In a particularly dark moment of Shakespeare's play, we learn that Caliban once tries to rape Prospero's daughter Miranda - recalling the great white anxiety of black men and the sexual threat they posed to white women during slavery and well into the twentieth century. Defining slaves as merely physical creatures incapable of higher faculties was an essential aspect of slavery, for it allowed the system to consider them animals rather than human beings.

The stance that Wideman adopts in his writings about the past, in the proper sense, is not "history" as a "science," but what Eschborn (2011) terms "literary historiography." This concept Eschborn defines as "a form of scholarly writing [that] is able to provide an image of the past for the reader [which is] not obliged to rely on historical sources and [is] even free to make up events and characters that are not included in the historical record" (2011, p.6). Wideman justifies his continual resort to imagination in recreating history, asserting that "imagination plays such a powerful role in the relations between blacks and whites in America" (TuSmith, 2011, p.8) in creating a society in which racial stereotypes are still prevalent. Hence,

he reappropriates the same tool of imagination to deconstruct those racial and racist stereotypes and build a positive self-image for the Black in the US. He thinks that the true image of the black "is not what we are [the present status of the Blackman is the result of what they have been made into by the master narrative] but what we think we are [which is 'centeredness' and self-definition]" (TuSmith, 1998, p.8). Wideman uses the tool of imagination most importantly in exploring and interpreting his understanding of the inextricability of individual and communal identities in the African sense I stressed in the heading of this subtitle.

Conclusion

True African identity, for Wideman, is not a static, predefined frame that admits no new input, but a quest, "a continuous narrative of self" which each time is another self in the making (1994, p.187). Identity is ever evolving, with new contextual inputs necessary for the adjustment for survival. These contextual inputs are provided by narratives. Perpetual revivifying narratives nurture the concept of black identity that is not to be conceived of as something static, but a continual reinvention, a fleeting, volatile occurrence that can be understood and made sense of only when put in the historical continuum of the dead and the unborn, and in the various geographic locations where personal and collective experiences unfold and enrich the race, making of us, culturally speaking, one in many, many in one, merging in the wide family of Damballah. Black sociologist Paul Gilroy espouses the same vision. Using a metaphor of economics, he views black identity in Europe and in the Americas as an ongoing process of travel and exchange across the Atlantic that generates hybridity. But this hybridity, first defined in foreign terms, has necessarily to be narrativized in black people's own perspective. This is indispensable to liberation.

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