“TELLING THE TRUTH WHILE ACTUALLY TELLING A ‘LIE’":
JOHN EDGAR WIDEMAN’S BLURRING OF FICTION AND NONFICTION

A thesis presented
by
William Patrick Duane
to
The Department of English

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts
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ABSTRACT OF DISSERTATION

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**Abstract**

“Telling the Truth While Actually Telling a ‘Lie’”: John Edgar Wideman’s Blurring of Fiction and Non-Fiction examines three fictional and two non-fiction texts. I use *Damballah, Sent for You Yesterday, Hiding Place, Brothers and Keepers*, and *Fatheralong* to demonstrate the social action that Wideman urges in his disregard for genre conventions. I trace the origins of Wideman’s technique, which are to be found in the African American folk tradition. He privileges oral storytelling and non-linear narratives in an effort to preserve this tradition. Wideman continues this tradition to channel the ancestral voices of Homewood and speak for entire communities. Through this technique, he connects to other inner city and African American neighborhoods that face the same dilemmas as Homewood. Wideman disassembles the idea of genre to encourage social action. He is aware of the various forms of knowledge that combine to form his discourse, and works against those that have been unjustly imposed. By calling to question our reliance on genre, and the assumption that recurrent situations are the same and can thus be categorized, Wideman urges readers to rewire their assumptions and question the discourses that do not reflect their rhetorical experience. He complicates the idea of accurate recall in memory to show that the same situations do not continually recur, even though we’ve been led to believe that they do. Wideman’s treatment of one story in fiction as slightly different from another story in non-fiction emphasizes that every situation is unique and should not be neatly categorized. This thinking leads to stereotyping, racism, and a perpetuation of oppression.
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Introduction

“I knew that I was composing a work of fiction, a work of literary art and one that would allow me to take advantage of the novel’s capacity for telling the truth while actually telling a ‘lie,’ which is the Afro-American folk term for an improvised story. Having worked in barbershops where that form of oral art flourished, I knew that I could draw upon the rich culture of the folk tale as well as that of the novel…” Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man*

In 1967, the same year that John Edgar Wideman published his first novel, Roland Barthes published *The Death of the Author* and said “all writing is itself [a] special voice, consisting of several indiscernible voices, and … literature is precisely the invention of this voice, to which we cannot assign a specific origin: literature is that neuter, that composite, that oblique into which every subject escapes, the trap where all identity is lost, beginning with the very identity of the body that writes” (143). An important mission for readers and critics of John Edgar Wideman has been to identify and locate the body that writes. What, in his texts, can be proven as fact or fiction? How are we to know the difference between the author and the narrator when Wideman says, in an interview with Judith Rosen, “I never know whether I’m writing fiction or nonfiction” (81). What do we make of genre distinctions when the author chooses not to obey them? Barthes argues against critical interpretations that connect the text to the author’s life. He does not believe that the identity of one person can be credited for a text, as writing consists of “several indiscernible voices” and is “the trap where all identity is lost.” In this paper, I will argue that what is important is not only locating *the author* John Edgar Wideman within his texts, but studying the ways that he uses genre distinctions to shift between his authorial persona and “several indiscernible voices.” Wideman deliberately complicates both the style of reading that Barthes advocates and argues against. I plan to trace this phenomenon through the following texts: *Damballah, Sent for You Yesterday, Hiding Place, Brothers and Keepers*, and *Fatheralong*. In his speech Barthes emphasized:
the true locus of writing is reading . . . A text consists of multiple writings, issuing from several cultures and entering into dialogue with each other, into parody, into contestation; but there is one place where this multiplicity is collected, united, and this place is not the author, as we have hitherto said it was, but the reader: the reader is the very space in which are inscribed, without any being lost, all the citations a writing consists of… (146)

I believe that “all the citations a writing consists of” are to be found in both the author and the reader. Wideman channels the history of his community, Homewood, through the voices of various storytellers. His identity dissolves within the text, becoming voices that issue from various points in history and engage in “dialogue with each other.” Through this process, Wideman’s work takes on historical, political, and moral significance in his readers. By self-reflectively engaging in varied levels of discourse, Wideman not only reveals the constructed nature of history, but also instructs his readers to take action against their own beliefs. He learns his history from the storytellers of Homewood: parents, aunts, and other extended family members. Wideman finds that the history they speak of is at odds with the broad, sweeping historical “truths” he finds elsewhere. By occupying multiple voices, whether that of an academic, storyteller in someone’s living room, or prisoner, he teaches readers to rethink the way that they allow writing to inscribe them with certain beliefs. He writes to reeducate readers.

Similar to his technique, which is frequently based in an associative and non-linear swirl of voices and storytellers in the African American folk tradition, his work is to be understood in a circle rather than a straight line. John Wideman’s work must be approached recursively1 as he later, through his nonfiction, provides information that illuminates his previously written fiction.

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1 In her critical text, All Stories Are True: History, Myth, and Trauma in the Work of John Edgar Wideman, Tracy Guzzio writes, “Widemans palimpsestic storytelling demands an examination that layers and weaves multiple traditions and theories to contextualize his revision of history implicated in the phrasing ‘all stories are true.’ Such a study also requires a recursive analysis of Wideman’s writing.” (18)
There is never a straightforward beginning, middle, and end for Wideman, the man who believes in the “Great Time” of his African ancestors rather than Western notions of measured time. Part of Wideman’s job, as an author, is to disrupt and decenter the linear measures that he feels have been unduly imposed and fail to match his communities’ values. His tactics of destabilization are political: he gives a voice to the lost, the silenced, the oppressed. The erasure of self is democratic, and makes way for multiple interpretations and a reader’s increased opportunity to co-opt the concepts expressed in both his fiction and nonfiction. His characters are then connected to broader historical tensions in America, extending Wideman’s work to further resonate with any African American community that has faced the same struggles as Homewood.

Two years after Barthes detailed *The Death of the Author*, Michel Foucault pursued a similar question in the essay “What is an Author?” and claimed that “In writing, the point is not to manifest or exalt the act of writing, nor is it to pin a subject within language; it is, rather, a question of creating a space into which the writing subject constantly disappears” (378). Foucault coined the phrase “Author Function,” the process by which an author’s name amasses an aura that supersedes the importance of his or her words. He says that “[the author function] does not refer purely and simply to a real individual, since it can give rise simultaneously to several selves, to several subjects—positions that can be occupied by different classes of individuals” (386). When we talk about John Edgar Wideman, we can’t only discuss the singular author figure. We must consider the “several selves . . . subjects . . . positions . . . occupied by different

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2 In an interview with Lisa Baker, Wideman defines “Great Time” as “ancestral time. It's non-linear. . . . it’s always been here, it always will be here. . . . So there is no beginning, no end. You are just as likely to bump into someone from fifty years ago as to bump into someone you saw the day before. . . . Linear time, for me, is a way of trying to come to terms, a way of trying to make sense of this mystery of Great Time. So clocks were invented, and measures like hours and centuries and progress and other material ways of comprehending time that are very Western and very arbitrary” (267).
classes of individuals,” all of which he accommodates through his narrative technique. He stretches himself to cancel his own individuality and give rise to a community of new ideas.

Through this process, Wideman is able to “tell the truth while actually telling a ‘lie’”. He believes that truth is contingent and something to be aspired towards, but is ultimately relative (Baker 269). For him, words do not lie, for they create their own rules, and therein resides an absolute truth (Baker 269). If through their own set of rules words create images, and images are the basis for stories, then all stories are true in that they evoke some image, thought, or feeling within the listener and the teller. Whether or not they are “objectively true” is of no significance, because the telling and retelling of a story continually creates new truth. Many of Wideman’s stories, like Ellison’s, are told in the “Afro-American folk” tradition. Wideman captures the performative nature of oral storytelling, picking up at a specific position and branching off into different memories through telling the story. The story is different every time, depending on who is listening and intervening as well as what the storyteller decides to share. Wideman shows his readers that no one situation recurs identically, even if we are simply recalling it through memory. We cannot classify the events of our life through the misperception that the same situations continually recur. Everything is different, and this belief in identical recurrence is what oppresses African Americans.

Wideman and Ellison’s stories are “improvisational” because they share what they know to be their own personal truth. A listener may feel that the story has happened in a different way, and they have the opportunity to interrupt the story to ask questions. Each storyteller and listener internalizes the tale with his or her own unique spin of truth. Wideman, like Ellison, takes the novel and short story form, reworking it from this improvisational angle of oral storytelling. Through sharing “truths” by way of “lying,” Wideman and his narrators create new life for their
listeners. They disregard their identities for the historical identities of the community members that speak through them. In *Fatheralong*, Wideman describes the process of writing, reflecting that,

As I wrote I listened as much as composed. Stillness spread within me as I entered a space where boundaries are breached. Inner quiet merges with a larger stillness and voices not mine begin to speak, not to me, but through me. I listen, neither affirm nor deny the authenticity of what I’m hearing. The voices are not mine, the story they’re unfolding just might be. (71)

To have “voices not mine begin to speak, not to me, but through me” is a case of Wideman, the author, disappearing so that readers may appear and take control. He communicates vital messages and uses these voices to speak for those who have been subordinated. Wideman works against an authoritative voice that dispenses both truth and historical record.

The following will be broken into three sections. First, I trace through Wideman’s influences in the African American folk storytelling tradition and how this in turn influences his technique. I then address how Wideman plays with the reader’s notions of fiction and non-fiction to reshape the idea of genre. The concluding section combines his political, historical, and technical elements, studying the way that Wideman retraces African American history to motivate his readers towards social action.
Chapter One

The influence of African American Folktales and the Oral Storytelling Tradition

Wideman’s texts speak to and across each other. Characters from Damballah reappear in both Sent for You Yesterday and Hiding Place (all three texts were originally published together as The Homewood Trilogy). Scenarios evoked through Damballah are expanded in Hiding Place, and readdressed in Brothers and Keepers. His stories continually build upon each other, jumping between the labels fiction and non-fiction, so that readers must shift between reading older and newer material, returning to previous passages when new texts have revealed information. Damballah, the earliest work that I’ll be discussing, is a short story cycle; the cumulative stories are to be read as a whole rather than as distinct and separate entities. Each story enhances the others. These stories then stretch towards Sent for You Yesterday, Hiding Place, Brothers and Keepers, and Fatheralong, depicting the community of Homewood in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Wideman cites African American folktales and the importance of an oral storytelling tradition as his primary influences. The stories of Homewood, kept alive through his retelling, have been passed down orally through the African American folk tradition.

In African American Folktales: Stories from Black Traditions in the New World, Roger D. Abrahams writes, “In traditional communities, one seldom encounters just one story told at a time. Instead, tales are told in sessions . . . One story follows another, generally because in some way it has been suggested by the first” (xviii). Wideman displays this tradition’s influence through the interconnectedness of The Homewood Trilogy, with stories and characters later finding analogues in his non-fiction. His work is to be read in combination, the stories continually building on each other, always adding to what has preceded and what will follow.
When speaking of the African American folk tradition, Abrahams also notes that “Oral performances tend to focus on the concrete qualities of the here and now, and on the practicalities and problems faced daily in the village or small-community context in which most of these stories were collected” (xix). Wideman focuses on the “practicalities and problems” of Homewood, Pennsylvania, but he has reformatted the African American oral performance, using his “small-community” to represent similar communities across the country with the hopes of catalyzing social action. The focus on the “here and now” in Wideman’s work is tied up in questions of genre. How can his work be classified as autobiography, fiction, nonfiction, postmodern, and then further subdivided? How can we make sense of his achronological narratives? As a writer, Wideman resists classification. According to Abrahams,

> Even when the lore records the way things were at the beginning or in some definable period (for instance, during slavery times), it is important that the storyteller convey a sense that the events within the story are dynamic and ongoing. . . . the verbs have a continuing-present feeling to them. Thus, characters often are reported to speak, not with the form “he said” or “she asked,” but in verbs that have a sense of ongoingness, such as “he say” or “she ax.” (xix)

Wideman believes in Great Time, which is directly opposed to linear time. His concept of “Great Time” helps to explain his storytelling technique, which, in accord with the African-American folk tradition, “convey[s] a sense that the events within the story are dynamic and ongoing.” Wideman’s stories continually build upon themselves. He addresses the issue of verb tense in an interview with Ulrich Eschborn, who asked if Great Time informed both the nonlinear time structure of his writing and the literary representation of history in his work.

Wideman responded:

> This presence of Great Time is accessible in the writing . . . In the grammar, in the verb tenses, in the way that, as a writer, I put things together piece by piece, I often become aware of how arbitrary it is to use “said” versus “says,” the past tense versus the present tense. Within every usage of the present tense there are a lot of implicit or understood
past tenses and vice versa . . . There must be some place, Great Time, where they all exist, where they exist simultaneously . . . In my writing, the sentences, the paragraphs—they are on the page . . . but I also want to suggest always that they are happening somewhere else—just as I think you and I happen somewhere else. (984-985)

Wideman’s concept of “Great Time” is based in ancestral African time (Baker, 267).

Wideman’s readers must be actively involved in his texts, making sense of their conceptions of time while the author works within his own. Wideman shakes the foundation of genre through his belief in Great Time. He provokes his readers towards reconsidering certain “truths” of life that they take for granted, beginning at a level as low as verb tense. In his interview with Eschborn, Wideman champions oral history, saying,

I believe that oral history—because it is a live exchange between or among people—has a way of refining itself. It is being contested continuously with each repetition, and each repetition occurs at a different time. So people become more informed not only about the story they’re hearing, but they become more informed about their own lives. They bring different kinds of information to the telling . . . If I’m listening to a story, I can protest, I can try to break in, I can say “Stop! Wait a minute!” which I often want to do when I’m reading something, but it doesn’t matter, the words just sit there and they just keep droning on and on. (988)

Storytelling is always an active and involved process, while reading and writing is significantly less active. However, Wideman’s work requires active and involved readers. He hopes that readers will interrupt texts and ask questions in the same way that an oral performance allows. Wideman preserves the oral elements of African American folktales in his writing because, as Henry Louis Gates, Jr. says, stories have kept both African Americans and their culture alive.³

³ In his introduction to an anthology of African American storytelling, Gates explains, “Telling ourselves our own stories—interpreting the nature of our world to ourselves, asking and answering epistemological and ontological questions in our own voices and on our own terms—has as much as any single factor been responsible for the survival of African-Americans and their culture… For the African-American, deprived by law of the tools of literacy, the narration of these stories in black vernacular forms served to bring together the several colorful fragments of lost African cultures in a spectacularly blended weave that we call African-American culture. (17-18)
Wideman’s stories often stretch backwards into the past, reaching through history from slavery to Homewood in the form of oral storytelling. “The Beginning of Homewood,” featured at the end of *Damballah*, begins with the narrator writing a letter to his brother and closes with the narrator continuing to revise and rethink the letter. Although readers cannot break the frame of the story and interrupt, the narrator continually interrupts and questions the truth and sequence of his own stories. The narrator’s “letters” are meant to explain what has happened to the author’s brother, Robby. Robby is serving a life sentence for second-degree murder as an accomplice to a felony turned homicide. The story is a work of fiction, however, so this character speaks further than the author Wideman’s experience, representing the young men of Homewood. Robby could be the character Tommy from *Damballah* and *Hiding Place*, or any person who felt trapped by the circumstances that older generations have passed down to them⁴. This powerlessness is also thematized in *Sent for You Yesterday*.

Wideman fictionalizes his non-fiction so that more of Homewood’s voices can speak through him and readers can experience varying perspectives. By retelling Homewood’s origins through a letter to Robby, Wideman seeks to make sense of the trouble that arose in its subsequent generations. In doing so, he relates to members of any African American community that may have been founded by former slaves, or whose occupants are the descendants of former slaves. As Tracy Guzzio notes, “Reaching back into the past allows Wideman to confront the site of trauma and the ‘original sin’ of America—slavery . . . He buries the recorded history in his writing as historians have often buried the stories of African Americans in the official chronicles” (144). Wideman urges readers towards considering their own history.

⁴ On page 40 I discuss Tommy’s feelings of helplessness towards the condition of Homewood.
In *Long Black Song*, Houston Baker discusses the blues tradition as integral to the African-American folk tradition. He quotes Ralph Ellison’s definition of the blues: “The blues is an impulse to keep the painful details and episodes of a brutal experience alive in one’s aching consciousness, to finger its jagged grain, to transcend it, not by the consolation of philosophy but by squeezing from it a near-tragic, near-comic lyricism. As a form, the blues is an autobiographical chronicle of personal catastrophe expressed lyrically” (35). Baker himself notes that “endurance and transcendence by lyricism are two of the most important aspects of the black folk experience, and the blues capture these essential aspects with consummate skill” (35).

Wideman is often described as writing in a blues style, and says that he grew up in an oral tradition that mixed American and African American elements with significant self-reflexivity, blues, jazz, traditional storytelling, Pittsburgh, the American South, and African storytelling (Eschborn 989). He also describes how, in the blues tradition, the singers always end their songs by reminding the audience that they have just heard a story (989). Likewise, Wideman lets readers know that he is both writing and telling a story. This is not unlike the self-reflexivity exhibited in his non-fiction, in which he informs readers that he himself is very aware that his “non-fictional” accounts are still telling a story, therefore fictional, both a truth and a lie.

Wideman wants his stories to connect a large group of people to a history that they may not have known. The storytellers of Homewood—Bess, Aunt May, and others—promote democracy through storytelling, enabling the listener and the reader to participate in a shared experience. It is through the blues, song, and storytelling that the history of Homewood is connected to the present moment. These performances allow present-day Homewood residents to experience the beginning of Homewood and its birth “down home” in the South. In *Hiding Place*, this is how Bess describes the process: “Bill Campbell could play that guitar…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” (49). Similarly, in *Brothers and Keepers*, Wideman “plays” or writes the songs he remembers John French singing: “These songs had survived. John French found them and stored them and toted them on his journey from Culpepper, Virginia, to Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania…He saved those songs and they documented his survival” (197-198). Wideman, like John French, is recreating old stories, mixing them with contemporary tales to further enable survival. The stories are not only geared towards African Americans, but readers willing to rethink their conceptions of American history. In the quote from *Brothers and Keepers*, we see that stories can move from the community, through a single person, back to another community. One single person can transport the history of an entire neighborhood. Stories and songs document survival, and Wideman must continue to pass on this tradition so that African Americans do not allow themselves to be enslaved in a different and subtler manner. These stories must be told to ensure African American survival. The efficacy of this mission often depends on Wideman’s using a series of different techniques in his writing.

In “The Beginning of Homewood,” the narrator traces the neighborhood’s lineage:

I still hear May’s voice: “. . . I remember the babies. How beautiful they were. Then someone tells me this one’s dead, or that one’s dying or Rashad going to court today or they gave Tommy Life. And I remember the babies…and don’t you know that’s what I remembers when I hear he’s robbed a store or been sent to prison or run off for some girl he’s left with a baby… (204)

Wideman assumes Aunt May’s voice to share the pain of his community. In the final sentences of “The Beginning of Homewood,” the narrator offers a vision of hope for the future, saying:

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5 Wideman expands this idea in great detail on pages 991-992 of his interview with Eschborn,
“So the struggle doesn’t ever end. Her story, your story, the connections. But now the story, or pieces of story are inside this letter and it’s addressed to you and I’ll send it and that seems better than the way it was before. For now. Hold on” (205). Wideman seeks to make the situation “better than the way it was before.” He wants African Americans to improve upon previous history, somehow bringing an awareness that these situations are occurring across the United States, not only Homewood. It is important, as a speaker, for Wideman to have experienced the events that he is discussing, so that readers sense the emotional resonance underlying his stories.

History builds on itself in the same way as Wideman’s stories and African American folktales. The narrator of “The Beginning of Homewood” breaks down the importance of Aunt May’s storytelling, explaining that,

[Aunt May’s] stories exist because of their parts and each part is a story worth telling, worth examining to find the stories it contains. What seems to ramble begins to cohere when the listener understands the process, understands that the voice seeks to recover everything, that the voice proclaims nothing is lost, that the listener is not passive but lives like everything else within the story. Somebody shouts Tell the truth. (198-199)

Wideman, like Aunt May, seeks to reproduce the “truths” that have been told. He wants readers, like the listener in the story, to avoid being passive and to ask questions about the stories that they read and hear. Who is spreading them? What might be their objective? Wideman reaches back into history because he must understand why Homewood has come to be the way it is.

The narrator moves between remembering Aunt May’s stories of Homewood to the current reality of the brother that he is writing to. He juxtaposes the freedom of the past with contemporary imprisonment and says “If they would have captured Great-great-great grandmother Sybela Owens, they would have made a spectacle of her return to the plantation,
just as they paraded you, costumed, fettered through the halls” (200). Wideman asserts that life in Homewood is no different than slavery, and the police and prison guards are the same as those men deployed to catch runaway slaves. What freedom did Sybela actually run to if this is the reality of what has come to be? The narrator reveals Homewood’s continuity: “Ask if you really had any choice,” he continues, “if anything had changed in the years between her crime and yours” (200). Wideman uses this story as a vehicle to make a political commentary. In the same way that Sybela was destined to escape her “keepers” and found Homewood, Robby’s environment ensured that he would resort to crime in an effort to alter his reality, enslaving himself and handing his power over to the keepers in the process. Wideman uses *Brothers and Keepers* to humanize Robby and explain the chain of events that influenced his predetermined path towards imprisonment.
Chapter Two

Genre Blurring as Social Action

It was a trick I’d learned early on. A survival mechanism as old as slavery. If you’re born black in America you must quickly teach yourself to recognize the invisible barriers disciplining the space in which you may move. This seventh sense you must activate is imperative for survival and sanity. Nothing is what it seems. You must always take second readings, decode appearances, pick out the obstructions erected to keep you in your place. Then work around them. (Brothers and Keepers 221)

Wideman has learned the boundaries and works to disassemble them. In the process, he encourages his readers to take similar social action. That is, act as if you’re falling in line with the American power structure, and then take it apart and rebuild your own. In a description of Foucault’s research methodology, known as the “archaeological method,” Karl Racevskis states: “It is a science that goes beneath the surface of a traditional history of ideas to find objects of knowledge and to reconstruct the process through which human subjects have made themselves into objects of knowledge” (230). Wideman is aware of the objects of knowledge that comprise his human subject. Understanding that these objects of knowledge are hardly different from those that guided his ancestors, he makes himself into his own archaeological subject, pinpointing the specific heritages and voices that combine to create his own discourse. By doing this, he reveals a deeper picture of the voices that make up his fellows, and he tries to recreate and represent them to connect to the widest possible readership. Wideman uses the genre distinctions that most readers take for granted and then shuffles, blurs, and rearranges them—causing us to question the truth of any historical record. He studies himself to see the informational biases he was born with, in an effort to move away from the structures that were predetermined to govern his thoughts.

In his interview with Ulrich Eschborn, Wideman connects the way that historiography
and fiction both deal in politics, allowing politics to work with a pure form of power. As he says:

I’ve been a victim—we all have been victims—of false stories. . . . there are people who use stories for bad reasons—to deceive, to hurt, to steal, to destroy. That’s what makes the stories political, their attempts to grasp power, hold power. That’s a very, very important dimension of storytelling which, at least, I try to address in my writing. (986)

Wideman uses genre blurring in his writing as part of a rhetorical call to action. He wants his storytelling to do something, to effect change outside the text. In the essay, “Genre as Social Action,” Carolyn Miller explains, “A classification of discourse will be rhetorically sound if it contributes to an understanding of how discourse works—that is, if it reflects the rhetorical experience of the people who create and interpret the discourse” (152). What if the discourse does not reflect the rhetorical experience of the people who are interpreting it? This is why Wideman needs to create his own discourse; one that self-reflexively studies one’s own discourse. This leads to his disregard for the ideas of “fiction” and “non-fiction” as they limit what he believes to be a human experience that cannot be categorized as either. Linear narratives and groupings such as “fiction” and “non-fiction” lead to the false stories that victimize readers and listeners. We can trace Wideman’s disregard for typical classifications to Baker’s idea that black literature has been created from a repudiation of white literature. If we think of Wideman as approaching storytelling with a Foucauldian archaeological method, we would recognize how he returns all the way to the basis of classification, “genre”, to destabilize and rebuild the way that stories are told. The definitions of “fiction” and “non-fiction” were borne in a white-dominant society. How, then, can Wideman trust delineations that have been set by the same power structure he is trying to uncover and discard? He uses our belief in a

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6 See pages 16-17 of Baker’s Long Black Song.
system of classification, which we refer to as “genre,” to prompt significant social action in his readers. Wideman’s working outside the boundaries of typical conventions incites readers to question the nature of discourse, how it is classified, and who is allowed to define it.

If we read Wideman’s works recursively, as if they unfolded in Great Time rather than western linear time, then a revelation in *Brothers and Keepers* can illuminate and give further significance to a story in *Damballah*. The situations in Wideman’s novels are constantly recurring and, in line with the African-American folk tradition, continually building on one another. On the issue of recurrence, Miller claims:

> What is particularly important about rhetorical situations for a theory of genres is that they recur…Recurrence is implied by our understanding of situations as somehow ‘comparable,’ ‘similar,’ or ‘analogous to other situations, but . . . situations are unique . . . they cannot recur. What recurs cannot be a material configuration, a ‘perception,’ for these, too, are unique from moment to moment and person to person. (156)

What are we to make of the off-kilter way in which recurrence occurs in Wideman’s stories? Events are frequently doubled, first appearing in fiction and later reproduced in non-fiction with the names changed. It is important to look at the way that he deliberately appears and reappears within his texts for a distinct purpose. He fictionalizes non-fiction and brings non-fictional events into fiction to shift our understanding of genre, truth, and history. His stories come to represent the ethos that all stories are true even as they “lie.” The same story may appear from a different perspective, reminding readers that situations do not appear identically to all involved parties. Although we categorize certain experiences beneath the umbrella of classifications and guise of genre, they are not recurring as exactly as we might imagine. Wideman resists the idea that situations are comparable and continually recur through first destabilizing the boundaries of classification in writing.

In the story “Across the Wide Missouri” from *Damballah*, published in 1981, the narrator
details a son’s meeting with his father. The narrator remarks, “I am meeting my father. I have written the story before. He is a waiter in the dining room on the twelfth floor of Kaufman’s Department Store” (134). There is always instability in memory, some questioning of whether something has previously occurred, and, if so, if it has been recorded. In these moments Wideman complicates our ideas of recurrence, noting that he has written the story before, but it wasn’t the same – even within our memory, situations resist the umbrella of classification. Similar information is also included in his non-fiction book Fatheralong, published thirteen years later in 1994. He has written it before, at least in the future. Similarly, the feeling that the narrator discovers in Kaufman’s, discomfort as a black person in a predominantly white setting, continually recurs. Wideman, however, knows not to mark each instance as if it were the same, resisting generalizations. The occasion visited in Damballah has left an indelible mark on both the narrator and the author. In Fatheralong, he briefly mentions that his father “worked as a waiter at Kaufmann’s Department store in downtown Pittsburgh” (34-35). He is trying to summon a memory, to recall where his father would have been at a specific point in time. In both stories the narrator expresses unease with being a black boy and visiting his black father in a restaurant populated by white patrons.

The narrator of “Across the Wide Missouri” then moves to another memory very much like one that the author Wideman may have had regarding his brother Robby: “Outside the judge’s chambers in the marble halls of the courthouse, years later waiting to plead for my brother, I felt the same intimidation, the same need to remind myself that I had a right to be where I was” (135). He begins to equate the feeling of exclusion developed as a child in Kaufman’s to a situation many years later, then reminds himself to resist generalizing situations as if they were the same. The narrator reaches outside the text, to the author’s life, shifting from
the fictional to non-fictional realm, as if demonstrating the way that readers can also translate their experience with fiction into real-life action outside the text. Viewing the white patrons as those in power, Wideman learns to shed the shadow they have cast on him. As a young narrator he feels out of place when surrounded by white people, allowing them to make him feel as if he doesn’t belong. The story transforms from a memory on his father’s work to an investigation into the young age in which he learned about race relations, began to believe his father was subordinate to white people, and learned to feel uncomfortable as a black man in a white environment.

In the same way that a young black man learns about the confines of racism, a young man or woman learns the traditional standard of genre, history, and storytelling. It is important for Wideman that his readers learn to resist all dominant ideas, not only those related to race. We should not only question the nature of historiography, but also the binary of true and false. In the following statement, the writer continues to address his writing process: “When I wrote this before there was dialogue…Father and son an island in the midst of a red-carpeted chaos of white people and black waiters and the city lurking in the wings to swallow them both when they take the elevator to the ground floor and pass through Kaufman’s green glass revolving doors. But it didn’t happen that way. We did talk” (*Damballah* 137). Wideman’s metafictional intrusion allows him to zoom out from his own experience and show, more generally, that of any black father and son surrounded by white people, so that he can find common ground with readers and enable a broader call to dismantle hegemony. Readers should not believe that, because they have been swallowed once by oppression, every situation of a similar appearance must also yield the same result.
By entering the text to complicate ideas of recurrence, Wideman encourages readers to question the situations that they believe are inevitable and identical. He begins with what is in the fragments, bits, and pieces, rather than try to first understand the wide-angle shot. He takes the small moment and builds it outward towards a greater purpose. Wideman addresses and reminds himself to always privilege the fragmentation that is characteristic of his writing rather than the linearity that those in power view as valuable. In this instance, the power structure that he must disassemble is the privileged positioning of academia. His son is set to perform the song “Shenandoah” (from the movie Across the Wide Missouri) at a school concert. The narrator states:

Had a choice between Song Night and entertaining a visiting poet who had won a Pulitzer Prize. I chose – without even remembering *Across the Wide Missouri* – the night of too many drinks at dinner and too much wine and too much fretting within skins of words and too much, too much until the bar closed and identities had been defrocked and we were all clichés, as cliché as the syrupy Shenandoah, stumbling through the swinging doors out into Laramie’s cold and wind. (139-140)

The poetry of a Pulitzer Prize winner should be no more meaningful than his son’s performance. As he and his father were separated from the restaurant’s patrons by the color of their skin, Wideman and the poet use not human skin, but the “skins of words” to remain distant, separate, and safe from each other. In this moment he chooses the linear path, and later acknowledges the problems therein. Wideman is constantly at odds with and destabilizing whatever power structure holds sway over his life. He admits when he gives in to it, and then, as he does here, uses it to reach a meaningful conclusion. His work is intended to resist the skins of words and

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7 The story circles around the song “Across the Wide Missouri,” the theme song from a Clark Gable movie by the same name. He notes that his son calls the song *Shenandoah*, and wonders if he should inquire about the title and determine which one is proper, and then attempt to correct him. Instead, he concludes, “It’s something a very strong instinct has told me to leave alone. To take what comes but don’t try to make anything more of it than is there. In the fragments. The bits and pieces.” (139)
clichés, forms of speech that can represent misguided recurrence. We use clichés to simplify our reactions to situations as if they were all the same and could be defined by a phrase.

Wideman’s work opposes this process.

In *Fatheralong*, we see the long-term effect of the narrator’s experience in “Across the Wide Missouri”:

Five days a week, roughly during school hours, if I thought of my father, I could place him in the dining room of Kaufmann’s Department Store. After my visit I could place myself there also, keeping out of people’s way, avoiding the eyes of anybody who might ask me my business, ask me what business did I have hanging around a restaurant only grown white people entered and left…At my desk in school I could see myself spying on the waiters in short white jackets and black pants, needing one to be my father, trying to guess which one, afraid my father’s face, like mine when I ventured into unknown places, might change. (41)

As a young man, he fears that situations will not continue to recur in the same way. He feels that he needs stability, even if it means his facing oppression. He ultimately knows that the situation will change, that he can not categorize all of his interactions with white folks under the assumption that they will carry prejudice. This idea has traveled from the child’s memory in “Across the Wide Missouri” to an adult Wideman in *Fatheralong*. The idea of being doomed, of believing the history that the dominant power has written for you, appears throughout his writing. In this passage, he recognizes that one does not have to believe the lie that they are doomed, they do not have to submit to what appears to be an indisputable truth.

Regarding “types,” Miller asserts:

Situations are social constructs that are the result, not of ‘perception,’ but of ‘definition.’ Because human action is based on and guided by meaning, not by material causes, at the center of action is a process of interpretation. Before we can act, we must interpret the indeterminate material environment; we define, or ‘determine,’ a situation. It is possible to arrive at common determinations of material states of affairs that may have many possible interpretations because…our [knowledge]…is based upon types (156)
Wideman is very aware of these social constructs in his writing. He knows that no two situations are identical, and each time he taps a memory it is as if he is experiencing it all over again. This is how all stories are true, but stories also consist of telling the truth while actually telling a lie. The lie is our “arrival” at common determinations of material states of affairs that may have many interpretations because…our [knowledge]…is based upon types.” The lie is that any or everyone shares the same experience with the same story. This is why, in the African American storytelling tradition, any listener can interject with their own version of what has happened. The truth is that the storyteller is sharing their idea of what their experience has been—it is true only for them.

Wideman uses this knowledge to resist and work against dominant types, which can lead to stereotypes. In *Hiding Place*, regarding Tommy, the narrator states, “They want him dead. They want to kill him but he made it through the night . . . every cop in Pittsburgh on his tail and he’s twenty-five years old and nothing, no good just like they been telling him all the days of his life, but he is smiling, smiling maybe for the first time in his life at his own silly smile” (42-43). Like the narrator from “Across the Wide Missouri,” there is an implicit assumption that being black is wrong. Being wanted for murder proves to Tommy that he has lived out his purpose as the police and society believed it to be. He is the murderer that they have willed him to become, fated through his being born in Homewood. This could apply to any other African Americans raised in a similarly structured neighborhood. Miller notes, “It is through the process of typification that we create recurrence, analogies, similarities. What recurs is not a material situation (a real, objective, factual event) but our construal of a type” (157). In his “nonfictional” work, Wideman makes readers aware that he and his family are familiar with the oppression cause by typification. He has both seen and heard about the way that Homewood has allowed
itself to be run into the ground, believing the dominant ideologies that surround African Americans, especially the inhabitants of a city (such as Homewood). He establishes his presence and experience in nonfiction, and then uses his fictional characters to show that situations do not recur identically, and that typification can be resisted. African Americans do not have to give in to the belief, like Tommy, that if they were born and raised in a neighborhood like Homewood they are destined for a life of crime and imprisonment.

Stories are important in African American communities because they work against the prevailing fiction that others have created against them. In *Fatheralong* is the following reflection:

> The stories must be told. Ideas of manhood, true and transforming, grow out of private, personal exchanges between fathers and sons. Yet for generations of black men in America this privacy, this privilege has been systematically breached in a most shameful and public way. Not only breached, but brutally usurped, mediated by murder, mayhem, misinformation. . . . The power to speak, father to son, is mediated or withheld, white men, and the reality they subscribe to, stand in the way. Whites own the country, run the country, and in this world where possessions count more than people, where law values property more than person, the material reality speaks plainly to anyone who’s paying attention, especially black boys who own nothing, whose fathers, relegated to the margins, are empty-handed ghosts.” (*Fatheralong* 64-65)

Wideman must provide voice for fathers, sons, African Americans, and their communities. He gives presence to absence by illuminating the ghosts of fathers, telling these tales about his own family and others. He demonstrates what happens when you allow another group of people to speak for you and to tell your story, when ownership of one’s culture is co-opted by another. As he reminds us, “Father stories are about establishing origins and through them legitimizing claims of ownership, of occupancy and identity . . . they must be repeated each generation or they are lost forever. If the stories dim or disappear altogether, a people’s greatness diminishes, each of us becomes a solitary actor” (*Fatheralong* 63). These stories sustain culture and keep
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communities connected. Wideman perpetuates the preservation of culture for Homewood and African American communities dominated by an unbalanced power structure. Presence works both with and against absence. The presence of African American folktales must be sustained to combat their culture’s erasure. Further, this presence must be amplified to then overturn the prevailing myths and stereotypes. They must reoccupy the space from which they have been absented.

Wideman questions whether historical accounts are capable of capturing an actual experience. In this regard, his work is often classified as historiographic metafiction. His writing both utilizes and challenges the nature of discourse, especially historiography. He is self-reflexive about his own writing process, and conscious that he creates his own truths through simply picking up a pen and writing words on a piece of paper. In his interview with Eschborn, Wideman says, “I think, from a sort of ethic or a moral point of view, if not even a legal one, that as a writer, I feel my obligation is to try to let the reader know what kind of game I’m playing” (986). Wideman knows that what he may advance as “truth” could quite possibly be a lie, as there is no objective truth that could be achieved in most situations. In Brothers and Keepers, he repeatedly uses metafiction to reveal that, further than discourse, it is our subconscious that distorts the truth, telling stories the way we want to hear them. He offers an important observation regarding his writing process, “I listen to my brother Robby. . . . I’m two or three steps ahead of my brother, making fiction out of his words. Somebody needs to snatch me by the

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8 In *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, Linda Hutcheons states, “What I want to call postmodernism in fiction paradoxically uses and abuses the conventions of both realism and modernism, and does so in order to challenge their transparency, in order to prevent glossing over the contradictions that make the postmodern what it is: historical and metafictional, contextual and self-reflexive, ever aware of its status as discourse, as a human construct…What historiographic metafiction explicitly does, though, is to cast doubt on the very possibility of any firm ‘guarantee of meaning,’ however situated in discourse.” (53-55)
neck and say, Stop. Stop and listen, listen to him” (88). Wideman reimagines and describes Robby’s experience in the same way that he wants us to read and then recast our own experience. We create our own fictions from what is told to us, relating and rewriting them as we hear them. Thus, a story that is true to someone else, once told to another person, can become a lie to the first teller, and a truth to the receiver who then proceeds to share it with a third party.

For Wideman, writing nonfiction while utilizing fictional techniques and self-consciously acknowledging the fiction in his nonfiction allow him to reveal what is at work in standard historiography.9 Again we see the importance of a democratic process in storytelling, in which all tellers and listeners have equal right to the distributed story. No one person or group can dominate and perpetuate “the truth”. This is possible in a story told orally, but not with one that is written and recorded to be distributed under the guise of Foucault’s Author Function, in which the name John Edgar Wideman takes on a meaning that overshadows and influences the material of his text. In an effort to move against the author function, John allows his brother Robby to speak, in his own voice, through much of *Brothers and Keepers*.

John Wideman is willing to lend the narrator’s voice to Robby because he possesses a crucial awareness of the narrator’s power. He often charges forward, in his nonfiction, to use his voice for a direct address to the reader. The guise of nonfiction enables Wideman to clearly and concisely cry out for social action, vying for an improvement in race relations. More important than the genre label is the narrator or teller of the story and their own “truth.” Again regarding Foucault’s archaeological method, Racevskis notes, “Foucault is particularly fascinated by the peculiar nature, the tenacity and pervasiveness, of discursive power: Discourses not only shape

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9 On page 77 of *Brothers and Keepers*, Wideman reflects on his unconscious desire to fictionalize his brother Robby’s stories.
thought but have a telling effect on bodies as well” (230). In Wideman, we repeatedly see that there is physicality to stories. Stories are powerful enough to enact real life change. In “Lizabeth: The Caterpillar Story” from *Damballah*, Freeda French is telling her daughter Lizabeth the story in which the baby, Lizabeth, ate part of a caterpillar, so her dad, John French, then ate the rest of the caterpillar to prove that if he didn’t die, she wouldn’t die either. Lizabeth begins telling her mother about the time *she* had tried to save her dad, and the two commence to reminisce over all of the times that John French required saving. Wideman often uses this technique of association, where one memory triggers another, which may trigger another, and all memories are explored as we swim through Great Time until the narrator returns us to where the story began. Wideman reaches through stories into other stories. Lizabeth’s mom, Freeda, talks about the time she punched through a window to save John French. Freeda speaks and Lizabeth responds:

I remember telling you the story.  
And showing me the scar.  
Got the scar, that’s for sure. And you got the story.  
Thought I was saving Daddy, too, but if you hadn’t put your fist through that window I wouldn’t have had a Daddy to try and save. (48)

The result of Freeda saving John is that she has a physical representation of the story (her scar) and also a story to tell, thus continuing the cycle of action that she engaged in (which resulted in her scar). Lizabeth “got the story,” which then set her own cycle of action. They continue speaking, with Freeda saying “Never knew John French could run so fast. Thought for a moment one of them bullets knocked him down but he outran em all. Had to be or I’d be telling a different story. It’s mixed up with other things in my mind but I do remember. You told the story and showed me the scar later but I was there and I remember too” (49). Lizabeth is unsure if she was there and if she remembers what she saw, or if she has heard the story from Freeda
and thus created the memory in a way that makes her believe she was there. For Wideman, this is the power that stories hold – they can rewrite your own memory and your own sense of self. They can place you, physically, in a place that you never were, making them both useful and dangerous if placed in the hands of the wrong people. Stories have the ability to both kill and keep people alive, depending on who tells it and how they share it.¹⁰

¹⁰ At the end of the story, on pages 59-60, the narrator reveals that Lizabeth needs stories to stay alive.
Chapter Three

Wideman’s Democratic Rewiring and Rewriting of Typified Genre Response

In Carolyn Miller’s *Genre as Social Action*, she cites the term “exigence” as integral to advancing a theory of genre. Genre, in Rhetorical Genre Studies, does not mean “fiction” or “non-fiction,” instead; it is a typified response to a recurrent rhetorical action (156). We use genre to shape our response towards situations that we believe to be similar. She says, “Exigence is a set of particular social patterns and expectations that provides a socially objectified motive for addressing danger, ignorance, separateness. It is an understanding of social need in which I know how to take an interest, in which one can intend to participate.”

Wideman rallies against typified responses to African Americans, and the typified responses that African Americans have developed in relation to life in the United States. His writing is a form of exigence intended to catalyze social action and shift typifications, dismantling the edifice that began as a story and has now been accepted as truth. This “ignorance, separateness” has become its own genre – it shapes the way that people react to situations that they think are similar, but are vastly different. It would be impossible for race relations to change without rethinking and rewiring typified responses. Miller writes,

Our stock of knowledge is useful only insofar as it can be brought to bear upon new experience: the new is made familiar through the recognition of relevant similarities; those similarities become constituted as a type. A new type is formed from typifications already on hand when they are not adequate to determine a new situation. If a new typification proves continually useful for mastering states of affairs, it enters the stock of knowledge and its application becomes routine. (157)
Wideman helps African Americans retain their history and forge their own futures rather than passively accepting “typifications already on hand.”11 We struggle to classify Wideman because he is actively working against classification, and using his texts as a vehicle to encourage social action. We can again return to the archaeological method of Foucault, described as “a science that goes beneath the surface of a traditional history of ideas to find objects of knowledge and to reconstruct the process through which human subjects have made themselves into objects of knowledge” (Racevskis 20). Wideman, urging readers to do the same, becomes his own archaeological subject, pinpointing his specific heritages and all of the voices that have accumulated to form his being. He becomes the voice through which all of his history speaks.

Wideman says:

I am really interested in democracy, in the radical sense—and the kinds of communal storytelling that occur on the basketball court, in the barber shop, and in my aunt’s kitchen are amazing examples of democracy. Anybody can come to the court to play . . . everybody gets a chance. And then it’s all woven together...It’s the process of self-expression, and how it creates a communal attitude or set of attitudes. It’s such a beautiful thing, a democratic thing. (Baker 271)

Communal storytelling is all-inclusive, everyone’s viewpoint is valid, and everyone’s truth is considered, though none of it is objective “truth.” Voice, and the language of that voice, can forever alter history and the truth. In Hiding Place, Bess stresses the importance of having a voice. She constantly zooms in and out of her own experience, shuffling through different stories and narrators, questioning who is telling her story and whether or not her memory can be relied on. She remarks that she doesn’t believe in photographs because “they can’t move, can’t

11 I think that a useful project, one that goes far beyond the scope of this paper, would be to investigate whether Wideman has influenced contemporary African American writers in their approach to form, technique, and whether or not they, too, work against the prevailing typifications.
talk back, can’t change . . . [they’re] trapped there and that’s where they always be” (31). The subjects of a photograph have no ownership, therefore, in the African American folk tradition in which Bess was raised, they tell only lies about the subjects. Without voice there is nothing – a character is defined and defines through their speech.

As if looking at and explicating a photograph in Fatheralong, John Wideman overlooks the city of Pittsburgh when visiting his dad. He records the city’s history and the damage inflicted on poor African Americans in the government’s attempt to clean up and improve lives, stating “Pittsburgh’s not unique. Big cities then smaller ones across the country urban-removed, urban-renewed, urban-enhanced themselves and their black population to death. Plans unraveled. Inner city came to mean sinking ship” (Fatheralong 27). Here is where Wideman opens up his singular, non-fictional text to be co-opted by the residents of all other cities that have “urban-removed, urban-renewed, urban-enhanced themselves and their black population to death.” He begins with Pittsburgh and then opens outward, creating another space for both his non-fiction and his fiction to be associated with the truths of anyone with an upbringing and experiences similar to what he has expressed.

The image of a train often precedes exigence in Wideman’s texts. If exigence is “a form of social knowledge—a mutual construing of objects, events, interests, and purposes that not only links them but also makes them what they are: an objectified social need” (Miller 158) then the train moves through Wideman’s work to encourage readers toward remembering their history and applying their knowledge to their present-day lives. The train appears in Hiding Place, displaying both the hope and despair of Homewood as well as similar communities.

. . . some fool always yelling Train’s coming and everybody else yells and its’ your chest all full and your heart pumping to keep up with the rest. Because the train couldn’t kill everybody. It might get the last one, the slow one, but it wouldn’t run down all the crazy
niggers screaming and hauling ass over Homewood Avenue. . . . From the track, you could look down on the winos curled up under a tree or sitting in a circle sippin' from bottles wrapped in brown paper bags. At night they would have fires, hot as it was some nights you’d still see their fires when you sat in the bleachers watching the Legion team kick butt. From high up on the tracks you could bomb the Bum’s Forest. Stones hissed through the thick leaves. Once in a while a lucky shot shattered a bottle. Some grey, sorry-assed wino motherfucker waking up and shaking his fist and cussing at you and some fool yells He’s coming, he’s coming. (62)

The train can’t kill everyone. The people of Homewood are preparing for death, and all of their activities, especially Tommy and his crews, lead deathward. Only a select few, such as Wideman, will escape the inner city alive. Those who are too slow or unintelligent will get caught, die, or go to jail. There is then the hope of the children, not yet corrupted, playing baseball and watching baseball, throwing stones at all of the bums. The bums are the children’s potential future if they follow the typified path that has been laid by the previous generation of Homewood that has been picked off by the train. Tommy reflects on the stories that he heard while growing up in Homewood, the majority of which were about the men that were privileged for being “bad dudes” who hung out in the woods, gambled, drank wine, and told lies (Hiding Place 62). This is the lost hope of Homewood and other African American communities, the men that have failed and are now displaced with nowhere to go, waiting for their lives to end. The stories that Tommy heard glorified John French and this type of behavior, thus he too grew to be a drug addict, drug dealer, and criminal. It was fated through the history that was relayed to him. He watched his ancestors responses to life, and mimicked them, thinking that he must develop the same behavior to survive. The social need that must be met is storytelling. The right stories must be told, and the listeners must learn that all stories lie while telling the truth.

*Sent for You Yesterday* opens with a memory of the train and expands the metaphor far more intricately:
I had this dream. . . . See I was on a train . . . and it’s pitch black night, inside and outside. Couldn’t see the hand in front of my face . . . . Sho nuff shake, rattle and rolling train full all these people. Scared people. . . . People banging up against you. . . . Quiet as lambs cept every once in a while all the sudden you hear somebody scream. . . . Funny thing was I knew just why they had to scream. . . . Ain’t no words for it, but I knew why. See, cause I wanted to scream. I wanted to cut loose and tell somebody how scared I was. . . . But I knew if I’d a screamed I’d be gone. . . . So I didn’t scream. Couldn’t scream. Just lay there holding it in . . . (9-11)

The train is the absence of past, present, and future that the men and women in these neighborhoods experience. Their ignorance of the past shapes their present and future. It is Tommy thinking that John French and the “bad dudes” of Homewood are to be copied. He is in the dark, or “pitch black,” ignorant of Sybela Owens and the founding of Homewood, the struggle previous generations pushed through for survival. He doesn’t know that he’s following a typified path that can be rewired through a better knowledge of history and awareness that he is enslaving himself again. He doesn’t know because on the train, like the inner city, everyone is suffering, but they are scared to say anything. They are afraid to act differently than they have before, to change their reactions to everyday situations. When they strike out against the oppressor or injustice they are taken away: they are killed, jailed, or “disappeared.” They are all moving together and confined to the same space but none of them are working together, only bumping into each other and getting into each other’s way. Fathers going to prison, men killing each other—everyone begins to work against each other rather than join together.

What is needed to effect any change is a knowledge of the past and the way that a different present and future can be shaped to rearrange the train’s course. Wideman’s stories are intended to spread this awareness and bring the community together. He is both telling a story and advocating for the telling of stories in the same process. For Wideman, to advocate a deeper historical knowledge is to suggest that everyone become his or her own archaeological subject.
Mine yourself and the knowledge that has come to create your current situation. Look carefully and critically at the potential lies that you have taken as truth and allow to govern your daily life. In Wideman’s work we see this most closely related to prejudice – having experienced racism once, do not continue reacting to every situation under the fear of racist threat.

Doot, the narrator of *Sent for You Yesterday*, is meant to carry on the history that he has learned through stories into the future. The book opens with the warning of the train, and closes with hope. Doot, while beginning to dance, says, “Everybody joining in now. All the voices. I’m reaching for them and letting them go . . . I’m on my own feet. Learning to stand, to walk, learning to dance” (208). Doot will create and recreate history, the present, and the future. He will shape life through the stories that he has heard. Instead of following his ancestors into oblivion, he will use the stories he has heard to create a new reality without the same typified responses to perceived genre.

Wideman constantly asks what could have gone wrong in the generations between Sybela Owens and his brother Robby. Where can we locate the disconnect between fighting for freedom and accepting a life of crime and punishment? When did the residents from Homewood shift from dismantling the power structure to accepting it? Wideman calls for another lesson in history, a paradigm shift in behaviors. Discussing slave owners and their intention to erase black history, Henry Louis Gates, Jr. says,

What the planters sought to do . . . was to make of the African’s consciousness of his or her cultural self a veritable *tabula rasa*, a blank slate, on which to build a new cultural and social order, and in which the very concept of ‘Africanness’ was obliterated and erased, and the concepts of ‘slave,’ ‘absence,’ ‘evil’—and virtually every other negative connotation in the Western culture of ‘blackness’ itself—would be reinscribed on this supposedly empty space . . . Despite the severe restrictions against the preservation of indigenous African cultural forms . . . black people *merged* what they could retain from
their African heritage with forms that they could appropriate from the various New World cultures into which they had been flung. (16)

Wideman has to speak up, and in doing so, motivate others towards learning their history and applying it. The planters can be substituted, in the work of Wideman, for any dominant power structure from slavery to the modern day. It’s the gentrification of black neighborhoods, building and then knocking down public housing, the media’s deliberately negative portrayal of African Americans, this automatic racism that lives in the unconscious mind, that which is deeply inscribed and must be dug up, dusted off, addressed.

To be inscribed with the African American folktales, uncorrupted by whites, is to possess the beginning required for change.12 Brother and the Homewood residents before him were “real.” As Lucy Tate says, “They were special people. Real people. Took up space and dint’ change just because them white folks wanted them different” (199). Wideman advocates action rather than passive acceptance. Wideman, like Doot, must dissolve and disappear within the text for all of the voices of Homewood to tell their history through him. In Wideman and Doot exists the accumulation of voices, stories, tales, and history that can rebuild a community. The stories must be told carefully and thoughtfully, however, as false stories are dangerous in the hands of the wrong people. As Tracy Guzzio says, “The writing of Homewood, the mythic text, must serve as communal memory that has combated the world of racism through its oral storytelling and music” (100). Wideman seeks to advance a democratic social action through storytelling that joins everyone together for a common purpose, the advancement of African Americans.

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12 On page 198 of Sent for You Yesterday, Lucy Tate explains to Doot that her generation has failed to preserve their history and challenge the power structure.
Connecting his nonfiction and fiction, Wideman notes in *Brothers and Keepers* that “Words are nothing and everything if I don’t speak I have no past” (98). He seeks to spur a new exigence, and “Exigence must be seen neither as a cause of rhetorical action nor as intention, but as social motive. To comprehend an exigence is to have a motive . . . Our motives are not private or idiosyncratic; they are products of our socialization” (Miller 158). The residents of Homewood, and other cities across America, must realize that their motives and the motives of those that oppress them are products of socialization. Wideman wants to help Homewood residents and other members of inner city communities to rewire their motives. They must dig beneath these deeply ingrained processes to reshape their future.

Wideman evens the playing field of history by incorporating alternating truths and perspectives, another technique that he advances through disregarding the accepted power structure. In *Hiding Place*, we see that The Police wanting to kill Tommy is no different than Ruchell murdering “Chubby”. Murder is murder and still perpetuates the same cycle. The narrator writes, “Down there they wanted to kill him. In the city streets he was dead already. Dead as Chubby in the parking lot. Dead as Ruchell running and hiding like there was someplace, anyplace safe” (37). This realization, that they were all going to die at the hands of those in power, leads Tommy to conclude, “The city was a circle and East Liberty niggers and Homewood niggers and West Hell niggers all the same, all dead and dying down there on the same jive-ass merry-go-round” (37). In these moments, when Wideman narrates through a fictional character that has a nonfictional analogue in his life, the statement carries more validity, and can be co-opted by any member of a city plagued by violence. He connects this “merry-go-round” through history for African Americans.
In his interview with Eschborn, when discussing Fanon’s argument that “colonialists spread the ‘theory of precolonial barbarism,’” Wideman says, “‘We recognized what he was saying, and we recognized that stripped-bare communities like Oakland, California, and some parts of New York and even Pittsburgh were described quite well by the ideas of colonialism that were in *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961) and that were in *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952). We recognized ourselves in those books, and we recognized the description’” (992). The situation hasn’t changed since the beginning of Homewood. The people have changed, but they haven’t yet found a way to break from hegemony. They can search and seek ways to escape, but without acknowledging what it took for women like Sybela Owens, they might never find a way out.

Race is both a truth and lie simultaneously, for it garners a real reaction, though it is a false construction. There is hope, however, so long as African Americans do not retreat into racism as an excuse for remaining on the “merry-go-round”.

African-American descent plays a part in all our stories, a powerful role in many. Racism appears as a factor just as often. On the other hand, race—the doctrine of immutable difference and inferiority, the eternal strategic positioning of white over black—can be given the lie by our life stories. Racism can stunt or sully or deny achievement, but many black people are on the move, beyond the power of race to pigeonhole and cage. They are supplying for themselves, for us, for the future, terms of achievement not racially determined. (*Fatheralong* xxii)

Wideman warns African Americans against the lies they can tell themselves. The lie that race is holding them back and renders them powerless or helpless, and the lie of “race” as a reality. This is one example of a typified response that has been developed but must be reconsidered.

Wideman must spread stories, for without knowledge of the past one is liable to believe whatever “realities” they are told about themselves. In *Hiding Place*, Wideman enters the

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13 See the prologue to *Fatheralong*, titled “Common Ground,” in which Wideman intricately details his thoughts about the cultural construction of “race.”
fictional text to remind us that his stories are based in reality, and to show the barriers that
Homewood resident’s success stories are up against. He is described as someone who lives “Out
west with the rich white folks,” (100) and has to correct someone who says he lives in Colorado,
noting, “it’s Wyoming, not Colorado” (100). To the residents of Homewood, who have never
before left the city, most of the United States is interchangeable and occupied by rich white
people. They are confined to such a small space (like the train) and can’t see anything outside of
their reality, which is pitch black. Wideman may also be having a bit of fun with truth here, as
his brother Robby was caught in Colorado after visiting John at his home in Wyoming. When
Aunt Bess is talking to Tommy, she refers to this character, Tommy’s brother, who has entered
the bar in Homewood and is immediately described as different, standing out through his
mannerisms, dress, and speech. Tommy is explaining the actions that have led him to being on
the run from the police to Aunt Bess, and says, “Do what I have to do to get by” (149). She asks him:

And what’s that? Robbing folks and messing with that dope and killing people so people
trying to kill you. What kind of life is that?” Didn’t have to be that way. Everybody
down there ain’t like that. You got a brother done alright for hisself. He’s a snotty,
dicty-talking nig— talking nig—er but he made something of hisself. Plenty people down there ain’t got
squat but they ain’t stealing and robbing. (149)

Robby responds:

Tell me bout it. Tell me about Mr. Barclay work all his life and got a raggedy truck and a
piece of house and they call him Deacon in the church and when he dies ain’t gon have
the money for a new suit to be buried in. . . . Old people burning up in shacks. Kids ain’t
even ten years old and puffing weed and into anything they can get their hands on. Tell
me about those fools marching off to Nam and coming back cripples and junkies and
strungout worse than these niggers in the street. . . . I’ll tell you bout jail . . . It’s like high
school reunion in there, everybody I grew up with’s in there or on there way or just
getting back . . . I could tell you something bout trying…Work and raise a family they
say… sorry ain’t no work. Then ain’t no family. They they say you ain’t shit. Then you
do what you have to do and you really ain’t shit. You an outlaw. But that’s what you
supposed to be in the first place. And that’s my life. The only one I’ve had. And they
gon take that if they can. (149)

This is the realization of the dream sequence that opens *Sent for You Yesterday*, an endless circle of suffering with no hope and no escape. Birth dooms all to a horrible death. Whoever finds a way out is described negatively, as if you’re either “snotty” or “robbing and stealing.” Wideman makes a point to relate to all of the various struggles of the neighborhood after he’s introduced himself as a character in the text, reminding readers that he is Tommy’s brother. Tommy later says,

I was scared a long time. . . . Scared of people, scared of myself. Of how I look and how I talk, of the nigger in me. . . . But I got no time to be scared now. . . . I ain’t killed nobody so fuck em. . . . Let them find me and kill me if they can but I know who I am and know what I did, and I’m ready to live now. I ain’t ready to die. Hell no. I’m ready to live and do the best I can cause I ain’t scared. (151)

Wideman further describes the condition of young men in trouble, and vies for a more complex understanding of his brother’s real life situation. He’s presenting the reality of a black man having the ability to be pinned with a crime without having really committed it. Miller says that “Genres serve as keys to understanding how to participate in the actions of a community,” (165) and Wideman writes to rework African Americans conceptions of the genres, or typified reactions to social situations, that they have accepted as unchangeable.

Barthes advocated a reading in which we only consider the text, and disregard the life of the author. Foucault investigated authorship, and how to detach discourse from its authorial persona. Wideman is invested in both of these processes. Think of who has created the texts that we read, and what discourses have shaped their authorial persona. What structures of knowledge have formed the information that the writer or historian is sharing? Similarly, in life, we must
consider the knowledge that has shaped our own discourse, action, and thought. To extend his text further than “fiction,” “non-fiction,” “modernism,” and “postmodernism,” Wideman uses all of these classifications to challenge the way that we create them. In doing so he advocates, through his action, writing, that readers reconsider history and the classifications that dictate their lives. A reader recognizes a fictional text because it is labeled as so, and may believe that a text bearing the inscription of non-fiction to contain purely historical truths. We have developed these typified responses to reading, and marking each text as existing within a particular genre more easily shapes our understanding of what is true or false. Wideman’s wish is that his texts will exist outside of criticism, literary theory, or a casual reading. His words will leave the page, instructing readers towards a particular social action—that of destabilizing the genres of their lives as he does the genres of writing.
Epilogue

Balancing fiction and non-fiction. I’m listening to The Kingston Trio’s “Across the Wide Missouri” through YouTube, watching the 18th and 19th century American Frontier images float across my screen, hoping the song will reveal new truths within Wideman’s story. The canyon fades into a bird, which becomes a shot of the Missouri River, followed by a series of panning shots—again of the Missouri River—probably lifted from Google Images. The Kingston Trio formed in late 1950’s California, spurring the American folk revival. They combined too late to have made the cut for Clark Gable’s film, Across the Wide Missouri, in which Gable, a white man and the lead role, falls in love with a Mexican woman posing as an American Native. The 1951 film was based on a novel published by Bernard DeVoto in 1947. The Kingston Trio made purposefully dated music, and “Across the Wide Missouri” was originally titled “On Shenandoah,” but no one knows the song’s creator. The title has nothing to do with the Shenandoah Valley in Virginia, and I listen repeatedly, hoping that these tenuous connections and disconnections will help me make the crucial move and discover the perfect theoretical frame that always escapes my critical grasp and enables me to make sense of Wideman in a way that no critic has before. I feel connected to him – still listening to “Across the Wide Missouri,” imagining him looking out over the Mississippi, not even the Missouri, but the Missouri flows into the Mississippi, and I’m conflating Wideman’s stories as he confuses his memories. It was “The Chinaman” in Damballah in which the narrator remains awake at night and “hear[s] the paddlewheeled steamers packed with cotton and slaves ply the river all night long.” (93) Wideman hears ghosts of his ancestor’s reality as he sees them in Clark Gable’s Across the Wide Missouri. Nothing is what it seems, everything a vast charade. Youtube segues into “On Shenandoah” without my doing anything, as if it too is working with Wideman to determine the
difference between the two songs. In a separate tab are news reports that tell me about Walter Scott, a black man who was gunned down by a police officer in South Carolina. Is it wrong to watch the video? To see another man murdered? Would we circulate a video of a police officer shooting a white man in the same way? Eric Garner, Mike Brown, and Trayvon Martin loom in the background. I see Tommy and Robby as well, but so far as I know Walter Scott is innocent, while Tommy and Robby were connected to a specific crime. I yearn to know Wideman’s opinion, if he watches over current events with the same fear as his ancestors before him. The train still runs from slavery to the current day, through all the cities in America.
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