

**Haunted Home**  
**Spectral Cities in the Novels of John Edgar Wideman**

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Haunted Home

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## Introduction

### John Edgar Wideman Against the Grain

*“The same utopia and the same ruin are contained in our city and in our language, and we have dreamt and lost ourselves in both.”*

Giorgio Agamben in *Nudities*

This Agamben quote, from the essay “On the Uses and Disadvantages of Living Among Specters” (2010), was pinned for two years to the wall above my working desk, where it served as a reminder to approach John Wideman’s novels as complex works of the imagination, works which produce vivid ideas and oftentimes contradictory ones. The quote reminded me as well that often, such contradictions were exactly the point of Wideman’s books.

Agamben’s words, which describe what it felt like for him to live in the ghostly city of Venice, align with the novels I analyze in this dissertation in several ways. In the first place, in *The Homewood Books* (1981-83), *Philadelphia Fire* (1990), and *Two Cities* (1998), readers are invited to dream and to lose themselves in language, which swerves from the lyrical to the down-to-earth, from the philosophical to the concrete. At the same time, Wideman’s representation of the black communities of Pittsburgh and Philadelphia is often one of ruin as well, of ruining police violence and of the physical ruins of gutted row-houses and gray public parks that form the setting of his novels. But then—in a twist that adds to their complexity—his novels are utopian as well. By providing a vision of the city that could have been, Wideman makes his reader “remember how simple it would be for things to be different,” as one of his characters reflects about the MOVE bombing in *Two Cities* (12). Wideman writes:

“you realize how easy it would be, how hungry you are [for] another world which could be this one, except it isn't” (12). In his novels, the city speaks:

I belong to you, the city says. This is what I was meant to be.  
You can grasp the pattern. Make sense of me. Connect the  
dots. I was constructed for you. Like a field of stars I need  
you to bring me to life. (*Philadelphia Fire* 44)

In the way that Wideman's narrators try to make sense of cities like Philadelphia and Pittsburgh, Wideman's readers are asked to “[c]onnect the dots” of his fragmented novels, to “grasp the pattern [and] [m]ake sense of [them],” to “bring [them] to life,” indeed, because in Wideman's books, the fragmented, splintered narrative is meant to give us a sense of the forces impacting black city life (44). So while his novels are certainly at times utopian, we should keep in mind that the above quoted passage is found in *Philadelphia Fire*, his book on the MOVE bombing, a catastrophe in which five African American activists and six of their children were killed by the Philadelphia police. The contradictory realities of African American life, of American life, and of Wideman's own life are always at work under the surface of his texts, serving to remind us that it is “*both* ruin and utopia,” that readers can dream/nightmare about and lose themselves in when they engage with this author (Agamben 40, emphasize mine).

Ultimately, ruins and utopia are perhaps not as diametrically opposed as one gathers at first glance. Ruins make concrete the residue of the past in the present, but they are not only the return of the *past* to the present (or rather, the stubborn trace of the past in the present) (Huyssen 7). They can evoke nostalgia as well, for “an earlier age that had not yet lost its power to imagine other futures” (7). Hence they are tinged with traces of utopian thinking, of past wishes for a promising future. In their

ambiguous status, ruins share a metaphorical similarity with the specters that are important for this dissertation (perhaps even a metonymical similarity: it is easy to think of ruins as haunted places). Because the specter too, is not only a remnant of the past. It points to the future as well, as it urges the haunted to acknowledge it. The ghost, as Avery Gordon states in *Ghostly Matters*, is “pregnant with unfulfilled possibility, with the something to be done that the wavering present is demanding” (183).

As we will explore in this dissertation, what is so interesting about Wideman’s city novels is that they address the idea of haunting in urban literature, carrying that genre beyond its conventions of realistic mimesis. Indeed, his work sways far from the common parameters in which “urban realist literature” was both written and discussed in academia for decades; one of the functions of the ghosts that appear so often in Wideman’s work is that they undercut any “realist” expectations that readers might have about novels written about the black communities of Philadelphia and Pittsburgh. In a similar way, the specter and its thorny political implications keep Wideman’s fiction out of the straightjacket of “protest literature,” which limited a generation of African American writers who wrote about urban space before him. For writers like Richard Wright and Ann Petry in the 1940s and ‘50s, but also for a writer like David Bradley, who published his first novel *South Street* in 1975, the joint



demand that urban literature ought to be “realistic” and that it ought to be “political” kept asserting itself throughout their careers.<sup>1</sup>

Wideman himself has had to answer such questions as well, surely, and mentions in a 1991 interview with Rebekah Presson that “to think of myself in terms of an African American writer or an American writer plays into a rather provincial set of distinctions” (111). Still, he is on the whole far less dismissive of such questions than his contemporary Bradley. In a literary career that now spans six decades, from the publication of his first novel *A Glance Away* in 1967 to the publication of the National Book Critics Circle Award-nominated *Writing to Save a Life: The Louis Till File* in 2016, Wideman has time and again reinvented for himself what both literature and what African American literature can mean.

### John Edgar Wideman’s Life

The author was familiar with a life in the spotlight even before he was a published writer. Four years before the appearance of his first novel *A Glance Away*, a portrait titled “The Astonishing John Wideman” appeared in *Look Magazine*. At the time, Wideman had been “showered with so many academic and athletic honors, awards and ‘firsts’ that he is unable to enumerate them,” as the article mentions (Shalit 1). He had won a scholarship to the University of Pennsylvania on the merits of his

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<sup>1</sup> Bradley, through various interviews seems to revel in asserting a writerly persona that jeers against such ideas. When asked about the political implications of his work, for example, he simply answers: “I love people when they buy it [his book], give me money, and enjoy it—because that means that I’m not *entirely* selfish” (Miller and Blake 35, emphasis in original). Regarding the importance of “black literature,” Bradley states that “[w]hen somebody shows me a set of discrete design criteria for the black novel that I can see in a statistically significant number of books, then I will start believing it. Nobody has done that yet” (Nixon 31-32). C.f. e.g. Jerry W. Ward Jr.’s “Everybody’s Protest Novel: The Era of Richard Wright” as well.

basketball skills, and became a star player at the college level, an all-Ivy League forward during his time at Penn (TuSmith *Conversations* xv). In addition to excelling in athletics, Wideman was awarded a Rhodes scholarship for Oxford University in 1963, becoming one of the first African American students to win it (xv).

Wideman's lustrous career of breaking color barriers and being 'first' would come to be offset by deep personal tragedies that befell him, as he was building the résumé of teaching and writing that culminated in his being awarded the MacArthur "Genius" grant in 1993 (xvi). Still, the fact that his brother Robby is serving a life-sentence without parole for involvement in an armed robbery in 1976 in which someone was killed, and that Wideman's eighteen year old son Jacob likewise was sentenced to life in prison for killing a roommate at a summer camp in 1986, are most often the primary lens through which his life is viewed in mainstream-press articles (xvi).<sup>2</sup>

An essay on Wideman that ran in the *New York Times Magazine* of January 29, 2017 (titled "Crimes of Being" in the magazine and as "John Edgar Wideman Against the World" on the *Times* website) takes a look at his latest book, which as abovementioned was nominated for the National Book Critics Circle Award.<sup>3</sup> The magazine piece, written by Thomas Chatterton Williams, was accompanied by several photographs of the author and amounts to a tribute to his long career. It signals perhaps a return to popular recognition for Wideman, and, one suspects, it

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<sup>2</sup> At age 46, Jacob was released from prison after serving almost 30 years. A recent *New York Times Magazine* article explains that Jacob Wideman had had "displayed serious developmental problems" at the time of the murder and had twice stabbed his sleeping roommate Eric Kane for no apparent reason (Williams 5). Though a teenager, Jacob was routed "into the adult system" by his prosecutors and sentenced to life-imprisonment (5). His parole was denied six times before his release in November 2016 (6).

<sup>3</sup> It was Wideman's first chance to win a major literary prize in years, though he ultimately lost to Matthew Desmond's *Evicted*.

also serves as a corrective to the diminished attention his work has been getting in recent years. The essay finds the author, now in his seventies, living a relatively anonymous life on New York's Lower East Side, mostly ignored by twenty-first century debates about race and society, as the author of the piece explains (1-2). Williams writes that "Wideman's layered and sometimes contradictory insights resist abbreviation and easy dissemination in short bursts of epiphany on social media" (3).

That his oftentimes difficult work has kept the author from a mass readership has indeed been remarked upon by several critics over the years, and by Wideman himself as well (cf. e.g. TuSmith "Benefit of the Doubt" 208-210). Already in his first novel, *A Glance Away* (1967), the author admits to having "a real interest in experimenting, in expanding the form of the novel," as he mentions in a 1972 interview with John O' Brien (6). As his interviewer points out, that book "echoes the early poetry of Eliot both in mood and style and has a central character who—Wideman admits—resembles Prufrock" (5). *Hurry Home*, published in 1970, by comparison uses a painting by Hieronymus Bosch as a way to structure the plot. In his third novel *The Lynchers* (1973), Wideman continued to work in the vein of demonstrating his fluency in high modernism.

The 1972 interview with O'Brien catches the author at a crossroads in his career, however. On the one hand, Wideman points out the importance of *The Waste Land* for his writing up to that point, mentioning that he shares Eliot's interest in the theme of "cultural collapse" (7). On the other, Wideman explains that, though he started reading African American literature and teaching a course on the subject five years previous, something which was "crucial in my development as a writer," as he states, still, "these things are just beginning to become embodied in the things that I write" (7-8). He quickly adds though that "[i]f there is any single book I learned a hell of a lot from, it's *Tristram Shandy*" (8). This is because Wideman's intimate knowledge of

“experimentalists” like Laurence Sterne (he studied eighteenth-century narrative technique at Oxford University (Williams 4)) were the “bit of formal training in literature” that allowed him to balance “traditionally realistic content and [Wideman’s] interest in innovative forms,” as interviewer and interviewee agree (O’Brien 7-8). Of his first novel Wideman mentions that “it moves pretty quickly away from realistic convention” (7). The author was from the start trying to experiment his way out of the traps of realism: especially in the 1960s and 1970s, black “realist” literature that was aimed at a large audience often took the form of delinquency literature that Carlo Rotella calls the “dead-before-twenty-one story” (309-310).

What followed for Wideman was a long hiatus from publishing, an eight-year-period that he refers to as his “woodshedding” days (Samuels 19). “I was learning a new language to talk about my experience,” the author explained in a 1983 interview (19). Wideman returned to the literary scene in 1981, triumphantly, with the simultaneous publication of his short story collection *Damballah* and the novella *Hiding Place*, the first two parts of what would become the Homewood trilogy (the award-winning *Sent for You Yesterday* followed in 1983). He accompanied his return with the statement that “the emphasis of my fiction has changed, ... there is a more explicit concern with Afro-American life” (Samuels 16). From this point on, Wideman starts to refer to his first three novels as a “laboratory” that allowed him to hone his writing skills, but that left him unsatisfied in terms of the audience they reached—books in which he felt the need to establish his “credentials with allusions to the ‘great writers,’” that is to say to Anglo-American and European Modernists (Samuels 17). Finding a new voice during his woodshedding years entailed gaining an intimate knowledge of African American literature and trying to incorporate it into his work (my chapter on the Homewood trilogy discusses some of the ways in which Wideman does so), and, in addition to connecting his writing to this literary tradition,

developing an ear for dialogue that is one of the best in American fiction. From the works of the 1980s onward, his crisp use of African American vernacular is rivalled by very few writers, perhaps only Toni Morrison and August Wilson.

Wideman attracted nationwide attention in 1984. *Sent for You Yesterday* won the PEN/Faulkner Award for Fiction that year, and the author's bestseller autobiography *Brothers and Keepers* was published, which was nominated for a National Book Critics Circle Award. It remains his most well-known book to date. The tragedy involving his son Jacob in 1986 kept the author in the spotlight of the media in the following years, although for different reasons than his writing ability (Williams 5-6). Remarkably, despite the personal tragedies that beset his life, Wideman remained prolific as an author in this period, combining his writing life with his duties as a professor at the University of Pennsylvania. In 1987, he published a new novel, *Reuben*, set in Homewood like his trilogy, but in a diegetic universe that is not connected to it; then followed the short-story collection *Fever* (1989), the novel *Philadelphia Fire*, about the 1985 MOVE bombing in Philadelphia (1990), for which he won a second PEN/Faulkner Award, a short-story collection called *All Stories Are True* (1993), an autobiographical work called *Fatheralong* (1994), a historical novel called *The Cattle Killing* about a fever epidemic in Philadelphia in 1793 (1996), the novel *Two Cities* set in Philadelphia and Pittsburgh (1998), the autobiography *Hoop Roots* (2001), the travel memoir *The Island: Martinique* (2003), a collection of stories called *God's Gym* (2005), the novel *Fanon*, about the connections between the famous theorist and Wideman himself (2008), a work of micro-fictions called *Briefs* (2010), and most recently his biography of Emmett Till's father, *Writing to Save a Life* (2016).

## Area of Focus

Of these works, this dissertation will look at the novels that have a contemporary urban setting: the Homewood trilogy, particularly the novel *Sent for You Yesterday*, forms the basis for my first analysis chapter, *Philadelphia Fire* forms the basis for the second, and *Two Cities* for the third. The 1987 novel *Reuben* is not analyzed at length, but is used to support the theses put forth with additional quotes and examples. In other words, I analyze the books that Wideman wrote in the 1980s and 1990s, his most prolific period, with the exception of his autobiographical work, his short stories, and the historical novel *The Cattle Killing*. This is the period in which Wideman found, rearranged, and ultimately discontinued the narrative voice with which he chronicled the hardships and resilience of the black communities of Pittsburgh and Philadelphia: The Homewood trilogy and *Reuben* are set in Pittsburgh, *Philadelphia Fire* is set in Philadelphia, and *Two Cities*, which caps off (for now) his decades long novelistic engagement with the city, is set in both.

As we will see, in all of these novels haunting and ghosts persistently make their appearance. In all three parts of the Homewood trilogy, for example, ghosts richly populate the diegetic world. From the opening story “Damballah,” the narrator reflects how “ghosts had everything in they hands, even the white folks [...] You know they there, you know they floating up in the air watching and counting and remembering them strokes Ole Master laying cross your back” (*The Homewood Books* 17). The hope that ghosts can serve as figures of memory for injustices that are immense, yet paradoxically enough always under threat of being forgotten, is often reasserted in African American haunting literature. However, Wideman only treats antebellum material in his first story of what would become the Homewood trilogy—as if to drench the work to come in the imperative to remember the

magnitude of slavery. But from there on the ghosts takes on various other guises and meanings. In *Hiding Place*, Aunt Bess is visited more than once by ghosts in her crumbling house on Bruston Hill: her dead husband appears to her at the end of the novella, and she sometimes seems to think that the fugitive Tommy, who briefly lives with her, is a ghost as well. *Sent for You Yesterday* has ghosts appearing in the houses and doorways of Homewood so often that, as one character remarks, you “could never be lonely here. Truth was she’s always tripping over ghosts and shoving them out the way so she could have a little peace and quiet” (*The Homewood Books* 498). In *Philadelphia Fire*, at various points, the victims of the MOVE bombing, as well as slaves forced into the ships of the Middle Passage, drug users wandering the Philadelphia streets, the narrator himself, and murdered Native American tribes are all described as ghosts (8, 63, 77, 103, 159). In addition, the text is haunted by the prophecy of a centuries-old play, *The Tempest*. In *Two Cities*, the MOVE leader John Africa appears as a ghost, there is a ghost on the toilet of Kassima’s house, and Mr. Mallory, the main character, is described as a ghost as well (2, 37, 114). His photography work involves trying to capture the “invisible presence in the vacant space” that is the empty lot where the MOVE disaster unfolded (175).

These are just a handful examples of the omnipresence of ghosts in the books I will analyze. Conveying to the reader a sense of verisimilitude is far less important to Wideman than providing him or her with an imaginative experience in which mourning the loss of life and human possibility that American society produces in black communities, as well as the possibility that a different world could come about, becomes foregrounded.

To explore Wideman’s engagement with haunting, my dissertation will base itself on the field of hauntology theory. Broadly speaking, my analyzes will draw from two of the pillars of these fields, Derrida’s *Specters of Marx*, and Avery Gordon’s

*Ghostly Matters*. These two texts will serve first of all to illustrate how haunting becomes an intervention at the narrative level of the text in Wideman's work, distorting time and therefore "what [the logic of] temporality makes possible," namely, "the way things are at a certain time, the time that we are living," as Derrida explains (21). Secondly, they serve to analyze the manner in which haunting "produc[es] a something-to-be-done," that is to say, the aspect of haunting which is steeped in "dimensions of movement and change—individual, social, and political," which are naturally of importance to a writer as committed to (and self-reflexive of) the impulse to address societal issues in his novels as Wideman is (Gordon *Ghostly Matters* xvi, xvii).

In my next chapter, I will delve further into hauntology theory as a framework for this dissertation, provide a tentative analysis of Wideman's use of ghosts in his text, and try to place his work in the context of 1980s and 1990s African American literary writing. Then follow three chapters of literary analysis, each of which focus on a distinct text, and, as I will argue, a distinct way in which John Wideman tries to describe the effects of haunting on the material he is working with. That material came with a certain expectation from audiences, as to how it should be written about, an expectation that the author sought to do away with. To write about black urban dispossession, without using the frame of realism, was a challenge that came with a realization that this dispossession brought with it a moral obligation to stay close to this material, to make his readers understand and feel something, without becoming sensationalist. The ways in which he proceeded are explored in this dissertation.



**Ghosts on the Scene:**  
**Theories of Hauntology and John Edgar Wideman's Haunted Novels in the**  
**Context of Their Time**

Wideman's novels move between various genres and impulses, and they can be as difficult to pin down as specters, which constantly travel between established concepts of reality and understanding as well. As will hopefully become clear from this dissertation, the novels under consideration here are without a doubt haunted texts. The author, searching for a more postmodernist approach to represent black city life than the frame of urban realism offered, found that the communities he was writing about brought with them a history and a moral obligation that he could not ignore, that returned to the text. And hence we see that ghosts make frequent appearances in his narratives, and that haunting influenced the form of his novels. This chapter presents some of the ways in which we can start to read and understand these ghosts, and it presents an overview of the theoretical framework that most benefits such an analysis, hauntology theory. In addition, it surveys both the influence of concepts of haunting in African American literature in the years that Wideman wrote the novels I analyze, and establishes that the presence of ghosts in his texts has so far been under-researched by scholars working on Wideman's oeuvre.

**The Spectral Turn**

In their introduction to *The Spectralities Reader: Ghosts and Haunting in Contemporary Cultural Theory* (2013), Maria Del Pilar Blanco and Esther Peeren present a brief survey of the steadily amassing scholarship that is being produced in the wake of

“the spectral turn” in the humanities and social sciences (15).<sup>4</sup> The editors explain that in the last decade of the twentieth century, haunting, specters, and ghosts became “influential conceptual metaphors permeating global (popular) culture and academia” (1):

[T]heir liminal position between visibility and invisibility, life and death, materiality and immateriality, and their association with powerful affects like fear and obsession ... came to be employed ... to theorize a variety of social, ethical, and political questions. (2)

Because of their ability to evoke the past—often the repressed or unofficial past—ghosts and haunting were seen as concepts that could illuminate and build on the discourses of cultural memory and trauma that had become central fields of interest in literary and cultural studies in years prior—an interest these fields share with various strands of African American literature of the 1980s and 1990s, which developed in this direction alongside it, and which, indeed, influenced the growth of memory studies as an academic field.

It is perhaps useful to note here already that between spectrality studies and fields of study that draw from psychoanalytic theory, e.g. trauma and cultural memory studies, there is a certain amount of topical overlap (in addition to their simultaneous growth as popular academic subjects in the 1980s and 1990s). What these fields share is an interest in the ways in which the past (whether private, public,

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<sup>4</sup> The term dates back at least to Roger Luckhurst’s 2002 essay “The Contemporary Gothic and the Limits of the ‘Spectral Turn’” (Del Pilar Blanco and Peeren 32). Del Pilar Blanco and Peeren note that “the spectral turn” has not always been “as prominently or enthusiastically adopted as a site of academic affiliation as other critical reorientations,” and their anthology leaves the question of the usefulness of the term “spectral turn” open, while keeping the “surge in scholarly attention for ghosts and haunting” in focus (32).

or both) continues to make itself known in the present, the ways in which it is not dead, not yet past (to paraphrase Faulkner), but still exerting influence over both society and individual subjects in the present. Del Pilar Blanco and Peeren explain that

[t]he conceptual metaphor of spectrality is deeply embedded within the discourse of loss, mourning and recovery that delineated the multidisciplinary project of trauma studies as it emerged in the 1980s. To be traumatized as Cathy Caruth has explained, is to be “possessed by an image or event” located in the past. To be “possessed” – gripped indefinitely by an anachronistic event – also describes the condition of being haunted, as it has been commonly construed. In other words, when we think of ghost stories ..., it is the haunting of the present by the past that emerges as the most insistent narrative. The mode of expression that many scholars use to describe the spectral, then, is similar to, if not fully consonant with, the terms used to describe the affective qualities of trauma. (*The Spectralities Reader* 11)

Memory studies were influenced as well by the aftermath of the Holocaust, whose magnitude the world gradually started to become aware of during the second half of the twentieth century. In the United States, public consciousness of its significance grew during the highly-publicized trial of Adolf Eichmann in 1961, which was followed by, as Eric Sundquist states, “a two decade outpouring of scholarship, survivor testimony, and literature about the Holocaust” (459). As Karen Remmler

explains, “much of the work of current cultural memory studies emerged to study the impact of the Holocaust on cultural forms of remembering” (103).<sup>5</sup>

Of course, when haunting is understood as the persistent effect of an unresolved past event in the present, the similarity of the concept with the notion of trauma becomes evident. In Freudian psychoanalysis, trauma, the intense and unassimilated event, is repressed by the unconscious and has to find a way to manifest itself through other means, i.e. the symptom, a form of psychic upheaval which arises only after the traumatic event has receded into the past (Thurschwell 28-29). As Freud states in “Lecture XVIII,” “it is as though [the subject] ha[s] not finished with the traumatic situation, as though they were still faced by it as an immediate task which has not been dealt with” (275). He continues:

It may happen, too, that a person is brought so completely to a stop by a traumatic event which shatters the foundations of his [or her] life that he [or she] abandons all interest in the present and future and remains permanently absorbed in mental concentration upon the past. (276)

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<sup>5</sup> It should be pointed out that the relation between Holocaust memory, African American literature, cultural memory and spectrality studies has not always been symbiotic, but has oftentimes been contentious instead. These broad fields expanded alongside each other and were together responsible for a growing public and academic interest in cultures of remembrance. All the same, it sometimes felt as though in the United States the Holocaust “became the benchmark of genocide” against which “African American slavery and its aftermath” was judged, as Eric Sundquist explains in *Strangers in the Land: Blacks, Jews, Post-Holocaust America* (2005) (6). In a certain way, American society was coming to terms with the Holocaust before it was coming to terms with its history of slavery, which created a strange situation and a “highly charged rubric” in which this issue came to be discussed (6). One example of the perhaps escalated discourse was the provocative dedication of Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*, to “sixty million and more,” a reference to the Middle Passage which was understood as an “exponential challenge to the Holocaust,” because it claimed a victim toll exactly ten times higher (Sundquist 449, 459).

Certain events are traumatic because they threaten the integrity of the subject as it understands itself, because they fall outside the boundary of what is acceptable. Whereas normal events are incorporated into logical chains, traumatic events do not get assimilated into a subject's sense of self, and are blocked from the logical chain. The traumatic experience "presents the mind with an increase of stimulus too powerful to be dealt with," as Freud explains (275).

We can think of a haunting ghost in much the same way; it is the unacknowledged past event, the past that has not been given its proper due, that has not been "worked through," which resurfaces—not straightforwardly but, again, "through other means," so to say, communicating in the indirect way that ghosts do, by throwing objects, or whispering, or by partly revealing themselves to threaten, torment, or seduce the subject into remembering. At the border of being forgotten and remembered, ghosts can be understood as what Del Pilar Blanco and Peeren call "the objects of and metaphors for a wounded historical experience" (*The Spectralities Reader* 12). It is therefore not surprising that in "the long and varied traditions of African-American thought, writing, and radicalism, the social reality of haunting and the presence of ghosts are prominent features," as Avery Gordon summarizes (*Ghostly Matters* 151).

Among the various neo-slave narratives and other novelistic genres that look back at the African American past—among them John Edgar Wideman's texts—it is, of course, Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987) which is the most heralded, a text that dealt exactly with the haunting of the past, and which gave the ghostly dimension a startling new relevance for a generation of scholars.<sup>6</sup> Besides *Beloved*, Jacques

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<sup>6</sup> For Avery Gordon, Toni Morrison's work formed an impetus to write her *Ghostly Matters* (1997), which is a standard work in the field of hauntology studies (194). Similarly, Sharon Patricia Holland speaks of the influence of Morrison's text on her scholarly work and that of her graduate cohort, in her introduction to *Raising the Dead: Readings of Death and (Black) Subjectivity* (2000) (Holland 363).

Derrida's *Specters of Marx* is another work commonly identified as a catalyst for the growing influence of metaphors of ghosts or "specters" and "spectrality" as critical-theoretical concepts. It was first published in English in 1994 (the original publication in French, *Spectres de Marx*, is from 1993). *Specters of Marx* is a text that is very much in dialogue with its historical moment, which was defined by the implosion of communism as a political reality in Eastern Europe and Russia and the corresponding celebration of free market capitalism as the parameter within which world-history was now destined to unfold (an idea popularized by thinkers like Francis Fukuyama).<sup>7</sup> Today, however, the legacy of *Specters of Marx* is not found in its response to this historical moment—Derrida's reading of Marx and the rather vague call that the book makes for a New International were not widely taken up by Marxist thinkers (7), and the response to "Derrida's claim that deconstruction was all along a radicalization of Marx's legacy" was generally received with skepticism by Marxist thinkers and deconstructionists alike (C. Davis 373). It is rather Derrida's explanation of what he terms "hauntology," another theme of the book, which has endured as a theoretical concept.

Hauntology uses the figure of the ghost as a metaphor to illuminate the idea of "the ultimate disjointedness of ontology, history, inheritance, materiality, and ideology" (Del Pilar Blanco and Peeren *The Spectralities Reader* 7). The term is a pun on the word ontology, to indicate how the idea of the ghost radically re-conceptualizes our understanding of being. A ghost can be understood as an entity that is at once both there and not there, as something that is visible and invisible at the same time, and it can signal the return of the past in the present. The paradox of the ghost, which

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<sup>7</sup> Derrida's text "address[ed] questions about the connection between the death of communism and the fate of Marxism" (Magnus and Cullenberg xi), in a way that sought to point out the continuing relevance of Marx's work, the "haunting survival" of this relevance despite proclamations of "the end of history" (Del Pilar Blanco and Peeren *The Spectralities Reader* 6).

can be summarized as “is / not is, *both*,” has the potential to shatter conventional conceptions of both space and time. In this sense, the ghost emerges at exactly the limit of understanding and not-understanding. Derrida describes the ghostly entity as “neither substance, nor essence, nor existence, [the] *never present as such*” (xvii, emphasis in original). Unlike ontology’s preoccupation with being, hauntology stresses that which simultaneously exceeds being and is less than being; the “*more than one / no more one*,” as Derrida initially defines the specter, or “some ‘thing’ that remains difficult to name: neither soul nor body, and both one and the other” (xx, 5, emphasis in original). The “non-object” of the specter “comes to defy semantics as much as ontology” through its status as “between something and someone, anyone or anything,” life and death (5).

In addition to exposing the limits of understanding, the ghost throws into stark relief the situatedness of understanding: Who sees a ghost here and who does not, who is haunted there and who is not, point us to the cultural situatedness of knowledge and awareness. Of course, in Wideman’s work, the ghostly, “some ‘thing’ that remains difficult to name” comes first of all to stand for America’s repression of its violent racist past and present (and future as well), the specter that is ever-present in some parts of Philadelphia and Pittsburgh, and only occasionally in others—the ghosts of slavery, of dispossession, of lynching, of racialized mass incarceration, of police killings of African Americans, appear to be visible for many but invisible for some. Still others ignore their haunting presence, sticking to their conviction that these ghosts do not exist.

In terms of its reconceptualization of time, the specter signals the idea that “the time is out of joint,” a quote from *Hamlet* which is central to *Specters of Marx* (Derrida 21). The traumatic event that the ghost symbolizes rips apart the logic of time, the sequence of past, present, and future that conventionally helps us to understand

yesterday, be present today, and anticipate what will happen tomorrow. The specter does away with such causality and leaves time “out of joint,” leaving us with the possibility that the past will happen tomorrow and that the future will return today (21). What the disruption of the conventional timeframe means for a writer like Wideman is that it allows him to offer us an alternative to conventional logic, which he blends with the African concept of “Great Time,” which, in Wideman’s words is “a nonlinear, atemporal medium in which all things that ever *have been, are, or will be* mingle freely” (*The Homewood Books* xi). By inventing a “space that allows us to bump into relatives long dead or absent friends or children unborn as easily, as significantly, as we encounter the people in our daily lives,” as Wideman explains in his preface to the Homewood trilogy, he recovers the utopian potential that the disruption of the specter carries.

Derrida’s concept of the ghostly was shaped in such a way that it could be readily incorporated into his overarching philosophy of deconstruction. For Derrida, as he remarks in the interview “Spectrographies,” (1996) the “logic of the specter,” which “regularly exceeds all the oppositions between ... sensible and insensible ... is *de facto* a deconstructive logic” (Derrida and Stiegler 39). Hence, as a potent reminder of “the uncertainty, heterogeneity, multiplicity, and indeterminacy that characterize language and Being because of their inevitable entanglement with alterity and difference,” the ghostly should be “lived with” in deconstructive approaches to hauntology, rather than, for example, be expelled or exorcised, as one might expect (Del Pilar Blanco and Peeren *The Spectralities Reader* 7, 9).

In his essay “*État Présent: Hauntology, Spectres and Phantoms,*” Colin Davis further explains that for Derrida, the specter is a deconstructive concept which through its in-between status (“between life and death, presence and absence”) is able to destabilize “established certainties” (376). From interviews with John Wideman,



we can gather that this is an important idea for him as well, as we will explore below. Davis explains that Derrida's specter "does not belong to the order of knowledge," and, importantly, that

[f]or Derrida, ... the spectre's [sic] secret is a productive opening of meaning rather than a determinate content to be uncovered. (377).

For Derrida the point is to learn to *live with* ghosts; the secret of the ghost "is not a puzzle to be solved" but it is rather an unknowability and indeterminacy at the heart of concepts that we should more often keep at the forefronts of our minds, as he would suggest (379).

As stated above, this approach to hauntology has been broadly taken up, and has according to Davis "spawned" quite an extensive corpus of texts, albeit a corpus that tends to combine textual analysis with "daring speculation" that "aspire[s] to extend the validity of [its] enquiry [beyond the text] to embrace a greater level of generality" (376, 377, 378). By this greater level of generality Davis means the Derridian hauntologist's focus on "the processes of literature and textuality in general" and ultimately the idea that the spectral forms a part of *any* narrative, that it is "a key to all forms of storytelling" (377, 378). Davis resists this idea and pleads for a more narrow analytical employment of "the spectre" instead, characterized by its distinct (mis)spelling (377).

In a similar vein, Del Pilar Blanco and Peeren also warn against a too broad understanding of haunting, in which the ghost becomes just one among various deconstructive tropes (*The Spectralities Reader* 14). If we consider a passage in *Specters of Marx* in which Derrida writes that "it is necessary to introduce haunting into the very construction of a concept. Of *every* concept, beginning with the concepts of being

and time. That is what we would be calling here a hauntology," we can start to see the potential risks involved (Derrida 202, emphasis mine). It is at this point that the "greater level of generality" that literary analysis which makes use of Derridian hauntology aspires to, becomes perhaps *too* general to illuminate how the notion of haunting in literature works at the level of the text.

In the years since the publication of *Specters of Marx*, critics have sought to become more specific in their efforts to elucidate the ways in which memory, history, and haunting relate to each other, for example by drawing attention to the various kinds of haunting that different historical events may engender (Del Pilar Blanco and Peeren *The Spectralities Reader* 15). In my own work, I am trying to avoid a too broad approach by staying close to the texts that I analyze, bringing the novels of John Wideman into dialogue with hauntology theory first and foremost because ghosts are prominently featured in his texts. Wideman mentioned in a 1989 interview that "[s]tories are a way of keeping people alive ... not only the ones who tell the story, but the ones who lived before" (Rosen 82). Thus his take on the writing and telling of stories reveals a sensibility that can be readily connected with the concerns of hauntology. Wideman further states that:

Stories break down our ordinary ways of conceptualizing reality. Because when we talk about what's alive and what's dead, what's past and what's future, male/female, all these dichotomies that we need in order to talk, they're not really very accurate or descriptive. (Rosen 83)

While I try to incorporate ideas about the ghostly that are leaning more towards a deconstructive approach in my analysis, a necessity given Wideman's own acknowledgement of deconstructionists like Derrida in his texts (cf. e.g. the passage

“sound and fury separated with ... Derridian diddley-bop from the mess that signifies nothing” in *Philadelphia Fire* (131)), I am also interested in establishing what ghosts do in Wideman’s text at a more political level.

A model for this additional approach is Avery F. Gordon’s *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination*, a book that tips its hat to Derrida’s work on hauntology, while remaining committed to its own theoretical course. While Derrida’s concept of the rupture of time through haunting is important for this dissertation on a philosophical level, Avery Gordon’s work provides it with a sociological register to measure the way in which haunting has political impact on societies. Theorizing haunting as a social problem rather than an individual one, as Gordon did, proved to be a crucial step in developing the concept away from trauma studies on the one hand, and on the other it served to demonstrate the way in which haunting implicates *everyone* in society, not just the victims of a repressed history such as slavery, but also (in that example), the descendants of white perpetrators. Gordon is alert to fact that the specter carries an ethical imperative and a meaning for the future, something which, as will be discussed below, is important in Wideman’s work as well. As Derrida mentions in “Spectrographies,” without the specter looking at us and holding us responsible,

[t]here is no respect and, therefore, no justice possible  
without this relation of fidelity or of promise, as it were, to  
what is no longer living or not living yet, to what is not  
simply present. (Derrida and Stiegler 42)<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> In “Spectrographies” Derrida further develops the notion of the specter’s gaze upon us, what he terms “the visor effect” (Derrida and Stiegler 40). This effect refers to the way in which the ghost “looks at or watches us ... [it] is not simply someone we see coming back, it is someone by whom we feels ourselves watched, observed, surveyed ... this thing looks at me and concerns me and asks me to respond or to be responsible” (40-42).

Gordon further developed this idea, by conceptualizing the ghost as being “pregnant with unfulfilled possibility, with the something to be done that the wavering present is demanding” (*Ghostly Matters* 183). Her *Ghostly Matters*, which was first published in 1997 (a new edition of the book came out in 2008), has grown into another foundational text within the field of hauntology theory. Gordon understands haunting as a way

in which abusive systems of power make themselves known and their impacts felt in everyday life, especially when they are supposedly over and done with (slavery, for instance), or when their oppressive nature is denied. (*Ghostly Matters* xvi)

Through a striking reading of Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* (among other works), Gordon tries in her book to describe the way in which the violences of “racial capitalism,” which often remain less than fully acknowledged, or repressed at the social level, return as ghosts or specters, which happens “when the trouble they represent and symptomize is no longer being contained or repressed or blocked from view” (*Ghostly Matters* xvi).<sup>9</sup> Again, she understands haunting to be different from “individual loss or trauma”; the ghost arises from “the whole complicated sociality of a determining formation that seems inoperative (like slavery) or invisible (like racially gendered capitalism) but that is nonetheless alive and enforced,” (183) and it is hence, arising as it does from social reality, shared to a larger or smaller extent by everyone within that social formation (190). Haunting, “to be tied to historical and social effects,” implicates every member of society, in Gordon’s view (190).

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<sup>9</sup> I place the term “racial capitalism” in quotation marks here to underscore that it is Gordon’s, not to cast doubt on its validity.

## Haunting in African American Literature

Thus it becomes clear that representing American history as a history that *haunts* is an effective way to convey the endurance of its traumatic afterlife, and as a matter that is collective rather than individual. By drawing attention to the continued existence of various forms of violence associated with, for example, the legacy of slavery, haunting underscores the way in which history survives its historical moment by disrupting progress-oriented historical narratives, and it can highlight the manner in which this history to a certain degree implicates everyone in American society. More than the notion of trauma, the notion of haunting can emphasize a collective forgetting and remembering, bringing into play the question of all Americans' responsibility for their shared history and future.

Ta-Nehisi Coates recently re-emphasized the idea of the continuation of American history in his award winning book *Between the World and Me* (2015), written as a letter to his son. In his essay, Coates explains that “[in] America, it is traditional to destroy the black body—*it is heritage*” (103, emphasis in original). The “right to break the black body” is analyzed by Coates as a constant in US history, an evil “[t]hat was true in 1776 [and] is true today” (105). He urges his son “never [to] forget that for 250 years black people were born into chains” in America, a period that, as he points out, is still longer than the years of freedom that followed it, and that this heritage effects the present moment, especially in the violence of police and vigilantes against African Americans, and the unwillingness of the state to prosecute such violence (8-12, 70). The manner in which Coates’s work builds on both academic criticism and ideas first explored in African American literature during the last

decades of the twentieth century is evident, and we must hope that the book's considerable popular acclaim will help to make its insights more widespread.<sup>10</sup>

Wideman, too, tries to make readers aware of the manner in which the past lives on in the present; the "breaking of the black body" forms a constant in his narratives. In *The Homewood Books*, for example, the story "The Beginning of Homewood" relates how Wideman's ancestor Sybela Owens and her white husband Charlie Bell came to settle in Homewood, first "[o]n Hamilton Avenue," where "the white men let Charlie know they didn't want one of their kind living with no black woman so Charlie [...] up and moved" to Bruston Hill, leaving the plot of land they owned on Hamilton Avenue behind (165, 166). Afterwards, the land turns out to be "fixed": Sybela cursed it, so that nothing can grow there (166). As a character in the story remarks, "[t]hat spiteful piece of property been the downfall of so many I done forgot half the troubles come to people try to live there" (166). Most of the Homewood trilogy is devoted to showing the lasting effects of racist violence against this Pittsburgh community throughout the twentieth century, violence which Wideman links to crimes perpetrated against slaves in his narrative (160-62). In *Philadelphia Fire*, the city's instantaneous amnesia after the MOVE bombing forms the absent core of the narrative. Rather than discuss the murder in a documentary form, Wideman produces a highly fragmented narrative with surreal undertones, in which the bombing becomes a symbolic continuation of the logic of racism that brought on historical events like the Middle Passage and the Vietnam War (cf. e.g. 60-61). Through this aesthetic twist he succeeds in conveying the rupturing impact that the meaning of this event carries, which brings his readers to the point where they should

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<sup>10</sup> Among other distinctions, *Between the World and Me* won the National Book Award, was a finalist for the National Book Critics Circle Award, and was named one of the ten books of the year by the *New York Times Book Review*.

“[p]retend for a moment that none of this happened” (97). The surreal treatment of real, not imagined, horrors, paradoxically forces them to acknowledge that, indeed, *this happened*: the Philadelphia police dropped a bomb on a neighborhood and killed five children and six adults, and destroyed 53 houses (97). In *Two Cities*, Wideman explores the theme of gun violence, as it is seen through the eyes of Mr. Mallory, a Second World War veteran with a combat trauma. Mallory works as a street photographer, and the reader learns about the emotional impact of living in black Philadelphia and Pittsburgh by following his life.

It is evident that the novels that Wideman wrote in the 1980s and 1990s were published in the context of a turn to history in African American literature in this period. In the words of Stephen Best, these decades saw “slavery emerg[e] as the constituent object and metaphor in African American studies,” something which Best describes as a “melancholic turn” brought on by various works of literature, *Beloved* clearly the most important among them (456). The momentum created by these novels crystallized in new approaches to scholarly criticism, for example Paul Gilroy’s influential *Black Atlantic* (1993), which “anchored the black experience of modernity in ‘a continued proximity to the unspeakable terrors of the slave experience,’” as Best characterizes Gilroy’s work (457).

Hence the way in which the legacy of slavery haunted the present became a topic of inquiry for scholars and novelists alike. The combined endeavors of literary works and scholarly criticism to examine this legacy has produced a rich body of work, that we can now look back on as having constituted a renaissance of thinking about the meaning of both American and transatlantic history. As we have seen above, in *Ghostly Matters*, first published in 1997, Avery Gordon argues that for African Americans, living with and “engag[ing] [with] the ghost,” became a “fundamental epistemology for living in the vortex of North America,” where

permission to amend the past is not readily granted (151). Literature, alongside academic criticism, became an important realm in which such amending was attempted anyway, a space in which

[k]nowing and claiming the disremembered and unaccounted for events, bodies, and identities that haunt US history [became] vital to social progress [...]. [R]eading and writing [could] ghost back against the erasure of past events but also move society and individuals beyond fragmentation, toward forms of remembrance and coherence. (Cutter 5-6)

In these years the foremost way in which African American writers were “ghost[ing] back,” engaging with the ghostly aftershocks of American history, was through neo-slave narratives, a term first coined by Bernard W. Bell in *The Afro-American Novel and Its Tradition* in 1987 (V. Smith 168). Valerie Smith notes that “neo-slave narratives began to appear in earnest after the mid-1970s” (168, 170).<sup>11</sup> What unites these works as a genre is their engagement with “the centrality of the history and the memory of slavery to [American] individual, racial, gender, cultural, and national identities” (168). The neo-slave narrative became the catalyst for black writing’s “melancholic turn” (Best 456). As one can imagine, the specter of the past as a haunting force in the present is a frequent theme in these works. In addition to recovering and retelling histories of slavery, these works sought to convey with a disruptive impact to the reader the horrors of the period, by re-imagining slavery from new points of view. Stef Craps, describing Fred D’Aguiar’s novel *Feeding the Ghosts* (1997), mentions that its goals were to

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<sup>11</sup> A seminal waypost was the publication of Gayl Jones’s *Corregidora* in 1975. Two important works that predate *Corregidora* are Margaret Walker’s *Jubilee* (1966) and Arna Bontemps’s *Black Thunder* (1936) (V. Smith 169-171).



[d]isrup[t] popular understandings of history as a linear progression from a colonial or slave past to a liberated “postcolonial” present. [It] invite[s] an ethico-political practice of anamnestic solidarity with the oppressed of the past *and* the present. (467)

This description brings to light the underlying objective of many of these narratives, and it can help us understand why the ghost is such a useful trope in these texts; by making an oppressed figure of the past return in the present, the writer can open up a space to memorialize this figure, which is under threat of being erased; he or she is able to represent the manner in which those living in the present continue to be bound to the past; and he or she can explore the similarities and differences between life in the past and life in the present. The figure of the ghost can come to stand for a (partial) representation of historical events so traumatic that they are unrepresentable, and at the same time call attention to the fact that this history is in danger of being forgotten. As Martha J. Cutter summarizes:

literary texts [can] signify the haunting, gaping holes in our understanding of the world, but they also resignify these gaps: they make them denote something novel or unique — something that has not been apprehended previously. (11)

In an example from John Wideman’s work, we can see in *Sent for You Yesterday* how the constant linking of Brother Tate to the much older Albert Wilkes through symbolism and through drawing out similarities between the two characters, places the violent death of both (which happen years apart) in a light that makes the reader reflect on the similarity of the historical forces of racism that work on the men.

Brother Tate in a sense repeats the tragic life of Albert without being aware of it. But the reader *does* become aware of it, does apprehend the significance of this repetition, and comes to understand it as a repetition of the way in which “they killing everything worth a good goddamn in Homewood,” as one of the characters remarks of Brother’s death (*The Homewood Books* 442).

As far as neo-slave narratives are concerned, the idea of haunting is especially prominent in those texts in which characters living in a time *after* slavery (whether a decade or a century) are struggling to come to terms with its immensity. Some of the most famous works in the genre conform to this template, among them Octavia Butler’s *Kindred* (1979), David Bradley’s *The Chaneyville Incident* (1981), and, indeed, Morrison’s *Beloved* (1987).<sup>12</sup> They correspond to what Ashraf Rushdy in *Remembering Generations: Race and Family in Contemporary African American Fiction* (2001), terms “palimpsest narratives,” which explore the “the fundamental part played by American slavery in the making of the modern world” (Rushdy 33, V. Smith 172). In both *Corregidora*, *Kindred*, and *The Chaneyville Incident*, “late twentieth-century characters are haunted by their enslaved ancestors” (V. Smith 172). For Rushdy,

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<sup>12</sup> To further illustrate the turn to history in African American literature with an anecdote, we can compare David Bradley’s first novel *South Street* (1975), a “hip” contemporary story set on the run-down Main Street of black Philadelphia by a writer “on the scene,” as the book’s back cover declares, with Bradley’s second novel *The Chaneyville Incident* (1981), which chronicles the quest of the historian John Washington “through the secrets and buried evil of his heritage” (back cover) to find out what happened in rural Chaneyville before the Civil War ended slavery, and to find out why knowledge of this incident destroyed his father’s life. In Bradley’s own words, it is a story about “the graves of thirteen slaves who were coming north on the Underground Railroad. When they were about to be recaptured, rather than return to slavery they asked to be shot. Someone obliged” (Bonetti 73). In a sense, it addresses a theme similar to Morrison’s *Beloved*: whether death is preferable to live as a slave in the American South. While *South Street* arrived at the tail end of a period of prominence for the kind of urban realist writing whose banner had been unfurled and carried by the generation of Richard Wright and Ann Petry, *The Chaneyville Incident* appeared when the turn to history in African American literature started to gain momentum.

slavery “haunts the peripheries of the [American] national imaginary” because it is both understood to be something that is not allowed to be forgotten (coupled with the alarm that in many ways it *is* forgotten) and because it continually “elude[s] our understanding” at the same time (2).

Again, the danger of traumatic events being forgotten and the idea that there is something beyond knowledge, beyond representation about them, combine here, and it is precisely these concerns that the trope of the ghost can address: the ghost bears the message of the past. It says that here, in this place, in another time, something important happened that should not be forgotten. The ghost signifies its pending erasure, while also remaining vague, indirect, about what happened precisely. Given its status as “neither substance, nor essence, nor existence, [the] *never present as such*” (Cutter 11, Derrida xvii, emphasis in original), it communicates indirectly, and hints at a violent history so immense that its proportions are difficult to come to terms with.

Wideman both incorporates and expands the idea of African American haunting in his work, as this dissertation hopes to demonstrate. Haunting enters the framework of a more contemporary setting of black struggle, thereby underscoring that this struggle is the product of historical processes. The author alerts his readers to the fact that the nightmare of American history continues to play itself out in black communities in cities like Philadelphia and Pittsburgh, and that, if left unacknowledged, it will continue to do so in the future as well. Wideman’s incorporation of ghosts in his texts is tied up with the loss of black lives in impoverished African American communities, and with the destruction of black bodies by American society as Ta-Nehisi Coates describes it. Whether in *The Homewood Books*, *Philadelphia Fire*, or *Two Cities*, the awareness that the black communities of Philadelphia and Pittsburgh—both the people living there and the

buildings they live in— are under constant threat of being destroyed, lives cut short by guns, houses crumbling, bulldozed or set on fire, this awareness is the content matter that makes his work cohere. The constant threat of erasure, or perhaps even more so the constant *process* of erasure that is taking place, places the characters in his novels squarely face to face with the fact that they are losing the world that they live in. His characters bear witness to it. They describe the failing educational system that cities provide as “detention-center concentration-camp rag-ass prisons we call public schools” (*Philadelphia Fire* 150); they witness the effects of urban renewal as “[w]hole blocks he remembered had been flattened. Intersections erased” (*Two Cities* 28); of the terrorizing police presence they say “the yo-yo wailing of its siren crashes against brick and stone, shatters them, brings down the walls” (*Philadelphia Fire* 178); of their segregation from the rest of society the characters in Wideman’s novels say that “[p]eople [are] jammed up so tight they shitting and pissing on top one another” (80); they describe mass incarceration as “[k]illing the man in you what prison’s all about” (*Two Cities* 167); society’s attitude of complete neglect to police violence is correctly identified as “[n]obody cares. The whole city seen the flames, smelled the smoke, counted the body bags” (*Philadelphia Fire* 19); in *Brothers and Keepers*, Wideman’s brother Robby explains that “[w]e see what’s going down. We supposed to die. Take our little welfare checks and be quiet and die” (132) ; on the whole, the scandalous circumstances in which these African American communities are forced to survive is remarked upon as being “part of the final solution” that ghettos represent, as Cudjoe remarks in *Philadelphia Fire* (30).

## Overview of Wideman Scholarship

Despite the politically coherent subject matter of his novels, Kathrym Hume has recently remarked that “[t]rying to find a logic to Wideman's output as an evolving totality, critics have not discovered a basic trajectory or sensed a coherent vision” (697). It seems that (like the specter) there is always something that eludes our understanding of these texts. Hume is right to point out the eclectic nature of the writer's oeuvre; the issues that Wideman addresses in his novels are treated in an unusual and fragmented style. And she is right too, unfortunately, about the fact that Wideman has never had the undaunted guide to help us through the maze-like intricacy of his writing. As recently as 2011 Tracie Church Guzzio bemoaned the “paucity of scholarship on Wideman” in her monograph on the author (*All Stories Are True* 4).

Moreover, with the exception of some, like for example Madhu Dubey's analyses in *Signs and Cities: Black Literary Postmodernism* (2003), books of criticism that have appeared on Wideman's work have often been inconsistent in terms of their quality. In *Stories of Survival: John Edgar Wideman's Representations of History* (2011), Ulrich Eschborn distinguishes the tendency in academic writing on Wideman to focus “on Wideman's biography,” as a way to explain his novels.<sup>13</sup> Several of these works have limitations, as Eschborn points out. For example, the first monograph published on Wideman's writing, James W. Coleman's *Blackness and Modernism: The Literary Career of John Edgar Wideman* (1989) “goes so far as to pass a moral judgment” on the

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<sup>13</sup> While Eschborn is critical of this approach (*Stories of Survival* 8-10), it is not completely unfounded, given Wideman's frequent use of autobiographical writing in his fictional texts, of characters named “John Edgar Wideman,” and of protagonists who share a lot of similarities with the author, in terms of their personal history and their profession. Moreover, Wideman has not been shy about pointing out such links himself, equating himself with the narrator Doot in the preface to *The Homewood Books*, for example (xi).

author's "selfish" decision to leave Homewood behind (9). The second monograph, titled *John Edgar Wideman: Reclaiming the African Personality* was produced in 1995, by Doreatha Drummond Mbalia, and it holds that Wideman "prostitute[d] himself during the 1960s" by writing novels which drew from a European literary tradition (52). As Eschborn points out, Mbalia's politically inspired scholarship at times amounts to a too harsh judgement of Wideman's first novels (9-10). Similarly, Susan Pearsall believes that the book is "of limited use for literary scholars due to its questionable scholarly apparatus" (11). Either way, Coleman and Mbalia's examples show us that there are sometimes quite normative ideas about what African American literature should be and how African American authors should write. Wideman's winding and indirect approach to direly pressing social issues has not always been met with sympathy, and was indeed found to be unacceptable by some critics, who perhaps expected a more directly political response to the subject matter that he treats in his books. As Gene Andrew Jarrett explains in *Representing the Race* (2011), a "political definition of African American literature is an ideological inheritance of the 'black nationalist' phase of the modern civil rights movement" (6).<sup>14</sup> Jarrett's monograph delivers a convincing argument against the preservation of this inheritance, unproductive as it has been at times as a method of literary analysis, quite likely in the case of analysis of Wideman's work, too. Wideman himself acknowledges in a 1989 interview the "bullyish tone and one-dimensional demands that characterized certain critics," which made him "feel pushed and shoved" (Rowell

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<sup>14</sup> Jarrett defines this ideological inheritance as revolving around the assumptions of "the definition of successful African American politics in terms of the racial authenticity of leadership; the utter ideological cohesion of racial constituencies; the primacy of popular over intellectual forms of expressive culture; and the nationalism, rather than the internationalism, of African American identity" (14) (Cf. e.g. also Warren, and Murray on this topic).

93). It also made him more determined to “exercise independence and find my own voice, my own prerogative” (93).

Scholarly attitudes like those of Coleman and Mbalia towards the work of Wideman can perhaps be best read within the context of their time, then, falling under the influence of 1960s and 1970s criticism that stretched into the 1990s (Jarrett 13). But we should also understand Wideman’s winding approach to his subject as a product of its time: by the time he published *Damballah* (1981) and *Hiding Place* (1981), literary writing about black urban communities had gathered a high degree of cohesion as a genre, what Carlo Rotella describes in *October Cities* as “the well-traveled grooves of ‘problem’ literature about the ... ghetto” (209), a genre that Wideman undoubtedly tried to subvert. Rotella explains that “ghetto narratives of the urban crisis developed consistent generic properties” in the 1960s and 1970s, which publishers seized on to market a variety of African American authors. Among such properties he lists unfiltered, “raw” (i.e. profanity-laced) first-person narration, negligible differences between author and narrator, misogyny, emphasis on the narrator’s lived experience of what American society held to be “ghetto pathologies” like broken families, criminality, imprisonment, and morally degraded behavior, and a license to philosophize about the causes of these “pathologies” along with a license to propose sweeping solutions to them (209).

Massively popular examples of this type of work were Claude Brown’s *Manchild in the Promised Land*, Alex Haley and Malcolm X’s *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, and Kenneth Clark’s sociological study *Dark Ghetto*, all of which were published in 1965. The hyperbolic and hypermasculine prose of for example Claude Brown, who identified Richard Wright as his literary idol, was readily taken up by critics as gospel, “clinical realism” deemed to be so realistic as to “reflect a historical process with a degree of accuracy that also makes the work valuable as social history,” as

Houston A Baker, Jr. proclaimed in 1971 (Rotella 323, H. Baker Jr. "The Environment as Enemy" 53). In fact, what many of these works did was to further entrench a sense of black city communities as "pathological," contributing as they did to a discourse of urban crisis and an "underclass" discourse that cast the economic calamities facing American cities as something that was caused by "a collapse of black cultural values and community" (Dubey 5). The generation of African American writers that published since the 1970s has been highly cautious about representing urban communities in their work ever since (5).

Wideman, as inventive writer as he is, too would seek to break out of this urban realist frame—it is hard to imagine him conforming to the constraints of any kind of genre fiction, much less a sensationalist one. As Madhu Dubey explains, Wideman did not "endorse a notion of politicized art secured by straightforward realist claims" (53). All the same, "urban" African American literature was expected to follow the dictates of social realism by literary critics, a dictate that Wideman's aesthetic does not conform to at all (92).

Towards the new millennium, new critical approaches on the author started to develop. In 1998, The University Press of Mississippi published *Conversations with John Edgar Wideman*, a collection of interviews with the author that span the years between 1963 and 1997. My dissertation makes frequent use of this volume, because oftentimes Wideman's own insights into his work are a lot clearer than the secondhand accounts of his critics are. *Conversations* was edited by Bonnie TuSmith, herself a Wideman scholar and a contributor to and co-editor of *Critical Essays on John Edgar Wideman*, a collection of essays published in 2006 by the University of Tennessee Press, which has a consistently higher quality than the abovementioned monographs. Especially the essay by Bonnie TuSmith herself, titled "Optical Tricksterism: Dissolving and Shapeshifting in the Works of John Edgar Wideman" is



worthwhile. She analyses *Damballah*, *Sent for You Yesterday*, *The Cattle Killing* and *Two Cities* for the way in which an object, when it is under observation by a character, often “transforms, shapeshifts, or even undergoes a ‘melt-down’” in Wideman’s texts, transformations which, she convincingly argues, “teach us a different way of seeing” (244, 246).

The other editor of this volume is Keith E. Byerman, who wrote two monographs on Wideman himself, *The Short Fiction of John Edgar Wideman* (1998), and recently *The Life and Work of John Edgar Wideman* (2013), which seeks to combine the telling of Wideman’s life story with an overview of his published work. The abovementioned James W. Coleman, who publishes as frequently on Wideman as Byerman does, has also written a recent monograph that seeks to make Wideman’s work known among a larger audience, titled *Writing Blackness: John Edgar Wideman’s Art and Experimentation* (2010) (ix). Byerman and Coleman share more than a purpose, however: it has to be noted that their books fail to convince at times, both stylistically and conceptually. Byerman concludes his text by stating that Wideman “could not become the writer of so much important work without studying the great tradition of literature and learning the methods of writing modern literature” (174). Coleman’s book gives the impression of a text rushed into print; his writing style and confused use of literary concepts often prevent him from succeeding.

More convincing scholarship is provided in two monographs from 2011, Tracie Church Guzzio’s *All Stories Are True: History, Myth, and Trauma in the Work of John Edgar Wideman*, and Ulrich Eschborn’s *Stories of Survival: John Edgar Wideman’s Representations of History*. Church Guzzio structures her text around the assertion that “in both form and content” Wideman’s work has “from the beginning” reflected the maxim “all stories are true” (11). While her attempt to discuss all twenty books that Wideman had published by 2011 is commendable, trying to reduce an oeuvre as

eclectic as that of Wideman to a catchphrase is perhaps not always an illuminating way to proceed, and Church Guzzio is by necessity often confined to giving the reader overviews of Wideman's texts. She makes rather generalized claims by trying to say things that are applicable to all of the author's books—books that were produced over a forty year period in which Wideman wrote in widely varying styles and from various perspectives. To paraphrase Kathryn Hume's insight: scholars who have tried to sum up Wideman's work found that it is not easy (697). But perhaps the more regrettable fact about Church Guzzio's book is that she leaves any discussion of hauntology by the wayside, which, given her interest in "history, myth, and trauma," as the book's subtitle reads, can be seen as a missed opportunity.

Ulrich Eschborn's monograph limits itself to a discussion of *The Lynchers* (1973), the Homewood trilogy (1981-83), *Philadelphia Fire* (1990), and *The Cattle Killing* (1996). Eschborn analyzes Wideman's "literary concept of history," as an attempt to write "history from below" by "mainly portray[ing] black urban poor African Americans and thus giv[ing] a voice to these black people who might not be heard otherwise," and by underscoring not only "the value of oral tradition but also the legitimacy of oral history as a source of knowledge about the past" (*Stories of Survival* 38, 48). His analyses follow a direction similar to that of Church Guzzio in *All Stories Are True*. The main thrust of Eschborn's argument holds that "history forms a key theme in John Edgar Wideman's fictional work," as he opens the conclusion of his research (*Stories of Survival* 183). Ultimately, I would argue that the scope of Church Guzzio and Eschborn's scholarship, with its focus on historiographic metafiction (cf. e.g. Church Guzzio *All Stories Are True* 20-21) and American historiography (cf. e.g. Eschborn *Stories of Survival* 1-12), fails to capture a layer of complexity present in Wideman's novels.

Hence, in terms of a dominant critical paradigm to position this dissertation towards, there is a scholarly consensus on the ideas that Wideman's texts engage with both American history and traditions of African American writing. But this consensus has not been developed much further beyond what is already a fairly apparent feature of the novels themselves. This is to say that in terms of sustained in-depth analysis of the complexity of the author's oeuvre, there is still work to be done. It is hard to disagree with statements like "Wideman revises the stories and images that have been written about African American history, culture, and life, even those from his own tradition, so that he can clear a space for other stories to be told," as Church Guzzio summarizes in her introduction, but this is often the gist of much critical work done on the author (14).

All things considered, in *Critical Essays on John Edgar Wideman* (2006), edited by Bonnie TuSmith and Keith E. Byerman, the reader is offered a comparatively wider variety of critical approaches, which are applied to a range of the author's texts in sixteen essays. The collection includes discussions of Wideman's blurring of fiction and non-fiction; the tension between individual and community that is found in several of his works; the significance of ideas like nationhood and nation-building in his work; the figure of the *flâneur* in his texts; in short, a cross-section of scholarly approaches currently in use within the field of literary studies. As abovementioned, the research in this collection is generally of a high scholarly quality, particularly Bonnie TuSmith own contribution, and I draw from it in my dissertation. But here, too, the omnipresence of ghosts in Wideman's texts is not given a sustained analysis.

Indeed, Wideman scholarship that embraces a hauntological approach is surprisingly scarce, despite both the frequent appearance of ghosts in many of his novels, and the fact that Wideman published these texts during a period in which hauntology became a prevalent academic methodology. Could it be that the "real"

urban setting of *The Homewood Books*, *Philadelphia Fire*, and *Two Cities* made critics overlook the surreal ghosts which haunt these spaces in the novels? As Madhu Dubey points out regarding *Philadelphia Fire*, critics were generally not pleased with Wideman's mixture of postmodern literary style and "black urban realities" (92). Jack Kroll, for example, reviewing the novel for *Time Magazine*, found that Wideman's stylistic achievement "bleached out the urban reality" it sought to portray (Dubey 92). Tellingly, perhaps, a discussion of the meaning of ghosts is found only in an essay on Wideman's 1996 historical novel *The Cattle Killing*, about a 1793 outbreak of yellow fever in Philadelphia, and in an analysis about his travel memoir *The Island: Martinique* (2003). The first of the two is a narrative with an urban setting that is not contemporary, the second setting *is* contemporary but not urban.

Perhaps this gave Cryderman and Marriott, who wrote on *The Cattle Killing* and *The Island*, a less pre-conceived sense of what to look for in these texts. In "Fire for a Ghost: Blind Spots and the Dissection of Race in John Edgar Wideman's *The Cattle Killing*," Kevin Cryderman discusses the manner in which this novel explores "the emergence of community as a response to what reason can neither explain nor contain" (1048). Cryderman's discussion of ghosts centers on the figure of the dead body of a black woman who will be dissected by a group of anatomists, and on the encounter between an old white man and a black preacher earlier in the novel, who appear as ghostly figures to each other (1051-1054, 1060-1063). Cryderman reads the dissected body on the mortuary table as "a silent, haunting, reverse gaze of immanent critique" on the Enlightenment viewpoint built upon both slavery and gender discrimination (1051). He demonstrates how the corpse becomes a "ghostly spectator of history" to its audience (1051). His reading of the scene between the black preacher and the old white man likewise focuses on the meaning of their gazes, which is informed by Derrida's understanding of the specter as having a "visor effect," which

arises when a “spectral *someone other looks at us*, we feel ourselves being looked at by it, outside of any synchrony” (Derrida 6, emphasis in original). In *The Cattle Killing*, Cryderman argues, the exchanges of such gazes “reveal race to be relational, social, and structural rather than ontological, emerging out of cultural narratives within modes of power-knowledge spectatorship” (1064). Moreover, this feeling of being observed by history, of being “inspected” by it serves as an imperative to act morally in the present and future, because, as we know from Derrida, “this thing looks at me and concerns me and asks me to respond or to be responsible” (Derrida and Stiegler 41-42). This is a moral imperative that forms a key component of haunting in Wideman’s city novels as well.

In David Marriott’s *Haunted Life* (2007), the chapter “Spooks: Wideman’s Catastrophe,” revolves around a reading of *The Island: Martinique*, and it delivers a salient point on what Marriott calls the memoir’s “close-up on media technology and the racial slavery that haunts it” (6-7). Like Cryderman, Marriott is interested in what various gazes mean in Wideman’s memoir, for example the “fantasy of seeing without being seen” which Marriott reads as being almost always an impossibility for the black subject given its “visibility,” a visibility that as Marriott rightly points out sparks “surveillance, and judgement” of black lives (6). His book examines the manner in which the failed mourning of slavery and the manner in which this manifests itself as simultaneously “remorse, guilt, blame, disavowal,” —in other words affect—and as an occult spectacle which stages “a dead time which never arrives and does not stop arriving, as though by arriving it never happened until it happens again, then it never happened” (xxi). Marriott’s reading of *The Island: Martinique* as an expose of the disavowal of the scandal that its “post-slavery world” is “built on a heap of black corpses,” provides an image that, as we will see, is already present in *Sent for You Yesterday* (xxi).

For Marriott, the specter of slavery “remains deeply inscribed in the visual media as fetish,” a fetish that is at the same time disavowed, however (7). He convincingly argues that Wideman reads Martinique as an island that is exemplary of such disavowal, a disavowal that then inevitably makes its return felt as a haunting (7). And visual media, especially television, are haunted by this disavowal as well, which, according to Marriott, Wideman sees evidence of in the “public fascination with the TV footage of 9/11” in the period after the attack on the World Trade Center, a fascination that boils down to “seeing the past never stop happening in a repeated image caught on camera” (Marriott 10-16). Still, the lure of these images to the public are symptomatic of “a more general failure to grieve” in the US, as he explains, which for Marriott finds its origins in the centuries-long disavowal of the horrors of slavery (10, 9-12). As we will see below, the manner in which televised images of suffering affect viewers is also explored in *Philadelphia Fire*, in which one of the protagonists learns about the MOVE bombing from a TV-news broadcast, which is then compared to watching scenes from the Vietnam War on television in the 1960s. It is the fear that history never stops happening in that novel which is crucial—this is why haunting is concerned with the future as much as it is with the past. Hauntology theory draws on Derrida’s idea that the specter combines the “*revenant* (invoking what was) and the *arrivant* (announcing what will come)” (Del Pilar Blanco and Peeren *The Spectralities Reader* 13). It is, not paradoxically, by drawing on the past, in this case the past of the Vietnam War as it was broadcast on television, that *Philadelphia Fire* imagines the city’s future.

## Analysis of the Novels

The following chapters hope to show that haunting manifests itself in diverse ways in all of the works under consideration in this dissertation. We will see that, for example, in *The Homewood Books*, ghosts most often communicate through sounds and music. By drawing from and enriching the manner in which sound is used in gothic traditions to represent the supernatural, Wideman constructs Homewood as an urban space of premonition. Echoes of violence can “scream through walls,” as Wideman writes, subverting the sense of security associated with the home as a hiding place (*The Homewood Books* 276). In *Philadelphia Fire*, haunting turns protagonist Cudjoe’s life into a surreal whirlwind in which past, present, and future become nearly indistinguishable, a blurring of chronology in which Shakespeare’s play *The Tempest* plays a seminal role. In *Two Cities* Wideman probes the relation between haunting and photography, with unanticipated results: rather than re-hash the idea of the photograph as the most haunted of mediums, he constructs a protagonist, the artist Mr. Mallory, who tries to push beyond the limits of this medium to communicate to his audience—a commitment to his artistic goals similar to Wideman’s efforts to expand the manner in which black urban communities could be imagined in American literature.

By employing hauntology theory this dissertation also hopes to demonstrate that the hope for an emancipated future is an important aspect of Wideman’s city novels; they do not only look to compare previous historical periods to the present, despite scholarly consensus on this idea. And “time” for Wideman does not only mean history, another way in which the historiographic approach to the author’s texts can at times be too narrow. As the character Reuben remarks in the eponymous novel from 1987, regarding “representations of time” (62), they are:

Everywhere and nowhere at once. ... The same numbers on the clock face can tell today's time, tomorrow's, yesterday's. A clock's face registers every moment, past, future, present. It expresses our true relation to time. ... Our immersion in a great sea, drowning, spewed forth endlessly ... Each time different, each time the same. Many in the one; one in the many. (*Reuben* 62)

An additional benefit of using a hauntology framework over a historiographical approach to these texts is that it can be a tool to comment on the representation of *space*, not only of time—in this case, the space of the haunted homes that are the neighborhood, the city, and the country in Wideman's work. Although, sure enough, we have seen that for Derrida, haunting seems to be primarily a disturbance of time, there is a possibility to read his concept of the specter as a disturbance of space as well. Certainly, he writes of the "*non-contemporaneity with itself of the living present*" in the first place (xviii, italics in original). It appears that for Derrida a spectral moment is mostly "a moment which no longer belongs to time," much more than a moment which no longer belongs to space, then (xix). The *time* is first of all out of joint in Derrida's thought on hauntology, much more than the space (xxi). The author looks at various possible translations into French of this famous phrase from *Hamlet* in his book, the most common of which, as he notes, is "the time is off its hinges" (22). The possibility that haunting involves a distorted sense of *space* is opened up as well, however, when Derrida remarks that another way to translate "The time is out of joint," would be "Le monde est à l'envers," in other words, "the world is upside down" (22).

Dislocation of space then, as well as distortion of time, is involved in haunting. And if we look at the work of Avery Gordon for support of this hypothesis, it initially



seems apparent that, as for Derrida, haunting first of all “alters the experience of being in *time*, the way we separate the past, the present, and the future,” in her notion of it, that is to say her focus is on time rather than space as well (Gordon *Ghostly Matters* xvi, emphasis mine). However, Gordon also uses the term haunting to describe the “instances when home becomes unfamiliar, when your bearings on the world lose direction,” a definition which chimes quite well with Derrida’s final translation of “the time is out of joint” as “the world is upside down” (Gordon xvi, Derrida 22).

In Wideman’s novels, haunting often has as its result precisely the idea that “home becomes unfamiliar,” a loss of direction that can apparently occur even in what should be the most familiar of places (Gordon xvi). For example, in *Two Cities*, when the character Mr. Mallory thinks about his murdered friend John Africa “slid[ing] beside him again, real as the memory,” when he’s “in two places at once or too many places,” it is “the simple business of not bumping into a chair when you cross a room, or going through the openness of a door without bramm[ing] your shoulder” which becomes difficult to manage (12). Home becomes unfamiliar, in other words. We could read such spatial distortion as a key component of haunting, then, all the more so because of the frequent representation of a fragile concept of “home” in Wideman’s fiction. The hiding places of *The Homewood Books*, like Aunt Bess’s house, which she burns down, or the house that various generations of the Tate family live in, which is invaded by the police, the destruction of the MOVE home by bombing in *Philadelphia Fire*, and the house where Mr. Mallory stumbles around in (the same house where Kassima mourns her murdered family members), all indicate that this is a recurring theme in these novels. As a character in Wideman’s 1987 novel *Reuben* explains, city authorities “can walk in your house anytime night or day. They can take what you got if they don’t think you should have it” (11).

As should be fairly clear from the preceding discussion, Wideman's novels rarely convey *one* straightforward message. Kathryn Hume rightfully points out that the author "shuns easy, obvious, clear-cut themes" in his work (722). As this chapter likely demonstrates as well, use of the metaphor of haunting, too, can be somewhat imprecise at times. But in a way this is what makes it powerful, fitting for a writer who is often imprecise as well, who tries to be imprecise because he cannot help "tap[ping] into this murky, liminal space every chance he gets," as Bonnie TuSmith notes of his work ("Optical Tricksterism" 244). Wideman almost always has more than one stance on the topics he writes about. Whatever forceful statements he makes, chances are that they will be reconsidered and deconstructed in a later part of the text. The author stated in an interview with Jacquelin Berben-Masi that "there's always uncertainty" in life and in writing, because "what I 'know' and 'don't know'" come together in both (578). He cautions his readers that "[i]f you think the world is something you understand ... you're going to be in trouble" (578). As Jeffrey Severs points out in a recent essay, sometimes "[s]cale and perception change not from book to book or story to story in Wideman but from line to poetic line; it is often hard to know whether a vision should be considered solipsistic, all-embracing, or both" (81). Indeed, it is more often the idea of *uncertainty* that he seeks to communicate, an uncertainty that ties in with hauntological philosophy because "the uncertainty, heterogeneity, multiplicity, and indeterminacy that characterize language and Being because of their inevitable entanglement with alterity and difference," are exactly what the ghost as a figure can portray (Del Pilar Blanco and Peeren *The Spectralities Reader* 7).

It often feels like his Wideman's novels work in much the same way. They talk in a polyphony of voices, delivering more than one message at once. As noted above, this can make it difficult to make definitive statements about his work, or for

Wideman scholars to find common ground, given the seemingly infinite angles of interpretation that the author's texts offer us. If we consider for example Kathryn Hume's conclusion to her essay about Wideman, which states that "[u]ltimately, his writing helps us take pleasure in the thickness of experience," we are reminded of just how malleable the author's work is, how differently it is interpreted by different readers—because "tak[ing] pleasure" is perhaps not the first response to the subject matter of Wideman's books that one would expect (723).

And yet, it demonstrates that his novels are spacious enough to leave room for such interpretations, however counterintuitive they might seem at first glance. So while my dissertation will firmly argue for the importance of the concept of haunting in the understanding of Wideman's work, it does not try to suggest that this is the only legitimate approach to these texts. My dissertation most of all tries to serve as a corrective, or rather an addition, to the perhaps too conventional scholarly approaches of "historicism" that are being used as an analytical framework by Wideman scholars. Yes, his texts can be read as narratives of the return of the past in the present. But we should not overlook the way in which the future, too, "returns" to the present in his work, as a haunting indictment of the unjust now that will create it.

In terms of the scope of the analysis presented here, my dissertation will argue that while searching for unusual and postmodern ways to represent subject matter that was conventionally treated through an urban realist approach in African American literary traditions, the moral obligation that this history carried with it haunted his texts. To reiterate Derrida's remark, "this thing [which] looks at me and concerns me and asks me to respond or to be responsible," is in the case of Wideman novels the plight, both current, historical, and future, of the black communities of Philadelphia and Pittsburgh that he represents in these novels, a plight that time and again makes it ghostly return to his texts (Derrida and Stiegler 41-42). While the

“urban realist” approach had lost its luster by the early 1980s, Wideman’s novels register the realization that neither could his stories be told in the mode of postmodernist daring only. The author’s search for a way to stick to the material referent of urban realism, namely, the black communities of Pittsburgh and Philadelphia, but to narrate their stories and their plight in a less limited way, took the form of three distinctly diverse texts. *The Homewood Books*, *Philadelphia Fire*, and *Two Cities* represent the different ways in which Wideman tried to balance his subject matter, his interest in innovative form, and his attempts to accurately bring to the page the weight of both history and the future pressing down on his work. The following chapters will foray into each of these texts to analyze the strategies the author employed to do so.

*The Homewood Books*  
Haunting Voices, Haunting Sounds

As noted in the previous chapter, one of the most succinct analyses of Wideman's work to date is found in Madhu Dubey's *Signs and Cities: Black Literary Postmodernism* (2003). Dubey points out in her book that Wideman comes across as being "haunted by authorial anxiety and guilt about his privileged education," in his work (87). What she adds to the typical scholarly take on Wideman's self-reflection *qua* having become an outsider to his community, is her claim that his works' urban setting fosters such reflective writing practices as well. In the context of fraught debates regarding the "realistic" representation of urban communities in black writing, the generation of postmodern authors to which Wideman belongs wrote in a spirit of "antirealism and textual self-reflection," in an effort to counter "essentialist constructs of black culture and community," Dubey argues (14). I would add that we can read *The Homewood Books* as the first of Wideman's efforts to balance a number of competing urges that often play a role in his texts; his distance and closeness to his extended family and the Homewood community in which they live, his effort to use "antirealism" to address issues that are *real*, and, indeed, his attempt to counter essentialist and demeaning discourses regarding black urban communities with his writing (14).

It was with *The Homewood Books* that Wideman established his acclaimed reputation as a writer. The trilogy, which consists of the short story collection *Damballah* (1981), the novella *Hiding Place* (1981), and the novel *Sent for You Yesterday* (1983), explores material usually viewed through the urban realist lens, but in a much more reflective and original way.<sup>15</sup> Named after Homewood, the segregated Pittsburgh

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<sup>15</sup> *Sent for You Yesterday's* winning of the PEN/Faulkner Award in 1984 prompted Wideman's publisher Avon to publish the three works as a paperback collection called the *Homewood Trilogy*. Then, in 1992, the University of Pittsburgh Press republished the texts in a single hardcover volume, as *The Homewood*

community where Wideman spent part of his childhood and where many of his relatives lived, the trilogy represented a turning point in Wideman's writing, in that it made him find his voice as a writer, as noted in the previous chapter. In the evolution of his oeuvre, the three books are generally regarded as an artistic breakthrough for the author, a change of direction from his early modernistic work towards a stronger emphasis on black cultural traditions as well as personal history (cf. e.g. Coleman 63). As we will explore in this chapter, Wideman drew from traditions of African American songs, myths, and literature, to achieve this. By integrating the African American traditions of writing, speaking, and singing into his trilogy, the author could demonstrate the richness and resilience of black urban culture as well, and simultaneously place himself in that tradition.

Wideman, describing his creative process during the writing of the trilogy, states that "[he] wrote [the] three books simultaneously", and that

[t]ales in *Damballah*, "The Watermelon Story" for example, were written at the same time as late drafts of *Sent for You Yesterday*. *Hiding Place* in its first compressed essence found its way into the story collection [as the story "Tommy"]. Sections of *Sent for You Yesterday* evolved during the period the earliest Homewood stories were being put on paper. [...] [The books] jostled, bumped, merged, and teased each other into existence. (*The Homewood Books* x)

Of the layered meaning of the trilogy, he mentions that "the books are linked by shared characters, events, and, of course, locales. [...] Deeper patterns of structure,

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*Books*, which included a new preface by Wideman. Page numbers in this chapter refer to *The Homewood Books*.

theme, and language also serve as unifying devices,” several of which I will explore in this chapter (viii). My textual analysis in this chapter will mainly focus on the novella *Hiding Place* and the novel *Sent for You Yesterday*, after first briefly exploring two stories in *Damballah*, with which I will establish the framework through which *Hiding Place* and *Sent for You Yesterday* will subsequently be interpreted.

“Damballah,” the title story of the collection, is the only narrative in the trilogy that is set in the Antebellum.<sup>16</sup> In it, we find a young enslaved boy who often spies on an older slave named Orion, as he stands in the river to catch fish with his bare hands. Orion thinks the young boy is a suitable candidate to teach magic to, somebody who can “learn the story and tell it again,” before Orion himself is gone (120). The story functions as an allegory of sorts for the entire trilogy. In his preface to *The Homewood Books*, Wideman explain that his initial impetus for writing a *roman à clef* about the community of his youth was the loss of his maternal grandmother Freeda French, who died in 1973 (x). During the days he spent in Homewood for her funeral, Wideman reconnected with the storytelling traditions of his family and their friends, who “shared [their] grief and [their] history, the stories of Homewood’s beginning” that Wideman had heard all his life but whose “possibilities for written literature” he was only now discovering (x). The ritual of the repeated telling of these stories is described by Wideman as essential to a sense of African American community, something which “must survive if we as a people are to survive,” as he

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<sup>16</sup> It is also the only story whose characters are not explicitly connected to the other characters that appear in the trilogy, which can be traced to the family tree that was added to the book. Not every character in the trilogy appears on the family tree because the texts also chronicle the lives of Homewood neighbors, etc. However, the connection of these character can always be traced to the characters on the family tree. This is not the case for the characters appearing in the story “Damballah.” How they are related to the rest of the family history which is the trilogy remains unclear, a symbol of the past of slavery as a period to which many African Americans cannot trace precisely how they relate in terms of their family background.

puts it (x). The narrator figure in the trilogy, named John or “Doot” by nickname, tries to become a bard-like figure for the black community with which he seeks to re-establish a connection, much like John Wideman himself. In addition to the lore and myths that encapsulate the lives of John’s family and their neighbors in the book throughout the decades of Homewood’s history, the trilogy finds consistency as a text through what Wideman calls “the gradual unfolding of the narrator’s [i.e. John/Doot’s] character” (xi).

Like John in the entire trilogy, the nameless boy in the short story “Damballah” learns the power of stories from someone he considers his spiritual elder. And just like Wideman mentions in his preface that telling stories can ensure the survival of the community, so does storytelling function as an essential skill of survival in “Damballah.” Reading the story of Orion and the young boy as an allegory of Doot’s process towards becoming a voice for his community throughout the trilogy (Doot is a young boy in many of the parts of *Sent for You Yesterday* as well) gives us several advantages. It first of all allows us to read storytelling, and language as such, as a kind of magic: in the narrative, it is not entirely clear what story Orion wants to pass on to his apprentice, but it appears to involve the powerful word “Damballah.”<sup>17</sup> Orion remembers that “[i]n his village across the sea were men who hunted and fished with their voices” (12). It seems that rather than to teach the boy the fishing magic, however, Orion wants him to know that there is a world that is different from “this blood-soaked land,” America (12). When the boy is spying on him in the river, Orion’s eyes are on him, “boring a hole in his chest and thrusting into that space one word, *Damballah*” (13). It enables the boy to hear sounds “[he] had never heard before, strange words, clicks, whistles and grunts” (15). Learning the word widens the boy’s

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<sup>17</sup> Damballah, as the epilogue of the book describes, is a Haitian Voodoo god who represents the ancient father, a “good serpent of the sky” (5).



sense of perception, to include a new language that is richly present in his surroundings. When he says “Damballah” to Aunt Lissy, a woman who functions as a mother for him on the plantation, she slaps him and tells him never to use this heathen word again, to speak only American (14). But for the boy, Lissy’s voice is “like chicken cackle,” and “his head a barn packed with animal noise and animal smell” (14). There are “too many others crowded in [his head] with him,” it is so crowded, in fact, that he cannot “hear his own voice with all them baying and cackling” (14). Compared to this cacophony, “Damballah [is] a place the boy could enter, a familiar sound he began to anticipate, a sound outside of him which slowly forced its way inside,” as Wideman writes (15). Although the boy’s learning of the word comes with its own range of noises (“strange words, clicks, whistles and grunts”), he experiences these as more welcome than the intrusive “baying and cackling” of the American English that is spoken on the plantation (14, 15).

Wideman appears to invite us to compare the boy’s conversion to his own progression as a writer—a progression that he chronicled in *The Homewood Books*, and that gives the trilogy its consistency, as he claims (xi). In the development of Wideman’s body of work, as noted in the introduction, *Damballah* and *Hiding Place* signaled a return to publishing after an eight-year period of “woodshedding,” as Wideman himself called it (Samuels 19). This eight year interlude was characterized by searching and finding a more distinct literary voice, by “produc[ing] a lot of manuscripts, none of which were satisfactory” —works he did not get published, but which helped him acquire “a new language to talk about my experience” (19). This new language allowed for dialogue with traditions of African American literature, traditions that he had familiarized himself with in this same period by editing an

anthology for Norton (18).<sup>18</sup> In “Damballah,” Wideman allegorizes this idea by explaining that learning the word Damballah heightens the boy’s sense of perception, and that it allows him to speak to the dead. The word, as a signifier of African American and Afro-Caribbean religious practice and resistance, comes to stand for a tradition that is different from the Anglo-American culture that enslaved African Americans during the Antebellum—and hence, as an opening story for this trilogy about an urban community, can function as a bulwark against discourses of “defective” urban culture.

After Orion gets murdered for knocking an overseer from his horse, the boy in the story worries what will happen to his ghost (Wideman *The Homewood Books* 17). When he sneaks into the barn where Orion was killed to figure out what has happened, he hears “the buzz of flies, unnaturally loud, as if the barn [was] breathing and each breath shook the wooden walls” (18). By “follow[ing] the sound” with his eyes, the boy discovers the dead body of Orion (18). The murdered man has taught him the ritual for talking to the dead: “The boy wiped his wet hands on his knees and drew the cross and said the word and settled down and listened to Orion tell the stories again,” as Wideman writes (19). The boy is the better for having become knowledgeable about “Damballah”; it makes him more perceptive, more understanding of the situation he finds himself in, and it allows him to communicate with his ancestors.

Similarly, this is what learning about African Americans cultural traditions apparently meant for Wideman. The author mentions that “*stylistically* [...] connect[ing] my books to what I assumed was the Great Tradition, the writers who came before” (Rowell 95), he had sought to write his first novels in a “tradition [that]

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<sup>18</sup> In my analysis of *Hiding Place* below, I will demonstrate the manner in which Wideman builds on the themes of Richard Wright’s *Native Son* (1940).

was mainly European, mainly literate," by making readers experience "echoes of T.S. Eliot, Henry James, Faulkner, English and Continental masters" in his texts (Rowell 95-96). By contrast, during the writing of the Homewood trilogy, his understanding of traditions changed: "as I grew and learned more about writing, I found, or rediscovered I guess, that what Bessie Smith did when she sang ... what John Coltrane did, what Ralph Ellison did, what Richard Wright did," was drawing from "a common human inheritance" that spoke to him (95, 96). The voice in which Wideman wrote grew more expansive as a result, so that black traditions were included and could speak through it in *The Homewood Books*.

In addition to demonstrating the power of storytelling as such, reading this short story as an allegory for the entire text allows us to uncover another of Wideman's purposes of his trilogy: "Damballah" imagines a history of resistance and spiritual survival to base the histories of his family on that he narrates in the trilogy. Orion is a powerful ancestor, who dies in the fight against his enslavement. He bears the name of the legendary Greek hunter who was enshrined as a constellation of stars by Zeus. Orion is a symbol of self-determination in "Damballah": he has given himself this name, whereas others on the plantation call him Ryan or Old Ryan (13). Including the story "Damballah," with its overtones of mythology and memorialization, in a trilogy about the black community of Homewood seemed particularly important, then, as an effort to counter discourses of black "pathological" culture in American cities (cf. e.g. Katz 441-445). It posits instead that these communities have a cultural history to be proud of.

A third way in which it is useful to treat "Damballah" as an allegory of the trilogy, is that we can defer from it the importance that the idea of haunting carries for the entire text. While Orion, as the symbol of a past of cultural resistance and resilience is tremendously important for the boy to have as a model, he is also a

towering figure for the boy, towering to the point of being fear-inducing, perhaps. And if for Wideman, Orion stands for the past, it is quite clearly a ghost-like past: one that is hard to make out, but whose power is evident. As the author states in the text, Orion notices in the period before his act of rebellion that he is becoming more and more ghostly. Orion feels that “[h]is skin was becoming like that in-between place the priest scratched in the dust,” a place that is described as “the crossroads where the spirits passed between worlds” (11). He can “feel the air of this strange land wearing out his skin, rubbing it thinner and thinner until one day his skin would not be thick enough to separate what was inside from everything outside” (11). It is interesting to note that his increasing ghostliness turns Orion into a deconstructive figure, an “in-between,” a passage-way “between worlds,” someone who no longer “separate[s] what was inside from everything outside,” in short, someone who embodies exactly the deconstructive logic that makes the word *hauntology* a pun on ontology.<sup>19</sup>

It is important for my argument in this chapter to note as well that with his new ghostly characteristics, Orion develops a stronger sense of *voice*. As Wideman writes: “all things seemed to come these past few months, not through eyes or ears or nose but entering his black skin as if each pore had learned to feel and *speak*,” (11, emphasis mine). The mixture of haunting and sounds, music, and voice, first described here, are a recurrent theme throughout the trilogy. Orion’s ghostly skin can

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<sup>19</sup> In a sense, this idea captures, in a nutshell, Wideman’s recurrent desire to convey a sense of uncertainty in his work, to stay in the “murky” liminal spaces as it was discussed in the previous chapter — we will explore this in-depth in the chapter on *Two Cities* (TuSmith “Optical Tricksterism” 244). One could imagine someone writing a short story that is much more straightforward (but ultimately less powerful) in its attempt to celebrate an honorable past and a warrior-like ancestor to take pride in. Instead, Wideman opts to complicate things so that the reader is never entirely sure where to stand: Orion, as the mythical past, is a half-faded, half-fading figure, who lives between worlds, who, on the one hand stands for Afro-religious practices, but then at the same time bears the same name as a Greek god. This, too, works as a strategy to counter the problem that Dubey identified, namely, that of essentialism in thinking of black community and culture (14).

“whisper,” and he thinks that at some point “[t]he voices and faces of his fathers” will burst through it (11). Thus, as Orion becomes more ghostly, he comes into closer contact with the voices of his ancestors; with the fading of Orion’s skin comes the ability to speak, and this voice becomes increasingly powerful (11). Wideman, too, by learning about “[t]he voices ... of his fathers” during his years of “woodshedding” ultimately developed his own voice, but the short story that opens his trilogy is a first indication that there was something decidedly haunting about this process (11).

The ghostly sounds that are described here, will haunt the Homewood trilogy at many points, whether as voices from the past, as music from the past, or as stories, as we will explore below. The story “Damballah” itself already expresses a central theme of *The Homewood Books* in this way, as we have seen. In her essay “Homewood’s Music of Invisibility,” Denise Rodriguez points out that in *Sent for You Yesterday*, narrator Doot’s “voice “get[s]” caught” up not only with the legacy and voices of his childhood community but, in a broader sense, with those of his literary ancestors” (140). In the trilogy, the link between present community and its past ancestors is established exactly by *voice*. As the boy explains in the story,

Damballah said it be a long way a ghost be going [...] and a new ghost take his time getting his wings together. Long way to go so you can sit and listen till the ghost ready to go home. [...] Orion talked and he listened and couldn’t stop listening till he saw Orion’s eyes rise up through the back of the severed skull and lips rise up though the skull and the wings of the ghost measure out the rhythm of one last word.  
(*The Homewood Books* 19)

Rodriguez points out that “[t]hrough storytelling, Orion achieves a symbolic coherence that counteracts physical dismemberment,” in this scene (139). But it is more accurate to say that it is rather Orion’s *ghost* who achieves this coherence, who “connect[s] art (music and storytelling) to transcendence (flight)” (139).

If we take a quick look at the final story of the collection *Damballah*, titled “The Beginning of Homewood,” we will see that the themes of honoring a past to take pride in, as well as establishing a connection to this past by story and voice, are reasserted—but that here, too, the process develops hand in hand with haunting. The story recounts the neighborhood’s history as beginning in 1859, when an eighteen-year old enslaved woman flees from Maryland and ultimately ends up living in Homewood (*The Homewood Books* 155). This is Sybela Owens, the “Great-great-great grandmother” of narrator John (155). By making her 1859 escape the starting point of “The Beginning of Homewood,” and of his family’s history, Wideman indicates his inclination to examine slavery’s afterlife, while acknowledges the importance of the Antebellum to the trilogy at the same time. Sybela is still spiritually connected to the events recounted in the story “Damballah,” hence, but how exactly she relates to them must remain unclear. What is certain, though, is that she, like Orion, is a historical ancestor who symbolizes resistance and self-determination, because of her successful attempt to flee slavery and ground the black community of Homewood, Pittsburgh.

And like in “Damballah,” storytelling and voice are important here. “The Beginning of Homewood” opens with narrator John trying to write a letter to his brother on this topic, a story which “Aunt May’s voice got [him] started on” (156). In the narrative, Wideman relates (in the narrative voice of his Aunt May) how Sybela Owens and her white husband Charlie Bell came to settle in Homewood, first “[o]n Hamilton Avenue,” where “the white men let Charlie know they didn’t want one of

their kind living with no black woman so Charlie [...] up and moved" to Bruston Hill, leaving the plot of land they owned on Hamilton Avenue behind (165, 166).

Afterwards, the land turns out to be "fixed": Sybela cursed it, so that nothing can grow there (166). Wideman develops this idea further (again it is the voice of Aunt May that is represented):

That spiteful piece of property been the downfall of so many  
I done forgot half the troubles come to people try to live  
there. You all remember where that crazy woman lived what  
strangled her babies and slit her own throat and where they  
built that fancy Jehovah Witness church over on Hamilton  
that burnt to the ground. That's the land. Lot's still empty  
[ex]cept for ashes and black stones and that's where  
Grandmother Owens first lived. What goes round comes  
round, yes it does, now. (166)<sup>20</sup>

The abandoned land has become haunted after Sybela and Charlie are intimidated into leaving it. The passage's use of African American vernacular is an example of the way in which Wideman managed to integrate oral traditions into his text throughout the trilogy, a way of paying homage both to those traditions directly, and to the African American literature which draws from it, like Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937). It is simultaneously a representation of the haunting of voice. In this ghostly story, as narrator John reflects, the purpose is that "the

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<sup>20</sup> It is interesting to note that Wideman's word of choice to describe the place, "spiteful," would later be echoed in the famous opening line of Morrison's *Beloved* (1987), which reads "124 was spiteful," to describe the house in which Sethe and Denver live with the ghost of Beloved (Morrison 3). Moreover, the theme of infanticide and the symbol of throat slitting would return in *Beloved* as well.

listener understands the process, understands that the voice seeks to recover everything, that the voice proclaims *nothing is lost*" (160, emphasis in original).

In their representation of the power of voices to recover and reclaim the past, "Damballah" and "The Beginning of Homewood" establish what I will argue is a crucial perspective on reading *Hiding Place* and *Sent for You Yesterday*: in both the novella and the novel, Wideman describes a process of slowly discovering the ways in which the sounds and voices of ancestors on the one hand give access to the past, but on the other also haunt the present. The ways in which echoes of shouts, screams, stories, music, and voices make their ghostly return to these texts becomes manifest on a narrative level, a linguistic level, and ultimately on a philosophical level.

#### "The Voice of a Ghost" in *Hiding Place*

The novella *Hiding Place* is most direct in establishing its links between sounds, music, voices, and the past, as I will briefly lay out here. Moreover, it first establishes use of the tradition of the blues as a reservoir of resilience that *Sent for You Yesterday* draws from as well. In the trilogy's preface, to reiterate, Wideman mentioned that "[m]usic [...] is a dominant, organic metaphor," one of the *Homewood Books'* "unifying devices" (viii).

To quote from Wideman's preface a final time, it states that one of the trilogy's intentions is to portray

the gradual unfolding of the narrator's character, the Doot who finally essays his dance at the conclusion of the trilogy. If the books achieve unity, Doot's presence in all of them should become apparent. While he's been humming the music, writing the stories, they've been making him. His/my



voice is inseparable from the Homewood voices I've been hearing since my ears and eyes opened. As the Swan Silvertones chant [...], *This is my story, this is my song*. (xi, emphasis in original)

As becomes clear here, music, songs, stories, humming, and dancing are used almost interchangeably by Wideman, symbolic as they all are for the author's discovering black cultural traditions as a means to build his *Homewood Books*—a mixture of genres that is also discernible in the previously discussed interview quote, which mentions Bessie Smith's songs, Coltrane's Jazz, Ellison and Wright's writing as influences for these texts (Rowell 96). Wideman equates them perhaps because they all serve a similar purpose: just like blues music can "illustrate that this community has a unique language, a culture, and a tradition," so does storytelling as such, Wideman appears to suggest (Church Guzzio *All Stories Are True* 132). Blues famously managed to transform "hollers, cries, whoops, and moans of black men and women working in fields without recompense" into the voice of the singer, while openly acknowledging the pain in which it was born (H. Baker Jr. *Blues, Ideology* 8-9). It is a music of "toughness of spirit and resilience [and the] willingness to transcend difficulties" (11). In its conjuncture with telling stories in the trilogy, which, for Wideman, is something that "must survive if we [African Americans] as a people are to survive," as we have seen, its critical importance in the necessary attempt to bend despair into hope is evident (*The Homewood Books* x). At the same time, it hints at a rich cultural tradition that can refute notions of "defective" African American urban life that were a mainstay of public discourse in the United States at the time of the trilogy's publication.

The narrative of *Hiding Place* develops straightforwardly (especially compared to the complexly unfolding *Sent for You Yesterday*), and the importance of music and

voice as simultaneously a reservoir of strength and a haunting reminder of the past is an evident aspect of it, as I will explain here. Tommy (a character based on Wideman's real-life brother Robby, whose fate he also explores in *Brothers and Keepers*) is the catalyst of *Hiding Place*—he is wanted by the police for taking part in a robbery in which a man was killed (though not by Tommy). He flees to Bruston Hill, which overlooks the Homewood neighborhood, to seek shelter in the decaying house of Aunt Bess, an aged widow who lives an isolated, hidden, life. Tommy fears that he will be killed by the police if they discover him; he has to convince Aunt Bess that he can hide in her house, but she would rather be left alone in grief over her husband, who has passed away years ago. She does not want to be disturbed in her commemoration of him, which takes on surreal forms. A third important character in *Hiding Place* is Clement, a young boy who regularly visits Aunt Bess to run errands for her. He thinks that rather than having Tommy as her guest, she is being visited by a ghost.

Alongside Tommy's attempted escape, the narrative hinges on Aunt Bess finding her voice to address Tommy's persecutors. As mentioned above, Bess lives by herself in an old shack until Tommy shows up on her doorstep. She is periodically visited by the ghostly voice of her husband in her home, as Wideman writes:

Bess ... Bess.

It was her man calling. But he was long dead. He couldn't be telling the story. No one was telling the story because the sky was falling and the music dying and her man's voice was far away now, far and high away as the birds. (*The Homewood Books* 190)

Here, haunting announces itself through a voice, and through (dying) music; it is the sound of Bess's husband's voice that first reveals itself to her, rather than, say, a vision of him. Sounds are further connected to the ghostly in the chapters on the young boy Clement, who spends his time at a barber store, running errands for its owner. One of his regular errands sends him up the hill to Bess, with whom he has developed a mystical connection that Wideman describes with metaphors of listening and hearing as well:

[...] he'd go up Bruston Hill. Walk to the very top where she lived. He hears Miss Bess listening for his feet hit her raggedy porch. Miss Bess waiting on the top of Bruston Hill. Everything in him blind except the part hearing her silent call. (186)

Clement's sense of hearing, like that of the boy in the story "Damballah," is of an almost supernatural quality. On one of his trips to Bess's house, Clement arrives to hear her talking to someone, and rather than knock on the door to announce himself, he stands in front of the door to hear what is going on. He realizes that Tommy, who is already rumored to be a fugitive, is hiding in the house. The boy's sense of hearing is so acute that in the silence which spreads when Tommy stops talking to Bess, he "can feel the man shouting at him" (202). Clement, like the boy in "Damballah," can hear what Wideman calls "the ghost voice":

He remembered the ghost [i.e. Tommy] trying to sneak out the back door. The ghost shouting at him through the wooden walls, *I ain't here, Goddamn it. Go Away. I ain't here.* How his ears hurt and head hurt and how he froze on the porch and couldn't take a step forward or couldn't take one

backward because the ghost voice inside the shack was  
warning him, was threatening him, was screaming *I ain't*  
*here Goddamn it* in the silence. (317)

The arrival of Tommy on Bess's doorstep brings back to live a traumatic past for Bess, a past that she had been avoiding by staying as still as possible, living secluded, never running into someone from Homewood who could remind her of it. Tommy's noisy arrival makes Bess *herself* come alive again, as well, in a sense. She states about his appearance that:

First there had been the stomping and pounding loud as  
thunder, loud enough to raise the dead because that's what  
she was, dead in a Henry Bow moonshine sleep and it  
would take thunder or an atom bomb to jerk her back to life.  
(327)

Tommy's "stomping and pounding" arrival is almost a kind of music in itself, and it is tellingly described as being "loud enough to raise the dead," that is to say, awaken the past, just like the ghostly voice of Bess's dead husband can (190, 317, 327). In Bess's home, where "she lived with the dead," Tommy sometimes whistles a song that her dead husband used to whistle as well (328, 329). Bess, standing on the porch hears "blues like her man whistled," coming from inside the house, which makes her wonder whether "her man was inside with him [Tommy]" (329). The song and the memory it brings up for Bess create a space that is almost physical, not unlike the way in which the word Damballah creates a space that the boy in the story can enter (15). It gets Bess physically moving as well, because she tries to approach her past. As Wideman writes: "for the first time in thirty some years she had pulled herself up from the rocker and stepped toward the music and it hadn't stopped" (329). This

brings to mind Morrison's concept of re-memory, though comparing the two scenes sheds light on the manner in which Wideman's undertaking differs from that of Morrison. If we compare the two, re-memory is more focused on sights, "a picture floating around out there outside my head," as Sethe explains to Denver (Morrison 43). It is "[t]he picture" that one sees that is "still there [...] if you go there," to revisit a traumatic site and risk it "happen[ing] again," bringing back the past, in *Beloved*, whereas the type of haunting that creates a sense of space occurs primarily through the medium of sound in *The Homewood Books* (43). It becomes evident that African American traditions of music, storytelling, and speaking, upon being heard by the characters, can awaken the past, just like it did for Wideman, but it is almost always a too large amount of past, a past so potent that it overwhelms and that it haunts, hence the frequent pairings of ghosts and sounds in the novella.

Tommy's arrival in Bess's house not only revives a blues song for her, but a lost phrase as well, indicating once more the power of voice as a conduit of the past: She realizes that she has seen Tommy before, when he was a child, "at the funeral when they buried Shirley's baby" (Wideman *The Homewood Books* 217). Aunt Bess "said the words again to herself *buried Shirley's baby* and the words were what she had been avoiding all along since she saw the boy's face," Wideman writes (218). After Tommy's arrival, the eyes of Shirley's baby float through the rooms of Bess's home at times, until she "get[s] used to those black eyes following me" (306). The return of Shirley's baby as an angel in the closing scene of *Hiding Place* is instrumental for Bess's finally leaving her house and the hill and returning to Homewood. When she hears the fleeing Tommy being chased by police sirens and shot at, "and knows it's too late to help him," Aunt Bess decides to burn her house down in protest (331). A spark of the flames begins to rise, a "blue spark [that] climbs and soars and then she realizes it is the angel in the blue-eyed gown," the spirit of the baby girl, and this

“angel in the blue-eyed gown works with her to set the house on fire” (331). Her dead husband returns in the final scene of *Hiding Place* as well, or at least he returns to the world as Bess sees it. She tells “[h]er man,” who is “still drowsy” from sleep (the sleep of death) to gather his “whistling self” and leave the house with her, because it is going up in flames (332). Bess wants to go down the hill back to Homewood, to “tell them what they needed to know,” namely that Tommy did not kill anybody and that he deserves another chance in life (332). The closing of the novella hinges on Bess finding a voice strong enough to address Homewood and the police, or perhaps society in general, and her dead husband supports her and helps her achieve this. Wideman writes:

She'll tell them. She'll make sure they hear. Yes indeed. On  
her man's arms now. Four good legs now and she's coming.  
(333)

As Rodriguez notes of the ending of *Hiding Place*, “[i]n the African American tradition, the blues functions not merely as a creative repository for pain, but as a means of transcending suffering,” something which the whistled blues of Bess’s husband, on which she can metaphorically lean, poignantly illustrates (137).

To further expand on the meaning of the ending of the novella, it is important to refer back to the gradual unfolding of narrator Doot’s voice (*The Homewood Books* xi). As noted above, just like Aunt Bess’ development in *Hiding Place*, Wideman’s own trajectory as a writer finding his voice realized itself in *The Homewood Books* as well. Alongside his inclusion of African American vernacular, and his adept use of blues traditions in these texts, Wideman expanded his reach as an imaginative author by deepening his knowledge of African American traditions of writing.

His rewriting of particularly Richard Wright's *Native Son* (1940) in *Hiding Place* is a good example of this. Wideman manages to create a space in his text for this "ancestral voice," if you will, at the level of form and language—the manner in which his main character Tommy is chased by the police because he is a murder suspect mirrors the plot of Wright's first novel, and there are linguistic echoes of Wright's phrases in the text as well. In *Hiding Place*, the fact that Tommy, when he flees from his hiding place at Aunt Bess's house, seeks refuge on top of a water tower (where he is apprehended by the police), serves as a not-to-be-misunderstood signal to the reader that this is indeed a retelling of Bigger's story, because in *Native Son* this is where Bigger is ultimately caught by the police as well (*The Homewood Books* 331, Wright 265-270). If we compare passages from the two books, it becomes apparent that Wideman includes various references to Wright's novel, which becomes a literary revenant which haunts his text. Richard Wright writes in *Native Son* how Bigger flees from the police and vigilantes over snowy Chicago rooftops:

The siren was louder than before and there were more shouts and screams. [...] Directly above him, white with snow, was a high water tank with a round flat top. [...] He did not know where he was going; he knew only that he had to hide. He reached the top of the tank and three shots sang past his head. He lay flat, on his stomach, in snow. (265-266)

Wideman makes the shouts and screams that chase Bigger return to *Hiding Place* like revenants of the past. He describes how "police cars rumbled up the hill, screaming to the top like something terrible was chasing them," a description that resembles Wright's in its focus on police sirens and screams, and that once again puts emphasis on sound as an effective transmitter of the past (*The Homewood Books* 331). Tommy is

caught on a water tower like Bigger before him, it is winter, and as Aunt Bess states, “nobody but a fool would be outside in all this snow” (328):

[T]he crest of the hill ablaze now with spinning red lights.  
One long finger of light traces the shape of the tower, finds  
the curving ladder and follows it to the top, pausing,  
pointing for a moment where the ladder touches the lip of  
the huge pot atop the steel legs. (331)

The reader does not learn what happens to Tommy in this scene, but there are gunshots exchanged between him and the police, as there are in the standoff between Bigger and the police and vigilantes (*The Homewood Books* 330, Wright 266-67). The snow, the gunshots, the water tower form the key elements in these scenes: it signals a repetition of history. And hence, the manner in which *Native Son* haunts Wideman’s voice as a writer on the level of the language and precise wording of the novella, is doubled in the direction which the narrative takes, a return of history that Wideman stages for the attentive reader. The repetition of fates of Bigger Thomas and Tommy—a name that certainly resembles the name Thomas—forty years apart, draws into question the separation between the present and the past.

“Fate,” indeed, is the title of Book Three of Wright’s classic (“Fear” and “Flight” are those of books One and Two, respectively). Wideman’s achievement in his novella is to subtly expand on the meaning of each of these words, and by doing so expanding upon—or in fact leaving behind—Wright’s style of urban realism as well. “Fear” is something that both Tommy and Aunt Bess admit has controlled too much of their lives (*The Homewood Books* 324-326). In the final interaction between the characters, Tommy says: “You scared ain’t you? You been just as scared up here as I been down there. And if I’m hiding, you’re hiding too” (324). But unlike in *Native*



*Son*, in which Bigger's fear leads him to commit violent acts that precipitate his downfall, *Hiding Place* sees both Tommy and Aunt Bess conquer their fears. Tommy comes out of hiding and declares that "I been scared all my life. But I ain't scared now. I ain't killed nobody ... They can't put that on me. They can kill me but I still ain't killed nobody and I ain't scared" (325). His declarative tone at the end of the narrative reminds us of the statement that Bigger makes in the closing scene of *Native Son*, as Wright writes: "'I didn't want to kill!' Bigger shouted. 'But what I killed for, I am! It must've been pretty deep in me to make me kill!' " (429). But the content of the two statements is diametrically opposed, signaling the different roles that fear played for them, in the end.

After Aunt Bess wakes up and realizes that Tommy is gone, she hears the police sirens and "knows it's too late help him" (*The Homewood Books* 331). She decides to come out of hiding as well: she burns down her house with the help of the angel of Shirley's baby, as we have seen above, and on the arm of her dead husband descends from the hill to "tell them what they needed to know," namely, that "Lizabeth's boy didn't kill nobody" and that "all he needed was another chance" (331-32).

Wideman amends the theme of flight as well. In addition to Tommy's fleeing from prosecution, that is to say, being in flight in the way that Bigger is, his character and Aunt Bess's are connected to the theme by the author in a different way. Both Tommy and Bess are consistently described in conjunction with metaphors of *flying*, a way in which Wideman opens up a second meaning of the word "flight" in *Hiding Place*.

Not only would flying away be a way for Tommy to escape the police who are chasing him, it gives his character a depth that expresses his melancholy over bygone times. Wideman writes how Tommy remembers, as he stands on Bruston Hill and looks out over Pittsburgh, how "once upon a time when he was a kid and it was night

and he had wondered how far it was to the glowing heart of the city [...] he had believed he could rise on the wind and fly away, far away where the city sparkled” (204). Bess, too, remembers her youth fondly, and her thinking about it is crystallizes in metaphors of flight just like they do for Tommy. She is introduced in the novella as follows: “It was spring and she was a girl again ... somebody was telling a story about her” (187). Wideman writes how “in the story she is young and beautiful and the sky is like a pretty picture above her [...]. What she saw last before her eyes shut were birds flying high above the trees. Birds so high they were black specks wheeling in formation, a handful of dark seeds scattered by an invisible hand” (187). Tommy also remembers his youth in Homewood, trying to catch the last trolley home after having sex with a girl named Sylvia in her hallway, running down the street and, as Wideman writes:

He is flying now, all long strides and pumping arms and his fists opening and closing on the night air as he grapples for balance in a headlong rush down the steep hill. He can hear the trolley coming and wishes he was a bird soaring through the black night, a bird with shiny chrome fenders and fishtails and a Continental kit [...] He was all in Sylvia’s drawers and she was wet as a dishrag and moaning her hot breath into his ears and the record player inside the door hiccupped for the thousandth time caught in the groove of grey noise at the end of the disc (225).

This aimlessly spinning record player foreshadows the cyclical nature that Tommy’s narrative is about to acquire, repeating as it does the story of Bigger in *Native Son*. Tommy doesn’t catch the trolley, and the text returns to a time closer to the narrative present, when he walks a neglected Homewood neighborhood and hears from his

friends about an opportunity to stage a robbery, the robbery that will end in disaster for him (234-235). "No trolleys anymore," Wideman writes, "But somebody forgot to take up the tracks and pull down the cables. So when it rains or snows [...] the slick tracks flip a car into a telephone pole or upside a hydrant and the cars just lay there with crumpled fenders [...], laying there for no reason just like the tracks and wires are there for no reason" (224-25). So the dream of "chrome fenders" has made way for "crumpled fenders," for a world that appears to be devoid of meaning (225). Similarly, Tommy, who wished he was a bird once, walks past "dead storefronts" and finds "[a] dead bird crushed dry and paper thin in the alley between Albion and Tioga [...] If you hadn't seen it in the first place, still plump and bird colored, you'd never recognize it now" (227). Wideman suggests that the flight Tommy had wanted to achieve is a dream that is crushed in the manner that this bird is, a bird changed for the worse to the point that it is unrecognizable, just like the Homewood streets on which it died.

In terms of his "Fate," as *Native Son's* third book is titled, it looms behind Tommy on the hill where he reflects on being a child and being able to "fly away, far away where the city sparkled" (204). Because behind him, "[t]hat giant swollen frog of a water tower perched on its stilt legs" stands (256). It is in this scene, which closes Part I of *Hiding Place*, that the ominous water tower is first introduced, ominous because, as an African American man in flight of the police for murder, the water tower is laden with symbolic significance, as the place where Bigger was caught in *Native Son*. At this point in the narrative, the police has not yet closed in on Tommy, who, looking out over the city, is able to have a contemplative moment about both his bygone youth in Homewood, and about the water tower which looks like "[a] giant soldered together frog made by somebody afraid of frogs" (256). It is a menacing, fear

inspiring structure, in other words. It seems to “foreshadow,” quite literally, Tommy’s fate, because he is standing *in* the water tower’s shadow:

He knew it was up there but hadn’t seen it all day till just  
this moment when its long shadow stretched down the  
hillside and he *looked up from the black reflection into the sky*  
which harbored its black silhouette. (256, emphasis mine)

The description “he looked up from the black reflection into the sky” seems to point out that Tommy stands in the tower’s shadow (256). And the fact that Tommy looks into the sky again and, rather than seeing birds or contemplating flying like he did when he was a child, sees the water tower, signals the transitions from the dream of “Flight” to the nightmare of “Fate” in the text. He tries to resist this fate that seems to be there ready and waiting for him because for now he realizes that you would “[h]ave to be crazy to go up that thing” (256). And so, as Wideman writes, “he retreated, he stared and then backed off. If anything could have started him up that curling ladder it would be those questions he asked a long time ago” (256). The questions mentioned here refer back to Tommy’s childhood, when he asked what the water tower was and why it was there, “[t]he first time he’d seen it” (256). But there are no answer for this, as Wideman writes:

Nobody could tell him how much it held, or why it was  
there. Even now, even grown he hesitated at the edge of its  
shadow. A black shape which would soon be swallowed in  
the deeper blackness falling of Bruston Hill. (256)

Although nobody can explain the water tower's purpose to Tommy as a child, his fate years later is to emulate Bigger and to climb it while he is fleeing from the police. He tries to resist doing this at first, because upon encountering the water tower again as an adult standing on top of the hill, he walks away from it, back to Aunt Bess's house (256). After Tommy has left there, the reader learns from the perspective of Aunt Bess about the police chase that has ensued, because "[s]he hears a car racing up the hill" and concludes that "[i]t had to be him. And it had to be them after him" (329). In a sense, Tommy is now the "bird soaring through the black night, a bird with shiny chrome fenders and fishtails and a Continental kit" that he once wished he would be, except that now Aunt Bess hears "the string of gunshots exploding in the darkness," and she says "Oh Good God Almighty" to herself because Tommy has to fear for his life (225, 330). Her ability to try to change Tommy's fate, as well as her own fate—a fate of "liv[ing] with the dead," living "old and evil and crazy up there by herself on top of Bruston Hill," and, as she realizes, basically for that reason "she was dead herself" — will hinge on whether she can convince the world of Tommy's worth as a human being (328). As it was mentioned above, Aunt Bess burns down her house on Bruston Hill and returns to her community to "tell them what they needed to know. [...] That he needed one more chance" (332). In the last line of *Hiding Place*, the three books of *Native Son* that Wideman amends in his text reverberate. It reads:

She's coming to tell them he ain't scared no more and they  
better listen and they better make sure it don't happen so  
easy ever again. (333)

By coming out of hiding Aunt Bess finally ends her flight from reality, just like Tommy ended his flight, and this signals that they have gained a new perspective on their fears; just like Tommy, she "ain't scared" any longer (333). The fate that had

been waiting for Tommy all his life is what she will address and try to change for the future, to “make sure it don’t happen so easy ever again” (333). In an interview with Jessica Lustig from 1992, Wideman reflects about his last line that he “wanted Bess’s last words to reverberate. I wanted almost to make hers a kind of avenging, or a threatening, voice” to express “the rotten deal [Tommy] got” and to “[arm] the community with a knowledge of itself which will hopefully open the door to a healthier future” (118). Her voice becomes a powerful tool, just like Wideman’s own had gained in strength during the writing of his trilogy. His complex response to Richard Wright, one of his literary ancestors, in *Hiding Place* serves as a clear example of this.

#### “Screaming Through a Wall” in *Sent for You Yesterday*

In *Sent for You Yesterday*, narrator John/Doot plays a more central role, as he is himself one of the novel’s characters. In the third part of the Homewood trilogy, the development, or “unfolding of [his] character,” as Wideman called it, is completed (*The Homewood Books* xi). *Sent for You Yesterday* has a complex narrative structure, in which various characters and events seem to mirror each another. In the novel’s present, “Doot” visits his uncle Carl and Carl’s girlfriend Lucy Tate in Homewood, to listen to stories about the community’s history. These stories are centered on Carl and Lucy’s friend Brother, an albino man who stopped talking when his son died. The novel recollects Carl and Brother’s childhood years, when John French (Carl’s father, Doot’s grandfather) often helped out his friend Albert Wilkes, a rebellious figure and skillful piano player who is eventually murdered by the police when he returns to Homewood after a seven-year absence. Brother resembles Albert in his outstanding piano skills, and in the fact that both characters are consistently described as ghosts.

Carl eventually falls in love with Lucy, Lucy who is in a sense Brother's sister, though both she and Brother are orphans who were adopted by the Tate family. Lucy became an orphan when her mother died in a house fire. Similarly, Brother dies (or commits suicide, this remains unresolved) after his son Junebug is burned to death by his siblings. At that point, Carl (who has fought in the Pacific during the Second World War), Brother, and Lucy share a heroin addiction of several years.

Adding to the complexity of *Sent for You Yesterday* is the fact that it shares a great degree of symbolism, narrative arcs, and themes with the other two parts of the trilogy, which all culminate in the novel in a way that stacks layer upon layer of meaning, as certain aspects of the text acquire growing significance through their interconnectedness. In "The Shape of Memory in *Sent for You Yesterday*," John Bennion mentions that "[a]ll these connections—whether among people, events, or days—are the raw material of the novel," raw material which both "the characters, the narrator, and the reader apprehend similarly, using their mental facilities to organize sensory material into frameworks for thinking, into patterns of perception," an indication of the legwork involved for readers of this text (145-46).

A good example of connections of symbolism and narrative arc that reach through the various parts of the trilogy to culminate in *Sent for You Yesterday* is found when we compare "The Caterpillar Story" in *Damballah* and in Lucy's recollection of Albert Wilkes's murder in *Sent for You Yesterday*—a recollection that is of crucial importance to the novel and on which I will focus the remainder of my analysis in this chapter. In "The Caterpillar Story," Doot's grandmother Freeda French is sitting in the kitchen with Elizabeth (Doot's mother) on her lap. She notices through the window that a "man, a skinny man, came running down the alley after Daddy [John French, Freeda's husband]. He had a big pistol just like Albert Wilkes" (*The Homewood*

*Books 35, 36*). Elizabeth remembers that Freeda was telling her a story at the time. "You told the caterpillar story," Elizabeth said, and Freeda answers that:

Yes, I probably did. If that's what you remember, I probably did. I liked to tell it when things was quiet. Ain't much of a story if there's lots of noise around. Ain't the kind you tell to no bunch of folks been drinking and telling lies all night. Sitting at the window with you at the quiet end of the afternoon was the right time for that story and I probably told it to wake myself up. (37)

This contemplative moment, and the safe space of the home that enables it, is shattered, however, when Freeda notices through the window that somebody is about to shoot at John French (36-37). To warn him she punches her fist through the glass of the window, this way alerting John so that he can make an escape from the armed man sneaking up on him (36-37). Wideman writes that: "the window had been there between her daydream and her Daddy," and "there had been separation, a safe space between, but the glass was shattered now and the outside air in her face and her mama's hand bleeding" (49). Elizabeth, on recalling the moment that her mother punched through the glass, says: "If I shut my eyes I can hear glass falling and hear the shots" (37). Sounds, of falling glass and gunshots, in this case, are the first fragments that travel from the past to the present.

Lucy Tate recalls these sounds as well, when she remembers the murder of Albert Wilkes, who is shot to death by the police in her home while he is playing piano. She explains to Carl (Doot's uncle) that she had to clean up "all that pretty glass from the door they busted in" after the murder (425). Wideman describes how the police rammed through the door of the house to kill Albert Wilkes (425). It could



have been Lucy rather than Elizabeth who says “[i]f I shut my eyes I can hear glass falling and hear the shots,” because the words describe a similar trauma that connects the lives of these women, a violence that has remained constant and that appears to re-occur through time.

As is obvious from both passages, sounds are once again represented as a crucial aspect of these haunting repetitions. They are in the ending of the novel as well. The equation of story and song, of finding a voice and telling a story that the author pursues throughout *The Homewood Books* is revisited in the final scene of *Sent for You Yesterday*, but it is quite clearly a haunted scene, signifying the manner in which narrator Doot has come to reckon with his past. In the scene Doot is in the living room of Lucy Tate’s house, and she tells him that the song he used to dance to as a child was called “Sent for you yesterday, and here you come today” – itself a good indication of the importance of the return of the past to the novel (517). Then Lucy turns on the radio, and Doot and she listen to “Track of my Tears” (518). At that point Brother Tate, who is dead, appears in the doorway, and Albert Wilkes, who has also been dead for years, “aim[s] his behind for the piano bench” (518). Doot starts “moving to the music coming from the radio,” and the novel ends as follows:

I know Albert Wilkes will blow me away [with his great piano skills] so I start loosening up, getting ready. I’m on my feet and Lucy says, *Go boy* and Carl says, *Get it on, Doot*. Everybody joining in now. All the voices. I’m reaching for them and letting them go. Lucy waves. I’m on my own feet. Learning to stand, to walk, learning to dance. (518)

Doot’s finding of his voice, his “reaching for” the voices of his community, culminates in a dance, performed to piano music that is played by the ghost of Albert

Wilkes. It is interesting to note that in "Chair Creaks, But No One Sits There," David Toop mentions that compared to other instruments, the piano is "most conducive to this ghostly activation, its keys either visibly undisturbed or lowering and rising by themselves" (295). In addition, the piano invokes an undertone of violence (the threat of "the lid [...] slammed down on the fingers of the pianist"), and can look like a coffin or a casket (295).

On the one hand, these scenes all contain what I have argued is important for the trilogy as a whole: the representation of Doot's familiarization with his family's traditions as a gradual unfolding of his voice, a voice that gives access to the past and that is structured by African American traditions of singing, playing music, talking, and writing. Doot's learning about them is mirrored by Wideman's own delving into his African American cultural and family background, a process that is traceable in the texts in for example his allusion to blues songs, African American literature, and his family's storytelling. What this allowed him to do is to represent the urban setting of Homewood in a non-reductive way, breaking with a mode of writing that was established in the 1960s and 1970s, as explained in the previous chapter. Wideman's representation of the neighborhood's historical background as one of pride and resistance, signifies an important step away from the ideas of black cultural deficiency that intellectuals both black and white circulated widely during the time of the trilogy's publication (cf. e.g. Katz 440-441).

What we have also seen, however, is that the history of Wideman's neighborhood that he came to know about is quite often a tragic one as well. The piano, as an instrument that guides the final scene of the trilogy, ambiguously provides both joy and invokes an undertone of the threat of violence and death (Toop 295) It is indeed the undertone of violence, or more precisely, the ever-present reality of violence in Homewood's past both distant and recent, that has made Doot's

searching and finding his family's history a haunting endeavor. Hence, if we compare passages like the one from "The Caterpillar Story" with Lucy's recollection of Albert's murder, and with the ending of the trilogy, it becomes clear that the memories that trilogy's characters keep alive by storytelling are often traumatic ones, that the songs they sing and listen to are often mournful, but that they persevere despite being haunted, in keeping with blues traditions.

Delving further into these scenes, as I will do in the remainder of this chapter, it becomes clear that on a symbolic level, using *sound* as a conduit of the past allowed Wideman to explore its great metaphorical potential. As Maria Del Pilar Blanco and Esther Peeren note in their essay "The Ghost in the Machine: Spectral Media," sound has the ability "to cross borders between subjects, and between the subject and the surrounding world" (204). Wideman is aware of this ability, and he uses it to construct the urban space of Homewood in his text, a space where the strict distinction between the sphere of the home and the sphere of the outside world is constantly undermined and under threat of being destroyed by violence, for example, or by echoes that summon the ghostly return of the past. Wideman uses sound to demonstrate this principle because it travels easily from room to room—or, as frequently occurs in the texts, between outside and inside (however they are defined), or between the past and the present.

In his essay "Chair Creaks, But No One Sits There" (2011), David Toop mentions that in supernatural fiction, sound is often interpreted as "an unstable or provisional event, ambiguously situated somewhere between psychological delusion, verifiable scientific phenomenon, and a visitation of spectral forces" (291). In *The Homewood Books*, it is assigned a similarly ambiguous status. If we recall what Clement called "the ghost voice" in *Hiding Place*, we see that it is precisely the way in which it can move through solid space which makes it haunting (317). When Clement stands on

the doorstep of Aunt Bess's house, he realizes that the fugitive Tommy is hiding there because he hears "ghost shouting at him through the wooden walls," as Wideman writes, "the ghost voice inside the shack was warning him, was threatening him, was screaming *I ain't here*" (317). Doot is similarly described by Clement as having "the eyes of the ghost on Bruston Hill. Eyes that could scream across a room, through a wall" (276). The fear that Doot has for his brother who is wanted by the police, *screams through walls*, that is to say, moves through solid space.

What ghosts and sounds have in common for Wideman is their ability to move through walls, and thus to subvert a stable sense of home. The author explains in *Reuben* how "a ghost that will spend its days floating back and forth between to places, two bodies, never able to call either one *home*" (107, emphasis mine). What he demonstrates in *The Homewood Books*, is that because of these ghosts of the past, neither can the characters in this trilogy easily call a place home. In the case of *Hiding Place*, the title of the novella itself conjures up the possibility of the home as a safe place to retreat, in Tommy's case from the police, in Bess's case from encounters with Homewood residents which stir up painful memories. Ultimately, because Bess's home is haunted and because Tommy is too restless to stay there, it does not prove to be much of a hiding place, however.

The space of the home is also destroyed in the two passages alluded to above, in which both Elizabeth and Lucy appear to be haunted by sudden eruptions of violence that Wideman takes particular care to describe as being invasive. To reiterate, Wideman writes about the attempt to kill John French that Freeda stops by punching through a window as follows: "the window had been there between her daydream and her Daddy," and "there had been separation, a safe space between, but the glass was shattered now and the outside air in her face and her mama's hand bleeding" (*The Homewood Books* 49). For Lucy, who witnessed the police bust through the door to

kill Albert, “all that pretty glass from the door they busted in” signifies this as well (425). Fragments of glass symbolize the violent rupture of home here, and they suggests that there is no safety for the residents of Homewood from the intrusion of, for example, the police, a representation that is borne out by a comparison to decades of actual police practices in African American communities across the country (cf. e.g. Alexander 74-78, 124-125).

What ghostly sounds have in common with such violent ruptures is that neither respect established boundaries of ontological concept like “home.” This is what makes them haunting, precisely because such a deconstructive logic is central to the concept. As Marisa Parham explains in *Haunting and Displacement in African American Literature and Culture* (2009):

Haunting [...] is appropriate to a sense of what it means to live in between things—in between cultures, in between times, in between spaces. (3)

Recall that in “Damballah,” Orion “could feel the air of this strange land wearing out his skin,” until it “would not be thick enough to separate what was inside from everything outside” (*The Homewood Books* 11). And similarly, Albert Wilkes’s ghostliness, too, is described by Wideman as “not a matter of being gone but being here and being gone both” (395). The Homewood trilogy furthermore underscores this “in between” principle of haunting through its broad inclusion of liminal spaces, especially doors, which, obviously, connect “what was inside from everything outside” (11). Doors, as I will analyze below, are constantly connected by Wideman to haunting in the trilogy, for precisely this reason.

The shattered door of Lucy Tate’s house is one example of the door as a symbol of transitional space, a boundary, but Wideman makes more frequent use of it, almost

always to represent something that is ontologically “in-between,” and not something onto itself, just like home cannot be something onto itself under the constant threat of violence or the memory of violence in these texts. Already in the second paragraph of “Damballah,” the very opening of the book, Orion remembers

the eldest priest chalking a design on the floor of the sacred  
obi. Drawing *the watery door* no living hand could push  
open, *the crossroads where the spirits passed between worlds*. His  
skin was becoming like that in-between place the priest  
scratched in the dust. (11, emphasis mine)

As we know from Houston A. Baker Jr.’s seminal monograph *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature*, the crossing sign, a frequent image in blues songs, “is the antithesis of a place marker. It signifies, always, change, motion, transience, process” (202).<sup>21</sup> Accordingly, in his representations of doors as such crossroads spaces Wideman draws once more from African American cultural traditions; the door as a changing, ghostly non-place where spirits pass through is frequently represented in the texts. In the passage above, “the watery door” is described as an “in-between place,” just like Orion’s skin is becoming an “in-between place” (*The Homewood Books* 11). Recall that in *Hiding Place*, Clement first learns about the “ghost” Tommy living with Aunt Bess when he’s standing in front of her unopened front door, debating whether to enter and hearing Tommy move in the house (202, 317). Similarly, Wideman writes that Tommy “had stomped through her [Aunt Bess’s] black, dreamless sleep and cracked all the boards of her door and ripped the covers of her bed” with his arrival (329). And Bess has to “push him [the ghost of her blues whistling husband] out the door [...] [u]nload him out the door” before she burns her

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<sup>21</sup> Cf. e.g. Gysin as well.

house down in the final scene of the novella (332). In *Sent for You Yesterday*, narrator Doot mentions in the opening pages, when he imagines the youth of Carl and Brother that:

I hear the door slam behind Carl and echo up and down  
Cassina [a street in Homewood] in the morning stillness. My  
grandmother [Freedra] cringes because she's told him a  
thousand times not to run outdoors like a wild Indian, not to  
bust through doors [...], and each time he flies through the  
frame and the door swings slamming shut behind him. (349)

A feeling of trepidation upon moving through a door is also expressed in the scene of Albert Wilkes's returning to the Tate house seven years after he fled Homewood because he killed someone. Having already moved through a "dark tunnel," a "door you pushed through to get into Homewood" to return, Albert calls to Mr. Tate (the man who adopted Lucy and Brother) in the vestibule, a scene with gothic overtones that I will quote at length here (381):

*Tate. Mr. Tate* [Albert calls]. He was talking to a dead man.  
Mr. Tate nearly dead seven years ago so he's surely dead  
now. And dead people could answer. Could blow that cold,  
dead breath in your face, in your ear, tickle the bare skin  
back of your neck with those icy ghost fingers. Wilkes  
shivered in the dark vestibule. Peered through the Tates'  
colored front-door glass [the glass that will be shattered by  
the police when they come to murder him]. His hand  
dropped automatically to the brass knob and turned and  
pushed. The heavy door squealed then shuddered when it  
hit the high spot still not shaved after seven years. (384-385)

Years later, the entrance to the Tate house has not lost its power to haunt. Carl mentions that “he couldn’t help thinking of dead people” whenever he was there, “in the hallway when he busted in from the street and didn’t see anybody” (419). This is when “[o]ld dead Mr. Tate and dead Albert Wilkes dressed up in sheets and wagging their clammy ghost hands” come to Carl’s mind (419). In the narrative’s present, Lucy remembers Brother, and she sometimes feels his presence in the house, which involves the brass door knob as well:

[w]hen her fingers wrap around the front doorknob and she thinks she feels warmth in the metal, the print of his hand so when she turns it and opens the door he’ll be there in the wingback chair grinning at her. (441)

Brother, himself something of an in-between figure as both an albino and a black man, is himself often described in connection to doorways, in-between places. Samantha (his lover) reminisces that she “[k]new he was a ghost first time he come to my door” (450). She remembers that “[h]e stands in the doorway. A white blackman. [...] She’d never seen a ghost before” (450). And in the final scene of the novel, as we have seen, Brother Tate “appears in the doorway” when Doot dances (518). The frequent pairing of representations of doorways with eerie, haunting sounds is a trope of gothic fiction, as David Toop points out (288-89):

The gate’s rusty hinges creak dismally, and when the latch clicks into its socket, ‘with a sharp clang,’ the narrator is startled [...]. Once again, sound serves as a presentiment of events to come. (289)



It provides hence another example of how neatly Wideman ties the various symbols which he works with in his text together. This is ultimately how the “patterns of perception” which “[a]ll these connections” between various parts of the trilogy establish, which John Bennion mentions, work (145-146): If we keep close track of one metaphorical level throughout the texts, we notice how it is invariably linked to another, which, if we would keep close track of it, would turn out to be invariably linked to *yet* another. Hence, we have seen that the haunting of voices from the past is linked to violent, intrusive memories, which is linked to the deconstruction of the home as a place of retreat, which is linked to the “in-between” status of crossroads and doorways, which in turn are linked to ghosts and haunting sounds, but, almost in the way that a Moebius strip works, at times it remains unclear how to pin down exactly where one of these metaphorical concepts ends and where another begins in the text.

### Conclusion

This chapter argues that the sounds of screaming through walls, of screams across time, alongside voices that give characters the strength to connect to ancestors in an effort to grasp history, are the key to understanding the haunting representation of Homewood that Wideman constructs in his trilogy. Wideman uses the medium of sound to convey haunting in the trilogy because in writing these texts he allowed himself to acknowledge the oral traditions of storytelling that he had known since he was a child, a voice which he had now found a way to include into his writing (*The Homewood Books* x). In the manner that hearing the word “Damballah” teaches the young child a vernacular to talk to ghostly ancestors in the story of that name, Wideman hearing his family’s history retold at a gathering after his grandmother’s

funeral amounted to a creative awakening, an awakening that forms the narrative arc of Doot in the trilogy, “the gradual unfolding of [his] character,” the “voice inseparable from the Homewood voices I’ve been hearing since my ears and eyes opened,” as Wideman writes (xi).

In addition, focusing on the medium of sound allows the author to represent the recurrence of violent histories that haunt Homewood and that echo through the narrative. Echoes of violence can “scream through walls,” as Wideman writes, subverting the sense of security associated with the home as a hiding place (276). The idea that “home becomes unfamiliar,” which, as Avery Gordon argues, is a key component of haunting, is expressed in this way in the texts (*Ghostly Matters* xvi). The repetition of fates in the trilogy, as seen in for example the mirroring of the lives of Brother Tate and Albert Wilkes, or Tommy and his intertextual counterpart Bigger Thomas, the manner in which these repetitions are connected to home-spaces, so clearly in *Hiding Place* as well as in *Sent for You Yesterday*, are all instances in which the “over-and-done-with comes alive,” as when Brother Tate and Albert Wilkes reveal themselves to Doot in the trilogy’s ending (*Ghostly Matters* xvi).

Haunting permeates the trilogy to the extent that it becomes clear what it meant for Wideman to turn towards his neighborhood’s history and its cultural traditions. At times, it seems that the difficulty of the lives he engages with, in which rupturing violence forms a constant danger, both in the past and in the present, threatens to smother any glimmer of hope the reader might feel for either a specific character or for the neighborhood of Homewood as a whole. It is often represented as a world in which “[t]hey kill everything,” as Carl remarks in fact, “kill everything worth a good goddamn in Homewood” (*The Homewood Books* 440). Several characters voice this sense of despair. Brother, when he walks the Homewood streets, can smell “death in

the air,” which could mean that it is “just Homewood [that is] dying,” as the narrator states (489-90). Brother imagines

[t]he graves in Allegheny Cemetery opening, a wind flood  
floating them through the streets so the streets are crowded  
and empty and everywhere he steps, his feet crush  
somebody’s dry bones. [...] [He] thinks about lying down  
right there in the middle of the pavement [...], [a]nd  
listen[ing] while the sidewalks die and the bricks tumble  
down and the sky cracks, and rain dry as talcum powder  
buries everything. (489)

What Wideman ultimately took away from confronting these haunting repetitions, perhaps, is a way to move on from them, however, in a manner beholden to blues traditions. After all, the appearance of the ghosts of Albert and Brother in the final scene of the trilogy is, despite everything, a happy occurrence—John/Doot is not afraid of them when he sees them, and says that he “know[s] how good it is going to sound” to hear them play piano (518). Facing and acknowledging his history has helped him as well as haunted him: he has found, along with his own, “[a]ll the voices. I’m reaching them and letting them go,” as he states, and he has “learn[ed] to dance” to them (518). What Wideman had found as well was a way to represent the urban community that he had sought to write about in a way that was not reductive, but that allowed for complexity and joy without marginalizing suffering. The ending of the trilogy suggests that at this point in his career, he had perhaps, as Derrida urges in *Specters of Marx*, “learn[ed] to live with ghosts, in the upkeep, the conversation, the company, or companionship [...] of ghosts” and thus to practice precisely the “politics of memory, of inheritance, and of generations” that Wideman

had searched for (xviii). It is what makes *The Homewood Books* such an effective trilogy, a text that through its ambiguity remains “[n]either in life nor in death *alone*,” but rather manages to respectfully represent both, in this way effectively doing away with the essentialism of urban realism that writers of Wideman’s generation sought to defeat (Derrida xvii, emphasis in original, Dubey 14).

*Philadelphia Fire*

**The Past, Present, and Future of the MOVE Bombing**

The next novel under consideration in this thesis is *Philadelphia Fire*, first published in 1990, which Wideman wrote in the wake of the MOVE bombing of 1985. The book is perhaps his most famous work of fiction—it won a PEN/Faulkner award, a distinction which at the time made Wideman the only writer to win this award more than once (Philip Roth joined him in 2001, and then even won a third in 2007). In the novel, Wideman describes the MOVE bombing, a momentous event of police brutality, as follows:

On May 13, 1985, in West Philadelphia, after bullets, water cannon and high explosives had failed to dislodge the occupants of 6221 Osage Avenue, a bomb was dropped from a state police helicopter and exploded atop the besieged row house. In the ensuing fire fifty-three houses were destroyed, 262 people left homeless. The occupants of the row house on Osage were said to be members of an organization called MOVE. Eleven of them, six adults and five children, were killed in the assault that commenced when they refused to obey a police order to leave their home. A grand jury subsequently determined that no criminal charges should be brought against the public officials who planned and perpetrated the assault. (97)

As becomes clear from the description, the unpunished police destruction of African American hope, property, and lives, that has a long history in the United States, found one of its nadirs in this disaster. In an interview with Charles Rowell given in

1989, Wideman indicates that the event held a far-reaching meaning for him, “in the same sense that you can see the universe in a blade of grass,” as he explains, and calls it “particularly important because it was *buried*,” (100, emphasis mine). It was buried, but far from dead—the crime went unpunished, and the conditions which made this disaster possible remained in place—and hence it came back to haunt.

Of the three works I analyze in this dissertation, *Philadelphia Fire* is Wideman’s most stylistically avant-garde work. Rather than providing a factual exposé on the disaster, the author produced a fragmentized and chronologically confusing narrative that poses a challenging read to his audience, even more so than *The Homewood Books*. Scholars like Madhu Dubey and Françoise Palleau-Papin have read the novel’s aesthetics as an extension of the “televsual mode” of flipping the channels (Dubey 129). In the book, a character named John Wideman first learns about the MOVE bombing while watching television on a Monday night with his wife Judy, in bed at home in Laramie. He is flipping through the channels in a teasing way that he knows his wife pretends that she does not like but that she secretly enjoys (*Philadelphia Fire* 99-103). The Wideman character is “the director, driver, pilot, boss hoss, captain, [because] the switch is in your hand,” but the passage turns less playful and switches to a short-sentenced staccato style when the couple sees how “[a] city burns on the screen” (100). Wideman continues the passage as follows:

Any large city. Anywhere in America. CNN. Cable News  
Network. Row houses in flames. Rooflines silhouetted  
against a dark sky. Something’s burning. We watch. Wonder  
whose turn it is now. Whole city blocks engulfed. It must be  
happening in another country. A war. A bombing raid. (100)

The Wideman character and Judy learn that the fire is burning on Osage Avenue in West Philadelphia, which is a street where they used to live, and they realize that, as noted above, “[o]ur old row house [is] somewhere in there, down in the darkness of the silhouette’s belly” (100). The violence that destroyed their old house is mirrored by the television’s destruction of their sense of security and their sense of feeling at home in their own bedroom. In this sense it functions in a way that sound and music do in *The Homewood Books*, that is to say the images on the television once more subvert the idea of the home as a ‘hiding place’ from racial violence. Wideman achieves this effect in the scene by showing the Wideman character and Judy at their most intimate, namely, naked. As the passage states: “this plump breast that is part of this woman [Judy], part of this scene which includes the image of a city where we once lived, burning, somewhere, for some reason. Burning in other bedrooms. In other cities” (101-102). We see here again how haunting makes the home unfamiliar, to paraphrase Avery Gordon (*Ghostly Matters* xvi). The Wideman character simply declares that “[t]hat’s how I learned about the Philadelphia fire” (*Philadelphia Fire* 103).

The television scene is so intimately connected with the metonymical exploding of a bomb, the effects of which the couple watch on the screen and feel reverberate in their bedroom, that one could argue that it is the MOVE bombing as such which shatters and fragments the novel’s narrative style and chronological coherence, rather than an adherence to a channel-flipping television style. As Françoise Palleau-Papin points out about the scene, this “shuffling [of] images on a television screen” cannot distract from “the intrinsic substance of the news of the raid on Osage Avenue” (650). Indeed, the news “blows to pieces every belief or illusion [of] the narrator” in a manner that is similar to “an explosion or series of explosions as in a bombing raid,” as she argues (650).

What is equally important about the scene, however, is the sense of narrative action it leaves unresolved. As Wideman describes, “[s]omething’s burning. We watch,” representing TV-watching as a detached practice of consuming this tragedy—whereas the Wideman character was “the captain” while flipping the channels in the scene, seeing the news of the bombing appears to have frozen him (*Philadelphia Fire* 99, 100). In his preface to *Haunted Lives*, David Marriott ponders what happens when images of violence and loss are broadcast to those who are “literally shaken by [their] intimacy to [such] documentary images (xiv). The short answer would be that viewers who have that intimacy towards the images become haunted by them. And, as we know from Avery Gordon, haunting is often characterized by the fact that it “produces something-to-be-done,” precisely because it registers “the harm inflicted or the loss sustained by a social violence done in the past or being done in the present” (“Some Thoughts on Haunting and Futurity” 2, 1). Politically speaking, haunting is the indicator of “unfinished business” that will have to be taken care of at some point, which means that, as Gordon explains, “one can say that futurity is imbricated or interwoven into the very scene of haunting itself” (“Some Thoughts on Haunting and Futurity” 3).

This is a dynamic which, as I will argue in this chapter, is central to *Philadelphia Fire*, most clearly in the Cudjoe narrative, which ponders the implications of the MOVE bombing for future generations of African Americans living in the city, and which leaves him haunted because he feels that he is unable to help this community. Cudjoe wants to explain to those around him that “[i]f they offed [i.e. killed] them people on Osage yesterday just might be you today. Or tomorrow” (*Philadelphia Fire*



193), investing the massacre—and the fact that no public officials faced criminal charges for it—with a foretelling power.<sup>22</sup>

In the novel, Wideman uses his protagonist Cudjoe's engagement with *The Tempest* to explore whether the "something-to-be-done" which haunts him can ultimately be translated into political action. If, at the end of *The Homewood Books*, the narrator to an extent learned to live with ghosts, then *Philadelphia Fire* poses a different conundrum, namely, the possible ways in which one can live with a haunting that pertains not only to the past but to the present and to the future as well, that to an extent blurs their boundaries because the structural conditions that underlie the inequality which produces this haunting remain unchanged. The question of Cudjoe's agency in such a blurred time-zone—how can he change the past, the present, the future, how is he implicated in them?—is furthermore thrown into stark relief by the author by giving Cudjoe the profession of writer, which places Wideman in the position to comment on the idea of intellectual pursuits (including his own) in the face of enduring and ever-escalating catastrophe.

As we have seen in *Ghostly Matters*, Gordon explains that haunting "alters the experience of being in time, the way we separate the past, the present, and the future" (xvi). This, too, becomes apparent from Wideman's aesthetic style in *Philadelphia Fire*, in which he blends these chronological spheres, in allusive passages in which the boundaries between them appear to dissolve. Wideman's novel is characterized by disorienting representations of time and space even more so than his other works are,

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<sup>22</sup> This idea was recently reiterated by Mumia Abu-Jamal, in an interview with the radio show *Democracy Now!* on May 13, 2015, at the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the bombing titled "Move Bombing at 30". Abu-Jamal stated that "[w]hen many people stood in silence, or worse, in bitter acquiescence, to the bombing, shooting and carnage of May 13, 1985, upon MOVE, they opened the door to the ugliness of today's police terrorism from coast to coast. [...] May 13, 1985, led to the eerie Robocop present."

conforming to descriptions that the text self-reflexively offers at various points.

Halfway through the story, the narrator explains that:

We all swim in the same sea of time. [...] We can hold in our hands proof of the endless ebb, flow and possibility. We can remember that what brought us here takes us back and brings us again. [...] We aren't able to touch the same place once again but what's there has been there a long time and so we've been there too, and so will again. (*Philadelphia Fire* 119)

This description is similar to an clarification that Wideman gave of “Great Time” in a 2000 interview, a conception of time that several scholars have argued is central to the author’s work, and which he describes as “non-linear because it’s always been here, it always will be here. It’s like an ocean” (L. Baker 267).<sup>23</sup> Wideman stresses that “[n]ot only the living, but the dead – everything that has ever happened – is floating around in this medium of time” (267).

Likewise, the novel itself constantly (and without much warning to the reader) switches back and forth between different time periods. Cudjoe’s haunted journey is often interrupted, told backwards, or seemingly disappears in the margins while other narratives take over. *Philadelphia Fire* is divided into three parts of roughly the same length, which are all written in a different style. Part One, the most accessible section of the book, is narrated by Cudjoe, a novelist in his early fifties who wants to

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<sup>23</sup> For further discussions of the importance of “Great Time,” which Wideman explains is way of conceiving time important for West-African and Native American cultures (L. Baker 267), cf. e.g. Ulrich Eschborn’s *Stories of Survival: John Edgar Wideman’s Representations of History* (2011) and Heather Russell Andrade’s “Race, Representation, and Intersubjectivity in the Works of John Edgar Wideman” (2006).

write about the MOVE bombing, which took place in his hometown of Philadelphia. When he first hears about the massacre, Cudjoe is living on the Greek island Mykonos, in the middle of a ten-year exile from the US, which he left after his marriage fell apart. His desire to write about the disaster, and to find the sole survivor of the massacre, a boy named Simba who has since disappeared, brings Cudjoe home to Philadelphia. There he meets former MOVE member Margaret Jones for interviews about the organization and for information about Simba, but Margaret does not trust Cudjoe and she is skeptical about his book project. Cudjoe also meets with Timbo, an old friend with whom he shares a past in 1960s political activism, but whom he has since grown cynical and become involved in the corrupt system of city politics as a cultural attaché to mayor Goode (the mayor who gave the green light to execute the MOVE bombing). In Part One there are various extended reminiscences by Cudjoe in which he reflects on his life in the United States before his departure. The reader learns about a trip Cudjoe, his wife, and their children made to visit Cudjoe's editor Sam on a vacation island. Cudjoe explains that since then, Sam, his wife Rachel, and their daughter Cassandra have all passed away.

Part Two establishes a new reading method. It alternates sections that further develop the narrative of Cudjoe with segments about a character named Wideman, who is "portrayed as the authorial first-person narrator who has invented the character Cudjoe" (Eschborn *Stories of Survival* 135). It should be pointed out that *Philadelphia Fire* was written during a period of intense personal crisis for Wideman. In 1986, his 16-year-old son Jake suffered a psychotic breakdown and killed his roommate at a summer camp, for which he was convicted to twenty-five years to life imprisonment in 1988, as mentioned in my introductory chapter (Byerman 19). Part Two of the novel addresses Jake's imprisonment, and the author explained in an interview in 1995 that "[o]ne of the subjects in *Philadelphia Fire* was the loss of

children" (P. Smith 143). This was a nightmarish twist of fate that followed in the wake of the success and recognition that came to the author after the publication of *Brothers and Keepers* (1984), an autobiographical work in which he comes to terms with the life sentence of his brother Robby. The devastating way in which Wideman's literary achievement on the topic of racialized mass incarceration coincided with the tragedy that involved his son is the immediate context in which he wrote *Philadelphia Fire*. Despite the many similarities between John Wideman the writer and the character Wideman in the novel, however, Wideman himself has pointed out in an interview that "all the voices [in the novel] are fictional," and are intended "to create certain effects within the novel," which is why most critics refer to the "Wideman persona" or the "Wideman character" in discussions of the text, as I will do here as well (Presson 108).

Part Two of *Philadelphia Fire* also contains extensive quotes from, for example, academic texts, and paragraphs that read like newspaper- and article-clippings. The Wideman-character segments are written in an autobiographical tone, and focus on the psychological aftermath of the imprisonment of his son. The reader comes to realize that just like Cudjoe searches for the boy Simba, the Wideman character tries to reestablish a connection to his son. The segments that develop Cudjoe's story in Part Two focus on his and Timbo's attempt back in the sixties to stage a rewritten version of Shakespeare's *The Tempest* with black schoolchildren in a public park, a production that ends up never being performed because of rain during the weekend in which it was supposed to be staged.

In Part Three, the style of the book changes once again. There are sections narrated by J.B., a homeless man, Richard Corey, a former MOVE sympathizer who has become an informant, and several others. The characters in Part Three appear to exist in the same diegetic world as Cudjoe, whereas characters that appear in the

Wideman-character narrative of Part Two do not. J.B.'s narration is paranoid and full of the imaginary associations of his broken-down mind. He is lit on fire by a group of teenagers and dies while he tries to crawl into a dried-up fountain on Independence Square. Richard Corey commits suicide by jumping from a building after he failed "to save [Philadelphia] from itself (*Philadelphia Fire* 179). In the last scenes of Part Three, the novel returns to Cudjoe, when he attends a memorial service for the MOVE massacre on Independence Square that, to his dismay, barely draws any participants.

If we want to analyze the "something-to-be-done" that the MOVE bombing creates for Cudjoe in the novel, that which Del Pilar Blanco and Peeren call the "specter that impose[s] a demand for attention and, crucially, action," the first thing to note is that it pushes the character into motion, as it were ("Spectropolitics" 94). The bombing draws Cudjoe out of his ten-year hiatus on Mykonos, where "[he] wasn't required to do a goddamn thing ... [d]ay after day of nothing and nobody gave a fuck" —but now that he has learned what happened to his old neighborhood this no longer feels like an appropriate way to spend his time (*Philadelphia Fire* 87). In the opening scenes of the novel, on the island, Cudjoe has apparently strayed from the ideals of political activism that had moved him in the 1960s. It is the "[s]tory of a fire and a lost boy that br[ings] him home," the boy that is "a lost limb haunting him since he read about the fire in a magazine," and Cudjoe states that "[h]e must find the child to be whole again" (7, 8). Moreover, he "want[s] to do something about the silence" that has surfaced in the wake of the disaster (19). The way in which Cudjoe is haunted by the bombing, then, is quite self-evident. However, as the reader gradually finds out, Cudjoe's wish to break the silence and his desire to find the boy—the two forces that set the narrative in motion, as it were—remain unfulfilled; he never locates Simba, and the memorial service for the MOVE victims in the final scene of the novel is not the call to attention Cudjoe hoped it would be. It also remains unclear if Cudjoe

ever manages to write the book about MOVE, as Madhu Dubey points out in *Signs and Cities* (88). In the final scene, the haunting of the disaster stirs Cudjoe into action once more, as he, incredulous about the fact that “Philadelphia ain’t coming” to the memorial, concocts a plan to “recruit a crowd for the memorial service” by outright explaining to bystanders the significance of the massacre (*Philadelphia Fire* 191, 193). He dissuades himself from doing so, however, and “leads no parade back to the square” after all, as Wideman writes (193).<sup>24</sup>

After Cudjoe decides against asking his fellow Philadelphians to join the memorial service, he experiences the insight that “[t]he burden of returning is remembering he has no secrets. No answers” (193). In a sense, Cudjoe’s narrative arc in *Philadelphia Fire* is his coming to terms with a failed attempt to escape from the knowledge that he has “no answers,” no solutions to the various forms of violence facing Philadelphia’s black communities.

### The Return of *The Tempest*

By reconstructing the scattered fragments of his narrative, the reader gradually finds out that Cudjoe walked away from being politically active, from “believ[ing] we could turn this country around,” as he and Timbo believed in the sixties (82). This disillusionment seems to be bound up with the failed “production of *The Tempest* by Cudjoe in the late late 1960s, outdoors, in a park in West Philly,” as the Wideman character describes it (132). Shakespeare’s *The Tempest* (written and first staged in 1611) plays a crucial role in both Cudjoe’s life and in the structure of the novel as a whole. In a sense, *The Tempest* works as an absent presence in the text, a play that continually hovers on the border of being there and not there in the novel, a symbol

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<sup>24</sup> I will return to an analysis of the novel’s closing scene in the final part of this chapter.

of Cudjoe's young hopes for political change that did not come to fruition, and that returns in a different form to his world, as we shall see. It is intertwined with the specter of the bombing and takes on symbolic significance for Cudjoe as an emblem of his loss of a sense of carrying out effective actions.

For Cudjoe, back in the sixties, rewriting and staging the play with schoolchildren meant teaching them "this immortal play 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" (127). In reality, too, *The Tempest* had become a key text for postcolonial criticism in this decade. It had been rewritten from a black perspective by Aimé Césaire in 1969, for example, in a way that is reminiscent of Cudjoe's attempt to rewrite it and stage it with an all-black cast (Coleman 112). In a 2010 interview with Ulrich Eschborn, Wideman remarked that "[t]he business about Cudjoe and Philadelphia and the kids doing *The Tempest* as a junior high school production—that all happened. That was going on when I was a college student. I knew a guy who was teaching in the public schools, and he, in fact, was trying to put on a production of *The Tempest*" ("To Democratize the Elements of the Historical Record" 992). He adds that "I remember very well the kids sitting around and doing it. Some way or another, it didn't come off. It was never done. I don't remember whether it was rained out or the project just fizzled or the kid had to go back to college and didn't see it through, but I remember the kids' disappointment" (93).

In the novel itself, because of rainy weather—"the city pisses on us ... [r]ains two days and nights steady," as Cudjoe puts it—the performance of the play has to be canceled (150). Shortly after, Cudjoe quits his teaching job at the school where he was preparing to stage the play, a "deserting" of the children which he has "always felt guilty about," because he "couldn't keep coming back to [...] failing every day. Little

teensy, teensy successes and mountains of failure. Couldn't take it," as Wideman writes (149, 150). Cudjoe mentions that he used to believe that he'd "stumble up on it one fine day. The kids still kids, meeting, doing the play in the park," but that this hope has faded in him since then (150).

Leslie W. Lewis argues that "[a]s a production that never happened it remains full of possibility in Cudjoe's mind, remains suspended in an always already present" (151). But this reading disregards the reminiscence that Cudjoe has about staging the play from, as Madhu Dubey describes it, Cudjoe's "disillusioned perspective of the 1980s" (91). Indeed this appears to be the case. As Wideman presents the narrator's thoughts:

For a long while I didn't believe. Convincing other people I could pull it off was my way of keeping the idea alive. I didn't believe a word I was saying, but if they believed, well I was encouraged to talk more. Bounce the notion off someone else. Easier than trying to convince myself, easier than lying to myself. I can look back now and admit. Yes, I was depending on an illusion. I was strengthening myself by feeding other people a lie. [...] If all these other people believe this bullshit, this harebrained project, what's wrong with me, why can't I believe it? Why should I be different? I talked them into talking me into doing it. If that makes any sense. (*Philadelphia Fire* 146)

Importantly, however, although Cudjoe walks away from *The Tempest*, the play will not leave him alone. Various elements in his life start to take shape according to the parameters of the play, as though it were its secret blueprint—that is to say, he does "stumble up on it," in various ways (150). Although he has left *The Tempest* for what it is, along with the hope of seeing it performed someday in the manner that he had



envisioned, the promise that it once held for him starts to haunt Cudjoe's life in a nightmarish way. While he had hoped for "Real guerilla theater. Better than a bomb. Black kids in the park doing Shakespeare will blow people's mind," this does not take place due to the fact that "[i]t rained. Two days and two nights," which can be seen as a storm in itself (143, 149). And rather than the figurative blowing of people's minds, in the end an actual bomb will be dropped on the neighborhood (Dubey 89), which Wideman metaphorically connects to *The Tempest* as well:

a storm bursts through the needle's eye. A tempest spins  
round the tall wing, cocooning it. A spitting kicking raucous  
web of sound and light and rushing dark cloud. A fist closes  
upon the intruder and wracks it ... the fiery ball of tempest  
... As abruptly as it is dropped upon its prey, the clutter of  
storm swirls away. (*Philadelphia Fire* 148)

Cudjoe's narrative is not a full-fledged retelling of *The Tempest*, even though the novel begins with a shipwreck and Cudjoe gazing over the sea from a Mediterranean island, in much the same way that Prospero does in the opening of the play (3-4). Rather than retelling Shakespeare's play, *Philadelphia Fire* borrows several of its key elements and themes, in a manner similar to *Native Son's* influence on *Hiding Place*, and, as we will see later, *A Tale of Two Cities* hovering presence in *Two Cities*. The way in which Cudjoe's exile on Mykonos repeats Prospero's Mediterranean exile, and the way in which a "fiery ball of tempest" is unleashed during the MOVE bombing, stage an "involuntary repetition" that is characteristic of the uncanny experience, and, as Avery Gordon reminds us, "[u]ncanny experiences are haunting experiences" (*Philadelphia Fire* 148, Gordon *Ghostly Matters* 50, 51). The uncanny "forces upon us the idea of something fateful and inescapable," and this is exactly how *The Tempest*

figures for Cudjoe in the narrative (Freud, quoted in Gordon 51). Avery Gordon explains that:

Something familiar “and old-established in the mind and which has become alienated from it ... through the process of repression” (Freud, “The Uncanny” 241) has transmuted into an unsettling specter. This is important. We are haunted by somethings we have been involved in [...]” (51)

And so it is for Cudjoe as well. That which he has been involved in, his past of political activism and the attempt to stage the play which was a symbol of that spirit of activism, comes back to him even though he had sought to escape it by moving to Greece. The further escalation of inequality and police violence in his old neighborhood since he left it poses to him the question of what would have happened if he had not retreated from it to live by himself.

How can we further contextualize Wideman’s use of this famous text? Thomas Cartelli argues that critical engagements with Shakespeare’s play went through various stages in the second half of the twentieth century. He explains that postcolonial writers “made a common practice of responding to, and rewriting, the Prospero-Caliban configuration during the first stage of postcoloniality,” citing various African and Caribbean novels published in the 1950s and 1960s, among them the abovementioned Aime Césaire’s *A Tempest* (1969) (83). Cartelli explains that a second wave of critical engagement in the 1970s and 1980s built on these works and looked at Shakespeare’s play in a more metaphorical way, in which “the names Prospero, Caliban, Ariel, and Miranda now operate[d] as interpretive touchstones [...] in writing as far afield as the poetry of Ireland’s Seamus Heaney and the novels of the Canadian Margaret Atwood, the Australian David Malouf, and the South African

Nadine Gordimer" (83-84). Gloria Naylor, belonging to Wideman's generation of African American writers, too, drew on the play, for her novel *Mama Day* (1988), in which it is the title character Miranda "Mama" Day who acquires magical powers and not her father Prospero, thus shifting the focus from the father's to the daughter's point of view (Storhoff 37). It is interesting to note how in the case of *Philadelphia Fire* both generations of responses to *The Tempest* play a role; at the level of Cudjoe's diegetic world, there is the 1960s rewriting of the play, while the novel as such can be said to be part of the tail-end of the 1970s and 1980s wave of works that utilize the play at a more metaphorical level.

Wideman uses the play to further develop the question of Cudjoe's power as a writer in the face of calamities as enormous as the MOVE bombing. He does so by partially modeling Cudjoe on Prospero, for example: Cudjoe shares numerous characteristics with Prospero, whose troubles began when he started "neglecting worldly ends, all dedicated to closeness [i.e. seclusion] and the bettering of [his] mind" (Shakespeare *The Tempest* I.2. 89-90). Prospero's exile to an island and his turn away from the world towards his books, the only source of his power—"without them he's but a sot" (III.2. 93-94)—reverberates in Cudjoe's entanglement. Cudjoe's exile to Mykonos, where he is "lonely lots of the time" turned out to be a mistaken undertaking as well, and his status as a writer and intellectual places him at odds with for example Timbo and Margaret Jones when he interacts with them later in the plot, both of whom question his profession (*Philadelphia Fire* 87). Timbo jokingly calls Cudjoe a "Distinguished Negro Intellectual," and urges him that rather than write a book about the MOVE bombing, he should produce the kind of novel that can be sold in Hollywood, so that he can make some money (74, 88). Margaret Jones, the former MOVE activist that Cudjoe interviews, is outright hostile to Cudjoe's project and tells him that the world "[d]ont need a book" about the bombing to find out its true

meaning (19). Susan M. Pearsall has convincingly interpreted Cudjoe's narrative as his gradual acceptance of the "gesture of authorial abdication, a replication of Prospero's yielding of his magical powers at the end of *The Tempest*" (43). Moreover, it is interesting to note that at the time that *The Tempest* was written "eloquence ... was still conceived of as the prime technology, the primary motive force in transforming the world," as Eric Cheyfitz explains in *The Poetics of Imperialism*, and that the play "conceives of power in terms of eloquence" (23). By expanding on this theme of the play, Wideman oblique reflects and comments on what other rewritings of the play may or may not have accomplished, as well as what writing as such can accomplish.

In addition, Martin Butler points out that what is essential to Shakespeare's play is "the dialogue between illusion and disillusion," which creates a tension between enchantment ("life as we would like it to be") and disenchantment, which both emanate from Prospero (xxii). Wideman made this tension between enchantment and disenchantment a defining characteristic of Cudjoe as well. Charley, a minor character in Part Two of *Philadelphia Fire*, interprets the message of the play as being about "[t]he power of the artist to create, transform. Poet as savior" (145). In the opening of Part Two of the novel, a narrative voice which appears to be that of the Wideman character eulogizes such enchantment, "life as we would like it to be," and its connection to literary writing as well. As the novel states:

Pretend for a moment that none of this happened [i.e. the MOVE massacre]. Pretend that it never happened before nor will again. Pretend we can imagine events into existence or out of existence. Pretend we have the power to live our lives as we choose. Imagine our fictions imagining us (98).

Cudjoe as a character emblemizes this tension between enchantment and disenchantment, he is caught between illusion and disillusion, between seeing his production of *The Tempest* as “a great idea. Real guerilla theater” and looking back on it as “bullshit, [a] harebrained project” years later (143, 146). His doubts about the artist’s power “to create, transform,” to be a “savior” for people, are the key to his unfulfilled sense of wanting to do something about the silence that haunts him after the massacre. He is discouraged from writing about it by those who in a sense stand closer to the bombing than he does (like Timbo and Margaret Jones), who do not seem to think this is a useful project, as noted above.

Cudjoe’s narrative is not the only level on which Shakespeare’s play figures in *Philadelphia Fire*, however. In Part Two of the novel, the Wideman character directly addresses his readers, to stress that:

This is the central event. 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 late 1960s, outdoors, in a park in West Philly. Though it comes here, wandering like a Flying 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 fire [...]. (132)

The appeal of *The Tempest* as an explanatory device for Wideman is thus manifold. He uses it to show how Cudjoe is haunted by his personal past—the abandonment of the school children—as well as his present—its theme of the power of poets, writing, eloquence, and words, plays itself out in Cudjoe’s life. But the play figures in the novel’s larger conception of history and time as such as well. Besides pointing out

that *The Tempest* should be regarded as “the bounty and hub,” that is to say, the center of meaning “of all else written about the fire” (132), he explains that:

If Cudjoe did not live to see his play hatched, he did spin from the endless circles of possibility that second meaning cached in the drama’s title: time. Borrowed time, bought time, saved time.

So this narrative is a sport of time, what it’s about is stopping time, catching time. Watch how the play works like an engine, a heart in the story’s chest, churning, pumping, tying something to something else, that sign by which we know time’s conspiring, expiring. (133)

Wideman’s doing away with past, present, and future as separate spheres, in the novel, as explained in the opening of this chapter, is accomplished with the help of *The Tempest*, which “wander[s] ... in and out of the narrative,” crucially, “like a *Flying Dutchman*,” which, to be clear, is the mythical ghost ship that forever sails the seas, spelling doom on those that sight it (132, emphasis mine). *The Tempest* “is never present as such,” in the novel—never outright performed—yet it makes its presence felt, in the novel’s scattered and desynchronized form, for example (Derrida xvii, emphasis in original). And given the circular notion of time in the novel, the question arises again to what extent the idea of “[t]he power of the artist to create, transform. Poet as savior,” that the play supposedly expresses matters, if history is bound to repeat itself (*Philadelphia Fire* 145). Making “this production of *The Tempest* staged by Cudjoe in the late late 1960s, outdoors, in a park in West Philly” the “central event” of the novel, Wideman offers his readers the ability to decide for themselves whether such attempts at playful resistance matter in the context of the world we live in, whether it

stands for creative transformation or whether it is hopeless to even engage in such projects (132, 146).

### Between the Middle Passage and the Vietnam War

Shakespeare's play becomes a tentative answer to the search for the meaning of the MOVE massacre that the novel attempts. Both Cudjoe and the Wideman character are on such a quest for answers in the narrative. Cudjoe is (tentatively, at least) writing a book "[a]bout the fire" to find out "[w]hat it means" (19). The Wideman character, recalling how in 1947 Jackie Robinson and the Dodgers "were turned away from a hotel in Philadelphia," asks himself: "Was that the beginning of the fire?" (108). This question indicates that it is unclear to him how far back in time he must search for an explanation. Ultimately, to try to solve this conundrum of looking ever further back into the past, the text turns to Shakespeare, "[w]ho saw the whole long-suffering thing in embryo, rotten in the egg, inscribed like a talking book on the tabula-rasa wall of the future," who saw "the whole ugly mess about to happen at that day and time which brings us to here, to today" (128).

The "whole ugly mess about to happen," of course, alludes to the colonization of America and the 400 years of violence against African Americans that followed (128).<sup>25</sup> Indeed, the centuries of "colonialism, imperialism, recidivism, the royal fucking over of weak by strong, colored by white" that follow receive a lot of attention in the novel (127). While Cudjoe imagines scolding bystanders that are not participating in the memorial service in the novel's final scene, by telling them "here you are again making no connections," the novel as a whole encourages the reader to

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<sup>25</sup> Duke Pesta explains that it is common among postcolonial critics to read *The Tempest* as an allegory of the settling of the New World (although he personally contests this interpretation) (273-75).

do exactly that, to draw historical parallels between various periods of American history, in which the brutal treatment of Others by whites remained a constant (193).

Among the historical references that the text includes are atomic bombings, the Holocaust, and the killing of Native Americans tribes whose names are “gilding the ruined city,” for example on *Osage Avenue*, where the bombing of MOVE took place (16, 48, 159-190). The two most important historical references for *Philadelphia Fire* are the Middle Passage and the Vietnam War, however.<sup>26</sup> In a scene that I will analyze at some length here, it becomes clear that Cudjoe is disturbed by the question of his involvement or his indebtedness to history. For this I will draw on insights from Ian Baucom’s essay “Specters of the Atlantic” from 2001. Baucom focuses on Fred D’Aguiar’s *Feeding the Ghosts* (1997), a novel that revisits the “massacre by drowning of 132 slaves aboard the slave ship *Zong*” that occurred in 1781 (Baucom 61).<sup>27</sup> He describes that while reading D’Aguiar’s narrative, the novel simultaneously offers us:

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<sup>26</sup> In a recent essay, titled “‘Playing father son and holocaust’: The Imagination of Totalitarian Oppression in the Works of John Edgar Wideman” (2016), Jeffrey Severs argues that *Philadelphia Fire* expresses Giorgio Agamben’s claim in *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (1998) that concentration camps are “in some way ... the hidden matrix ... of the political space in which we are still living,” much more than it is “an anomaly belonging to the past” (Agamben, quoted in Severs 73). While I agree with Severs that Wideman in the novel tries to deduce an underlying matrix or logic to the MOVE bombing, and tries to ground this logic in historical events, my chapter argues that rather than the concentration camp, *The Tempest*, the Vietnam War and the Middle Passage are assigned this role in the text.

<sup>27</sup> Baucom explains that the murder was “ordered by the ship’s captain, Luke Collingwood, when he became aware that ... his ‘cargo’ would perish before he could steer it to port, and that the only way for him to guarantee a profit to himself and the vessel’s Liverpool owners was to jettison all those sickly slaves who, by continuing to consume water, were ‘threatening’ the welfare of their fellows and then to claim compensation for these jettisoned ‘goods’ under the ‘salvage’ clause of the *Zong*’s marine insurance policy” (61-62).



Images of a brutally singular or a brutally exemplary violation, images of an isolable atrocity in the history of the transatlantic slave trade or images of a punishing “modernity” recurrently replaying itself in every corner of the globe. (78)

In an important scene in the First Part of *Philadelphia Fire*, the evocation of the Middle Passage creates a similar scene of haunting, in which the distinction between this and other historical events is left deliberately vague to Cudjoe, blurring boundaries that force the reader to ponder whether the scope of what is being depicted is particular to just the individual scene, or whether it holds true in a far wider context.

While he is on an island, Cudjoe is throwing trash bags from a car with his older friend Sam at a garbage dump that looks out over the ocean. As he sees gulls flying over the dump, he reminisces how they “had followed the ferry across the sound” on the day that Cudjoe reached the island, hovering in the “boat’s slipstream, patiently sailing, scanning the water for bilge” (60). This makes him remember reading about “sharks trail[ing] the stench of slave ships all the way across the Atlantic, feasting on corpses thrown overboard” (60-61). Already in *Reuben*, the character Kwansa remembers how she read poems at the Homewood public library about “slavery days and slaves carried cross the ocean in sailing ships. Sharks eating the poor Africans they threwed overboard,” indicating the importance of this history for Wideman (9). The scene in *Philadelphia Fire* continues as follows:

Heave ho. Hurl a plastic sack. The mounds grow tall as a house, a pine tree. Body bags stacked a mile high rotting in the sun. Bad meat. Dead boys coming home from Vietnam were Cudjoe’s age, Cudjoe’s color, his high-school classmates. You couldn’t see color through the thick, green bags.

You could smell corpses, but all of them—red white black  
brown yellow—stink the same. Sam is careless. The bag  
bursts, vomits up its guts. He apologizes. His eyes accuse  
Cudjoe of being younger, stronger, of having many more  
years to live. Cudjoe is guilty. Others crossed an ocean and  
died for him. (61)

In the last sentence, it remains ambiguous which ocean crossing Cudjoe refers to, the crossing of the Pacific to fight the Vietnam War, or the crossing of the Atlantic via the Middle Passage, and this ambiguity serves to create an effect of indeterminacy that is central to literary representations of haunting. As Baucom further explains, “a temporal disturbance, an experience of inhabiting a contemporaneity that is not contemporary with itself, an experience of inhabiting what we might think of as a heterochronic order of time,” is what such representations can illustrate (78). He continues:

It is a time of uncertainty [that haunting represents], of  
bewilderment, of not being able to determine the status of  
that which lies before our eyes, and of being unable to  
decide whether the thing has or has not been seen before,  
whether it is exceptional or serial, and whether it belongs to  
a “now” or a “then” (Baucom 78).

In the scene in *Philadelphia Fire*, Cudjoe has trouble precisely with “determin[ing] the status of that which lies before [his] eyes” as well; his mind carries him away from the present through a trail of associations that hover somewhere between the Vietnam War and the Middle Passage, as we have seen (78). Moreover, this indeterminate “then” that exists on the border of two violent histories is confused by Cudjoe with

the “now,” with the hurling of plastic sacks that he and Sam are occupied with (Baucom 78, *Philadelphia Fire* 61). It once again begs the question of Cudjoe’s implication in historical events, the extent to which he is living a moral life or the extent to which he is “guilty,” as he suspects himself to be in this scene, indebted to the past and unable to find a way to make up for it (61).

Alongside *Feeding the Ghosts*, Ian Baucom analyzes another artistic representation of the *Zong* massacre in his essay, J. M. W. Turner’s painting from 1840, titled *Slavers Throwing Overboard the Dead and Dying—Typhoon Coming On* (which was later renamed *The Slave Ship*). He explains that Turner, through his skillful use of genre conventions, strives to:

both ... acknowledge the unevenness of time, the uncanny, repetitive presentness of the past within the present, *and* to smooth out that unevenness: by containing the massacre within “past” time. (80, emphasis in original)

If we compare this effect to the scene in *Philadelphia Fire*, it becomes apparent that this is precisely what Wideman does *not* do; in order to prevent such a “containment,” of the past within “past time,” he uses metaphors that can refer to several historical periods at once, in order to open the past up. The throwing overboard of corpses that are eaten by sharks, the sailors’ chant (“Heave ho”) that Cudjoe uses to throw bags, the body bags of Vietnam casualties containing “Bad meat,” as though their bodies had been meant to be eaten, the anthropomorphizing of the garbage bag which “vomits up its guts” (61)—by making these associations blend into each other, the similarities between the distant past, the recent past, and the now start to morph and form a blurry picture. Moreover, these images echo previous descriptions in the novel of the MOVE bombing: the character Margaret Jones, in her description of the

massacre, asks “[w]hy did they have to kill my brothers and sisters? Burn them up like you burn garbage? [...] Those dogs carried out my brothers and sisters in bags,” further solidifying the links between slavery, the Vietnam War and the MOVE bombing (17). As we have seen in the framework chapter, David Marriott analyzes in *Haunted Life* how Wideman’s travel memoir *The Island: Martinique* represents “a history that refuses to be simply past, that cannot be entirely possessed, a history that has happened and is always yet to happen insofar as it never stops happening” (Marriott 10). A similar dynamic is at work in *Philadelphia Fire*, as the abovementioned passage bears out. It is the fear that history “never stops happening” that is crucial for Cudjoe, which is why haunting is concerned with the future as much as it is with the past. Whether the past of the Middle Passage, *The Tempest*, the Vietnam War, the death of his friend and editor Sam and his entire family, or the MOVE bombing, Cudjoe appears to be involved in all of it, though to an extent that is unclear to him and left deliberately vague to the reader as well.

### The Vietnam War and the Policing of the Future

Marriott’s concept, like much of hauntology theory, draws on Derrida’s idea that the specter combines the “*revenant* (invoking what was) and the *arrivant* (announcing what will come)” (Del Pilar Blanco and Peeren *The Spectralities Reader* 13). And it is, not paradoxically, by drawing on the past, in this case the past of the Vietnam War (itself, as we have seen, connected to the Middle Passage by Wideman) that Cudjoe and *Philadelphia Fire* as such imagine the city’s future. When J.B., the homeless man who is one of the narrators of Part Three, is killed by a group of kids who spill kerosene on him and light him on fire while he is asleep, his death invokes a powerful cultural memory of the Vietnam War, the self-immolation of Buddhist

monks (188). In Part One, Cudjoe remembers these events, and he inadvertently predicts J.B.'s death as well, in a sense. He philosophizes that:

If the city is a man sprawled unconscious drunk in an alley,  
kids might find him, drench him with lighter fluid and drop  
a match on his chest. He'd flame up like a heap of all the  
unhappy monks in Asia. Puff the magic dragon. A little bald  
man topples over, spins as flames spiral up his saffron robe.  
In the streets of Hue and Saigon it had happened daily. (21)

The foreshadowing of J.B.'s death—as well as the city's burning—is represented in the disorienting chronological style that the novel makes frequent use of. At this point it is only something that “might” happen, might happen as it had happened in the 1960s in Vietnam, a past which is subsequently narrated in the present tense, however, as “[a] little bald man topples over,” and then again in the past tense, as it “had happened daily” (21).

The scene provides one of the first hints in the novel of a problem that has emerged in the city to which Cudjoe has returned, where a MOVE-bombing-inspired nihilism has taken hold of children who are out to murder adults. Simba, the elusive boy that Cudjoe is looking for, appears to be involved in their ascendancy. He is rumored to have become the spiritual leader of a cult-of-youth group that reappears throughout the text. In an interview with Rebekah Presson in 1991 Wideman explains that “[i]t's Simba and his friends who are putting graffiti on the walls. They're the ones who might be responsible for the fire next time,” a reference to James Baldwin's iconic essay from 1963 (110).<sup>28</sup> Simba's group is motivated by “a list of atrocities that

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<sup>28</sup> Leslie W. Lewis offers an analysis of Wideman's use of Baldwin's text in “*Philadelphia Fire and The Fire Next Time: Wideman Responds to Baldwin.*”

prove adults don't give a fuck about kids," as the novel states, the most important of which is the MOVE disaster, because "the fire burned up mostly kids" (*Philadelphia Fire* 91). Simba, because he managed to escape the massacre, and "[s]urvived bullets and flames and flood and bombs," is rumored to have become a messiah-like figure, "a symbol of kid power," albeit one that spells doom for adults (91). The ideas that his group spreads in pamphlets throughout the city appear to aim at establishing a totalitarian system in which children rule and in which everybody over age twenty-one will live "in adult concentration camps" (90). Cudjoe, when he sees the graffiti that the groups sprays, becomes frightened:

*"Kids Krusade. Kaliban's Kiddie Korps. Cudjoe saw the graffiti everywhere. Triple K's. MPT. Double K's. Money Power Things. Anywhere and everywhere. [...] rainbow signs signifying things were changing, a new day on its way, breaking out, taking over [...] War paint, Cudjoe thought. Gearing up for battle. Kids priming the city with a war face. [...] He knew. He saw. He was afraid. (88-89, emphasis in original)*

The messages that the Kaliban's Kiddie Korps spreads are violent and grim, as the group's acronym suggests. The violent legacy of the MOVE bombing, which continued the violent ethic of the Vietnam War, has influenced them, and it appears to be the most immediate referent for the "[w]ar paint" Cudjoe is thinking about (89). One of the narrators of Part Three of the novel, a youth who is inspired by Simba, expresses robbing pedestrians in terms of militarism that are derived from these violent histories, as he states his wish to:

Bomb them motherfuckers. Set a fire under they asses. [...] Knock some on the ground. Take everything they got. Wave your piece in the faces of the ones left standing. Back. Get the fuck back, while you strip the ones on the ground. Stand shoulder to shoulder. Hard black brothers. Swoop in like Apaches, like Vietcong, hit for the middle. (165)

Kaliban's Kiddie Korps actualize Caliban's famous reproach to Prospero in *The Tempest*: "You taught me language, and my profit on't is, I know how to curse" (*The Tempest* I.2. 363-364). The children in *Philadelphia Fire* curse: They have appropriated a militaristic discourse because this is what they have understood to constitute the reality that the MOVE bombing left in its wake. In this way, the past ensures its continued existence in the future, hate begetting more hate, as Caliban foretold, and *The Tempest* continues to make its presence felt in Cudjoe's life. Whereas he was once full of idealism and dedicated to helping Philadelphia's black schoolchildren, he now fears the consequences of having abandoned this effort, to the point of envisioning doom because he feels unable to answer to the imperative to act which the haunting of the disaster has created in him.

It is important to note that Simba's brief appearance in the novel is described with an image that refers to the cultural memory of the Vietnam War as well. Cudjoe describes how the boy is observed through an "infrared sniperscoped night-visioned weapon" that a sharpshooter has aimed at the MOVE house during the siege (*Philadelphia Fire* 8). Simba stumbles out of the house, and "is gone again as quickly as he appeared" (he is a fleeting presence in the novel, usually behind the curtain rather than on stage) (8). Wideman continues the scene by describing how Cudjoe imagines the siege to have taken place:

Cudjoe hears screaming *stop stop kids coming out kids coming out* as the cop sights down the blazing alley. Who's screaming? Who's adding that detail? Could a cop on a roof two hundred feet away from a ghost hear what's coming from its mouth? (8, emphasis in original)

The dying MOVE members, presumably the voices who are warning the police about the presence of children, are tellingly described as "a ghost" here (8). Cudjoe imagines that the sniper, when he's being interrogated after the siege, explains that he did not shoot at "the vision" in his cross hairs, "[b]ecause what I seen was just a kid, with no clothes on *screaming*" (8-9, emphasis in original). The screaming naked child, earlier in the passage described by Cudjoe as "last seen naked *skin melting*" (8, emphasis in original) restages precisely what is perhaps the most horror-inducing cultural memory of the Vietnam War, the photograph of a young Phan Thi Kim Phuc running away from her village after it has been bombed with the incendiary weapon Napalm. Wideman, in his use of this image, demonstrates that these horrors are not a thing of the (recent) past but that they return in the present, that the logic which led to the bombing of children in Vietnamese villages is employed in the US, *brought home*, where the bombing of children, unbelievable as it may sound, continues.

It is important to point out that the author's metaphorical linking of the Vietnam War and the MOVE disaster through Cudjoe's imagination is anything but farfetched. In her 1994 study on the bombing, *Discourse and Destruction: The City of Philadelphia versus MOVE*, Robin Wagner-Pacifci analyzed hearings conducted after the fact and concluded that indeed "[t]he specter of Vietnam, its weapons, personnel, [and its] psychological damage, hung heavily over the MOVE conflict" (137, 58). For example, neighbors and police officers alike apparently had the delusional fear that MOVE members trying to escape the house, whether children or adults, could be carrying



explosives and could blow themselves up when surrendering, in a manner reminiscent of Vietcong tactics (58, 59, 137). Comparably, paranoid fantasies such as these guided the LAPD's conduct in black communities in Los Angeles at the time as well. Los Angeles Police Chief Daryl Gates, who had shockingly enough congratulated Philadelphia Mayor Wilson Goode for his handling of the conflict between the city and MOVE, and had called him a hero on national television for bombing MOVE, spoke of war in reference to his approach to policing in South Central Los Angeles (Wagner-Pacifici x, M. Davis 318 note 21). Mike Davis, in *City of Quarts* states that "the chief of the DA's Hardcore Drug Unit added: 'This is Vietnam here'," a metaphor borne out by the fact that since the 1960s, the LAPD had been on the forefront of militarizing its police force, acquiring helicopters and military technology initially developed for use in the Vietnam War (M. Davis 268, 251, Parenti 22). The LAPD also "borrowed a strategy used in Vietnamese villages when they painted huge numbers on the tops of public housing units to enable helicopter surveillance," as Julilly Kohler-Hausmann explains in "Militarizing the Police: Officer Jon Burge, Torture, and War in the Urban Jungle" (48). In her essay Kohler-Hausmann argues that America's "punishing democracy flows from a cultural imaginary and a set of police practices profoundly shaped by the Vietnam War" (44). She points out that "[u]rban areas had long been constructed as foreign, racialized spaces; once they were in open revolt [in the 1960s], their struggles with state authority were easily interpreted with the same rhetorical devices used for insurgent populations abroad" by those in power across the country (48). It appears that, in a similar manner, MOVE's revolt against city authorities in the 1980s was understood in such terms.

As we know now, of course, the militarization of American police forces has continued unabated in the decades since, demonstrating that *Philadelphia Fire* was in

fact prescient about the future by drawing on the past, in this regard. An example from recent years is the claiming by police departments of US military equipment previously used in the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, equipment that due to the (for now) waning scale of American involvement in these wars is no longer in use. Since weaponry that is left unused is generally destroyed by the military, requests for it from police departments are rarely turned down. What results is the shocking reality of police departments armed with military-grade weaponry, like for example 100 round M-16 fully automatic rifles and in certain cases even mine-resistant armored vehicles.<sup>29</sup>

### The Memorial Service: Anticipating the Past's Future

Cudjoe's sense of history repeating itself, in both the now and in the foreseeable future, as well as the seemingly unbreakable template for this repetition that *The Tempest* forms in his life, are relayed to the reader once more in the closing of the novel, which chronicles a memorial service held for the victims of the MOVE siege. Cudjoe, who is disillusioned by the small impact that the memorial service appears to have, "wonders why words are so heavy. Why didn't words rise and fly like balloons?" (*Philadelphia Fire* 198).<sup>30</sup> This inadequacy of language, itself an echo of

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<sup>29</sup> Cf. e.g. Kraska and Cubellis's "Making Sense of American Paramilitary Policing", Alexander 74-78, Apuzzo's "War Gear Flows to Police Departments," and Hall and Coyne's "The Militarization of U.S. Domestic Policing".

<sup>30</sup> Françoise Palleau-Papin writes about the importance of balloon imagery in her essay "Of Balloons in John Wideman's Fiction." She explains that Wideman makes use of them as a "flexible medium which translates into a number of metaphors, expressing a wide array of emotions and situations. They inflate and deflate, explode or hiss away to their last breath, stand for characters or ideas, and create a style of their own when they appear" (655). From Palleau-Papin's statement we can draw the conclusion that balloons function as metaphors in myriad ways to "express the vulnerability of the human condition very vividly," as she states (645), that is to say, they operate on a level of complexity

Caliban's famous reproach, seems to loom large over the memorial service which fails to do justice to the MOVE victims. In *Haunted Life*, David Marriott suggests that haunting is occasioned by "failed mourning," which the last scene of *Philadelphia Fire* reiterates—what signifies a failed mourning more clearly than a barely attended memorial service for a tragedy as severe as the MOVE bombing? (10). Mourning, moreover, might occur if an event is located sufficiently in the past, but with the conditions that made the disaster possible in place, and moreover, as the novel explains, "no criminal charges [...] brought against the public official who planned and perpetrated the assault" what we have in the final scene is haunting, not mourning, signaling that the future is very much at stake (*Philadelphia Fire* 97). Hence, Cudjoe wonders whether the candles handed out to the attendees will "be collected and saved for another day, to commemorate another massacre," and realizes that he has known the words "*Never again*" all his life (198).

At the instant that these "[w]ords come to him," "Cudjoe hears footsteps behind him" that belong to a "mob howling his name. Screaming for blood" (199). This is the specter that the failed memorial service has summoned, an outcry against the repetition of history, and the novel concludes with a reckoning for Cudjoe, when he "turns to face whatever it is rumbling over the stones of Independence Square," as the last line of the novel reads (199).

What or who exactly rushes towards Cudjoe on the last page of the novel, however? The passage is left deliberately vague, so that there are multiple possible answers for the reader to consider. In "'All My Father's Texts': John Edgar Wideman's Historical Vision in *Philadelphia Fire*, *The Cattle Killing*, and *Fatheralong*,"

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on par with metaphors like flying, doorways, fire, sounds, and snow, to name a few of the metaphors that are touched on in this dissertation and that as we have seen operate throughout his texts, as well as intertextually.

Tracie Church Guzzio reads this final scene as Cudjoe's confrontation with the past, and she concludes that the "whatever it is" are the ghosts from a riot that Cudjoe alludes to as he waits on Independence Square for the memorial's start ("All My Father's Texts" 186-187). It is indeed how the final scene of the novel starts:

Less than an hour before the memorial service for the dead of Osage Avenue and Cudjoe is surprised to see the square's nearly empty. For a second he populates it with ghosts. All of Philadelphia crammed into Independence Square. Its 1805, a Fourth of July rally. [...] It's 1805 and before the party begins that year, blacks are hooted, shooed and beaten from the square. (*Philadelphia Fire* 190)

Church Guzzio reads the rumbling mob that charges towards Cudjoe as "[the] history that has always been the 'footsteps behind him,'" in other words, they are "the ghosts from that incident [who first] brush past him and fill the square," as she states ("All My Father's Texts" 187). History catches up with Cudjoe in this interpretation, then, and it engulfs him. While this is a legitimate reading, it is important to stress that it is equally possible to read the ending of *Philadelphia Fire* as the coming of the *future* that the novel anticipates as well, however. In this case, it would be the youths who charge Cudjoe, as they finally start their "*Kids Crusade*," upon finding further proof in the under-attended memorial that, indeed, the adults of Philadelphia do not seem to care about the fates of black children (*Philadelphia Fire* 88).

Support for this second reading, in which Cudjoe would be attacked by the children for failing to deliver on the "something-to-be-done" which the MOVE bombing created in him, is found throughout the text (remember as well that, upon seeing that the memorial service will be poorly attended, Cudjoe thinks about but

then decides against recruiting Philadelphians to come to the square, again failing to deliver on the haunting imperative of the disaster) (193). First of all, footsteps are often connected to the kids throughout the work. If the reader carefully attends to “the flashing half-signs ordinarily overlooked” like these, he or she finds that *Philadelphia Fire* “become[s] animated by the *immense forces of atmosphere concealed in them*” (Gordon *Ghostly Matters* 204, emphasis in original). When J.B. is drenched in kerosene and killed, *a killing that takes place on Independence Square where Cudjoe later faces a mob*, he first “hears the pitter patter ha ha ha ha of little ha-ha feet” sneaking up towards him, “the pitter patter of little sneakers laughing,” before he is killed (*Philadelphia Fire* 185, 188). Quite obviously, these might be the footsteps that Cudjoe later hears on Independence Square as well, then, rather than the footsteps of history (199). Earlier in the text, Cudjoe is described as walking through a park at night and hearing the “spirit voices” of “[l]ittle folk who emerge from their hiding places at midnight and rule the park,” until he realizes that these are the voices of kids (50).

That scene ends with Cudjoe thinking that “[a] ball pounding the asphalt would be like a drum summoning the kids. They’d share their secrets with him as they played through the night” (50). Then, in one of the last sections of Part Two, Cudjoe imagines what it would have been like to stage *The Tempest* with his schoolchildren as follows:

A drumroll announcing the play’s beginning, the moment when identities slip away. Spirits descend and walk about like ordinary folks. [...] [L]ittle kids will whoop and holler, shriek with delight. Their enthusiasm will ignite the rest of the audience. We’ll all be seized. Players. Play. Audience. Bound together by the screaming children. (149)

Kids, Philadelphia's future, are consistently associated in the text with shoes (cf. e.g. p.46-48 as well), spirits, voices, screams, and drums. In the final scene at the memorial, when "drums commence a meditative riffing," it could be seen as exactly a "drum summoning the kids" (198, 50). When the drums start at the service, Wideman writes how "[p]eople *onstage* and *in the audience* sense there's nothing more to say" (198, emphasis mine). Notice how Cudjoe's production of *The Tempest* could have been performed at the memorial service: there is a stage, and an audience in the setting of the novel's ending. So is it not just as possible that Cudjoe faces the indignant specter of a future generation of Philadelphia's African American children who will have to brace themselves for the tragedy's reoccurrence, as it is that he faces the past? The children from whom he walked away and to whom he still owes a performance of *The Tempest*?

### Conclusion

The strength of the novel is that it creates enough space for either of these two readings to be consistent. Cudjoe is about to have "an enchanted encounter in a disenchanted world between familiarity and strangeness" in the closing of the novel, and whether it is the past or the future that catches up with him cannot be said with certainty (Gordon *Ghostly Matters* 55). Indeed, both interpretations fit into the framework that *Philadelphia Fire* establishes, which would suggest that both the past and the future collapse into the present in the final moment of the novel. On Philadelphia's Independence Square, a site symbolic of the promise of democracy, a more fully realized democracy that is always still "to come" and not yet realized, it is rather its ultimate betrayal that triggers the arrival of the "future present," which arrives as "an alterity that cannot be anticipated" because it is a spectral event that

“cannot be awaited *as such*, or recognized in advance therefore,” as Derrida explains in *Specters of Marx* (81-82). Wideman, too, leaves his readers and his main character in a position where they do not know what it is exactly that comes rushing towards them, because it is not entirely recognizable.

Through frequent allusion to spirits and ghosts, and by showing the ways in which the MOVE bombing is a continuation of American history, the novel can clearly be read as a narrative of the return of the past in the present. The way in which Cudjoe fears that he is indebted to the past can be understood to catch up with him in the ending of the book. At the same time, by describing what Cudjoe imagines the bombing will leave in its wake, the future, too, “returns” to the present in the text, as a haunting indictment of the unjust now that will create it. The specter is not only the return of the dead (Wolfreys 71). It also “calls into question the possibilities of a future based on avoidance of the past,” a questioning that Wideman’s novel attends to as well (Weinstock 6).

As has become clear from the analysis, *Philadelphia Fire*, like the Homewood Trilogy, can be read as a narrative that is permeated by the dead who insist on not being forgotten, not only those of the MOVE victims, but also of historical figures like Buddhist monks, the enslaved of the Middle Passage, American soldiers in Vietnam, African Americans attending a 1805 Fourth of July celebration, and of characters within the diegetic world of the text, like the homeless J.B., the editor Sam and his wife and daughter, and MOVE-sympathizer Richard Corey. The novel’s main character Cudjoe is somehow connected to and struggling to make sense of all of them, haunted by his past of political activism, by his walking away from helping the black schoolchildren of Philadelphia, and this past catches up with him when he finds out about the MOVE bombing in Greece. Then, his attempts to do something in its aftermath, to find the survivor Simba and to write a book so that the disaster’s

memory will be saved, are thwarted, and to his dismay people have already stopped caring about the bombing a year after it occurred when there is hardly anybody present at a memorial service.

Cudjoe's sense of futility at the end of the narrative is mirrored by the cyclical nature of time that the novel presents us. Whether in the past, in the present, or in the future, the narrative suggests that the logic which ensures "the royal fucking over of weak by strong, colored by white" that the Middle Passage, the Vietnam War, and *The Tempest* symbolize is bound to restage itself, to the point where it does not appear to matter if we are in the past, the present, or the future, as the text blends these chronological spheres to prove its point (*Philadelphia Fire* 127). Whereas he had once taken on the challenge of breaking the patterns of domination that "this immortal play" expressed by teaching it, the play ends up breaking him, in a sense. Its principle as Cudjoe had described it repeats itself in both the history of the US and in the history of his own life, whether he thought he walked away from it or not.

Wideman makes the unfulfilled possibility of Cudjoe's production of *The Tempest* haunt the reader too. To reiterate, this is what Cudjoe imagined would come about if he had staged the play:

[L]ittle kids will whoop and holler, shriek with delight.  
Their enthusiasm will ignite the rest of the audience. We'll  
all be seized. Players. Play. Audience. Bound together by the  
screaming children. (149)

In a manner that we have seen demonstrated throughout the novel in this chapter, the passage subtly carries a double meaning just below the surface. How is it possible that instead of enthusiasm that ignites an audience, a bomb ignites a neighborhood; how is it possible that the screaming children are dying, instead of playing? This



question is what *Philadelphia Fire* leaves its readers with. The final scene, in which a small audience gathers in front of a stage and is silent, not to witness a play performed in the outdoors but to attend a memorial service, is perhaps meant to suggest what a character in *Two Cities* ponders about the MOVE bombing as well: “how simple it would be for things to be different” (*Philadelphia Fire* 198, *Two Cities* 13).

In terms of the power of fiction to achieve this, what *Philadelphia Fire* probes through its protagonist is the “pretend[ing] we have the power to live our lives as we choose. Imagin[ing] our fictions imagining us,” that Cudjoe perhaps has lost faith in (98). If *The Homewood Books* saw narrator Doot coming into his own and growing up to write the works about Pittsburgh’s Homewood community in the way that he thought that they ought to be written, then *Philadelphia Fire’s* shows us writer-figure Cudjoe wavering on the question of whether such works can make a difference, in the face of the unchanging brutality of African American oppression throughout generations, and in the face of his own inability to escape the ways in which this oppression haunts him. Similarly, the Wideman character mentions in Part Two of the novel that “I do feel my narrative faculty weakening,” that is to say, he believes that his capacity to develop a coherent narrative is starting to wane (115). In terms of the novel’s formal structure, Wideman continued to build on the form that he had invented to write about Homewood’s haunting in this novel, and moved farther into stylistic fragmentation to test perhaps the limits of narrative themselves as useful frames to understand the extent to which haunting can have his characters in its grip, given the scale of the tragedies they have to face.

What haunting does to notion of realism in the representation of black urban communities here, is that it lets Wideman move even further away from this frame than in *The Homewood Books*. Haunting, in various ways, creates a surreal narrative in

*Philadelphia Fire*. The manner in which protagonist Cudjoe encounters *The Tempest* and its symbolic significance virtually everywhere that he looks is a clear example of this. Such a surreal approach is, it should be pointed out, very fitting to convey to readers exactly the way in which the MOVE bombing itself was in a way a surreal event, a haunting event that turned the world upside down, an event that no narrative frame was strong enough to reconcile.

*Two Cities*  
**The Ghostly "Dance of Light and Dark"**

The novel *Two Cities*, first published in 1998 by Houghton Mifflin, is set in both Philadelphia and Pittsburgh, and thus combines the locales of *The Homewood Books*, *Reuben*, and *Philadelphia Fire*. In this text, Wideman probes further into material that he had already addressed in those previous books, questions regarding haunting, African American city life, and the ways in which art can represent them. Here, too, we find these questions converge on a specific character, in this case the artist Mr. Mallory. Although, unlike John/Doot and Cudjoe before him, Mr. Mallory is not a writer but a photographer, Wideman more directly explores the issue of the meaning of art through this character than in his previous work. Wideman returns to the two settings of his previous city novels in *Two Cities*, but one suspects that he did so to conclude his engagement with them. As noted in the introduction to this dissertation, *Two Cities* is his last fictional work about black urban communities with the narrative length of a novel (for now, since Wideman is still an active writer at age 76). What this discontinuation of his engagement with the topic, and the way in which it is foreshadowed in *Two Cities* itself, might mean, will be explored in the conclusion to this chapter.

*Two Cities* revolves around three characters: Robert, Kassima, and Martin Mallory. Although there remains a lot that is left unspoken in the narrative — tactical silences that force the reader to piece together the stories of the characters — the novel is less complexly set up than the other two works under consideration in this dissertation. In terms of *Two Cities*' philosophical perspective, the book *is* complex, but the narrative arcs of the characters can be rather unambiguously established, especially in comparison to the manner in which *The Homewood Books* and *Philadelphia*

*Fire* force readers to gradually reconstruct the storyline. Robert and Kassima provide the justification for the novel's subtitle: *A Love Story*. They meet in a Pittsburgh bar called Edgar's, Robert is in his fifties and Kassima is in her thirties. They end up sleeping together after a night of dancing. Upon going home with her, Robert realizes that she lives on the same street that he grew up on, Cassina Way—a "place buried so deep in his memory he'd forgotten it was also real," as Wideman writes (*Two Cities* 27). The house that Kassima lives in is so familiar to Robert that he wonders it might be the actual house he was born in, though he cannot say for sure. Kassima is recovering from the shock of losing three men in her life within the span of a year. As she states herself,

A son died playing Russian roulette. Another son killed  
when a dope deal he wasn't even involved in went bad and  
they were looking for someone to hurt and shot him because  
he was the only one home. AIDS killed their daddy in  
prison. (55)

After she has been dating Robert for a while, her fear of losing him leads to Kassima's break-up with Robert. During a day in the park together he is playing basketball while she is in the audience, and a dispute breaks out between Robert and players on the opposing team, one of whom points a gun at Robert and threatens his life. To intimidate him further several shots are fired into the ground. Kassima thinks that she has lost another man in her life to violence when she hears the shots, and her fear of this happening leads her to conclude that she cannot see Robert anymore, that she has become too attached to him.

The third character, Mr. Mallory, forms the focus of this chapter. He is a boarder in Kassima's home, and it is only when he passes away that Kassima seeks contact

with Robert again, several months after the gun incident on the basketball court. Together they make arrangements for Mr. Mallory's funeral, during which it is revealed that Kassima and Mr. Mallory, after years of keeping each other at a distance, had become friends during the last months of his life. So Kassima did lose another man in her life, and she turns to Robert, who himself is troubled by the ending of their relationship, to console her and to reconcile. During the funeral itself, there is more gun violence, due to the fact that at another wake held at the funeral home a murdered gang member is being remembered. A shooting breaks out at the wake, and in the chaos and confusion Mr. Mallory's casket gets opened and his body falls on the street.

It is gradually revealed in the text that Mr. Mallory has left his magnum opus in Kassima's care, a photography project that he had been working on for years but that was ultimately left unfinished—and, for this reason, he has asked Kassima to destroy all trace of it. Mr. Mallory walked the streets of Philadelphia and later Pittsburgh as a street photographer, but as an atypical one: he spent his time taking pictures using a tinkered-with camera that did not make the scroll of negatives advance after exposure, exposing again and again the same negative. My chapter will further examine this artistic choice and what it means below. Through flashbacks, the reader learns that Mr. Mallory fought for the US army in Italy during the Second World War, an experience that made him decide to become a photographer (these flashback are given enough context by Wideman so that they are easy to follow for the reader). During his military service there, his friend Gus convinces him to leave the army base one evening and join two Italian girls on a secluded beach for a sexual encounter. Upon discovery, the two African American men draw the ire of their white compatriots and in a manhunt Gus is killed by US soldiers, as are the girls. Martin Mallory manages to escape, though he suffers a leg wound that troubles him for the

rest of his life, a symbol of the trauma that he will walk around with from that night on. Years later, while living in Philadelphia, he befriends John Africa, leader of the MOVE group, and the two of them go on walks together to have philosophical debates.

The opening of the novel has Mr. Mallory, a year after John Africa gets killed in the MOVE bombing, imagining that his friend is joining him once again on a walk through the streets of the city. Mr. Mallory photographs the aftermath of the MOVE bombing, and eventually relocates to Pittsburgh, the city where his old friend Gus was born. Because he is not able to meet the ambitions of his art project and bring it to completion, he asks Kassima to destroy his work and his entire archive when he senses his encroaching death. After Martin passes away, Kassima and Robert are undecided about actually carrying out this last wish. They bring the box of negatives with them to the funeral, and try to save it once the gun violence breaks out. Once outside, where the opened casket of Mr. Mallory now is, Kassima dumps the pictures at the body's feet, and they "floated down like snow beside the coffin," as Wideman writes (238).

This attracts the attention of the youths that had shown up for the wake of the slain gang-member (or their rivals who started the shooting, this remains unclear). Wideman ends the narrative arc as follows:

Then some of them started coming up, looking at us beside the coffin, looking at the pictures all over the ground, picking up pictures, looking at them, looking at each other, handing them around, talking, walking off with pictures in their hands. Who knows what they were seeing. What they said. Who knows what they thought. And that was the beginning of the end of the worst part of that day. (239)

The ending of the novel suggests a potential political and social purpose to the photographic work of Mr. Mallory that he himself did not believe it could achieve. The pictures appear to alleviate the animosity between the youths who threatened each other's lives minutes before, although Wideman remains ambiguous about this in this passage by writing: "[w]ho knows what they were seeing [...] [w]ho knows what they thought" (239). Still, it becomes clear that the youths start to look at each other, perhaps with a greater appreciation, after looking at the photographs. They start to exchange words rather than gunfire.<sup>31</sup>

While *Two Cities* brings together two urban locales that have formed an important geographical axis in Wideman's literary imagination, it also offers the author's most fully developed reflections on the nature of art in his oeuvre up to that point. And although the ending of the novel seems to favor a philosophical position that elevates the social purposes of art to a height where it can possibly quell animosity, foster a sense of community, and initiate a process of reconciliation, this position is undercut in the text as a whole, in which such goals are variously doubted and embraced by Wideman, in a manner typical of his work. As Madhu Dubey had already remarked of *Philadelphia Fire* and other works, Wideman's views of the social purposes of art have always been ambivalent at best (cf. e.g. Dubey 81-84). This stance is taken to a further conceptual level in *Two Cities* by the author, in which such ambivalence becomes precisely the point of artistic endeavors. Through the written correspondence of Mr. Mallory with the artist Alberto Giacometti, Wideman explores his own work as a writer in the book, which provides an opportunity for the reader to learn more about his understanding of the purposes of art, with the character Martin

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<sup>31</sup> This passage would be the ending of the novel where it not for two pages of postscript called Zugunruhe. It explains why Mr. Mallory moved from Philadelphia to Pittsburgh—in honor of his old army friend Gus (241). The postscript for Martin Mallory seems to reestablish the idea that he is the most important character of the novel.

Mallory functioning as “Wideman’s fictional mouthpiece for his theories” (Hume 705, 722). More specifically, as I will argue in this chapter, Wideman uses Mr. Mallory’s work as a photographer to explore the extent to which artistic representation can convey the character’s haunted world in *Two Cities*: Mr. Mallory’s haunting leads him to understand ambiguity as a crucial existential principle, a principle that he attempts to capture in his photographic art, a process that dramatizes Wideman’s own evolving thinking on this subject.

“Two Cities, Two Places at Once”: Mr. Mallory’s Haunted Sense of Space and Time as the Uncertain “Simultaneity of Everything”

In “‘Dimensions’ and John Edgar Wideman’s Mental Cosmology” (2003), Kathryn Hume puts forth the idea that Wideman’s oeuvre can be understood as a layered “cosmology,” which grew to include more and more discursive styles—a piling up of voices and complexities that accumulated alongside the growing number of books Wideman had written (702). Her essay is striking for its attempt to make sense of both the different phases of Wideman’s career as well as their overarching themes. Hume characterizes Wideman’s worldview as she constructs it from his texts as a “curiosity about hidden complexities that [the author] wants to bring into view and explore,” a vision that “derives from a sensitivity to those crumpled-up, invisible dimensions that most of us ignore as we make our daily rounds in everyday space-time” (698). Engaging with the work of Wideman can “enrich the experience of reading and remind us of the compressed, hidden dimensions that we so often overlook in everyday life” for her (699).<sup>32</sup> There is evidence of this intention in an interview that

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<sup>32</sup> These remarks are on point, if a bit broad. Similar claims can be made about literature in general, or about altogether different disciplines like the natural sciences, for that matter, as Dartmouth astrophysicist Marcelo Gleiser does in *The Simple Beauty of the Unexpected*, for example. He reminds us



Wideman gave Sheri Hoem in 1984. In it, the author talks about the “kind of 360 degree in-the-round communication that good writing attempts,” which Hume reads as the desire to “render ... the complexities of responses” to readers, “complexities that they suppress and filter out” (Hume 702, Hoem 40). For Hume this means that “consciousness, after all, can be seen as a reducing valve that cuts down on the stimuli reaching us,” and that “Wideman tries to open that valve wider” (702).

One can certainly come away with this impression after being immersed in one of the author’s works. In the novels that are discussed in this dissertation, the overlapping of characters and events, despite widely diverging locales and historical periods, bring about a kaleidoscopic vision that can make the reader question his or her own mooring in a historical epoch as well as reflect on the various layers of conscious experience (smell, sight, hearing, tasting, feeling) that we are constantly tuning in and out of during our conscious life. Let us return briefly to the body bag scene discussed in the chapter on *Philadelphia Fire* to give a concrete example. Purposefully vague statements like “others crossed an ocean and died for [Cudjoe]” refuse to commit to a single coherent context and in this way make the reader first search for it (which historical period is this referring to?) and then realize that it can be one of several. In addition, the narrator’s descriptions of sensory perceptions—in this passage (“Cudjoe tried not to breath as he helped unpack a week’s trash from the trunk”) and throughout Wideman’s work—serve to remind readers of their own sensory experience and the extent to which they at times ignore it, thus adding to the reader’s “experiential dimension” (Wideman 61, Hume 699).

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that “we see very little of what really goes on around us. Science is our probe into invisible realms, be it the world of the very small, of bacteria, of atoms, of elementary particles, or the world of the very large, of stars, galaxies, and even the Universe as a whole” (4-5). Looking deeper into life, delving under its surface, reflecting on it, is part of what Wideman does, as Hume points out, but it is part of intellectual endeavor as such.

With regard to *Two Cities*, such a “desire for multiplicity, for multisensual input, for layers that may have points of connection but whose connections need not be tidy or definitively important,” (Hume 705) is encountered by readers primarily through Mr. Mallory’s letters, a “correspondence” with the artist Alberto Giacometti which Mr. Mallory never actually initiates because he never mails them. Through these letters, the reader gets a deeper understanding of both the character’s, and by proxy’s Wideman’s, philosophy of art. We find that a desire for “multiplicity” is expressed at various points throughout the novel, and was additionally expressed as well as in interviews given by Wideman himself around the time of the book’s publication. In the text itself, we notice that Mr. Mallory mentions the influence of Romare Bearden’s work on his own art in his letters. Bearden’s paintings “are many paintings in one” for Martin Mallory, “overlapping, hiding and revealing each other. Many scenes occur at once, a crowd hides in a single body,” as he declares (*Two Cities* 117). Bearden is a clear example, perhaps one of the finest, of an artist who succeeded in representing African American urban scenes without being reductive or resorting to essentialism through his collage work.<sup>33</sup> It is no stretch of the imagination to argue that John Wideman’s novels function in a manner similar to the one that Mr. Mallory describes here. They are often quite literally many narratives in one, not only in terms of their content but in their form: traditional fiction, newspaper fragments, letters, philosophical tracts, and autobiographical sketches alternate and blend into each other to the point where one sometimes can only come away with a vague sense of narrative voice, scene, and setting. Already in *Philadelphia Fire*, the narrator describes how he “must always write about many places at once. [...] The splitting apart is

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<sup>33</sup> Bearden’s work *The Block* (1971) is featured on the hardcover edition of *Two Cities* (Houghton Mifflin 1998). The Vintage Contemporaries editions of *Damballah*, *Hiding Place*, and *Sent for You Yesterday* feature artwork by Bearden on their covers as well.

inevitable [...] toward the word or sound or image that is everywhere at once” (Wideman 23, Hume 700-701). As we will see later, the “image that is everywhere at once” reminds us of the photographic art that Mr. Mallory tries to bring into being.

To reiterate, by going everywhere at once, both Wideman and the character Mr. Mallory in the text seek to disentangle the “crumpled-up, invisible dimensions that most of us ignore as we make our daily rounds in everyday space-time” (Hume 698). Here, perhaps, we come closer to an understanding of what purposes art carries for the writer: to rouse the audience out of its general slumber, to make him or her view the world with a fresh pair of eyes, a layer of preconceived assumptions shed. By ripping a coherent worldview apart in front of our eyes, Wideman forces us to reconstruct it ourselves from the fragments he provides us. In his interview with Sheri Hoem, he likens this process to the idea of “a connecting of truths” (41). This process, which is indeed integral to reading Wideman’s texts, is mirrored in the task he sets for his characters, who are often at a loss for meaning when facing the harsh truths of their existence, be they personal shortcomings, the brutal racial inequalities of American society, or encroaching death. For example, Cudjoe in *Philadelphia Fire* hears the city talk to him as he looks out over it from a hill. It urges him to make connections: “You can grasp the pattern. Make sense of me. Connect the dots,” the city tells him, as we have seen in the introduction (Wideman 44, Hume 722).

In addition, by being “everywhere at once” Wideman asks his readers to reorient themselves, to ask themselves whether they currently live in more than one time, more than one space as well. The title *Two Cities* suggests as much. In an interview with Jacqueline Berben-Masi from 1999, the author explains what it means to him:

We always exist in at least two cities: the city of the body, the city of the mind. You can think of a human being as two cities: what's immaterial and what's physical, what can be touched and seen. So we're in constant tension, selves alternate, proliferate, slip and slide. [...] [The title of the novel] is a prop for the reader to remember that wherever you are, there's probably another place just as present, there are always two places, at least. (Berben-Masi 572).

In a sense then, the title urges the reader to reflect on the way in which they experience reality, to become aware of the possibility that this experience is a lot less straightforward than they tend to assume, because "probably another place" is just as present for them, "wherever [they] are" (572). This echoes the manner in which haunting comes about in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, in which the specter is closely connected to certain places. As Sethe explains to her daughter Denver, "[w]here I was before I came here, that place is real. It's never going away" (Morrison 43). And crucially, Sethe believes that "if you go there—you who never was there—if you go there and stand in the place where it was, it will happen again; it will be there for you, waiting for you. So, Denver, you can't never go there" (43-44). In a word, "Places, places are still there" in *Beloved*, in a manner which must have influenced Wideman's approach in *Two Cities*, and the idea that "another place [is] just as present" which Wideman mentions quite clearly echoes the wording of Morrison's text (Morrison 43, Berben-Masi 572).

It is important to take note of the fact that in the abovementioned quotes, the uncertainty that Wideman wishes to communicate to his readers is primarily described in metaphors of spatial location as well. For example, he mentions that "we have all this information, but when you step out the door, you've never been there

before. It's a different river," which offers us the theme of navigation through time and space. In fact, as we see from the quote, it is reflected in the title of the novel. Again, "two cities" for Wideman means urging his readers to "remember that wherever you are, there's probably another place just as present, there are always two places, at least" (Berben-Masi 572). Early in the novel we find a good example of what this means, and the manner in which it corresponds to theories of hauntology can be discerned quite clearly: Mr. Mallory's traumatic experience of reality strongly alters his sense of place, just like it does for Sethe in *Beloved*. In the opening chapter, titled "Missing John Africa," it is as much a different *space* as it is a different time in which he appears to live the remainder of his life. From the beginning of the novel, the reader gets the sense that the events of Mr. Mallory's life weigh heavily on his mind. Witnessing the *de facto* lynching of his friend Gus and the two women he and Gus slept with in Italy, and witnessing another friend, John Africa, get killed in the MOVE bombing, leaves Mr. Mallory a broken man with a scattered sense of equilibrium. For Mr. Mallory, one of the most thoughtful characters Wideman has brought to the page, this scattering has been reason for reflection and a distinctive philosophical approach to life. Early in the book, Wideman records Martin Mallory's thoughts as follows: "Everything connects, nothing connects. Two simple truths and each made perfect sense on its own but together they mystified him. Then and now. Two cities" (*Two Cities* 6-7). Here again we find an expression of the principle of the known and the unknown coming together, as well as the deconstructive philosophy that lurks behind it. The combination of the statements "[e]verything connects, nothing connects" creates a tension, not unlike the tension of trying to push the same poles of two magnets together, that is at work as well in the logic of the specter, as Derrida defines it. It is the reckoning with a "*more than one/no more one* [le plus d'un]" that defines haunting for him (xx, emphasis in original). The author explains that:

one does not know what it *is*, what it is presently. *It is* something that one does not know, precisely, and one does not know if precisely it *is*, if it exists, if it responds to a name and corresponds to an essence. [...] Here is—or rather there is, over there, an unnamable or almost unnamable thing: something, between something and someone, anyone or anything [...]. (5, emphasis in original)

As becomes clear here, because the ghost is both something/someone and nothing/no one at the same time, because it is both of the past and of the present (and of the future, because it raises the possibility of returning *again*, later, of never going away), because it is both somewhere and nowhere, it has such deconstructive potential for Derrida. Similarly, to try to conceptualize Mr. Mallory's philosophical stance, namely that "Everything connects, nothing connects. Two simple truths and each made perfect sense on its own but together they mystified," is both possible and not possible at the same time, and it repeats the gesture of shattering our basic assumptions of knowledge that Derrida heralds (*Two Cities* 6). To try to imagine a space where one can reconcile these opposing concepts places us precisely in a position which "no longer belongs to knowledge," where we are forced to consider "an unnamable or almost unnamable thing" (Derrida 5). It brings us to a place where the city's imperative to "grasp the pattern. Make sense of me. Connect the dots," is both possible and impossible—we grasp that the pattern is ungraspable, that the pattern is "ungraspability" itself, we connect the dots that everything connects and nothing connects simultaneously (*Wideman Philadelphia Fire* 44).

Mr. Mallory is standing on a bridge in Pittsburgh when he has this thought, and remembers meeting John Africa on a different bridge in Philadelphia a year earlier, which makes him feel "lost, lost trying to figure out the space where they are

supposed to connect ... He's lived long enough to gather plenty of pieces of the puzzle, long enough to know he'll never find a way to fit them together" (Two Cities 6). In this scene it is important to focus again on the sense of spatial distortion that Mr. Mallory experiences. The known and unknown coming together in him morphs his ability to understand his spatial location, the condition to which the title of the novel pays homage: The fact that Mr. Mallory is lost in a different time, so to speak, lost thinking about his murdered friend John Africa, makes him feel spatially lost as well, unable to navigate his world. Wideman writes: "Just take one teensy giant step over to John Africa's side. You're dizzy because you're in two places at once or too many places and maybe it's your own fault you're stuck here where you are and he isn't" (12). By being haunted by the memory of John Africa in this scene, Mr. Mallory is in two cities. He is in Pittsburg and in Philadelphia both, his sense of space is distorted. Tyrone Simpson mentions in *Ghetto Images* that on several occasions, "time and space conspire to confuse the war veteran of his whereabouts" due to his traumatic memories, and refers to Cathy Caruth's definition of trauma of "a break in the mind's experience of time" (232). And it is clear here how space, too, is distorted for Mr. Mallory. As Maria Del Pilar Blanco and Esther Peeren point out in "Possessions: Spectral Places," the condition of feeling haunted, "has been classically conceived as attached to a *where*" as well as to a *when*, be it "the proverbial haunted house [or] the ghost town" (395, cf. e.g. Baer 425 as well). They describe spatial haunting as instances where "[t]he correlation between movement and progress is broken and the subject succumbs to a feeling of ungroundedness and spatio-temporal disjointedness" (396). This fits the situation of Mr. Mallory quite well. Whereas he previously walked through the cityscape together with his friend John Africa, philosophizing with him about the possibility to create a better world, he now walks a bridge (in a different city) by himself, but indeed, "the correlation between

movement and progress is broken" for Mr. Mallory ("Possessions" 396). He now experiences that "the work your body does, putting one foot in front of the other ... the simple business of not bumping into a chair when you cross a room ... all easy work you easily manage without a conscious thought bogs down, becomes hard, confused treacherous" for Mr. Mallory, when he wishes for "John Africa to slide beside him again, real as the memory" (*Two Cities* 12). And again here Wideman uses an example of navigation, and of piecing together coherence from fragments: "The map in your head, your hands, the million pictures your eyes snap to guide your feet and ears and lungs are blurred. Ten maps at once or no map" (12). This "blurred picture" foreshadows the type of photographic art that Mr. Mallory creates, which we will explore below, indicating the way in which haunting finds its way into his artistic endeavors.

As we have seen in the framework chapter of this dissertation, for Derrida haunting seems to be first of all a disturbance of time. But what is so useful about his concept of the specter is that it can be read as being capable of disturbing space at the same time. We have seen that Derrida explains haunting as the "*non-contemporaneity with itself of the living present*" in his "Exordium" to *Specters of Marx* (xviii, italics in original). A haunted moment is at first conceptualized as "a moment which no longer belongs to time," rather than something which disturbs space in his work (xix). Indeed, it is firstly the *time* that is out of joint for Derrida, rather than the space (xxi). As we have seen, the theorist prefers to translate this phrase as "the time is off its hinges" initially, although he also recognizes that "the time is out of joint" can be translated as "Le monde est à l'envers," in other words, "the world is upside down" (22). This gives us the opportunity to read haunting as a disturbance of space, in addition to, or alongside with, a disturbance of time.



When Mr. Mallory describes “missing John Africa,” Wideman characterizes this as the world being turned upside down for his character. Wideman writes:

Your hands shake, you lose your balance, you're short of  
breath. Two cities, two places at once. Is the bridge coming  
apart. Will this wave of dizziness pass. [...] No up, no down.  
No near, no far. (*Two Cities* 13)

We have seen in the theoretical framework chapter of this dissertation as well that for Avery Gordon reads haunting as a disturbance of both space and time well. She theorizes the concept as something which “alters the experience of being in time, the way we separate the past, the present, and the future,” surely, perhaps privileging time rather than space in her reading, but she importantly sees haunting as something which is involved in the “instances when home becomes unfamiliar, when your bearings on the world lose direction,” a definition that we can easily pair with Derrida’s ultimate understanding of “the time is out of joint” as “the world is upside down” (Gordon *Ghostly Matters* xvi, Derrida 22). Indeed, when Mr. Mallory thinks about his murdered friend “slid[ing] beside him again, real as the memory,” when he’s “in two places at once or too many places,” it is “the simple business of not bumping into a chair when you cross a room, or going through the openness of a door without bramm[ing] your shoulder” which becomes difficult to manage—home becomes unfamiliar for him, in other words, his house is once again haunted by his lost friend and he loses his sense of direction, *even at home*, where “your bearings on the world” should normally correspond to “the simple business of not bumping into a chair when you cross a room,” because you have succeeded in doing this countless times before (*Two Cities* 12, Gordon xvi).

Wideman continues the description of Mr. Mallory as losing his sense of up and down, near and far, as follows:

Your body failing you not because it's getting things wrong.  
At last, at last it's beginning to get things right. Say yes to it.  
Say yes. Let go. (13)

Here we see that Mr. Mallory, interestingly enough, has more willingness to accept haunting as something that happens to his life than for example Cudjoe does in *Philadelphia Fire*. Mr. Mallory does not try to resist it as much, and even though at first the thought of “how simple it would be for things to be different,” for a world to exist with “no clanking machines ladling the dead from one pit into another” makes him “lose [his] bearing, twist like a fish on the end of a hook,” as Wideman writes, he ultimately allows the possibility that what he experiences is “[m]aybe truth's riding you. Truth's sudden weight, sudden absence” (13). Interestingly, whereas for Hamlet, “The time is out of joint. O, cursèd spite, /That ever I was born to set it right!” (Shakespeare *Hamlet* I.V. 188-189), Mr. Mallory does not feel the imperative to set things right, to resist the haunting, and seems to be open to the idea that this “out of joint-ness” is closer to truth than any sort of straightforward experience of time and space. Indeed, when we look at the artwork he is trying to produce, we see that he is trying to capture precisely the blurred effect that haunting produces for him, as when he states that “the million pictures your eyes snap to guide your feet and ears and lungs are blurred,” when he thinks about the return of John Africa (*Two Cities* 12).

What are the implications for the way in which Wideman conceptualizes haunting at this point in his career? It should be pointed out that there is a great deal of correspondence between the manner in which Wideman conceptualizes his writing in interviews, and the way he constructs the photographic art that Mr. Mallory tries

to create. In his interview with Berben-Masi from 1999, Wideman sees a link between his writing practice and the uncertainty that comes with our experience of the world, and it is worth quoting the author at length here:

Ideally, when I write a book, what I “know” and “don't know” come together. And it is the tension between the two, the sort of mysterious way that the two can dialogue, that might give the writing its special edge, when it has that edge. Because isn't that the way we operate in the world? We have this central apparatus, we have certain information; we know, for instance, if we walk outside, it might be colder than inside; we know about cars, we know about other people, we have all this information, but when you step out the door, you've never been there before. It's a different river. So, all this stuff that you've armed yourself with might be, for one reason or another, totally irrelevant and get you into as much trouble as guide you. The known and the unknown coming together, and the place where they come together is us, our experience, who we are. If you think the world is something you understand, or if you don't make the effort to examine the world and simply go on your instincts, either case, either extreme, you're going to be in trouble. You can't depend too much on one or the other. And so there's always uncertainty. (578)

The author likens writing to living because both activities involve finding a measure of equilibrium between what one knows and what one does not know, whether it is the way in which a story or character might develop and surprise its creator, or the

way daily life might.<sup>34</sup> Wideman appears to extend this mindset to “step[ing] out the door” and “walk[ing] outside,” that is to say, to navigating a world that always ends up being different from the ideas we have about it. What appears to be important for him is to resist the urge to cling to those ideas, to create a space within oneself where “the known and the unknown com[e] together,” which, to circle back to the author’s literary practice, can be experienced when one reads one of his novels (578). This is not unlike how Derrida characterizes his “essay in the night” (i.e. *Specters of Marx*), an advancement “into the unknown of that which must remain to come,” and it seems that Wideman’s quote conforms to the idea of the specter as something that hovers between what is known and what is not known as well (Derrida xvii, 5). The uncertainty that Wideman mentions in the last part of the quote is in a sense almost elevated to an ethical stance, in a manner reminiscent of what Susan Sontag describes in *At the Same Time* as “perhaps the beginning of wisdom, and humility,” namely “to acknowledge, and bow one’s head, before the thought [...] of the simultaneity of everything, and the incapacity of our moral understanding – which is also the understanding of the novelist – to take this in” (Sontag and Dilonardo 226).

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<sup>34</sup> Surprise is considered to be an important aspect in the creation of literary fiction. The idea that stories which are too fully conceptualized at the initial stage of writing tend to fall flat and fail to come alive is a common observation among writers, which, to paraphrase Wideman, would mean that the known and unknown of the narrative insufficiently create the kind of tension that gives good writing its edge (Berben-Masi 578). George Saunders has mentioned in an interview that he “found out that the same minute I had an idea about what I wanted to write, life would go out of it” (5). The author refers to a famous quote by Flannery O’ Connor in the interview, who wrote in her book *Mystery and Manners* that “the writer can choose what [s]he writes about but [s]he cannot choose what [s]he is able to make live” (27). In a different context, short-story writer Ron Carlson explains that “surprises and turns in the writing that you didn’t anticipate” are necessary for writing to be “solid” (15). His experience is that “if you get what you expect [in the writing process], it isn’t good enough” (15).

### Between *Two Cities* and *A Tale of Two Cities*

This idea quite clearly ties in with the obvious homage that the title of *Two Cities* pays to Charles Dickens' 1859 classic *A Tale of Two Cities* as well. Its opening sentence, certainly among the most famous in English literature, encapsulates exactly "the simultaneity of everything" in a striking way:

It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us, we were all going direct to Heaven, we were all going direct the other way [...]. (5)

Mr. Mallory, as we have seen, shares this understanding of the simultaneous existence of opposites in which "[t]wo simple truths" can coexist even though they contradict each other (*Two Cities* 6-7). This is what the character calls "the dance of light and dark" that he seeks to capture in his photography, a phrase that pays homage to the opening of Dickens' novel too, as we see here, given its mention of the seasons of "Light" and "Darkness" (*Two Cities* 179, Dickens 5).

*A Tale of Two Cities* influences *Two Cities* at a level beyond that of intertextual play, however. The devastating outbursts of violence that Dickens brought to the page are present in Wideman's novel, in which the dispossessed youth of Pittsburgh and Philadelphia murder each other senselessly. In the novel, Kassima asks how it is possible "to hear the same news day after day" on the radio, of "some young black

man or boy [who] had hurt another somebody like him,” and “still have anyone left alive in a city this size who was black, male, and under twenty-five” (201). In these two cities, Wideman seems to say, a nightmare unfolds that is on par with the historical currents sweeping the London and Paris of Dickens’ text.

To this effect, the final scenes of the two novels are comparable in their juxtaposition of violence and hope, another expression of how both the best and worst of times can perhaps coexist. In *Two Cities*, Mr. Mallory’s coffin is mistakenly carried out of the funeral home and opened on the street by gang members who are looking to desecrate the body of the rival they have murdered. Kassima rushes towards the commotion and finds Mr. Mallory’s body, which is half naked and half covered in a shroud. She “kneel[s] down beside him, kissing his rough, icy cheek,” and protects him with her body (238). The scene carries connotations of an almost *Pietà*-like sanctity in which Mr. Mallory plays the role of a Christ-figure. Indeed, his work seems to have a redemptive potential, because the photographs which Kassima “dumped [...] at Mr. Mallory’s feet,” while she starts to preach towards the crowd that surrounds them, are picked up by several of the people gathered (238-39). As explained above, the photographs inspires them to start talking to and “looking at each other,” which signals a precarious sense of hope, in that it is “the beginning of the end of the worst part of that day,” as Wideman writes (239). The closing of the novel is similar to Dickens’ *A Tale of Two Cities* because in the latter, too, senseless violence forms the backdrop of an emerging sense of hope. In the last chapter, we follow Sydney Carton and the young seamstress he has befriended as they wait in line to be executed by the guillotine (401-403). Sydney, like Mr. Mallory, has a certain Christ-like bearing to him, and his friend tells him that she “think[s] you were sent to me by Heaven” to make it through her final moment in life (402). Like Kassima kisses Mr. Mallory, so does the seamstress kiss Sydney in front of a crowd (403). And in the

manner that Mr. Mallory's legacy proves to be transformative to the people gathered around his dead body, so are the "prophetic" last thoughts of Sydney, "If he had given an utterance to [them]," a hopeful ending to a moment of viciousness, which we also find in *Two Cities* (404). As Dickens writes,

I see a beautiful city and a brilliant people rising from this  
abyss, and, in their struggles to be truly free, in their  
triumphs and defeats, through long years to come, I see the  
evil of this time and of the previous time of which this is the  
natural birth, gradually making expiation for itself and  
wearing out. (404)

It is a wish that could have been uttered for Philadelphia and Pittsburgh by Mr. Mallory in Wideman's text, a longing for emancipation that is a mainstay of African American writing as such. Wideman, rather than resurrecting it entirely in his text, hints at this possibility for emancipation by subtly including it in his intertextual archive.

To return to the idea of an openness to uncertainty, Wideman does not straightforwardly quote *A Tale of Two Cities*, however, but rather gives its thematic content space in his text, in a manner comparable to way in which *Native Son* is referred to in *Hiding Place* and *The Tempest in Philadelphia Fire*. There is never a complete certainty of intertextual reference—Dickens is never mentioned in the novel, as opposed to the sculptor Alberto Giacometti, for example—yet the similarities between the endings of *Two Cities* and *A Tale of Two Cities* are too many to be coincidental. It is, in a sense, too, an expression of Mr. Mallory's philosophy, because between the two novels "[e]verything connects, [and] nothing connects" (*Two Cities* 6). This is the sort of "multisensual output" that Wideman seeks to foster in his

novels, and what he appears to value in both the creation of art and literature and in the way it is experienced by his audience (Hume 705). It is, to reiterate, the tension between “what I ‘know’ and ‘don’t know’ com[ing] together” that drives the creative process of the author, and we see here how Wideman puts his readers in a similar bind (Berben-Masi 578): even those with a background knowledge of *A Tale of Two Cities* can never be entirely sure that what they are reading refers back to it. Like a ghost in a room, the presence of *A Tale of Two Cities* in Wideman’s novel is both there and not there simultaneously.

### Haunting and Photography

What Susan Sontag singles out as wisdom in *At the Same Time*, namely the acceptance of “the simultaneity of everything, and the incapacity of our moral understanding,” correlates to the ideal that Mr. Mallory hopes his artwork will express in *Two Cities* as well, which, as he describes it, revolves around the simultaneity of “many scenes occur[ing] at once” (Sontag and Dilonardo 226, Wideman 117). Mr. Mallory expresses the wish that he “might find a way, an art to record the struggle, the give-and-take, the dance of light and dark” (*Two Cities* 179). This gives us a tentative explanation of why he proceeds as he does, overexposing photo-negatives to the point that it is unlikely that there is much to see on them, in a sense using the same photo-negative for more than one composition “at the same time.” Mr. Mallory is trying to produce, as he writes in one of his letters,

One among countless ways of seeing, so the more they [the audience] look, the more there is to see. A density of appearances my goal, Mr. Giacometti. So I snap, snap, snap. Pile on layer after layer. A hundred doses of light without



moving the film. No single, special, secret view sought or revealed. One in many. Many in one. (91)<sup>35</sup>

In “Black, Not Blank: Photography’s (Invisible) Archives in John Edgar Wideman’s *Two Cities*,” Petra Dreiser argues that for Mr. Mallory, the “genuine seeing, the ‘Seeing [that] is Freedom’ [which] he wishes his pictures to exemplify,” this seeing “subjects itself to the constant fluidity and transformation of the world, so that, ultimately, nothing tangible can remain” (5-6). Dreiser concludes that

Mr. Mallory realizes that an art which must inescapably fix—choose exclusively from an array of possible images, arrest in movement, and physically hold on paper (and even film) with the help of a chemical concoction—can never achieve such evanescence. (6)

Late in the narrative the reader learns that Mr. Mallory “decided to become a photographer” while he contemplates the hilly landscapes of Italy during his service in World War Two (*Two Cities* 179). The contradictory tension between the beautiful landscape and the ugliness of war, the simultaneous existence of “death and danger,” and “a tiny flower, a breeze, dawn on the hills” starts him on a journey to find “an art to record the struggle, the give-and take, the dance of light and dark I’d witnessed” (179). But as Dreiser correctly points out, photography also “inescapably fix[es],”

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<sup>35</sup> This allows us to read *A Tale of Two Cities*’ insertion into the text, too, as an example of the “density of appearances” that emerges when “layer after layer” of Dickens’ novel is referred back to (91). And, indeed, “the more they look, the more there is to see” there for the reader (91), a statement by Mr. Mallory that can function as a guide for the reader of Wideman’s novel, which once again confirms that, indeed, what Wideman discusses through his character applies to his own oeuvre as well.

which perhaps makes it unsuitably to capture “the dance of light and dark” that the character mentions (Dreiser 6, Wideman 179).

Mr. Mallory therefore fears art as such, any and all art, to be “a lost cause,” a loss akin to the “hopelessness” of “all of us who must risk losing what we see if we truly want to see it” (*Two Cities* 119). But perhaps it is especially photography that suffers from having to “inescapably fix” reality—and thereby to represent it as being less complex than it really is. The certainty that comes with the photographic image, as opposed to the uncertainty that writers like Wideman and Sontag encourage as an ethical stance, is what Mr. Mallory struggles with as well. Because he, too, wants to capture “the simultaneity of everything” in his work, he has to try to find a way beyond traditional photography to achieve his goal, a conundrum that reflects Wideman’s struggle with expectations of mimetic realism throughout his career (Sontag and Dilonardo 226). After multiple *Philadelphia Fire* reviews argued that that novel’s stylistic achievements got in the way of “the urban reality that it sought to render,” it perhaps becomes clear why Wideman chose a photographer who struggles with the tools of his trade as the protagonist of his next contemporary urban novel (Dubey 92). Both Wideman and Mr. Mallory apparently work with a medium and with subject matter that audiences somehow expect will produce something approaching realism.

One of the opening statements that Susan Sontag makes in her seminal *On Photography* (1977) is that “[p]hotographed images do not seem to be statements about the world so much as pieces of it” (4). They are “miniatures of reality” for her (4). But the relative amount of certainty that cannot help but attach itself to the photographic image works against the goals of the artist Mr. Mallory. As Barthes puts it in *Camera Lucida*, photographs have “evidential power,” and it is exactly the evident, the obvious, that needs to be penetrated, and turned upside down, if you will, to arrive at

the insights Mr. Mallory hopes to communicate (106). In the image, as Barthes continues, “the object yields itself wholly, and our vision of it is *certain*” (106). Echoing Sontag, he explains that “contrary to [...] other perceptions which give me the object in a vague, arguable manner,” photographs appear to interfere with interpretation, and herein resides their “certainty” (106-107). And this certainty obviously comes to stand in the way of what Wideman points out as the fact that “there’s always uncertainty,” if one is willing to keep one’s eyes open for it, be receptive to it, in order to arrive at wisdom, humility, what Sontag calls “the simultaneity of everything.” For these thinkers, and for Mr. Mallory in the novel, the important thing is to remain “faithful to the ambiguity of our existence” to keep in mind the “the multiple meanings of everything we do [and of everything that] is done to us” (Simic “The Consolation of Strangeness”).

And in this, photography inherent disposition towards the realistic doesn’t necessarily help. The self-confident manner in which it serves up reality as an image ready to be consumed prevents it. As Susan Sontag mentions, photographs “give us the sense that we can hold the whole world in our heads” (*On Photography* 3). They “furnish evidence,” as “[s]omething we hear about, but doubt, seems proven when we’re shown a photograph of it” (5). And as Barthes adds in *Camera Lucida*, “in Photography, I can never deny that *the thing has been there*”: Photographs give us certainty (76, italics in original).

But from Mr. Mallory’s (and Wideman’s) understanding of the purpose of art, multiplicity and fluidity are what is important, rather than certainty. In the novel, a shedding of assumptions is generally represented as having emancipatory potential. As the fictional John Africa remarks, “The whites got an idea about us and won’t let the idea go. Can’t let it go. Scared to let it go [...] They got a picture of African people locked up in their minds and nothing’s gon change it” (*Two Cities* 229). The stability

that such a picture provides reminds us of the psychoanalytic theory of the mirror stage, in which images come to “symbolize the I’s [i.e. ego’s] mental permanence,” as Lacan mentions in his paper “The Mirror Stage as Formative of the I Function,” a mental permanence that can come to replace a sense of fragmentation (76). For Wideman, though, “all this stuff that you’ve armed yourself with might be, for one reason or another, totally irrelevant and get you into as much trouble as guide you,” as we have seen (compare the idea of “arming yourself” with the language of Lacan in his famous essay, which speaks of the protective “armor” of an assumed identity) (Berben-Masi 578, Lacan 78). Wideman wants the reader to feel lost too, in a sense, so that he or she can reorient themselves. And if he voices his aesthetic theory through the character Mr. Mallory, the photographer’s art should in some way come to approach such a state as well. Gradually, as Mr. Mallory states it:

The bits and pieces of yourself you worried about so much,  
burdened yourself to keep track of, account for, the  
fragments you treated as your precious, unique portion, by  
and by come together or dissolve into just what they’re  
supposed to be, you and not you, as they were all along. You  
fit. This thinner time that falls almost outside time allows  
you to see through endless layers, see the thick layering.  
Glorious some days, a menace others. (*Two Cities* 146)

But as we have seen from our theoretical discussion above, this is not how photographs, Mr. Mallory’s medium as an artist, generally work. Rather, photographs and images shore up a stable sense of self, and in a sense work against the process that the character here describes. Mr. Mallory gradually comes to realize this. In one of his letter to Alberto Giacometti, he writes of being “discouraged, ready

to give up picture-taking" (82). He mentions the influence of the sculptor's art on his work: "[y]ou admitted failure, even welcomed it," he writes, and "[s]aid it's impossible to copy a world that never stops changing. Seeing is Freedom, you said. Art fakes and freezes seeing" (82).

Mr. Mallory, whose artistic goals include that viewers see "the image I offer as many images, one among countless ways of seeing, so the more they look, the more there is to see," seeks to avoid this "freezing" by proceeding as he does—he has adapted his camera so that he can expose "[a] hundred doses of light without moving the film" (91). Mr. Mallory shoots multiple photographs of the black communities of Pittsburg and Philadelphia on the same negative, overexposing them to the point that they are unlikely to clearly represent anything when they are actually developed as photographs. For Mr. Mallory, "[n]o single, special, secret view [is] sought or revealed. One in many. Many in one," is his stated goal (91). One senses in this Wideman's reaction to critics' demands that the expectation to write more politically made him feel "pushed and shoved" (Rowell 93). The "force of habit [that] turns to certainty" is what Mr. Mallory tries to break, and it is this habit which makes "[us] forget how spirit and mind piece the world together glimpse by glimpse" (*Two Cities* 91). What Mr. Mallory admires in the work of Alberto Giacometti, Romare Bearden, and Thelonious Monk is that they keep the complexity of the world at the forefront of the audience's mind. As he writes in his letter to Giacometti: "A stare that freezes and kills just the opposite of what you do, and Mr. Bearden and Mr. Monk. You turn things loose" (118).

What Barthes sees as the "very essence, the *noeme* of Photography," however, is the fact that "I can never deny that *the thing has been there*" in this art form, which perhaps can be compared to a "stare that freezes and kills," as Mr. Mallory defines it (Barthes 76, emphasis in original, *Two Cities* 118). Contrary to painting, as Barthes

mentions, photography is stitched much more closely to reality, it refers to a “necessarily real thing which has been placed before the lens,” as we have seen (76, emphasis in original). “That-has-been” is the name of this *noeme* for Barthes, if you will, a definition that he refines to “someone has seen the referent (even if it is a matter of objects) *in flesh and blood*, or again *in person* (77-79, emphasis in original).

Perhaps this is what has made Mr. Mallory “discouraged, ready to give up picture taking” (*Two Cities* 82). He writes to Alberto Giacometti that:

I've learned from you the world vanishes when anyone looks hard enough, hard the way an artist must. How do you make your peace with this vanished world, with what's unseen, there and not there. How do you keep the sting of its absence present in your work. (82)

And so it appears again that what he tries to achieve is something that works against the innate functioning of photography (which is also why Mr. Mallory has to tinker with the inner workings of his camera). Keeping “the sting of ... absence present” in art, the sting of “what's unseen, there and not there,” is a foremost principle for Mr. Mallory, but photography as Barthes identifies it has to concern itself with a “necessarily real thing which has been placed before the lens” (*Two Cities* 82, Barthes 76). The problem that Mr. Mallory runs into is that he tries to deliver a representation of more than a “real thing,” namely, the unseen, that which is “there and not there,” in other words, the ghostly edge of reality (Barthes 76, *Two Cities* 82). Whereas for Barthes, the *noeme*, indeed, the *essence* of photography is the proof that “someone has seen the referent ... *in flesh and blood*,” what Mr. Mallory strives for in the novel is to have his photographs “expose what lies beneath the skin,” to push past established phenomenological concepts in other words, to “[g]o where there is no skin, no

outside or inside, no body," as he puts it, which is a goal that clashes with the essence of photography as Barthes identifies it (Barthes 79, *Two Cities* 119). There is one instance in the novel where Mr. Mallory actually tries to photograph ghosts, and for this he also uses his technique of overexposing the same negative (*Two Cities* 175). It is "the last photo he snapped before he left Philadelphia," as Wideman writes, "or was it his first photo, the ruins of the house on Osage Avenue where John Africa and his people [were] murdered" (haunting disturbs Mr. Mallory's sense of chronology again here) (174). Mr. Mallory witnesses the scene of the crime days later, when he "hears clanking machines digging, lifting, tossing, scattering their remains" (175). Then, it appears that he hears the victims, "hears them ... sees *their invisible presence in the vacant space he shoots over and over*, shooting and not allowing the film to advance, shooting till the film snaps off its spool and then shooting some more" (175, emphasis mine). Invisible presence in vacant space: Mr. Mallory tries to photograph that which is already no longer there, rather than capture the "That-has-been" (Barthes 77).

Interestingly enough, Barthes admits that the "That-has-been" of a particular photograph that one encounters in the "daily flood" of images can be "experienced with indifference" (77). His famous innovation on the idea of the punctum provides a clue here. Importantly, not every photograph carries this punctum with it. Plenty of images leave Barthes largely cold, they interest him for their *studium*, for what they can show us of worlds that are removed in time and space, but they do not engage him beyond "a kind of general, enthusiastic commitment [...] without special acuity" (26). Things are different with photographs that carry in them a *punctum*, which he famously defines as "that accident which pricks me (but also bruises me, is poignant to me)," something which shoots out of the photograph "like an arrow, and pierces me" (26-27). The great risk for the socially conscious artist (like Mallory, and by extension, of course, Wideman) is exactly that what one offers up to the observer will

be experienced indifferently by him or her, however. The socially conscious photograph has to compete in a flood of photographs and is likely to be swallowed up by it. And what if it *is* recognized for what it is? The “That-has-been,” the “melancholy of Photography itself” is ultimately perhaps precisely that: melancholic, but safely so. The punctum that Barthes identifies as stinging him is perhaps experienced as a melancholy comfort more than anything else.

After all, we keep snapshots of times and people we have lost around, and for a reason. Does Barthes’s melancholy experience of the photograph even constitute a haunting? If we compare it to haunting as a mental experience which Wideman tries to represent (and which he can bring alive on the page like few others), we can get a good sense of the differences involved. Kassima, in her home after Mr. Mallory has died there, and where she had lived with her deceased sons and husband, experiences a sense of “that-has-been” in a manner that is far from melancholy. As Wideman writes:

Booby traps everywhere in the house. Stuff waiting for you to stumble over it so it can remind you of them and break your heart. You try to spare yourself the pain of uncovering, of coming across when you least expect it, when your nerves can't handle it, something they left behind. You straighten up, tidy up, sort and bag and hide away and toss. You clean and scrub every inch of the house. Then you bathe yourself so no traces stick to your skin, so all the blood's washed off. Try as you might, you can't finish the job. Always something you miss. Something you've forgotten had anything to do with one of them jumps you. [...] How hard it was. [...] You can't help making them up whole on the spot. Believing



them alive again. Tripping over them, falling, breaking your neck, your heart. (*Two Cities* 138)

For Kassima, memories haunt no matter how hard she tries to get rid of them; her house is haunted by the presence and non-presence of the murdered men in her life. And is not the “over-and-done-with com[ing] alive” Avery Gordon mentions as constituting a haunting something else entirely from the way in which the photograph tells the viewer that “That-has-been”? (Gordon *Ghostly Matters* xvi, Barthes 77). Interestingly enough, Gordon briefly discusses *Camera Lucida* in her book. She reads the *punctum* as being able to “bring to life the life external to the photo,” this external life being a blind field that is “pressing in from the other side of the fullness of the image displayed within the frame” (107). What the *punctum* does, as Gordon reads it, is evoke this blind field “and the necessity of finding it” (107). She continues that, then, when we “catch a glimpse of its endowments [i.e. the blind field] in the paradoxical experience of seeing what appears to be not there we know that a haunting is occurring” (107).

But is it really? The manner in which the *punctum* evokes the life outside of the photo and our desire to find it, reads much more like a melancholy experience than a haunted one. Melancholy comfort is decidedly *not* what Mr. Mallory is after in the novel. As Tyrone Simpson correctly points out in *Ghetto Images*, “Mallory does not intend his aesthetic labor to sate the consumptive desires of bourgeois viewers who more than likely reside well beyond the boundaries of the ghetto” (230). In addition, Mr. Mallory’s work as a photographer runs the risk of becoming a part of the traditions of “urban photorealism” that can easily “reduce the multiple mysteries that constitute urban discomfort to stereotype,” a conundrum that reminds us of the one facing Wideman throughout his career (Simpson 241, Dubey 10-11). And hence Mr.

Mallory tries to step away from conventionally photographing his subjects, which would likely produce the kind of social documentary artwork that can be easily consumed, experienced with or without either shock or indifference, and then forgotten. The punctum as Barthes theorizes it remains containable. It produces a melancholy experience perhaps, but one that can be accessed at will, one that is bound by a picture frame.

Mr. Mallory, in one of his letters to Alberto Giacometti states that "I've learned from you the world vanishes when anyone looks hard enough hard the way an artist must" (*Two Cities* 82). As we have seen, he asks the sculptor: "How do you make your peace with this vanished world, with what's unseen, there and not there. How do you keep the sting of its absence present in your work" (82) He admires Giacometti's art "for remembering what is lost" (83). But perhaps Mr. Mallory's preferred method of producing his own photographic art stems as well from the realization that conventionally photographing his neighborhoods means preserving it in pictures that, however melancholic their content, can give a sense of comfort to the viewer that something is saved, when in Wideman's novelistic worlds, very few things are (Jeffrey Severs speaks of Wideman's "apocalypticism" in a recent essay) (75). As Madhu Dubey, reading a scene from *Philadelphia Fire* that involves a photograph, explains in *Signs and Cities*: "the belief that we can possess time by holding its visual image in our hands supplies an illusory solace against our actual loss of time" (126).

As we have seen, the Barthian haunting of the art photograph is manageable, it ends relatively soon after we walk out of the exhibit, or close the photography book and forget about it. This is what Mr. Mallory avoids in his work, but to do so he has to push the established conventions of photography, and perhaps even push beyond its limits. During his lifetime, he never shows his work to an audience, and he never brings his "picture taking project" to completion (*Two Cities* 178). In his own eyes, the

approach of “stack[ing] slices of light onto each square of film,” is supposed to create photographs which offer “[d]ifferent views, each stamped with its own pattern of light and dark but also transparent, letting through some of the light and dark of layers beneath and above (117). But Mr. Mallory sums up his life’s work as “[b]oxes of overexposed snapshots, undeveloped negatives, unsent letters,” and he doubts that “anything he’d ever said or done had made the slightest difference for anyone” (89). After his death, Kassima describes the work Mr. Mallory produced as follows:

All I could see when I held the film up to light was gray,  
gray, gray. Gray close to white in some and some closer to  
black and some with silver veins running through or maybe  
some different shades of gray. (211)

So perhaps his work *was* able to communicate what he hoped it would. The images that are layered in a way that is both light and dark, black nor white but various shades of *gray*, put to mind exactly his desire for “an art to record the struggle, the give-and take, the dance of light and dark I’d witnessed” (179). Kassima remarks of the work that it makes her “[s]ad to think what’s lost. Wonder what Mr. Mallory had in mind. What’s in the negatives nobody is ever going to see” (212). In a sense, this was the purpose of the photos. Rather than straightforwardly documenting the communities of Pittsburgh and Philadelphia that are erased, and thus saving something of them for posterity, the photos go beyond that and invoke precisely that that which has been erased cannot be recovered and is forever lost, underscoring the severity of destruction black communities face. In addition to the loss of black lives that is constantly encountered in the novel, the Homewood neighborhood itself is destroyed by neglect, as “houses [are] boarded up or shells or bulldozed into vacant lots, craters, mounds of rubble,” as Robert witnesses in the novel (28). He likens “the

row of six or seven houses standing on one side of Cassina” to be akin to “the last stale slice of a cake” that somebody had consumed long before (28).

Mr. Mallory weds the loss of the world of Homewood that he tries to capture to the loss of certainty that is central to his artistic philosophy, represented in his work by the color gray, a synthesis symbolizing the resolution of the binary of black and white that American society continues to regenerate, with such deadly results as the MOVE bombing. The “sting of absence” that he encounters daily in his outside world, whether it is post-MOVE disaster Philadelphia or crumbling Homewood in Pittsburg, is what he tries to keep alive in his art. A straightforward documentation of his environment would not suffice for this, it would produce a realism that does not parallel the haunted experience of time and space that Mr. Mallory tries to navigate, understand, and communicate.

### Conclusion

As this chapter has shown, Wideman uses his character Mr. Mallory in *Two Cities* to explore the ways in which haunting can be communicated in artistic work. The character, who lives in a blurred reality in which time and space are distorted because of his traumatic memories of World War Two and the MOVE bombing, takes this distortion at face value and concludes that the ambiguous manner in which, as he states, “[e]verything connects [and] nothing connects” is a concept that most closely resembles his lived experience. To articulate this principle in his photographs, Mr. Mallory lets different times and locales overlap, by re-exposing film-negatives, a technique that produces blurry gray results which, in their evocation of loss and in their distortion of ontologically distinct objects, evoke exactly the hauntological idea that we are seeing the “*more than one / no more one,*” or “some ‘thing’ that remains

difficult to name” when we behold the spectral (Derrida xx, 5). Mr. Mallory succeeds in avoiding to make his work conform to “urban photorealism,” not an easy task given photography’s inherent properties (as they were discussed in this chapter), by pushing his photographs to the limits of legibility (Simpson 241).

The manner in which Mr. Mallory’s (productive) struggle with his medium resembles Wideman’s attempts to write about African American urban communities is one of the most fascinating aspects of *Two Cities*. While, Wideman, too, wanted to represent these communities, the risks involved in this endeavor were readily apparent for the author (Dubey 5). We can read Mr. Mallory’s repeated exposure of the same negative, showing Pittsburgh and Philadelphia again and again, as a metaphor for what Wideman did in his novels: showing these two cities in so many different ways that the various layers which are always present in his work start to contradict each other and foster a sense of indeterminacy and uncertainty, which, though it has often kept scholars from being able to make definitive statements about his work, ensured that his subject matter (black city life) was not read in a realist or essentialist way.

We do need to take in consideration Mr. Mallory’s doubts about the effectiveness of his work, his doubts that “anything he’d ever said or done had made the slightest difference for anyone” as a thought that perhaps Wideman struggled with at times as well, however (89). The manner in which Mr. Mallory’s life work “float[s] down like snow” beside his dead body, as Wideman writes, suggests the extent to which it is ultimately ephemeral, something that will inevitably melt away without a trace (238). And yet, in a way that was perhaps not foreseen by the photographer, Wideman makes the work somehow be politically effective in the end, portraying a layered grayness that gets the bystanders who pick up his pictures to think about and discuss what they could mean (238-39).

As the author writes of his protagonist: "He's lived long enough to gather plenty of pieces of the puzzle, long enough to know he'll never find a way to fit them together" (6). The unresolved puzzle is an apt image for Wideman's own writing. There is almost always something that remains unresolved in his texts, some fragment of writing that cannot be used as a piece of the puzzle that one tries to put together, something that sticks out and is beyond understanding. In this way, the known and unknown come together in his texts, they coexist, and they leave the reader to conclude that ambiguity is indeed the inevitable outcome of trying to completely understand the author's work. Either way, the fact that *Two Cities* so clearly expresses this uncertainty should be taken into account, alongside the fear of ineffectiveness that Mr. Mallory mentions, when we speculate as to why Wideman did not return to Homewood and Philadelphia in his novels after writing about them for two decades. His desired goal, as he stated, "for the reader to remember that wherever you are, there's probably another place just as present," and its clear connotations of haunting, had perhaps been sufficiently met at last (Berben-Masi 572).

## Conclusion

The goal of this dissertation, to argue for the importance of the concept of haunting in understanding the work of John Edgar Wideman, and thus to create more room for this perspective in critical approaches to the author's work, has hopefully been reached. Through analyses of three of his works which are set in the cities of Pittsburgh and Philadelphia, I have tried to demonstrate the manner in which Wideman sought to expand on both the idea of urban realism as it was often expressed in African American literature, and the manner in which he sought to expand on the idea on the literary traditions of haunting, which the author was in conversation with as they were being established in the 1980s and 1990s, and which tended to focus more on the afterlife of slavery than did Wideman's work. What makes Wideman's city novels an interesting object of analysis is that he managed to make their contemporary urban setting into a haunted narrative world, as much as for example the Antebellum South was for other writers working with the concept of haunting. *The Homewood Books* (1981-1983), *Philadelphia Fire* (1990), and *Two Cities* (1998) share a concern with the manner in which the history of racial violence that developed in Northern US cities through for example segregation, stigmatization, and police killings connects with and should be understood within broader contexts of violence leveled at the Other throughout modern history, of which Wideman always includes various examples in his texts. The ghosts that populate his narratives remind the characters of the ways in which their lives are connected to larger narratives of their family history, of African American history, of transatlantic history, and of world history. They represent the loss of lives and opportunities that occur in for example the Homewood neighborhood of Pittsburgh, in which violence is never far away from the characters' diegetic world. The manner in which haunting interrupts a

straightforward, “realist,” approach to this topic is evident from the fragmented chronological style that the novels present, from the surreal scenes in which characters encounter ghosts or (in character Cudjoe’s case) see their life unfolding along the parameters of the past of *The Tempest*, and from the philosophical digressions it inspires, in which both characters and author try to make sense and narrative out of the ambiguity that haunting and its effects—distorted times, spaces, and concepts—leave in its wake.

We have seen that Wideman sought to connect his stories of Homewood and Philadelphia to alternate contexts of understanding by associating them with well-known literary narratives, like *Native Son*, *A Tale of Two Cities*, and *The Tempest*, as well. By invoking works that were, respectively, almost half a century, more than a century, and several centuries old at the time that Wideman wrote his books, and by demonstrating the way in which the stories *he* tells are similar to those works, Wideman is again able to invoke the similarities between different time periods, and the idea that these time periods can return to the world of the characters in his work: In *Hiding Place*, Tommy’s life unfolds along the lines of Bigger’s in *Native Son*; in *Philadelphia Fire*, Cudjoe’s narrative reminds us of *The Tempest*; and in *Two Cities*, Mr. Mallory’s death invokes the ending of *A Tale of Two Cities*. It is interesting to note, too, the manner in which these famous texts of the past make their presence felt in Wideman’s work, namely, indirectly. They function like “flashing half-signs ordinarily overlooked,” hovering between presence and absence in the text (Gordon *Ghostly Matters* 204). And hence they too can be seen as specters of a kind: the reader, as though encountering a ghost, is never entirely sure whether he or she can trust that the traces of these literary pasts in Wideman’s texts are placed there on purpose, or that he or she is just imagining the similarities.



As we have seen in my analyses, Wideman in his oeuvre makes the idea of haunting register on a variety of scales. In *The Homewood Books*, characters hear fragments of songs, or voices of ghosts, and through memory, they can travel both through time and through space, because these voices can scream right through walls, and indication of the manner in which the home is a fragile, difficult to protect entity in Wideman's Homewood. This is an idea that we have seen expressed in all of the works under consideration here as well: Hiding places, to paraphrase the title of the Homewood trilogy's novella—from the past, from fate, from the police, from violence—are few in Homewood and in Philadelphia. Freeda French has to break her own window to warn her husband that somebody is about to shoot at him, an action that the author describes in telling terms, since, "there had been separation, a safe space between, but the glass was shattered now and the outside air in her face and her mama's hand bleeding," as Wideman writes (*The Homewood Books* 49). Aunt Bess's home on Bruston Hill is frequented by the ghost of her dead husband, and by Tommy, whom she first takes for a ghost, but who has come to her to hide from the police. Neither of them can stay there, as Tommy flees again and Aunt Bess burns down her house to protest Tommy's fate. The house that the Tate family lived in in *Sent for You Yesterday* is also a place where, as Lucy says, "she could never be lonely here. Truth was she's always tripping over ghosts and shoving them out the way so she could have a little peace and quiet" (498). Home, whether understood at the level of the actual house, the neighborhood, the city, or the country, is indeed a haunted place in Wideman's city novels. In *Philadelphia Fire*, the fragility of the home is of course most centrally represented by the MOVE house, which was destroyed by the Philadelphia police (along with 53 more houses). In *Two Cities*, too, we have seen how the haunted Mr. Mallory loses his sense of being at home, a state of being that Avery Gordon deems a central characteristic of haunting (*Ghostly Matters* xvi). As she states,

“[y]our bearings on the world lose direction” when haunted, a condition that Mr. Mallory clearly exhibits when he stumbles around in his own house, unable to avoid “bumping into a chair” because in his mind he is only halfway there, while in his memories he is meeting with his departed friend John Africa (Gordon xvi, *Two Cities* 12). The character tries to represent the condition of being in “Two cities, to places at once,” or, in fact, of being in “too many places” at once in his artwork, photographs of African American communities in Pittsburgh and Philadelphia that seek to reconcile the beauty of “a tiny flower, a breeze, dawn on the hills” with the horrors of “death and danger” that are so often present there (*Two Cities* 12-13, 179).

A description of Wideman’s project in the novels I included here perhaps approaches this statement as well, and it describes the complex task that the author had set for himself: to combine into narratives the ways in which life in these cities can be both horrifying, sorrowful, and beautiful at once; to demonstrate the ways in which history bleeds into the present and continually jeopardizes an emancipated future in these spaces; to maintain a sense of political mission—and all of this in the context of the highly fraught issue of representing African American urban communities that was significant in the years that Wideman published his work, an issue that threatened to usurp any “realistic” portrayal of these communities into the deeply problematic parameters of either sensationalist “problem” literature or the “underclass” debate (Dubey 14, Rotella 209, Katz 441-445). That Wideman’s project in these novels was indeed a complicated balancing act can be read from the protagonists of *The Homewood Books*, *Philadelphia Fire*, and *Two Cities*, through whom the author self-reflexively addresses the difficulties of sticking to the material referent of urban realism (i.e. African American urban communities) without representing it in a reductive or essentialist way. His accomplishment is that while writing haunting, complex, virtuosic texts, he managed to do justice to the moral obligation that writing

about black urban dispossession brought with it. In the ending of *The Homewood Books*, Wideman himself seems to be most confident in having pulled this off, having found the right voice for his content, and it finds narrator John/Doot celebrating that fact. But already in *Philadelphia Fire*, Cudjoe has become skeptical of its usefulness, which is reflected in the novel's more fractured form. What was the purpose of narrating the past's violent hold on the present (as *The Homewood Books* do), when the present produces violence on an enormous scale as well (the MOVE bombing), a scale that places in doubt any sense of an emancipated future? This is what *Philadelphia Fire* asks. That it perhaps both *is* and *is not* a meaningful endeavor to keep trying to turn such events into narratives is what the synthesis of *Two Cities* presents the reader. The contradictions of Wideman's work are fully accepted in this novel, a text that elevates these contradictions into a philosophical stance that the artist Mr. Mallory takes, in an inclusive gesture by which the author himself came to full terms with the implications of the work he had been doing for two decades.

What ultimately confirms hauntology theory as a useful framework for the analysis of his novels is the fact that its philosophically rich insights match those that Wideman presents in his texts. The frequent inclusion of "too many places," of both beauty and horror, are the mark of a writer who came to accept the contradictory positions his texts put forth wholeheartedly. Just as Derrida defines the specter to be "some 'thing' that remains difficult to name: neither soul nor body, and both one and the other," so does Wideman embrace the *both* in his multifaceted texts, to signal the "the uncertainty, heterogeneity, multiplicity, and indeterminacy" that his characters experience and that he conveys to his readers on the page (Derrida 5, Del Pilar Blanco and Peeren *The Spectralities Reader* 7). Spaces flow into another in his work, and time especially is fluid as well, as the spheres of the past, present, and the future

interchangeably hover between what we normally hold to be our established understandings of them.

And this dissolving of the past, present, and the future in his texts is what perhaps comes to haunt the contemporary reader of John Wideman's novels as well. His novels about African American city life—stories often of dispossession, incarceration, and state violence—remain as relevant in our day as they were at the time of their publication. To be sure, Wideman first published *Damballah* and *Hiding Place* in 1981, which is now more than 35 years ago. Reading them today, along with *Sent for You Yesterday* (1983), *Philadelphia Fire* (1990), and *Two Cities* (1998), it becomes clear that these texts have not lost any of their pressing urgency to explain the difficult circumstances under which African American communities in American cities are forced to endure. Perhaps it is why Wideman has not revisited this material since. The ghosts that these novels represent speak for themselves, and continue to speak for themselves, given the unchanging conditions of structural violence that they lament.

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## Eidesstattliche Erklärung

Hiermit versichere ich an Eides statt, dass ich die vorliegende Dissertation ohne fremde Hilfe angefertigt und keine anderen als die angegebenen Quellen und Hilfsmittel benutzt habe. Alle Teile, die wortwörtlich oder sinngemäß einer Veröffentlichung entstammen, sind als solche kenntlich gemacht. Die Arbeit wurde noch nicht veröffentlicht oder einer anderen Prüfungsbehörde vorgelegt.

Koen Potgieter

Berlin, den 1. August 2017

## Summary

### **Haunted Home: Spectral Cities in the Novels of John Edgar Wideman**

This dissertation argues for the importance of the concept of haunting in understanding the novels of John Edgar Wideman that chronicle African American city life in Pittsburgh and Philadelphia at the end of the twentieth century. It analyzes the novels *The Homewood Books* (1981-1983), *Philadelphia Fire* (1990), and *Two Cities* (1998) for the manner in which haunting interrupts a straightforward, “realist,” approach to this topic. My findings are that Wideman proceeded through the use of a fragmented chronological style, through surreal scenes in which characters encounter ghosts, and through philosophical digressions that haunting inspires, digressions in which both characters and author try to make sense and narrative out of the ambiguity that the specter and its effects—distorted times, spaces, and concepts—leave in its wake. My analyses, whose theoretical foundations are found in the work of Jacques Derrida and Avery Gordon, among others, show that Wideman makes the idea of haunting register on a variety of scales in his work, to combine into narratives the ways in which life in Pittsburgh and Philadelphia can be both horrifying and contradictory; to demonstrate the ways in which history bleeds into the present and jeopardizes an emancipated future; and to maintain a sense of political mission—all of which in the context of the fraught issue of writing about African American urban communities that presented itself in this period.

## Zusammenfassung

### **Haunted Home: Spectral Cities in the Novels of John Edgar Wideman**

Diese Dissertation argumentiert, dass das philosophische Konzept ‚Haunting‘ eine wichtige Perspektive auf die Romane von John Edgar Wideman bietet, insbesondere jene, die das Afroamerikanische Stadtleben in Pittsburgh und Philadelphia am Ende des zwanzigsten Jahrhundert beschreiben. Die Dissertation analysiert die Romane *The Homewood Books* (1981-1983), *Philadelphia Fire* (1990), und *Two Cities* (1998) und fragt danach, wie ‚Haunting‘ das realistische Erzählen unterbricht. Meine Arbeit zeigt, dass Wideman versucht, diese Unterbrechungen realistischen Erzählens durch die Nutzung eines fragmentierten chronologischen Stils herzustellen, durch die Beschreibung von surrealen Szenen, in denen Charaktere Geister sehen können, und zudem durch philosophische Exkurse, die durch ‚Haunting‘ inspiriert sind, Diskurse, in denen sowohl Charaktere, als auch der Autor versuchen, die Ambiguität des ‚Haunting‘ und seine Effekte – verzerrte Zeiten, Räume und Konzepte – zu verstehen. Meine Analyse, die hauptsächlich auf die theoretische Arbeit von Jacques Derrida und Avery Gordon basiert ist, zeigt, dass ‚Haunting‘ deswegen in vielfacher Weise in diesen Romanen zu spüren ist, wodurch der Schriftsteller Wideman es schafft, zu zeigen, dass das Stadtleben von African Americans oft widersprüchlich ist. Wideman zeigt in diesen Büchern, dass die Geschichte in die Gegenwart zurückkehrt, und so die emanzipierte Zukunft in Gefahr bringt, und behält dabei aber einen politischen Auftrag im Blick, trotz des Kontexts, in dem er seine Romane publizierte, ein Kontext, in dem das Schreiben über das Stadtleben von African American Stadtleben kompliziert (und politisch aufgeladen) war.