

Ulrich Eschborn

Stories of Survival

John Edgar Wideman's
Representations of History

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For my parents

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Introduction

As a consequence of the cultural and political changes in the 1960s, American historiography and African-American literature have focused their attention on the previously neglected topic of African-American history and have questioned the formerly predominant master narrative of American history as linear progress. Like other American authors such as Thomas Pynchon, E. L. Doctorow, Robert Coover, and Philip Roth, African-American writers since the 1960s have produced numerous works dealing with history, especially with slavery and its effects. The historical novels *The Marrow of Tradition* (1901) by Charles W. Chesnutt, *Black Thunder* (1936) by Arna Bontemps, *Flight to Canada* (1976) by Ishmael Reed, *Beloved* (1987) by Toni Morrison, *Middle Passage* (1990) by Charles Johnson, and *The Known World* (2003) by Edward P. Jones, to name six outstanding examples, demonstrate the great variety of African-American literary representations of history.

The Marrow of Tradition is a realist novel set in a Southern town after Reconstruction and describes an anti-black riot – based on the riot in Wilmington, North Carolina, in 1898 – in order to examine the mechanism of “white supremacy.”¹ *Black Thunder*, a modernist novel, describes a failed slave rebellion in Virginia in 1800, which was led by the slave Gabriel Prosser. By suggesting that slaves should not just be regarded as passive victims but as historical agents, the novel questions the predominant motif of deprivation in African-American literature at the time (cf. Diedrich 434). *Flight to Canada*, a postmodern novel, deals with the time of slavery and the question of American multiculturalism by employing parody, irony, and anachronisms. *Beloved* depicts a former slave woman who kills her daughter in order to spare her the experience of slavery. The return of her daughter as a ghost forces her to remember repressed traumatic experiences from the time of slavery in acts of what Morrison’s protagonist calls “rememory.” *Middle Passage* is a philosophical parable about the experiences of a black protagonist on a slave ship symbolizing the republic and focuses on the search for African-American identity as well as the relationship with the Other in American history. *The Known World*, an “old-school” novel (Wideman 2009a), offers a realist tale about the insanity and brutality of the system of slavery in the antebellum South and creates the impression of historical authenticity by using fictional historical

¹ Early in his writing career, Wideman wrote a scholarly article about *The Marrow of Tradition*: “Charles W. Chesnutt: *The Marrow of Tradition*” (1972-73).

sources. These examples already illustrate that, in spite of the correspondences between African-American literary texts dealing with history, one should not overlook that each author develops a specific way of creating history in literature.

John Edgar Wideman, born in 1941, is another contemporary American author of African descent who focuses on history in his work. John O'Brien argues in a review of Wideman's books *Damballah* (1981) and *Hiding Place* (1981) in 1983: "The motivating force behind John Wideman's fiction has always been a sense of the past" (168). In a 1984 portrait of the author, Wilfred D. Samuels first names "the significance of history" in a list of "themes which continue to dominate his work" (1984, 273). In this study, I want to show that Wideman's writing is based on his own specific and complex concept of history consisting of various closely connected elements: the understanding of history as a collective mental process, black family and community, a local approach, forgotten stories, and historically neglected people, ritualistic storytelling, mainly in African-American Vernacular English, the Igbo saying "all stories are true," and the double perspective on history of central characters. Wideman defines the term "story," which is essential to his work, as "a formula for extracting meaning from chaos" (1990d, x). Stories are instrumental in creating meaning and social identity in a chaotic world by ordering past experience. "Ritualistic storytelling" can be defined as a repeated action which takes place in a group including the storyteller and the listener(s) and constructs meaning through the interpretation of the past. Because of the repetition in the course of time, the stories go through countless versions. The listeners are free to comment on the story and thus to take part in the storytelling process. Among African Americans, this collective action serves to stress solidarity, to create an awareness of historical roots and to promote self-confidence for the ongoing resistance against oppression. The stories represent a record of survival which provides models of successful African-American self-assertion.

All the aforementioned elements of Wideman's literary concept of history can be subsumed under the idea of history as a "record of survival" – to use Wideman's own words (1976, 34). As the author makes clear throughout his work, African-American life has been a struggle against discrimination and oppression reaching back to the days of slavery.² Wideman frequently uses the term "survival" in nonfiction texts; both "survival" and "story" are key terms in his worldview which establishes a connection between art and survival: "Art is someone speaking, making a case for survival" (2001a, 230). Keith Byerman believes that "whatever strength African Americans display comes in and through history" (160). Therefore, according to this idealist thinking, Wideman's own art is part of the culture that is supposed to help African Americans to survive in dignity (cf. Interview with Eschborn 991).

² Alfred Hornung writes about "music and play acting performed in public for religious and cultural purposes" as a cultural aspect of African-American survival during slavery (235): "These dramatic performances of daily life formed a cultural bond among uprooted Africans in a strange land and created an African American community strong enough to overcome the bondage of slavery" (235).