To Democratize the Elements of the Historical Record: An Interview with John Edgar Wideman

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TO DEMOCRATIZE THE ELEMENTS OF THE HISTORICAL RECORD

An Interview with John Edgar Wideman

Ulrich Eschborn

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John Edgar Wideman's literary work, already spanning more than four decades, comprises ten novels, three collections of stories, one collection of microstories, four nonfiction books, including his bestselling autobiographical work Brothers and Keepers *(1984), and many essays, articles, and reviews. In the course of his career, Wideman, professor at Brown University where he teaches creative writing, has been awarded the PEN/Faulkner Award (1984, 1991), the American Book Award, a MacArthur Award, a Lannan Literary Fellowship, the James Fenimore Cooper Prize of the Society of American Historians for the novel* The Cattle Killing *(1996), and, for his short stories, the O. Henry and the Rea Awards. He self-published his latest book, a collection of microstories entitled* Briefs: Stories for the Palm of the Mind *(2010).*

Professor Wideman kindly gave me the opportunity to interview him in Brittany on August 12, 2008. This conversation differs from other interviews with Wideman because it focuses on one specific, crucial aspect of his work: history. After Wideman's first two novels, history became a central issue in the third novel The Lynchers *(1973),* the Homewood trilogy *(1981–83),* Philadelphia Fire *(1990), and the historical novel* The Cattle Killing *(1996) as well as in the nonfiction books* Fatheralong: A Meditation on Fathers and Sons, Race and Society *(1994),* Hoop Roots: Basketball, Race, and Love *(2001),* and The Island: Martinique *(2003). His complex approach to history engages concepts like mind and imagination, Great Time (a notion derived from African thought), survival, storytelling and oral history, family, and community. The interview addresses these aspects and reveals that Wideman's concept of history runs counter to the Western idea of linear time and the idea of history as the sum of historiographic texts describing "great leaders" and "great events." In accordance with the notion of Great Time, Wideman represents time and history as nonlinear. He believes that stories about African American families and communities such as Homewood, the African American Pittsburgh neighborhood in which he lived until the age of twelve, are as important as the so-called great events such as the Second World War. As Wideman puts it in the interview, he tries to "democratize [the elements of the historical record] in the sense of reshuffling the hierarchies or getting rid of hierarchy."*

At the end of the conversation before the 2008 United States presidential election, Wideman answers a question about history-in-the-making, namely his hopes with regard to a possible presidency of Barack Obama. His closing words are: "We'll meet again after the election and have another talk [Laughter]—if we're allowed." In fact, I was fortunate enough to have another meeting

with John Edgar Wideman in New York City three days after Obama's election victory on November 4, 2008. The author was glad about the election result, which he had predicted early on.

ULRICH ESCHBORN: I would like to start with three definitions of history that you give in your writing. The first one is from your memoir *Fatheralong* in which you define history as a "collective enterprise of the mind." Could you read this passage?

JOHN EDGAR WIDEMAN: *(Reads)*

> History is not something given, a fixed, chronological, linear outline with blank spots waiting to be filled with newly unearthed facts. It's the activity over time of all the minds comprising it, the sum of these parts that produces a greater ecological whole. History, the past, is what you're thinking, what you've thought. *You,* the individual, you the enabler and product of the collective enterprise of the mind. History is mind, is driven by mind. . . .

ESCHBORN: Thank you. In an interview with John O'Brien in 1972, you give a definition of history which goes in the same direction: "To go back into one's past is in fact dreaming. What is history except people's imaginary recreation?" (10). These statements about history underline that each person is involved in a mental process of creating history. One could call this a democratic concept of history. However, you also claim: "History is a cage, a conundrum we must escape before our art can go freely about its business" (Preface vi). Do you thus suggest an alternative to an older concept which regards history as the sum of historiographic texts written by historians who often focus—or used to focus—on "great leaders" and "great events"?

WIDEMAN: When I talk about history as a cage, I also mean a mental production, the mental production of academics or the mental productions of a particular school of thinking or a country's or an ethnic group's vision of itself. Of course, individuals also have the capacity to cage themselves, to build up walls of personality, build up walls of self-identity which become their history and can become ways of losing control, being cut off from that process which, I like to think, is a continuous process of making oneself up, making up the person that you are. It's the excitement of making that person up which, I think, gives a particular vitality to my life and other people's lives. If we keep running into walls, it's much less fun in the process. Those walls can come from—as I'm suggesting many other places—the two definitions of history that we've just been talking about.

ESCHBORN: Can history be both a cage and at the same time liberating? Knowledge about history can be liberating for African Americans and can strengthen their identity as well as their determination to resist discrimination.

WIDEMAN: Oh, it's a very complex business, isn't it? Because there's a matter of who is inside and who is outside a cage. A Chinese philosopher was imprisoned because the Chinese state at that time in which he lived believed he was dangerous, believed he was a subversive person. So they kept him caged up. His keeper who fed him in the morning and was the only person who saw this man arrived one morning with the usual portion of gruel and water and bread. He saw that the philosopher was crying, felt sympathy and said: "Oh, tough day today? Why are you crying?" The philosopher said: "Because of the cage I see around you, because of the bars that are cutting you off from life." The story should stand for itself, but it is a question of mind, it is a question of what is inside your head: "Does it liberate you or does it stultify, stunt you?" There's always give and take. I like to think the power resides in the one with the stronger mind.

ESCHBORN: Let me address another point: the concept of Great Time. In an interview with Lisa Baker in 2000, you describe Great Time as nonlinear, ancestral time which is like an ocean in which we do not swim in only one direction. You describe it as a medium in which the living and the memory of the dead, in which past, present, and future come together ("Storytelling and Democracy" 267). In *Hoop Roots* you write: "All time's always present" (104). You argue that this concept is part of West African and Native American worldviews and differs from what you have termed "Western clock time" which you say represents an attempt to make sense of Great Time. You mentioned a book called *African Religions & Philosophy* (1969) by John Mbiti influenced your thinking ("Storytelling and Democracy" 267). I think, in your writing, one often finds examples of past, present, and future merging in one point. Did you make up the term "Great Time" yourself? And does this concept of Great Time inform not only the nonlinear time structure of most of your writings but also the literary representation of history in your work?

WIDEMAN: I will start with the first question because it's easier: no, that word "Great Time" does not originate with me. The first time I saw it used was in Mbiti, but I think Janheinz Jahn uses it. I think it's a fairly familiar coin to those ethnographers and students of culture who began to make inquiries into African philosophy probably going all the way back to the French book about Ogotemmeli, a West African bard and soothsayer and philosopher. So Great Time is not my phrase. Great Time suggested to me—as I thought about it and as I heard it rephrased and I reconceptualized it—a kind of sea. That's how I understand it. I think that's how it works in my books, in my stories.

Now we're getting to the second part of the question. This presence of Great Time is accessible in the writing, or it speaks to me in the writing sentence by sentence, not only in episodes and not only in mixing the 1940s, for instance, with the 1970s. In the grammar, in the verb tenses, in the way that, as a writer, I put things together piece by piece, I often become aware of how arbitrary it is to use "said" versus "says," the past tense versus the present tense. Within every usage of the present tense there are a lot of implicit or understood past tenses and vice versa. When I say something about this interview ... Is the interview in my head present and is it thus legitimate to talk about the interview in my head using a present tense? Is the interview something that I have already caged in time and so am therefore thinking of as past? Should I therefore use a past tense in my

references? And then, what tenses are these kind of cogitations framed within? How do those two tenses speak to themselves if one is in the past and one is in the present? Well, they can speak to each other. There must be some place, Great Time, where they all exist, where they exist simultaneously. I'm sorting these kinds of issues out almost word by word. It's fun for me as I write to invite the reader into this process, to propose perhaps the mystery of the reading process itself. Where, in what space, in what temporal space, does the reading process occur?

Some languages have a very special verb tense for telling stories. That verb tense cues the reader to think: "Once upon a time." In English we have that formula that introduces fairy tales and stories and so the reader is being instructed how to read. "Once upon a time" means: "Maybe something happened. Maybe it didn't. Maybe it's happening now. Maybe it's going to happen tomorrow. Let's play. Let's escape where we are. Let's escape the temporal frame in which we are and go somewhere else." In my writing, the sentences, the paragraphs—they are on the page, they are in a certain black and white, nailed-down, organized frame, but I also want to suggest always that they are happening somewhere else—just as I think you and I happen somewhere else. Your parents are thinking of you perhaps in Germany. My mother who is not alive any more is somewhere else, and certainly part of me is connected to her, etc., etc. So it's that problematic "somewhere else" of fairy tales, of song, of movement, that indefinable place that we're all very much aware of.

ESCHBORN: Is Great Time a process of the mind, or do you think that it is a description of external reality? Maybe that's a difficult philosophical question. One has to differentiate between "subjective" and "objective," which is problematic.

WIDEMAN: Well, it's a concept, it's a thought, it's an idea, but it manifests itself quite in a material way. When you are dancing, for instance, there's often a picture in your mind that you're kind of following, or you are shadowing that picture—and that picture may or may not be conscious, or it may be intermittently conscious. You're looking at your dancing partner, and you're seeing that actual body in front of you and you're trying to keep time with it, but you also have in your head, and in your limbs, maybe some other version of the dance. If your partner's a good dancer, you're paying attention to your partner. If it's not such a good partner, maybe you're dancing with that person who exists in Great Time, who has come to you through tradition. Then your partner looks at you and they can see that you're quite awkward, that you have two left feet, that you're not fun to dance with at all. So they would have no idea that you have this perfect dance that you think your body is kind of representing. There are material representations, but there are infinite kinds of slides and preparation and movements back and forth. I think that's probably somewhere at the bottom of Great Time. And that's why I associate it with an ocean because it's a continual movement, continual shifting, a continual set of possibilities none of which ever ends the story. It's simply pass in, pass out.

I was thinking of something like Great Time the other day as I was walking along by the ocean. I was aware of the proliferation of forms and the abundance of things that were along this beach: shells and rocks and pieces of wood and some pieces of garbage

and who knows what? But I was thinking that they were representations of me, of all the parts and all the pieces that I have, and that not only was I welcome and allowed to walk along this beach in my present form, but I could see what I was going to become: these inanimate things, but they weren't really inanimate on another level because many of them had once been alive. Then they'll go back out into the sea, and they'll brew something else and some other life. It's a great comfort to think that there was something as great and powerful as an ocean which could create and take me apart, but I could be conscious of it, conscious of myself and a broken piece of sea shell, and could see how that counted as much as whatever full-blown and full-bodied sense of John Wideman that I had at that moment. They're all equal, all those intimations of what I could be and what I had been and what I was at the moment.

ESCHBORN: I also want to address the relationship between historiography and fiction dealing with history. Two other quotes from different interviews of yours: "I think ... historians are probably novelists who haven't come out of the closet" (Interview by Silverblatt 120). And the other one: "For me any kind of writing is invention, selection" (Interview by Bonetti 47). According to Hayden White, for example, literary writing and historiography are based on the same patterns of selection and "emplotment." So what is your opinion about the relationship between historiography and literary writing about history? In the historical novel *The Cattle Killing*, for example, you deal with this relationship, especially in the prologue and the epilogue. Do you regard both, historiography and literary writing, as forms of storytelling?

WIDEMAN: Fabulation, making things up, yes. Both are that, which is why I think, from a sort of an ethic or a moral point of view, if not even a legal one, that as a writer, I feel my obligation is to try to let the reader know what kind of game I'm playing. It may be a game which wants to scramble the distinction between actual events and things I'm making up, but somehow I try to make that explicit, in my writing anyway, so that I am not saying, well, Frantz Fanon was born in 1900 when, in fact, I know he wasn't born in 1900, and it's in the record that it's 1925. Come on, why should I say 1900? Well, if I do say 1900 or I do say 1400 as the date of his birth, there should be something in the novel that clues the reader why I might be doing that and why it's not a simple deception or a simple piece of ignorance or a simple attempt to twist for the purposes of the fiction. Or maybe I'm just sloppy. I don't want any of those things to necessarily intrude on the reading or corrupt the reading. So, at least in my work, I try to make implicit or explicit a kind of contract. Here's what we're doing, for instance in *The Cattle Killing:* there are some real toads, and then there's an imaginary garden. Or there's an imaginary garden, and there are real toads. I think the reader should know that, number one, there is that mix, and, number two, have some clue as to how to figure out which is which because I think another way that historiography and fiction relate is that they're both dealing in politics, and this is of crucial importance: politics in the purest sense of power. I've been a victim—we all have been victims—of false stories. Well, all stories are false stories in a sense, but there are people who use stories for bad reasons—to deceive, to hurt, to steal, to destroy. That's what makes the stories political, their attempts to grasp power, hold

power. That's a very, very important dimension of storytelling which, at least, I try to address in my writing.

ESCHBORN: I'm going to mention that point about false stories again in a later question, but let me talk about the perspective on history in your work now. It seems to me that your representation of the past, for example in the Homewood trilogy, in *Philadelphia Fire,* in the story "Fever," and in *The Cattle Killing,* often foregrounds poor, marginalized African American characters and local historical events which may be traumatic, such as the 1793 fever in Philadelphia in *The Cattle Killing* or the 1985 MOVE bombing in the same city in *Philadelphia Fire,* and you often look at history from the perspective of the family and the community. If you agree with this characterization, what are your reasons for taking this perspective on history?

WIDEMAN: I guess, to democratize the elements of the historical record, "democratize" in the sense of reshuffling the hierarchies or getting rid of hierarchy and thinking more in terms of a dynamic in which nothing is higher or lower but that things feed into each other, inform each other, and learn from each other and quarrel with each other—democratizing that process—so that what happens to my family is also as significant in the texts as what happens to a city or a country or in an epic. So a bad week in Pittsburgh, in Homewood, can be seen in terms of a plague visited upon the Israelites. The word "lamentations" might be relevant to both, and to quote the Book of Lamentations in the Bible is just as relevant in terms of a grandmother in Homewood losing her grandson as it is to the Israelite who watches her child cut down by Egyptian invaders.

ESCHBORN: Is the choice of local events part of the attempt to democratize history?

WIDEMAN: Well, I'm not a professional historian. I read a lot and I think a lot and I imagine a lot about the past, but what I know most about are those local things, those local events, those local people. That's a good place for me to start because, after all, those things we've been talking about are quite complex of themselves. To make sense of Great Time, to make sense of the historical record, is quite demanding, and I'm humble enough to know that I better have my feet on solid ground, at least in part of the discussion, in some of the elements I throw into the mix. So I figure I am an expert on my life—even though just a part-time expert.

ESCHBORN: *Hoop Roots,* your nonfiction book dealing with basketball, family, and African American culture among other things, contains a story called "Who Invented the Jump Shot," at the beginning of which the narrator is waiting for a lecture dealing with that question and thinks to himself before the lecture starts:

> My colleagues of the Euro persuasion will claim one of their own, a white college kid on such and such a night, in such and such an obscure arena, proved by such and such musty, dusty documents, launched the first jump shot. By the end of two hours, they'll own the jump shot. Rewriting history, planting their flag on a chunk of territory because nobody's around to holler *Stop thief*

The passage describes written history fabricated by European Americans and constitutes one example of countless historical distortions and lies pervading much of European American historiography about minorities such as African Americans.

In an interview with Kay Bonetti in 1985, you say that the stories of your family "have the truth of oral history, which for me is probably a more reliable kind of truth than written history" (47). And oral history is central to your representation of history. Nevertheless, I think that most historians today still believe that written history is a more reliable source than oral history, which, however, has also become a tool of historical research. Why do you think that oral history is more reliable than written history?

WIDEMAN: Well, probably it's an overstatement because I feel the pendulum, the weight, is on the other side. To open a discussion, sometimes you take an outrageous point of view, but I don't think my point of view is outrageous. I believe that oral history—because it is a live exchange between or among people—has a way of refining itself. It is being contested continuously with each repetition, and each repetition occurs at a different time. So people become more informed not only about the story they're hearing, but they become more informed about their own lives. They bring different kinds of information to the telling. This is a process of winnowing, a process of keeping the story honest that is dialogic or dialectical, if you will. Written history tends to be more static, or the particular text is static. Scholarship—the accumulation of critical and scientific methods to critique any given text—when you think of that, critical scholarship over time is trying to perform for texts, for reading, exactly what I try to describe in terms of oral history. Now both kinds, the oral and the written, can get frozen, can become side-tracked and become dogmatic for various reasons. There are processes which share a bit of uneasiness and anxiety about that. Therefore, you have mechanisms built in, both in oral history and written history, to interrogate itself. So I give both a kind of equal legitimacy in that sense, but I think oral history has to satisfy its audience in ways that written history does not have to satisfy its immediate audience. Therefore, the oral history is more demanding in that sense and perhaps more reliable. I like the idea—and I think it's an honest idea—of a level playing field. If I'm listening to a story, I can protest, I can try to break in, I can say "Stop! Wait a minute!" which I often want to do when I'm reading something, but it doesn't matter, the words just sit there and they just keep droning on and on.

ESCHBORN: I think, as a writer, you face the challenge of transforming oral history into writing, and you once said that you try to keep the special flow of storytelling in your writing (Interview by McGinty 189). So what do you think is the relationship between oral history and your written texts? I talked about this in one of the course sessions on *The Cattle Killing* that I recently taught. I said: "Writing can only be an imitation of oral storytelling."

WIDEMAN: Stories did not begin with writing. Probably, stories began with no words. The first storytelling was mimetic. The first storytelling had to occur before languages developed. The body was used to show fear or to point to something or to imitate some animal or to make noises. That was the beginning. We've been able to refine that into bits

of invisible force that can be translated into pictures or words on a screen, but somehow that electronic plus communication of the internet etc. flows from those origins of having no words, having no shared languages but inventing ways of imitating reality directly. I think the mysteriousness and the precariousness and the intimacy that we lose when we accept a code—whether that code is a particular language or a particular register of that language—and let that begin to stand for the touching and the moving and the smelling and the approach of two bodies, we're always involved in compromise, always losing and gaining something. So I think, in my writing, I'm trying to look in both directions, back to the origins, the origins being the origins of any kind of communication, being feeling, something you're worried about or something you want or something you're using gestures to form, somehow the need to share that with another, sharing feelings, sharing a feeling. So I'm pointing in that direction as well as ahead to the hyper development of words and language and symbolic systems to get across meaning to one another. That's a pretty abstract idea, but I'm pretty abstract this morning.

ESCHBORN: *[Laughter]* You can be as abstract as you like. In fact, now I want to address some abstract terms which have been used to characterize your writing. I think self-reflexivity is a central element of your work. As you already said, you want to demonstrate to the reader what you are doing, you want to show that something is play, is a game. Self-reflexive elements in texts about history, for example the prologue and epilogue of *The Cattle Killing,* make readers aware of the fact that there is an unbridgeable distance between the author and the historical subject, and that a historical representation is necessarily an imaginary literary recreation. The high degree of self-reflexivity or, in other words, metafictional reflection could be regarded as a postmodern element of your work. I would like to know if you think that such terms as "historiographic metafiction," "modern," or "postmodern" are useful categories for classifying your writing. Scholars do not agree whether your work is modern or postmodern. Some argue that your first three novels are modern. Sometimes certain critics argue that a particular work is modern while others claim it's postmodern.

WIDEMAN: Oh, that would be very postmodern, wouldn't it? *[Laughter]* Or premodern or postmodern, those kinds of responses.

ESCHBORN: But do you think in such terms at all?

WIDEMAN: I think in such terms because it's interesting to read people who pay so much attention to literature and chop it and parse it and abstract it in such intricate ways. That cast of mind is certainly a cast of mind that I enjoy and that I've tried to cultivate, but I think it's useful for me to remember and maybe useful for my readers to remember that the oral tradition that I grew up with—that is a kind of mix of American and African American and all the elements that go into a modern sensibility—has a tremendously high degree of self-reflexivity. That comes as much from the blues and jazz and traditional storytelling in my home and in the American South and what I know about African storytelling. That is, a good storyteller has to begin with his or her own physical presence in the face of the

listener or listeners, which gets in the way of some kinds of stories. If I address a bunch of children and try to scare them, try to entertain them, I want them to forget I'm there. How do I manage that? Do I use a kind of ventriloquism? Do I make my voice quaver and roar? Do I bark to make them forget that it's a person? Do I change my voice altogether so I kind of growl like a giant or like they might think a gremlin or dwarf might speak? In other words, the idea of disguising the narrative voice and the idea of making those disguises part of the story and the idea of sharing with the audience some of the ploys and tricks that you're using, or removing them from the story and talking about them, pointing to them, for instance, when the bluesman or the storyteller says: "People used to say your grandfather was a stingy man. And that's not what everybody said. Some other people said your grandfather was a very generous man." You are warming the audience up. You are placing yourself in some sort of rhetorical relationship with them. You are already problematizing the past, problematizing the idea of story.

When the bluesman finishes a song, he often says: "If they ask you who sang this song, tell them it was Sonny, he'd been here and gone." That coda attached to a blues song or a story is an active self-reflection. It is a framing of the story in a particular highly conscious way that says "It is a story," that says: "You've been listening to the vehicle of a story. Let's go back to someplace else, let's return to the spot we were before." That little coda at the end of a blues song says something about the world which the singer and the listeners are returning to. It puts it on an even plane with the world that's been inside the story, inside the song, and it also suggests the kind of flexibility of the imagination that allows people to go back and forward. For a while, they were inside that song, worried about the people, worried about the places inside the song, but now they can leave it. Now they have to deal with the fact that here somebody was saying it and that somebody now has his hand out and wants to be paid. That is all a very complicated transaction. To make it work well, the self-consciousness and the self-reflexivity and the tools which the blues person uses are quite intricate, and there's a lot at stake. That is no more or less true of the most postmodern kind of text—same moves, same tricks, same maneuvers.

ESCHBORN: So do you think you have been influenced by that African American tradition?

WIDEMAN: Oh absolutely, before I knew words like self-reflexivity. In other words, I just put it in very simple terms: storytelling is an intricate matter. Anybody who undertakes to tell a story is conscious of that at some level. Probably, the more they think about the story, the more highly skilled a storyteller they become. I don't believe it's natural. It's always a question of seeming natural.

ESCHBORN: I would like to ask you about the topic "storytelling and survival." In *Hoop Roots* you write: "Art is someone speaking, making a case for survival". In the preface to the Homewood trilogy, you write that ritualistic storytelling "must survive if we as a people are to survive". I agree with Matthew Wilson who states that, in this trilogy, "the way one connects to community and thus to history is through storytelling" and that "the necessity of resistance through a kind of counter vision, one that inheres in story"

is an important theme. In *The Cattle Killing*, there is also a direct connection between storytelling and survival: the protagonist, the preacher, tries to save the ill woman listening to him by telling her stories. In *Fatheralong* you write about the necessity that African American fathers pass on stories to their sons. Your representations of history, but also your descriptions of present-day United States society, suggest that African American art and culture, especially in the form of stories, endow African American characters with self-confidence, a positive self-image, a sense of history, origin, and community and are thus the key to individual and community survival. Do you stress the importance of the African American cultural tradition, especially storytelling, for survival because you think that the imagination and a positive self-image are the most important prerequisites for resistance, for the struggle for survival?

WIDEMAN: Well, that question with so many answers that I've given to it, lined up after it, sort of makes me say: "Well, I probably said enough about it." Here's a slightly different slant on it. I have an idea, or I have a notion—certainly not original but important to me—that storytelling is a pretty basic instrumental tool. When I think of prehistory when nobody was around to write it, but put myself in a cave somewhere ... It's night. It's dark outside, and everybody's scared because we know if we go out there, there are no friends, there are no lights, we're just there. One purpose of storytelling would be—one purpose of storytelling has always been—to give people the facts of life as life is understood. And that is: "Don't go near the swamp." "Don't put your hands on the electric burner." "If you see a big animal, get in the other direction, go away from it rather than towards it." That kind of simple instruction, that kind of simple passing on of information necessary to survive.

ESCHBORN: Cautionary tales.

WIDEMAN: Cautionary tales necessary to survive. But not only cautionary instruction, general instruction! The animal in pictures on the cave is the beginning of classification, is the beginning of zoology and biology. That's the kind of animal we want to try to get. These are its features. These are its weaknesses. This is what we are going to do with it if we capture it. That's what the picture might be showing. They are instructions. There are also instructions on how to dance and what to eat, etc. Stories can still have that very basic function. That's what makes them so important.

Yes, survival, but survival in terms that we participate in defining because just bare survival is one thing, but surviving a life which we imagine and form in our own minds—that's another thing. Stories are intermediaries that kind of make life worth surviving or give us a certain feeling of satisfaction if we do survive. Survival is tied up with those other dimensions of story: satisfaction, aesthetics, etc.

I would hope that, in my stories and in stories of African Americans in general, survival is foregrounded for this reason: clearly, chattel slavery is not an issue in the twenty-first century for most Americans—or at least, we think so. But if we don't keep alive the memory of what slavery was and don't keep it alive in a sophisticated, intelligent way, then we forget. And if we forget, then we can be victimized by the same institution

again, the institution disguised in a slightly different form. The institution of slavery disguised as working for a wage, for instance. If we kept alive in our stories what slavery actually was, a state of mind, what it did to people, what it did to people who enslaved, what it did to people who were slaves, then we have that picture in front of us, and we are going to recognize slavery when it comes along in a different name, in a different time. Our survival in the present and our ability to resist evils which we've experienced before depends on that keeping alive of a very real, basic understanding of what we've had to fight in the past.

I think the German writer [W. G.] Sebald is a good example of this in a sense that he felt that the time for Germans had come—if I understood, this is my reading of Sebald anyway—to ask themselves about their suffering during World War II and ask questions about that suffering, because he felt that suffering was continuing and that it was interfering with the richness and possibility and growth in the present. He felt that that hangover of guilt and grief and unresolved self-identity, an unresolved picture of actually what happened in Germany to Germans during the war because that picture was not available, because it had been repressed, couldn't take the next step of getting beyond it. So his research, his movement back into history, was a question of survival. We have to look at the past. We have to make sense of it. That past includes our own suffering as a people, not just damage we've done to other people. So we have to stop hiding from that, hiding from our own pain, hiding from our own grief, hiding from what we've done to ourselves. Only if we look at some of these things can we continue to survive as a healthy people. I think it's a perfect example of what I'm trying to get at.

ESCHBORN: I would also like to talk about the historical meaning of Shakespeare's *The Tempest* in your works. I think it's the most important intertextual reference in your work, a recurring motif. The drama is mentioned in several works and plays an important role in *Philadelphia Fire* in which the protagonist, the writer Cudjoe, tries to perform the play with ten- and eleven-year-old poor black students in 1968. In your descriptions of the play, Prospero appears as a powerful oppressor who tries to impose his culture and worldview on Caliban. Caliban once owned the island but is now Prospero's slave, a "savage," a colonial subject whom Prospero and Miranda try to "civilize." In this context, one may think of Fanon's argument that colonialists spread the "theory of precolonial barbarism" (147). Do you regard the relationship between Prospero, Miranda, and Caliban as an archetypal colonial situation which turned out to characterize American history, especially the situation of African Americans which could be regarded as a kind of colonial situation? After a reading from your new novel *Fanon* this year, for example, you said you were born into a semi-colonial situation in the United States (Wideman, "Black Writers' Conference").

WIDEMAN: Well, Fanon's metaphor was very, very appealing to lots of us in the early sixties. We recognized what he was saying, and we recognized that stripped-bare communities like Oakland, California, and some parts of New York and even Pittsburgh were described quite well by the ideas of colonialism that were in *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961) and that were in *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952). We recognized ourselves in those books, and we recognized the description.

I had the same kind of shock of recognition with Shakespeare when I read *The Tempest.* Those texts are connected through my experience, through my reading of them and coming across them. The 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.* 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. All those elements are my history, personal history, parts of my autobiography. They resonate in just that fashion. It's a truth, a connection, that's demonstrated again and again between the way I understood my life and the way certain writers have the ability to represent that life in a work. It's not mysterious in that sense. It's not even a question of choice. The texts reached out for me and grabbed me. And I still think about them all the time.

The relationship between Caliban and Miranda and Prospero points in the other direction, too, back to a more Freudian notion of that triad. Here we have the father and the son competing for the woman, competing for the mother, who is also the daughter, who is also a sister. That primeval horde. And everybody bumping heads and fighting, etc., etc. Who's going to possess the woman? Who's going to possess the leadership? Who's going to possess the land? Shakespeare was drawing on something that's probably primeval and deep in the unconscious. There is tremendous sexual jealousy and tension, I believe, in *The Tempest.* So good work does that, good work opens out into the great sea, into Great Time.

ESCHBORN: Another important aspect of storytelling in your work is African American vernacular. What role does African American vernacular play in your representation of history through storytelling?

WIDEMAN: Well, I think that the language in which a story is told is crucial and that it's not a passive business. The language instructs the story, and the story instructs the language. If one listens to a good storyteller, you probably learn something about language. The good storyteller is asserting a kind of ownership not only over the story that he's telling but also over the language. So for a culture, it's crucially important to have these voices that tell good stories—that tell powerful stories—because it's a way of claiming the language. It's also a way of changing the language, for individuals but also collectively, for the group. Certainly, in America, that was understood on a deep, often unspoken level. It's not a coincidence that, at the end of the period of slavery and even towards the end of the period of slavery, there evolved very, very widespread and popular forms of entertainment: one being the minstrel vaudeville show, the other being, in a written form, the story of ex-slaves. I would suggest that America was trying to hold on to but also understand what the old uncle, the old Mammy, the old plantation hand traditionally had to say to the master. It is a way of incorporating, maybe even, if you will, appropriating the black oral tradition into the total American experience. That can be seen as probably a predictable and a conscious stage of cultural exchange. It's not

accidental that it happened when it did. It's not accidental that the figures in vaudeville, in Chesnutt's stories or in the stories of Joel Chandler Harris or in the sentimental music of a Stephen Collins Foster are trying to hold on to that, the black storyteller, and squeeze it and get as much as possible out of it.

Just as a footnote: The book I'm working on now is about Louis Till, who was the father of Emmett Till, the fourteen-year-old boy who was killed in Mississippi in 1955. Anyway, Emmett Till's father was Louis Till, and he was not part of the historical record. There are a few references to him here and there, but people don't know about him. I'm trying to write a novel about this man. What's interesting about him is that he, according to the record, had very little to say. He was laconic, he was almost mute, but his voice is crucial to a certain class. Obviously, if we could hear what he had to say, we would learn an awful lot about the other side, from the other side, about the other side: why is a person like Louis Till, an African American man, a young African American man, so difficult to bring into the culture in general? Why is the culture so resistant to his presence? Why is he so feared? Why is there such violence enacted against him? But more than that, what does it feel like to be him, to be that target? And then, finally, from the writer's point of view: what if the target just keeps his mouth shut? How do you get that on the page?

ESCHBORN: Louis Till was from Chicago, I guess. Emmett Till grew up in Chicago.

WIDEMAN: Well, Louis Till was born in Missouri but he went to Chicago at one stage of the Great Migration and lived in a black community in Chicago. He was an orphan born in Missouri. I have still to find out more about his beginnings.

ESCHBORN: And what was his profession?

WIDEMAN: He worked in the Argo Products, which was a big company town, a company that owned the town that all the black immigrants had moved to. Their big product was cornstarch; and it's from the cornstarch that they made sweeteners and that they made products like Arlaga Syrup and pancakes and all kinds of things that are characteristically "black." But he was a soldier. Louis Till went to the army when he was, what, twenty-two years old and served in World War II. Then he was executed for the crime of rape and murder by the United States army in 1945. Ten years later, his son was killed, was murdered. So, the fact that the father was killed ten years earlier than that makes most people take notice and start thinking and wondering about the relationship and what this tells about class and cast and violence. Anyway, it's a fascinating story.

ESCHBORN: So, it's an historical subject again.

WIDEMAN: Yes, well, an historical subject that's been repressed and forgotten.

ESCHBORN: I would like to ask you an autobiographical question about history as a tool in daily life. In your book *Brothers and Keepers*, you write about your time as a student at the University of Pennsylvania from 1959 to 1963: "History could have been a tool, a support

in day-to-day confrontations I experienced in the alien university environment. History could have taught me I was not alone, my situation was not unique. Believing I was alone made me dangerous, to myself and others". What kind of historical knowledge could have shown that you were not alone in your situation at an almost all-white university?

WIDEMAN: Well, the truth is: I was alone. And the truth is that each one of us is alone, but one thing that made me less alone and that kept me from being simply a predator or a madman or an *isolato* was the fact that I had a family. Because I had a family and I knew people loved me and respected me and liked me, that gave me a baseline, that gave me a kind of strength to deal with hostility and deal with difference. So history simply performs that function in various ways. If I knew that the reason that there were no people who sort of looked like me and who had my cultural background exactly was not because all of us were inferior and I was superior to my kind and so, therefore, I happened to be the one who was special because I wound up at the university, if I knew about university politics of admission, if I knew about how elite universities work in any society, if I knew the mechanics of the admissions process, if I was cognizant of the state of urban schools in America and what percentage of black kids went to awful, segregated schools, etc., etc., then I would have a slightly different attitude.

ESCHBORN: You didn't have that knowledge then?

WIDEMAN: Well, I had some of that. For instance, there was a man named William Fontaine who taught at the time I was at the university. He was a philosopher. All I knew was he was kind of old, kind of a tall, skinny, black guy that I'd see occasionally in college hall. He was the only teacher of color. Given the prejudices that I had imbibed and brought with me to the University of Pennsylvania, I thought: "Well, shit, I'm not going to take classes with that guy. What does he know? He probably is not as good as the white teachers because he is a black teacher." So I avoided him, just kind of turned my head when I'd see him in the hall. That kind of ignorance on my part, that kind of prejudice, that kind of lack of understanding, kept me from meeting this man, kept me from being able to learn from him. He knew W. E. B. Du Bois. He was at the *Presence Africaine,* the first kind of cultural worldwide gathering of black intellectuals. I later saw his picture in a *Presence Africaine* photo from 1956. He brought that kind of history into the University of Pennsylvania, and I just totally missed it the same way I missed the opportunity to learn a hell of a lot about Africa and the Caribbean when I was a student at Oxford because I didn't pal up with those guys. I didn't have the curiosity about Africa and the Caribbean. Those were kinds of, for me, Fourth World places that didn't really matter very much. My destiny, my life, was going to take me to places like Paris and Rome and maybe even Greece. That's where I belonged, not in some backwater, not in some place where they're killing each other, where they're having riots and where there is no stable government and where there is ignorance. I had been conditioned away from the means of positively identifying myself. I had lost that. I missed it for the longest time, and I'm still catching up. That's a long answer to a shorter question.

ESCHBORN: A very interesting one! Another short question: would you like to write an autobiography, a history of your own life?

WIDEMAN: I always do. *[Laughter]*

ESCHBORN: *[Laughter]* Yeah, that's right. You keep writing an autobiography.

WIDEMAN: One interesting facet of writing is: people read what's on the page, and they make more or less what they want of it. Because there is a man of African American descent about my age who did some of the things that—as you or somebody else could establish—in fact, I did, some character, who looks very autobiographical, is that me or is that not me? The only one who knows about my representation really—and I don't even know—is me. Writing is both exposure and the deepest disguise because I may be choosing to tell you about an authentic me which is not authentic at all but the one I want you to hear or the one I need to tell myself, the one I need to avoid confronting, a self which is too complicated, too frightened, and too elusive for me ever to understand. So the idea of autobiography or authentic autobiography is rather mysterious to me.

ESCHBORN: You wouldn't like to write one?

WIDEMAN: I think you do write it in spite of yourself but ... what else could you do? What else are you doing? You're writing yourself if that's what autobiography means. You're always writing yourself. But to what degree does that writing have access to various levels of one's experience and understanding and awareness? That's another question which certainly the writer is not necessarily the best person to answer in the sense that Rachmaninoff playing Rachmaninoff doesn't give you necessarily any definitive playing of Rachmaninoff. He's limited by his technical virtuosity among other things.

ESCHBORN: Did anyone encourage you to write an autobiography?

WIDEMAN: That's what people tell me to do all the time. That's what the worst critics always tell me. They tell me because they think a) that it's possible and b) that it would get them off the hook. If you hear it from the horse's mouth, then it's true, right? All that anxiety about prejudice and race and stuff like that, well, let's ask a horse, and we'll get it all straight, once and for all. And so if somebody hears what they wanna hear: "Yeah, that's right." And when they don't hear what they wanna hear, then I'm not writing autobiography, I'm doing something else, I'm writing like a Frenchman, and so therefore I'm inauthentic. Autobiography and the notion of autobiography is a very crude hammer, a crude discrimination that critics can make and use against the writer, use against the writing.

ESCHBORN: My last question is about history-in-the-making, about Barack Obama. You have criticized United States society for grave defects, for example, the principle of

ruthless capitalist greed, the fact that the rich become richer and the poor poorer, and the exclusion and discrimination of people from minority groups who often suffer from poverty. Are you nevertheless optimistic that Obama—should he win the presidential election—will succeed in effecting the promised change, also for African Americans? What kind of historical change do you dare to hope for?

WIDEMAN: In my wishful thinking, I would love to see Barack Obama perform in politics the way Michael Jordan performed basketball. That is to say: there was one kind of basketball before Jordan and another kind of basketball afterwards. The one that came after was much more interesting. It revealed much more of the potential of the game and the possibility of the game because he brought a kind of individual skill and genius to it. I think everybody who plays the game of basketball after Jordan is somewhat indebted to him and his model. His capacity to understand and interpret and expand the game was very, very healthy in America and in the world. The fact that it was a very dark African-descended man is part of the magic, part of the lesson. Jordan recovered the game and brought into the game—in a way that no one could deny them—the skills of the playground, the skills of individuality and flair and style and intensity and aggression. Given all that, I won't try to make a point by point comparison, but suppose Barack Obama could change the game of politics, move it just by an inch or two in a different sort of direction so that, when the average American thought about politics, they would have the benefit of someone who had played the game in a slightly different way, not for self-interest, not for self-aggrandizement, not as an errand boy for a certain kind of interest, not as a bag-man for his people.

Who knows? I'm not a politician. I'm not in Barack Obama's place. So I don't know what he might be able to bring. I have some ideas about that. But let's just say that the politics look different, look better, look more positive after him. That would be a great, great contribution, and again, the fact that he would be a man of African descent would be another lesson on top of that. That's my ideal or that's an ideal situation. It is possible in a way Jordan is possible. Things happen quickly. When I was coming up and playing basketball in college, to say that something was a playground move was a negative statement, and it was a reason for a coach to put you on the bench. Now coaches try to teach their players in college "playground moves."

Things are pretty bad. Life—it's not a game, it's not an attempt to score points and have more points than the other team at the end of sixty minutes. It's life. It's people. It's so complex that to even hazard a guess about what happens in the next minute is sort of stupid. I know better than to think that one person elected as the president of the United States is going to make the average American more or less selfish or self-interested or nationalistic. I know that's not necessarily going to happen. But give him a chance! Let's see what happens. The symbolic value would have such an impact on the world if he were elected. Here, I'm predicting after saying only a fool would predict. If he is elected president, the symbolic value is incalculable—what it means to a kid in Kinshasa or a little kid in Bombay or a little kid in Norway. You just don't know.

In the subway in New York, if the subway is crowded and it's, you know, that typical polyglot mixture of people in New York City, and a black kid is just kind of making his

way in the middle of the subway car to get a handhold and bumps a white person, the white person might be annoyed because he's bumped. But he might look at the kid and think, "Ah, that kid might be Obama! He might be the next friggin' president!" instead of "He might be a mugger." That's little things. That's how change occurs. That's how people's hearts change. So the symbolic value is very exciting, the potential.