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LE PARADIGME 'AFRIQUE-OCCIDENT" DANS UNE DYNAMIQUE DE GLOBALISATION DES LITTÉRATURES, ARTS ET CULTURES

Textes réunis par

N'GUESSAN Kouadio Germain

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Black-and-white marital relations in John Edgar Wideman's *Philadelphia Fire* and *God's Gym*

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Abstract

Black and White relationships in the US, by and large, have always been tinged with the psychosis of the demonization of the other. Black people's resentment about past societal wounds, economic exploitation, and social marginalization offer an odd contradiction to Whites' clichés of Black people inferiority. Deep-rooted social complexes built over centuries, which make "interracial" relations fraught with distrust and suspicion. This social distrust challenges the creation of sound love relations between Whites and Blacks and stands as a constant threat to the survival of mixed families.

This research work explores the African American author John Edgar Wideman's narratives of mixed marriages in *Philadelphia Fire* and *God's Gym*, and expounds on the constant deadly traps "racial" difference sets to otherwise sincere and loving husband and wife. The intricacies of personal and communal history, the weight of "people's eyes," and society's condemnation for trespassing against miscegenation and rape, twist marital relations, propelling them into the oxymoron of love and hatred.

This study uses the critical approaches of psychoanalysis, Afrocentricity, and Postmodernism. The output expected is the analysis of the societal complexities that condemn mixed marriages in an era of increased demographic mixings that make these relations a major issue which society has to cope with.

Key Words: Black – white – mixed marriage – identity – United States – Africa

Résumé

Les relations entre Noirs et Blancs aux Etats Unis, en général, ont toujours baigné dans la psychose de la diabolisation de l'autre. Le ressentiment des Noirs généré par les blessures sociétales du passé, l'exploitation économique et la marginalisation sociale offrent un étrange

contraste aux clichés de l'infériorité des Noirs nourris par les Blancs. Des complexes sociaux nés au fil des siècles et enracinés dans la société colorent les relations "interraciales" de méfiance et de suspicion. Cette méfiance sociale entrave la naissance des relations amoureuses saines entre Blancs et Noirs et constitue une menace constante pour la survie des familles mixtes.

Le présent travail de recherche explore les œuvres de fiction *Philadelphia Fire* et *God's Gym* de l'auteur afro-américain John Edgar Wideman portant sur les mariages mixtes et met l'accent sur les pièges fatals et constants que les différences «raciales» posent à la survie de couples qui, si les conditions avaient été différentes, auraient fait des maris et femmes aimants et sincères. Les subtilités des histoires personnelles et de l'histoire collective, le poids du «regard des autres» et la condamnation par la société de ceux qui osent violer les lois interdisant le «croisement des races» et le «viol» compliquent les relations conjugales, les propulsant dans l'oxymore de l'amour et de la haine.

L'approche psychanalytique, l'afrocentricité et le postmodernisme sont les théories critiques utilisées dans cet article. Le résultat attendu est une analyse des complexités sociétales qui condamnent les mariages mixtes à une ère de mélanges démographiques accrus où ces relations constituent un défi majeur auquel la société doit faire face.

Mots clés: Noir – Blanc – Mariage mixte – identité – États Unis – Afrique

Introduction

The significant advances made in technologies in our era have intensified global communication and exchanges, reinforced the belief in development, and also accelerated the division of the world into two parts: a wealthy and fast developing part, the West, with its major poles of development that attract millions of the populations from the second part, the poorer countries, lagging behind in the race to development and the acquisition of wealth. The US is one of those biggest poles of development which appeal to and attract a huge and ever increasing influx of immigrants from all over the world, and particularly, populations from developing countries seeking better living conditions. These factors, added to the earlier free migration history of the USA and slavery, foster today physical proximity between people from diverse regions, cultures, and races all over the country. The increased mobility made possible by technological advances and demographic imperatives, population mixings in neighborhoods, at workplace, in streets, at schools,

and at other places of socialization, have spurred the challenge to the American social tradition forbidding marriage between individuals from different races.

In 1967, in its decision on the Loving v. Louisiana case, the American Supreme Court invalidated the laws prohibiting interracial marriages, thus removing all the legal barriers to the freedom of all Americans to choose their spouses irrespective of their "race."[1] Fifty years after the decision, interracial marriages in the US, particularly between Blacks and Whites, although they are no longer viewed as a trespassing against the law, nonetheless, still bear the token of social singularity and deviancy which, often, if not always, puts the spouses into a delicate situation of marginality from which they negotiate their social relations, with all the attached traumatic experiences. The African American author John Edgar Wideman, in *Philadelphia Fire* and *God's Gym*, fictionalizes the challenging experience of black and white who outmarry, creating their families across what William Du Bois calls the American social "veil" (v). He explores the intricacies and complexities of the love and marital relationships of characters who choose to free themselves of the shackles of a society which stifles individual choices and restricts its members' expectations with regard to their lineage. A spellbound bluesy lyricism emanates from these narratives of interracial romance, which expresses the extent of the battles White-and-Black, "creolized romances," have to confront in the American society today, fifty years after the Loving v. Louisiana decision.

This article purports to analyze the psychological, cultural, and social stakes which challenge the communal lives of these mixed couples, through Wideman's works *Philadelphia Fire* and *God's Gym.* After a **review of the related literature** carried out to assess the input of various previous research works made on the topic (1), this paper tackles the examination of **the paradigm of beauty and the chemistry of interracial physical attraction in the USA** (2), and then focuses on the other **psychological and cultural obstacles to Black- and-White marriages in the US** (3).

1. Literature Review

Black and white romance in Wideman's work is an issue that Doreatha Drummond Mbalia discusses in her book *John Edgar Wideman*

[1] Since the concept of "race" is a social construct without a scientific background, the word "race" and its compounds, in this article, for want of another lexeme, are used in inverted commas

Reclaiming the African Personality under the title '"And Arn't I a Woman" : Wideman's Women.' Mbalia is most critical of Wideman's portrayal of black women and their beauty in his fiction, especially in his first books (69). White women, she says, in Wideman's works, are more intelligent and their physical features: hair, eyes, nose and complexion, more attractive and beautiful than the black females' features. She asserts that he is alienated as he pictures some of his protagonists – the fictionalized figures of the author himself, as attracted to white female beauty (70; 72). She goes even further, inferring a resemblance between black-and-white romances in Wideman's fiction and the author's own life and marriages to white women (74 -75). She analyzes these relationships from an African-centered perspective and notices a gradual evolution of the author in the realization and acceptance of his own blackness, an evolution that she divides into three noticeable phases (71 - 82). Mbalia concludes by arguing that the Shakespearian figure of Prospero, symbol of the white man, uses her daughter as a "trap" to catch the black parvenu (82).

A technical approach to communication in mixed marriages was adopted by Judith Martin and Thomas Nakayama in their book *Intercultural Communication in Context.* They devoted a session entitled "Intercultural Dating and Marriage" to the study of the way these families experience and negotiate their communal lives. Martin and Nakayama compare statistics on cross-community marriages in various cultural and ethnic communities in the USA and point out that marriages to black people, especially women, have the most critically low rates of all due to the lowest "caste connotations" attached to African-descended people in America (360).

The criticism of the social crisis caused by white and black relationships is an issue John Edgar Wideman himself touches upon in his latest work to date, the meditative nonfiction *Writing to Save a Life: The Louis Till File*. In this work, Wideman revisits and criticizes the parallel horrific ends of life of father and son, Louis and Emett Till, serving as the metaphor for all African American males through history, regardless of the epoch. Emett Till, an African American boy of 14 years, was tortured, mutilated and killed, and his body thrown into a river in Mississippi in 1955, allegedly for whistling at a white woman. Louis Till, his father, had been convicted, ten years earlier, in Italy as a soldier by a martial court and executed by the American Army, for raping two white women and murdering an Italian female. Wideman tries to decipher the strange and abiding color prejudice which has always enthralled black people in America. He makes an advocacy for the condition of all African American males presumed "guilty of desiring to rape white

women…so any colored…male [that a police] agent killed couldn't be innocent" (107). The possibility of psychosis-free love between African Americans and other people of all ilks is what the female African American author Sharon Cullars also discusses in her article.

Reviewing a new trend in American novels, Cullars published a news article entitled 'Interracial Romance Novels – Not a "Fad."' She contends that there is a burgeoning trend in American novelists of embracing the topic of cross-race romance with African American females, a pattern that just reflects a recent evolution in the American society itself where relatively low rates black women, compared to other "racial" communities, were involved in interracial love relationships. The human need which impels people to fall in love and marry are progressively shattering the artificial barriers erected by society. These people who engage in these relationships want to see their own images and visions "reflected in the media, including literature," too.

The issue of black-white marriage is a revolving theme in Wideman's work. Cudjoe, the protagonist of *Philadelphia Fire,* is a black intellectual married to a white woman and who watches on the television, on the Greek island of Mykonos, the images of the 1985 police bombing of a neighborhood of row houses that is home to black nonconformist families in Philadelphia. Cudjoe recalls his lovemaking scenes with his white wife and ends the description with: "That is how I learned about the Philadelphia fire" (103). In the bombing ordered by government officials, lots of black men, adults and children, lose their lives. The protagonist parallels and blends the two - personal and collective - stories. He sets out to find the little boy Simba who escapes the fire, and to tell about the tragedy, in an attempt to save himself and free his soul from the guilt of desertion. Wideman revisits the interracial romance topic in several short stories of the collection *God's Gym*. The palimpsestic version of the same black and white couple is presented in "Fanon."

Paul and Chantal, visit Martinique, Frantz Fanon's home country. On their way to the beach, Paul's gaze meets with the eyes of a giant drawing of Fanon. On an island which bears the scars of slavery, this unexpected "encounter" Paul makes with Fanon while holding hands with a white lover rewinds in him whole patches of black history and questions his relations to a lover whose people are responsible for "chopping up Lumumba and burning his body parts in and oil drum"(*God's Gym*, 120). Paul is overwhelmed by a sense of betrayal and guilt, torn between his two selves of lover and Blackman. He starts a quarrel with Chantal when he sees a white man lying on the beach stealthily looking at her. Their two encounters with the black activist and

the white man spoil their evening and leads them to a quarrel that jeopardizes their union. The blending of the two story threads suggests a metonymic coupling of personal and collective stories.

In both *Philadelphia Fire* and "Fanon" (*God's Gym*), the African American male confronts the dilemma of reconciling love and identity. Cudjoe/Paul (just like his partner) is *an* individual, unique, incomparable. But this does not wipe out his belonging to a family, a community, a "race." He is therefore liable to the commonest ills that plague African American males, and people of African descent in general. The intradiegetic mode of Cudjoe and Paul's narratives, in the two stories, enables us to measure and somehow share the qualms of the male protagonist. There is furthermore a high level of intertextuality between the two narratives of this '"metafictional couple" which we have already seen in several incarnations, moving in "circular patterns"' (Guzzio, 232). The narratives of Cujoe/John and Catherine/Katrin, and that of Paul and Chantal can be analyzed as a multilayered single story in various versions and contexts (Guzzio, 217, 232, 233). Furthermore, some critics assimilate or hint to Wideman's own life in analyzing what Eschborn calls "Wideman persona" (154). The writer's life cannot be assimilated to his characters. It should be pointed out however that it is relevant to understand the depth of the insight provided by an author who goes through the same "racial" cleavage and produces fiction works with characters, settings, and circumstances that are similar to his own life (Ibid, 92, 173, 215; Mbalia 63).

Judith Martin and Thomas Nakayama distinguish three phases in a relational development: initial attraction, exploration and stabilization (365). As the image is the most important factor in the initial attraction to a romance/marriage partner, this study first analyzes, in these two fiction works, the narrativization of the images of Blacks and Whites as individuals and communities in the USA and the way "cross-race" romances are conceived of.

2. The Paradigm of Beauty and the Chemistry of Physical Attraction in the US

The appraisal of the concept of canon of beauty, as viewed in works of literature, may call into consideration such diverse domains of human knowledge as aesthetics, sociology, psychology, political history and ethnic anthropology. In addition, the mass media, and literature, too, have an important power in shaping the image and canon of beauty today as they control and popularize the image. Images may be defined as individual or collective representations, a way of appraising and

understanding the self and the world around us based on "intellectual, affective, objective as well as subjective outlooks." These representations are more biased by subjective factors than determined by objective considerations (Brunel, Pichois, and Rousseau, 64). Because our images are shaped more by the projection of our dreams and desires, Albert Lortholary assimilates images to "myths and mirages" (Ibid). Beauty lies in the eye of the beholder, as has a popular saying.

In the USA, and in the world as a whole, images and standards, tastes and preferences are, today, subtly shaped by the most powerful media companies held by mainstream White America (and European countries) which enforce their beauty standards on Black and other non-White people while demeaning the physical features specific to blackness. African Americans, in addition to their castrative past of slavery, today hardly have any hold on their present image. William Du Bois, rightly, complains of "That sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity" (2). Paul, in *God's Gym*, imagines going to the movie theater with his white lover, and remembers his childhood terror each time he hears African names in the news: Kazavubu, Mobutu, Tshombe:

> Names embarrassing me, sounding like tom-toms, like jibber-jabber blabbered through big African lips at Tarzan or bwana in Hollywood movies. Black, sweaty native faces. Fat eyes rolling and showing too much white….as I the news reported rape, massacres, chaos in faraway countries, terrified Europeans fleeing, wild African seizing power. Mumbo-jumbo names. Cannibal names. Nigger names coming to get me. (120)

It is worth pointing out that all these images, in reality, spring from Paul's own imagination since infancy. Also, this imagination is spurred by the presence (also imaginary) of Chantal, and of his childhood white schoolmates through whom he vicariously appraises his own relation to blackness: "Would I tell her [Chantal] that I heard my white friends [childhood classmates] giggling at the funny names" (120). The imaginary presence of his classmates and the ridiculousness he feels in the news report occur when Paul is but a schoolboy. As an adult now, the imaginary presence of his white lover, Chantal, opens the door to this remembrance. This means that the character, since his boyhood, has not evolved much and come to terms with his own belief of inferiority. The presence of these intimate white figures, although years apart, triggers the film of events and pushes him down into the psychological

actualization of his complex. The images of black inferiority and primitivity, and of white superiority are enforced onto Paul's mind, and onto most African American's minds, at an early age. The enforcement occurs as early as two or three years, or sometimes before, as would evidence the Clark doll experiment carried out with African American children of this age bracket[2]. One can fully understand the shame Paul feels only in relation to these references that have impressed those images on his appraisal of the black identity in relation to whiteness: he speaks of Hollywood, Tarzan, bwana, that is to say the mainstream white entertainment and white-produced child literature.

The depreciative opinion black people have of themselves is one of the major topics developed in Wideman's work. In *Philadelphia Fire*, the protagonist Cudjoe, as can be inferred from his choices and behavior, suffers from color complex, too. After he comes back to find and write about the MOVE bombing, he crosses a poor black gypsy neighborhood in Philadelphia, an area full of filth and horror scenes. The cityscape of disaster-stricken area with "world poster hunger" children is presented through Cudjoe's eyes (22). The horror scenes arousing his own "fear of contamination" help the reader understand the direct association which Cudjoe makes between blackness and sickness, and also blackness and poverty. The description of the squalid neighborhood, in his stream of consciousness, brings Cudjoe back to an unpleasant beach scene on the Greek island: "He is naked except for his bikini briefs, a gaudy towel slung like a bandolier over his shoulder. *He is ashamed of his skin, its sleekness, its color* (emphasis mine), the push of his balls against the flimsy pouch of black nylon." (22) This offers an insight into the motives which account for his flight from blackness and the color complex he nurtures.

Cudjoe subconsciously links blackness to poverty and shame. The beach is usually the place *par excellence* where bodies are most uncovered and simultaneously presented to one's own and other people's eyes. It is in this large exposure of naked bodies, most of which are white, that Cudjoe feels the most his difference. The "ugliness" of his dark body strikes him as a revelation. The anxiety of castration in Cudjoe may also be linked to his obsession about white female body. He continuously fantasizes about the white barmaid Teresa. The most salient

[2] The Clark Doll Experiment is an experiment that Dr. Kenneth Clark and his wife Mamie Clark carried out in 1939. They asked black children to make a choice between two dolls which were similar in all respects but for the color. One was a black doll and the other a white doll. Most children thought the white doll was the more beautiful and reflected "goodness".

and recurring features he daydreams of are related to her whiteness: her "red-dimpled white cheek" (*Philadelphia Fire,* 27). Cudjoe seemingly makes up for his thwarted manhood by projecting it on the "beautiful" femininity of the white female body: "He'd daydream of leaving the bar with Teresa, her alabaster skin luminous in the fading moonlight. They were survivors. No one else in the streets… Make love to her in the ruins that have never been a city, ruins that were once a wish for a city, a mile-high oasis of steel and glass and rich visitors." (24-25) Black men searching for beauty in White females' bodies only usually demeans black females' image of the self. These women then try to bring themselves into step with the canons of beauty, as the lighter their complexion, the more chance with love and marriage partners, and the more social opportunity and mobility they would have. The color complex brings minority groups among whom, African Americans, to show implicit outgroup marriage preference. The cosmetics industry has set out to make a lot of profit in "selling whiteness" through cosmetic chemicals (most of these are substandard quality and sometimes dangerous for the health): skin bleachers, hair straightening products, plastic surgery services. Jill, in *God's Gym*, in the image of African American women, will never wear her hair natural. She spends hours on end, entire nights giving her hair the three hundred and fifty nine various looks, except its natural state: "Nappy. Kinky. Turbanize it. Bald it. Dread it. Braid. Twist. Cornrow. Afreakanize" (19-20). Still, Jill tries to convince herself that her hair is naturally beautiful (19).

Cudjoe is aware of his own alienation. He even understands how beauty standards are imposed on, and accepted, by black people. That is why he himself stages a revisited, black version of *The Tempest,* which, as a schoolteacher, he has tried to teach his young black schoolchildren. This, he hopes, will "unteach" them the falsehoods they are imbibed in since childhood about race and beauty canons (*Philadelphia Fire,* 131).

One of those falsehoods denounced in Wideman's works, is the wrong image of bestiality and incomparable physical aptitude of the black male body. Guzzio, commenting on this, observes that "The black male body became a depository of the West's "darkest places," a "walking palimpsest of fears and fascination possessing our cultural imagination" (209). She comments on Shakespeare's *The Tempest,* one of the Western "founding texts" and its effects on Americans' psyches:

> White Americans still equate African Americans primarily with athletic ability… The African American male body is displayed as something consumable. The representation of black masculinity and physicality builds on the animalistic representation of the black male

> body that is the source of both white male consumption and fear. (206) The image of blackness as ugly, animal, sexually violent, and primitive can be found in the earliest cultural representations of colonization and New World slavery. The character of Caliban from William Shakespeare's play *The Tempest* is a forefather of such representations…Since Caliban can only express himself through Prospero's tongue, he exists only through Prospero's voice. The white ownership of the African American's image, especially of black males, continues to impact African American identity today. (Guzzio 210)

In spite of his awareness of his own complex, Cudjoe finds it difficult to get rid of the image of white female bodies, and ponders the differences between all those shapes and colors which have enthralled his own imagination and subtly shaped his own preferences:

> What was different and what was the same about all the bodies. Blond, dark, lean, stubby, every nation represented, all shapes of male and female displayed in any angle he could imagine. What was he looking for in women's bodies? Surely he'd have tripped over it trudging up and back those golden beaches on Mykonos. But no. The mystery persisted. His woman in the park. (*Philadelphia Fire*, 27)

Because Cudjoe has a color complex and is also aware of it, he finds it difficult to soundly live his relationships with his wife. He destroys his love relationship by wantonly hurting his wife. One may link Cudjoe's scene on the beach to another in *God's Gym* in which Wideman sets the female protagonist Jill: "The beach presented problem for my girl's grade of hair… Thus colorful scarves, various experimental cuts, wigs, chemical aids, prayers, and cute hats. Owwhee. Her pale girlfriends shouted once when oh my god Jill's hair, drenched in a sudden shower, became a nappy storm" (18).

In short, the image of the black body, especially the male black body, and the paragon of physical beauty, are two of the major factors related to the image, which trick Paul and Chantal /Cudjoe and Caroline into building their relations on biased premises and precipitates their bonds into a quick, precocious extinction.

3. Psychological and Cultural Obstacles to Black-and-White Marriages in the US

3.1. The Sense of the Call of Duty

Culture, depending on its aspect under focus, may alternatively be defined as the way in which people participate in or resist society's structures, as the programming of the human mind with an interactive aggregate of characteristics that influence a human group's response to its environment, or as shared and learned patterns of belief and perception whereby reality is produced, interpreted and digested (Martin and Nakayama, 77-79). These definitions underline culture as a social construct with the relational dualities of participation/opposition, production/perception.

The two lovers engaged in the romantic relations are opposed in these conceptual dualities. Paul and Cudjoe appraise culture through opposition and perception exclusively, while Chantal and Caroline belong in the dominant, normative group in charge of producing and participating. Paul is pigeonholed in that perception of resistance and opposition culture, while at the same time in love with a white woman. But the understanding he has of his opposition cultural identity does not allow much room for him to enjoy his relationships to his white partner. It is in this vein that Guzzio points out: "Paul and Chantal are likely doomed as a couple because they operate under the historical weight of culture clash, colonization, and black-white relations that Fanon attempts to reveal – unless they can find ways to deconstruct these images and engage each other on intimate human terms" (220- 221).

As it often happens with people of marginalized cultures, Paul and Cudjoe have a high sense of their collectivist identity and interdependence on other black people. In the same way that Paul feels ashamed at Fanon's gaze on him while he is strolling to the beach, hand in hand with his white wife (*God's Gym*, 123), Cudjoe is stricken by the realization of a high connectedness to the black Move resistance movement led by John Africa as he watches the images of the houses burning on television (*Philadelphia Fire*, 103). Both of them are assailed by grief in a brief moment of encounter and revelation. Paul perceives "the sadness and anger of his [Fanon's] gaze": "His eyes staring trough me. Who are you. Why are you here on my island with this woman" (*God's Gym*, 123). Cudjoe and Paul respectively perceive the fights of the Move movement and Fanon's commitment as a collective cause which requires the participation of all African Americans, and of all black people, especially the commitment of intellectuals. Cudjoe

understands the political activism of the Move as a battle for the cultural and political liberation of African Americans. The activist movement works at denouncing government and corporate abuses, fighting cultural assimilation through its back-to-nature philosophy. Its members, in the image of all African Americans, have their lives destroyed by the white political apparatus of the USA, fighting for Cudjoe while he takes the easy option of leisurely spending his days on the beach of an island with his white wife.

As a matter of fact, as can be noticed, there are opposing versions of the actual event which took place in March 1985 on which Wideman grafts his fiction: the version of the black survivors, and the official version of the city authorities, police officers and fire fighters. According to the victims, the assault was carried out with the visible intent to kill the members of the movement, men, women, and babies alike, not to dislodge them. Their houses were first assaulted with water hoses. Then, the police officers dropped a firebomb from their helicopter which set the houses on fire. As they were chocking in the smoke of the burning houses and decided to come out. Then large quantities of tear gas forced them to get out exposing them now to the bullets of the sharpshooters in ambush. They emptied their guns, reloaded, and emptied them again. All in all, sixty-six houses were destroyed in the neighborhood (Amy Goodman). It is the fictionalized story of the black victims that Cudjoe intends to make known to people for fear of official obliteration.

Cudjoe's action, in fact, will not directly save the Move members as police officers have already destroyed their row houses and killed eleven people: six adults and five children, leaving only two survivors: a lady and a young boy (*Philadelphia Fire*, 97). His project registers in a soul searching perspective as he wants to find the boy and tell his story. One may surmise that Cudjoe thinks that as he is a deserter, he then becomes accomplice to the murder of the boy. Only the guilt for desertion Cudjoe feels, and, by extension, his self-assimilation to the sharpshooter, frozen in hesitation with his finger on the trigger, makes him think again and again about how the sharpshooter in ambush must have felt while aiming at the Move members' children, with his eye glued to the telescopic sight (Ibid, 8). His sense of guilt is so accurately and acutely pictured in the thousand questions he thinks the government-commissioned policeman asks himself while disposing of very young lives. He assesses his own desertion in a most depreciative way when he hears the call: "Ladybug. Ladybug. Fly away home. Your house is on fire. Your children burning. […] Runagate, runagate, fly away home/Your house's on fire and your children burning" (Ibid, 7; 22).

Cudjoe's commitment to make the story known is a duty he imposes on himself to atone his qualms of conscience. Although finding the boy will not save the victims who have already perished, it will certainly connect him to his community again and provide him with the black community's version that he intends to write. Only he can play that part in the communal story as he is a writer. This responsibility, while part of the collective action, is nonetheless personal. It registers in a general superstructure of the collective fight. Cudjoe's African collectivistic culture emphasizes the "familial identity" that, Martin and Nakayama assert, is characterized by "the importance of emotional connectedness to and interdependence with others" (149). They rightly observe about these collectivistic cultures that "the goal of the developed identity is not to be independent from others, but rather to gain understanding of and cultivate one's place in the complex web of interdependence with others […] The understanding of the self may be more connected to others" (149-150). It is in this vein that one may understand Cudjoe's newly found consciousness and his resolve to face his duty: "He'll tell Margaret Jones we're all in this together. That he was lost but now he's found" (*Philadelphia Fire,* 22).

Cudjoe's sudden unprepared return to Philadelphia echoes the homecoming of Du Bois's John (141–153). With his high degrees, John thinks that he will easily integrate the white society but is completely taken aback to discover that his high degrees make no difference in the face of the white world. Confronted with rejection, John comes back home to lend a hand in working for his community, the African-descended people:

> "Perhaps," said John as he settled himself on the train, "perhaps I am to blame myself in struggling against my manifest destiny simply because it looks hard and unpleasant. Here is my duty to Altamaha plain before me; perhaps they'll let me settle the Negro problems there, - perhaps they won't. 'I will go to the King, which is not according to the law; and if I perish, I perish'"[3] (147)

Like John, Cudjoe articulates his newly found vocation with a visionary fervor. But the problem is that if he was lost to his community and now returns, he is nonetheless deserting his wife and children. His sense of guilt has raised unsurmountable barriers to the enjoyment of his marital bonds. His departure from Mykonos island can be analyzed as a homecoming but also as a flight from his marital responsibility.

[3] Quotation marks taken from the original text.

One very important aspect of the issue is that even in the absence of any external social hostility, both Paul and Cudjoe have to wage great battles against their own conscience. Their superego erects such a high wall between their own choices and breeding. The black male protagonist's aspirations run counter what, he perceives, are his community's struggles. These battles the male character wages against himself are, in Wideman's works, more strenuous than the real external social and familial opposition that he faces. The commitment these characters have, as intellectuals, to their communities, stands as a barrier to the easy fulfilment of their personal welfare and enjoyment. Never do these male characters reconcile these two chapters of their own existential problems. This leads them to a multiphrenic splitting into many different and contradictory selves. Wideman's portrayals of black men engaged in biracial marriages are bathed in their evolution from what Guzzio terms "articulate survivors to articulate kinsmen" (193). But whatever choice they make, they lose something. Choosing to be a good lover, they realize, is severing themselves from the nurturing sap of their roots. Facing one's communal responsibility is failing the family. Both Paul and Cudjoe are caught into "Trying to solve a riddle whose answer is yes and no. No or yes. You will always be right and wrong" (*Philadelphia Fire*, 15).

3.1. Suspicion and Distrust

Although most couples usually have arguments, the ordinary lovers' tiffs which, in culturally homogeneous couples, are part of the ebb and flow of common life, are sometimes amplified, taking a dramatic turn with people engaged in black-and-white interracial relations. Misunderstandings, in these couples, unearth historical wounds and resentments. Paul and Cudjoe's self-distrust and suspicion, the distrust of their partner and the suspicion they have toward "people's eyes" are some of the major handicaps to their marital/love relations.

3.2.1. The Suspicion of Oneself

Both Paul and Cudjoe nurture an inconsequent narcissism that weighs down their chains. Their narcissistic drive is first about the guilt they feel in succumbing to the complex of inferiority. In both cases, the black male protagonist accuses himself of "bleach[ing] his soul in the flood of white Americanism" (Du Bois 3) by getting married to a Caucasian female, although he sometimes asserts and tries to convince himself that love is the cement of his union with the white female. It surges up from the

smooth surface of self-delusion that Paul and Cudjoe are irreversibly entangled in the Western web of brainwashing. Naturally, people outmarry for love. But these characters are not sure whether they have married for love. Paul's hidden intents are clearly visible in his own imagined conversation with Fanon: "I should have listened. Fanon speaking from the grave." (*God's Gym*, 132) The message Fanon whips onto his mind is: "It is so easy to become one of them" and therefore lost to oneself (*God's Gym*, 123). This is however the reverberation of his own conscience as he lends these words to late Fanon.

The ominous accusing finger is always pointing at Cudjoe's chest too. Guilt is persistently gnawing, nibbling at his conscience. He has his schoolchildren stage a revisited version of Shakespeare's *Tempest.* This revisited version, Cudjoe's project, is necessary to demonstrate that Caliban [the ancestor of the black man], is not the chimpanzee pictured in Shakespeare's tale (*Philadelphia Fire*, 131). Cudjoe insists on the importance of Shakespeare's version in brainwashing black people. Nevertheless, his own subterfuge is bared. He hardly believes in what he is saying:

> 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. (146)

Paul also is confronted with the same doubt that he must clear before he can engage in a sound relations with Chantal. He confesses: "I loved you and it scared me. I needed to understand everything about you. I needed you to help me understand" (*God's Gym*, 132).

The lexeme of "island," setting for the happy but too brief enjoyment of their love affair, can also be translated into isolation, separation, hiding, escape, invisibility, and therefore guilt. Paul juxtaposes the metaphor of love to that of island: "So much for love. So much for our island" (Ibid, 131). The possibility of love is excluded in an open, socially inclusive environment. In the same vein, Cudjoe's imagined romance with the white barmaid, strangely enough, even though set in Philadelphia, contorts the city into an apocalyptic, disaster-stricken area left with only two survivors: the two lovers (*Philadelphia Fire*, 25). Why can't either Cudjoe or Paul live their love affair with their partners on the main land, surrounded by the ordinary stock that makes up a real city if it were not to hide their guilt and complex? One may surmise that the

protagonist unconsciously banishes the marriage to his white partner from his own range of possibilities. He clearly articulates this after his flight away from her, his second desertion: "lost and found head, the head returning home from its long wilderness of chasing what it couldn't have, shouldn't have, didn't need, tan blond girls […] who tried their best to make me forget what they were or weren't" (*Philadelphia Fire,* 21).

3.2.2. Suspicion of One's Love Partner

One cause of the constant tension that hems the love relationships of the protagonists, apart from the guilt they feel for their choice, is the suspicion and distrust they have vis-à-vis their love partners. Both Paul and Cudjoe come out as two hostages of the past who try, however unsuccessfully, to free themselves of the traps of history and society. Suspicion makes them visualize their partners through changing, dissolve-and-reshape successions of social intimacy and otherness. Cudjoe ponders whether one *black* rib, following the metaphor of the genesis, can be made into a *white* female (*Philadelphia Fire* 102). Cudjoe's constant meditation and fixation in scrutinizing what Caroline is thinking, yield clues to his uneasiness with her and his constant and unnecessary desire to control her, which itself might be interpreted as a feeling of insecurity and total lack of confidence. Cudjoe asks himself: "How do I know what she's thinking? Why do I assume I do? Her left breast, the one closest to me, or closer, since it's one of a pair, slouches brown nubbed and complacent... If I touched it or bit it, would I learn what it was thinking?" (*Philadelphia Fire,* 101)

In the same vein, Paul's feeling of insecurity is what makes him draw the color divide between Chantal and himself, on a simple glance that a white stranger casts at her: "The white guy staring at you on the beach yesterday. What do you think he was thinking… His stare white not black. The master checking out his property" (*God's Gym*, 126). Chantal, pictured in this way, is not normally meant to be his lover, but would be a better fit, by natural right, for a white lover. This stance is confirmed with Cudjoe who makes the dividing line most clear: "Nothing you got is yours anyway. You know you stole it. Know you ain't spozed to have it. You lied and cheat and steal to get it. Mine now. My fingers in her silky hair and silky panties. My hand in your money box… hymie[4] motherfucker." (*Philadelphia Fire*, 165) Paul also resorts to name calling in his frustration, addressing Chantal, as she later recalls, as a "white

[4] The word Hymie is a derogative American slang term used to refer to people of Jewish descent.

whore": "*White bitch*. Waking me up in the middle of the night. *White whore*. Refusing to look at me. Touch me." (*God's Gym*, 132) As a matter of fact, Chantal and Paul's meeting with the white stranger on the beach is the catalyst event which spins the chain leading to their break and the failure of their black-and-white relationships. As far away as the white man on the beach is standing from the couple, the magnetic attraction he exerts on Chantal through a mere look is strong enough to pull them apart.

Paul and Cudjoe's qualms are targeted to destroying their own love and family relationships. Their attempts to repress the feeling of insecurity fails sometimes and gives way to violent bursts and destroying gusts of anger and frustration. This makes them both behave rudely, shooting scathing arrows at their partners. Cudjoe imagines a conversation he holds with Caroline on the reviewed version of *The Tempest* by Shakespeare, the version that he has rewritten and rehearsed with his schoolchildren. He forces Caroline and himself into the black-white opposition paradigm expressed in Shakespeare's *Tempest,* and assimilates her to the heartless and lust-driven figure of Miranda:

> Miranda…probably a little older than you, hon. Two, maybe three years at most. Do you have an older sister? Yes? Couple years older? Yes? Then you know what Miranda's like. [Black] boys on her mind all the time. Thinking about [powerful and sexually pleasurable Black] boys even when she's thinking that's not what she's thinking about…The more you learn about Miranda, the better you will be at playing her. She lived four hundred years ago [in *The Tempest* published by 1610-1611] but try and think of her being somebody you know. Shakespeare's time was different but some things never change. (*Philadelphia Fire*, 143)

Cudjoe accuses Caroline of being a Trojan horse sent by her father to "civilize" and tame him, and to keep him under check for white interests and prosperity:

> She wants to share. But she can't. She's a prisoner, too. Hostage of what her father has taught her. A language that Xeroes image after image of her father, his goodness, his rightness, his deed to the island [here metaphor for America] and the sea-lanes and blue sky and even more than that. The future. Which is confirmed and claimed in the words he taught her and she taught Caliban, buried of course, unmentionable of course, like her private parts… Her father needs her to corner the future, her loins the highway, the bridge, sweet chariot to

carry his claim home. Her womb perpetuates his property. Signs, seals, delivers. Spirit needs flesh. Word needs deed. And Caliban understands the connections. Wants out. Wants in. All her civilization whispered in his ears. Her words on the tip of his tongue. (141)

3.2.3. Suspicion of Other People

Through the guilt Cudjoe and Paul feel and the suspicion they nurture toward people in their black community, they sentence themselves into rejection. Fanon's eyes on Paul is the metaphor of Abel's eye still staring at Cain. Fanon's eyes pierce out his secrets and accuse him of betrayal, at his hiding place, the island: "Of course it's Frantz Fanon ['s painting on a wall]. Who else. Why had it taken so long to recognize him. To recognize the sadness and anger of his gaze. His eyes staring through me. Who are you. Why are you here on my island with this woman" (*God's Gym*, 123).

The fugitive Cain, fleeing from the island, the scene of his "crime," reads hints to his crime on every face he sees. But while Paul is grappling with recent past with late Fanon, Cudjoe, as for him, faces the living eye of the black woman who succeeds in escaping from the fire. The scene of Fanon's eye staring through Paul finds a call-and-response echo in Cudjoe's encounter with the black lady who grants him an interview: "How could they express so clearly, with nothing more than their eyes that they knew his secret" (*Philadelphia Fire* 9). How can the fire survivor know Cudjoe the teacher and writer's whole past and "betrayals" with minutest details this quickly? Betrayal is sensed like a scent/smell shrouding the deserter:

She was permitting him to overhear what she told the machine. Polite, accommodating to a degree, she also maintained her distance. Five thousand miles of it, plus or minus an inch. The precise space between Cudjoe's island [his desertion refuge] and West Philly. Somehow she knew he'd been away, exactly how long, exactly how far, and that distance bothered her, she held it against him, served it back to him in her cool reserve, seemed unable ever to forgive it. How did she know so much about him, not only her but all her sisters, how, after the briefest conversation, did they know his history, that he'd married a white woman and fathered half-white kids? How did they know he'd failed his wife and failed those kids, that his betrayal was double, about blackness and about being a man? How could they express so clearly, with nothing more than their eyes that they knew his secret,

that he was someone, a half-black someone, a half man who could not be depended upon? (*Philadelphia Fire,* 9)

These feelings of betrayal and ostracization condemn Paul and Cudjoe's love story to failure. Their "dream of a good life, a happy life on a happy island" (*Philadelphia Fire* 10) remains but a fleeting illusion, just a dream, nurtured out of society and reality. Both Paul and Cudjoe embrace their "interracial" relations as a betrayal, as "shifting loyalties," which, in fact, is not. Identity and love are not antinomical. Milan Kundera, in an aphorism, defines tenderness, and by extension, love and marriage bonds, as "the attempt to create a tiny artificial space in which it is mutually agreed that each will treat the other like a child" (qtd. in *The Art of the Novel* 30-31). Children, by definition, are primarily destined to grow and mature. Family, therefore, can be viewed as a circle dedicated to growing and healing, to mutual understanding and sharing. If there were any biases or complexes each lover enters the marriage bond with, then family must be viewed as the prime sphere of psychological healing.

Conclusion

The male protagonist-narrator, in the two works cited, posits the fulfilment of his duty to his "racial" community only in the denial of his interracial love bond, and the enjoyment of his love relationships in opposition to his commitment to his community. But the two spheres of his life are not necessarily opposed. Paul deserts his wife under Fanon's glare, and Cudjoe flees away from Caroline in order to assume the Move's cause and rescue Simba's story. As it is in the interest of both lovers that there is no social prejudice between their two communities, it is in their interest to fight against prejudices, if any, to make their union sustainable. Paul and Cudjoe are engaged in a love relation that calls them to restore mutual acceptance by fighting against the oppressor-oppressed relationships which prevails between their respective communities. This battle is in line with the survival of their marriage.

This article does not negate the weight of the society. The weight of social condemnation a constant threat to creolized families in the US. However, the individuals engaged in these relationships share their part of responsibility, as the memory of marginality outlasts the marginality, and oppression leaves deep scars on the mind of the oppressed as well as that of the oppressor. So, African Americans must deconstruct the psychological schemes that subjugate them in "interracial" relations since there is no inherent antinomy between love and "race."

Maria Root asserts that “intermarriages have a ripple effect that touch many people’s lives. It is a symbolic vehicle through which we can talk about race and gender and reexamine our ideas about race” (12). Studying the evolution of “interracial” marriages is studying the evolution of relationships between “races”. Coping with the requirements imposed by a society in swift evolution should be one of the first objectives of cultural identities, since a culture which negates evolution, stays impervious to readjustments, is doomed to disappear. African Americans, and African-descended people in general, in their reappropriation of the black experience analyzed from an African perspective, should also face the requirements dictated by modern society. Getting married to a Caucasian wife does not necessarily entail the repudiation of one’s culture.

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