"He Looked Like A Man": Narrating Child Identities in the Meditative Non-fiction of John Edgar Wideman

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This article discusses the nonfiction writings of contemporary African American author John Edgar Wideman as a response to the crisis of violence affecting young African Americans, and argues that Wideman's vision for the potential recuperation of disenfranchised black youth encompasses a radical reassessment of childhood itself and its relationship to time. The discussion addresses the author's particular concern with a phenomenon that sees black children characterized as adult-like, as part of a rationalization of violence perpetrated against them. Wideman's work situates an alternative economy of time, observed in a range of African diaspora settings, where the notion of childhood as a phase of development rooted in linear time can be reappraised, and the fragile possibility of African American youth living beyond the specter of violence can be glimpsed.

Childhood is established in a European-American tradition as a discursive field that bestows protection and innocence upon children, yet African American childhood is repeatedly seen to fall outside of the purview of the childhood discourse, as what is otherwise normally considered to be a period of protection and grace is denied by the brutal fiction of race.[1] As a developmental narrative, the Western discourse of childhood is grounded

[1]I am following Henry Louis Gates, Jr.'s suggestion here that race is a "fiction" and a "metaphor" ("Writing 'Race'").

in linear time, and the "fiction of race," according to Wideman, accelerates childhood for African American children, in what amounts to something of a drive toward death. In Wideman's alternative vision for narratives of identity, childhood is not seen as simply a phase of individual development in which privileges can be bestowed or withheld by adults. Instead, childhood inhabits what is understood as an African notion of "Great Time," in which the child is seen to be held within a community of the living, the dead and the yet to be born. Here, time itself is understood as more fluid than notions of development allow, and figures of circularity, of shared space, and "common ground" are prioritized, the activities of speaking, sharing and telling stories providing explanation and context for identity. Wideman finds a traditional template for this kind of space in his own, intimately-known African American community (originally based in stories of his own childhood in Pittsburgh), yet also links this to the Igbo "ogbanje" spirit-child, the child who returns from death to life many times through the same mother in West African ontologies, and which will be familiar to readers of Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958) and Ben Okri's *The Famished Road* (1991).

The "new social studies of childhood" emerged as an interdisciplinary field of academic study in the 1990s, and has identified that in the conventional European discourse of childhood, the child is seen as having a special relationship with time, having a personality which is defined by both "being" (having agency of her own), and "becoming" (being an adult-in-the-making).[2] Yet research has also shown that when black children are imagined to be 'like adults,' the privilege which childhood affords—of the notion of development—is displaced by an idea that the child's identity is decided and will never change. Wideman, interestingly, posits linear discourse as denoting a kind of "chaos" that is at odds with life itself, severing any presumed attachment between linearity/rationality and the notion of calm and control. In the realm of "ogbanje," meaning is accrued through stories, repetition, circularity and connection to tradition, rather than through linear "namings," and the possibility emerges for reconceptualization of the relationship of African American childhood with time itself, situating identity as a process which occurs beyond the fictions of race.

I read selections here from what I am calling Wideman's "meditative nonfiction," alongside excerpts from statements made by the author in interviews and in speeches. The style in which I read Wideman's works as

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[2]Emma Uprichard gives a brief but useful bibliographic survey of the debate. See Uprichard 304.

speaking back and forth to one another to form a rich blanket of meaning accords with the very way that Wideman insists meaning must be understood, particularly to communicate to young African Americans alienated from traditional cultures, and in need of a field of knowledge in which the stories of their own identity might start to be heard. Through storytelling, disenfranchised African American youth are connected with people past and present, identifying a revolutionary consciousness which is also transcendent of national and cultural boundaries, potentially connecting subjectivities all over the globe. Wideman thus invokes a complete reconceptualization of time itself, which radically alters how both individual personality and the nature of childhood are understood. This paper shows how such a reconsideration of the nature of time resonates with recent approaches in *both* childhood studies *and* in diaspora studies toward the language of physics. Yet Wideman finds an approach to time which rather than seeing an application of scientific concepts in new ways, is grounded in tradition, and is age-old. This recalibration of the time of the present is found both in the stories which constitute traditional African American community for Wideman, and in a connection to a broader diasporic consciousness, yet is sufficiently pliable to resonate in terms which can be understood to be both contemporary and global.

The New Social Studies of Childhood and Reading the African American Child

During the last decade of the twentieth century, an interdisciplinary field of research emerged, most particularly in European and American scholarship, that began to be known as the "new social studies of childhood," and whose fundamental interest was to position childhood as socially constructed, and children themselves as capable social actors or agents. The new social studies of childhood is concerned with situating childhood as a historically and culturally-specific practice; scholars of childhood studies regard Philippe Ariès' 1962 work, *Centuries of Childhood: A Social History of Family Life*, as "provid[ing] the grounds for [childhood's] analysis in terms of its social context, rather than abandoning [it] to a naturalistic reduction" (James, Jenks and Prout 4). Though Ariès' contention that childhood was only "invented" or perceived to be a distinguishable state from adulthood in Europe in the mid-eighteenth century has been roundly criticized from all sides, his basic premise—that childhood is always a situated historical practice based upon factors unique to a given situation—has proved irrefut-

able.[3] As Allison James and Alan Prout put it in their volume *Constructing and Reconstructing Childhood*, "the immaturity of children is a biological fact of life but the ways in which this immaturity is understood and made meaningful is a fact of culture"(James and Prout 7).

Childhood studies as a field of inquiry, then, allows us to recognize a cultural outlook that brings certain expectations to framing the figure of the child, and to the concept of what constitutes childhood itself. This is summed up neatly by Mary Jane Kehily:

> The idea that childhood innocence should be preserved is a pervasive one and can be seen to operate on many different levels. [. . .] Drawing upon the work of French philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–78), the Romantic discourse claimed that children embody a state of innocence, purity and natural goodness that is only contaminated on contact with the corrupt outside world. [. . .] Children's purity should be respected and protected in order for them to express themselves freely and creatively. [. . .] The tabula rasa discourse draws upon the philosophy of John Locke who developed the idea that children come into the world as blank slates who could, with guidance and training, develop into rational human beings. Within this discourse the child is always in the process of becoming, an adult-in-the-making with specific educational needs that adults should take seriously. (Kehily 5).

Childhood has thus emerged historically in the West as a discourse that naturalizes ideological assumptions of what a child is, and thus bestows certain rights and privileges upon the child: the right to protection, to education, and to possessing what is recognized as a state of innocence. In this discourse, the child springs from nothing, is inherently good and guiltless, and inhabits a distinct period—grounded in linear time and seen as "childhood"—in which there is an expectation that s/he will be molded by adult influence. Key to these Western historical ideals of childhood are the linked notions that firstly, childhood is a temporary state, and that secondly, it is parental and communal love and protectiveness which safeguards and thus helps to identify the realm of childhood.

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[3]Disputed most notably by Linda A Pollock, who critiques Ariès's conclusions because they are drawn largely from the evidence shown in paintings, but also argues that "All human infants are born helpless, dependent on adult care and adult transmission of their society's culture. To adults all over the world, children represent something helpless and weak, something to be protected, supervised and trained and also something that is a valuable asset to their society (Mead & Wolfenstein, 1955)" (Pollock 38).

The African American scenario presents a particular kind of slippage in defining the figure of the child—time and time again, we see the black child who exhibits certain kinds of behaviors, proclaimed to no longer inhabit the realm of "childhood."[4] Robin Bernstein comments: "This is the flip side of the well-known libel of the 'childlike Negro:' the equally libelous, equally damaging, but heretofore underanalyzed exclusion of black youth from the category of childhood" (Bernstein 16). Precious, the abused child of Sapphire's 1996 novel *Push*, is a figure who helps to identify this schism, when, for instance, she encounters a kind of "exclusion" from childhood when, at the age of twelve, she gives birth to her second baby resulting from habitual rape by her father: "[Nurse] look at me [. . .] She say, 'Was you ever, I mean did you ever get to be a chile?' Thas a stupid question, did I ever get to be a chile? I *am* a chile" (Sapphire 13). Precious' worry here is problematic, and one whose urgency and relevance to contemporary social contexts can hardly be overestimated: her immaturity is indeed "a biological fact" even though she has been raped and is herself a mother, but if she is unloved and unprotected by adults, is she a child? Wideman invokes the figure of Precious to analyze the predicament of contemporary African American youth, and for Precious, the insistence upon claiming the territory of childhood as her own in the face of the continuous and conspicuous abuses unleashed upon her is a claim to her humanity, and a defense of her right to not be violated. Her father's horrific cry as he rapes her —"You jus' like your mama"— is one instance of a tendency we will see again, in which obliterating the right of the child to be identified *as* a child is a way of characterizing the child as an adult who is competent to handle, or who is even "asking for," any punishment that is inflicted upon her (25). Ann Arnett Ferguson has documented this practice, which she calls "adultification," in her fieldwork in an anonymized US elementary school, and explains the process whereby children's "transgressions are made to take on a sinister, intentional, fully conscious tone that is stripped of any element of childish naïveté. The discourse of childhood as an unfolding developmental stage in the life cycle is [thus] displaced" (Ferguson 83).[5] As the child is sped toward

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[4]Howard C. Stevenson has commented upon the denial of childhood as a space of 'becoming' in the context of African American boys: "While Black male youth are "becoming" and developing racial and gender identities, American society represents them in very static ways, and consequently they also present themselves in static ways. This typecasting is what Irving Goffman would call "presented identities," and, for African American males, these public identities are based on feelings of hypervulnerability." (Stevenson 60).

[5]Childhood innocence, as Bernstein puts it, is "raced white," and naturalizes the exclusion of

adulthood by the fiction of race, the "biological fact" of childhood affords no gesture of protection from violence. The customary temporal basis for the realm that is situated as childhood in a European tradition is destabilized and collapsed by the violent dynamics of race.

The process of "adultification" allows the fiction of race to deny any differentiation between adult and child, and thus considers the condition of protective love that springs from that differentiation as irrelevant and unnecessary. There is an insidious underlying assumption in this equation, in which race is situated as an established invariable; when the black child is "adultified"—imagined to be a black adult—the category of childhood is instantly decimated by the fiction of race. As Ferguson continues:

> The exemption of black males from the dispensations granted the "child" and the "boy" through the process of adultification justifies harsher, more punitive responses to rule-breaking behavior. As "not-children," their behavior is understood not as something to be molded and shaped over time, but as the intentional, fully cognizant actions of an adult. This means there is already a dispositional pattern set, that their behavior is incorrigible, irremediable. Therefore, the treatment required for infractions is one that punishes through example and exclusion rather than through persuasion and edification, as is practiced with young white males in the school. (89-90)

When we observe this unequal figuring of the black child as an adult, any veil of illusion about race is deftly torn from our eyes. Adultifying the child reveals that even an adult who happens to be black (and especially, poor and black) must expect to find herself, by default and by virtue of her social "caste," the recipient of unquestioning punishment in a society that complies with the habitual violation of the boundaries of her person. Precious reveals her understanding of the protective powers of both whiteness and childhood in the face of violence, when she fantasizes that her mother might defend her from her father's abuse: "Git off Precious like that! Can't you see Precious is a beautiful chile like white chile in magazines" (Sapphire 64). Adultification is not only a denial of childhood, but a racialized denial of humanity itself that continually affirms the status of the black child as

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blackness from the purview of childhood—reading innocence into children's cultural forms provides, as Bernstein puts it, "the perfect alibi" for a wholesale forgetfulness of the role played by black or non-white children in the history of American childhood. (Bernstein 8). The "whitening" of childhood innocence therefore conspires with conditions which situate race and class as given, and which allow the non-white, and moreover, the "non-innocent" (as surely Precious would be deemed to be), to fall outside of the experience defined as "childhood."

victim of violence.[6]

"I Am A Man": Displacing Race to Survive Childhood

Wideman begins a non-fiction piece entitled "The Killing of Black Boys" with the words "I am a man," and goes on to comment, "Both of us 14 the summer they murdered Emmett Till. [. . .][. . .] Like Emmett Till, in 1955 I had just graduated from junior high. I'm trying to remember if, like Emmett Till, I carried pictures of White girls in my wallet" ("The Killing" 278-79). The only way for black boys to escape the perils of adultification, Ferguson comments, is to display "a performance of absolute docility that goes against the grain of masculinity. [. . .][. . .] the essential lesson for young black males to learn if they are to get anywhere in life: to act out obeisance is to survive" (Ferguson 87). It becomes clear that Wideman regards Till's fate with an attitude approximated by the saying "there but for the grace of God go I"—an approach that is frequently seen throughout his writing when he encounters African Americans less fortunate than himself. Yet Wideman's opening words also resonate frighteningly with testimony given in the case of Emmett Till, cited in an article for *Look Magazine*: "Bobo Till was 14 years old: born on July 25, 1941. He was stocky, muscular, weighing about 160, five feet four or five. Preacher later testified: "He looked like a man" (Huie 202).[7]

Wideman's close identification with Till draws a haunting conclusion which figures, at a stroke, how the process of adultification might paradoxically cut a child down before he has a chance to become a man. "[A]s long as race continues to legitimize one group's life-and-death power over another," the status of a man, when it is applied to a child, can only speed that child's demise by removing any of the protection that the discourse of childhood might afford against the murderous fiction of race ("The Killing" 281). Wideman's assertive opening to his meditation on this subject does the heart-breaking work of claiming survival for black manhood in testament

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[6]It is a testament to the power of sexuality in these dynamics of violence that Ferguson's book-length discourse does little to distinguish between the nature of adultification of boys and girls beyond the more overt sexualization of girls or the physical threat posed by boys. My discussion marks this troubled and seemingly insurmountable gender focus of the racial violence question.

[7]"The Killing of Black Boys" was originally published in 1997 in *Essence* magazine, and is collected in Mettress 2002. Strangely, the piece reappears with minor changes under the title "Looking at Emmett Till" in *In Fact: The Best of Creative Nonfiction*, ed. Lee Gutkind. New York & London: W.W. Norton & Company, 2005: 24-48. In this revised piece, the striking opening words, "I am a man" are completely excised.

to those children who have been denied such an opportunity. Such a bold claim of subjectivity, Wideman says, is a "prerogative [that] remains rare for a black man in American society" (*Brothers and Keepers* 44). In their echo of how the naming of Till as a man served as justification for his killing, these simple words also glance at the uncertain, unsteady nature of the relationship between boyhood and manhood in the African American scenario. By claiming his own status as a man, Wideman represents the meaningful possibility of surviving that threat of violence inherent to the adultification that he and other black boys, including Emmett Till, may have encountered during the course of their childhoods. His words serve as a powerful assertion not only of his own humanity, but of all black boys' right to the protection of childhood.

Wideman speaks in an interview of "the next real revolution in human consciousness, [as] a readjustment of the notion of a continuous personality," and his thoughts on identity, grounded in a rethinking of notions of linear time, have implications for his approach toward the predicament of contemporary African American youth (TuSmith 122). He continues: "the idea that we are one person, and we somehow have the ability to yoke all these warring impulses, [. . .] up into one package, [means] we have this terrible, weighty obligation, to make all those pieces fit into one whole" (122). Throughout the text of Wideman's 1994 treatise/memoir *Fatheralong*, Wideman destabilizes any straightforward or explicitly linear relationship between race and identity, beginning the book by imagining "two black people meeting in the street," and commenting that "the names flapping in the air—black, negro, african american, colored, etc., etc.—[. . .] are inadequate to describe the sense of common ground we exchange at this moment" (ix). He goes on to establish this idea of "common ground" as a nexus of culture, storytelling and belonging that is utterly disrupted and destroyed by the fiction of race: "Common ground. How can we seek it, understand it without slipping into talk about race?" (xii). Crucially, Wideman argues that while "theories of race [are] elaborated [. . .] to rationalize prerogatives of self-interest," "Common ground is the higher ground, spiritual and material, we strive to gain" (xiii, xxii). Thus the "names," which act as markers of race, function in a linear narrative mode that is "never exactly in synch" with the "flow of life" itself (187). Wideman surmises that "duration is an illusion," and that "The idea that time unfolds linearly [. . .] feels utterly unconvincing" (*Fatheralong* 186). He turns to Chinua Achebe's 1958 novel *Things Fall Apart* in order to begin to identify a field of signification in which processes of storytelling begin to open possibilities for identity which

are closed down by acts of naming:

> At the beginning of *Things Fall Apart*, Chinua Achebe mentions a story the people of Umofia pass down from generation to generation, concerning the founder of their clan, the ancestor who wrestled a spirit of the wild for seven days and seven nights, earning for himself and his descendants the right to settle on the land they've occupied ever since. Told countless times, countless ways, in each recounting the fabled bout happens again, not in the past, but alive and present in Great Time, the always present tense of narrative where every alternative is possible. (*Fatheralong* 62)

Wideman understands the instructive nature of Achebe's circular, continuous conception of historical time, and its benefit for young black people in America who are otherwise alienated from a tradition in which memories of the past would once have helped them to draw meaning from bewildering experience, and thus to understand their identities:

> the African voice, the conduit of traditional wisdom [teaches that] the dead are those who don't speak and are not spoken of, those not connected by vital words, those whom the stories have forgotten, who have forgotten the stories. Why am I in this American land? Why do I claim it? Why should anyone respect my claim, respect me? Who listens when I speak? Who will treat my story not as entertainment, not as a product to be sold or consumed? (*Fatheralong* 64-65)

Without connection to the realm of stories, discussion, conflict and potential chaos that is embodied by "Great Time," and living under the chimera of race, which instead offers only the linear timeline of a great unchangeable fiction, it is black children who according to this view are themselves "the dead." On one level, Achebe's novel itself is the story of Okonkwo's weak ancestral inheritance, which could be read as metaphor for African American youth alienated from tradition. The other story that is going on in Achebe's novel, however, is that told by the ongoing sound of "drums beat[ing] the unmistakable wrestling dance," a sound that is "persistent and unchanging" and "no longer a separate thing from the living village" (Achebe 30, 31). Wideman comments:

> The wrestling match [. . .] is an intersection like the one drawn with chalk on an earthen floor to summon Loa, like the crossroads sacred to Damballah where living and dead pass one another, [. . .] confirmation is received through the senses that the ancestral spirits live, the wrestlers sweat again, flesh smacks flesh, watchers

> cheer, gathered in a circle around the threshing ground where bodies are flung and fling themselves into patterns as familiar and unpredictable as the steps of jazz dance, the choreography of a fast-break slam dunk on a playground basketball court. (62-63)

As "common ground" metamorphoses into "threshing ground," dance floor and basketball court, Wideman's prose works to extricate African American culture from the deadening chokehold of race, to reinstate knowledge of a culture where living and dead, young and old, African and African American may be known alongside each other. This is the "Great Time of our African ancestors, a nonlinear, atemporal medium in which all things that ever *have been*, *are*, or *will be* mingle freely" (xi). The African time-scheme signaled by Achebe and Wideman represents an alternative story, of which the spirit-child "*ogbanje*" is emblematic, that is occurring at all times alongside the dehumanizing fiction of race. In this alternative world-view, narratives of belonging are not only bestowed upon children by parental love and protection, but are heard, within drumbeats, jazz, story, basketball and dreams.

Ogbanje the Spirit-Child: Epistemologies for Diaspora and Childhood

While, according to Emma Uprichard, childhood studies is founded in an "inherent 'arrow of time'" that understands "the 'being' child as someone who 'becomes' an adult," for Wideman the narrative regime imposed by the illusion of linear time (on childhood, and indeed on life itself) is a "basic source of human unhappiness" (Uprichard 303-4; *Fatheralong* 187).[8] If, in the process of adultification described by Ferguson, "there is already a dispositional pattern set" for young people, this is arguably only an intensification of the tendency that, according to Wideman, is imposed by the pre-existing idea that childhood itself has a beginning, a middle, and an endpoint that will constitute some form of so-called "arrival." In the move away from traditional communities, children who are not "connected by vital words, those whom the stories have forgotten, who have forgotten the stories," are forced by the oppression of race, which collapses the lingering temporal progress of childhood, to "become" overnight (*Fatheralong* 63-64). As Gloria Ladson-Billings observes, in the context of US elementary

[8]Uprichard draws this term from Peter Coveney and Roger Highfield, *The Arrow of Time: The Quest to Solve Science's Greatest Mystery*. London: Flamingo, 1990.

schools:

> The paradox of Black boys' experiences in school and society is that mainstream perceptions of them vacillate between making them babies and making them men. When they are somewhere between the ages of three and six years they are acknowledged as cute but rarely as intellectually capable. [. . .] This notion of little Black boys as cute does not last long. Before long they are moved to a category that resembles criminals. Their childhood evaporates before they are eight or nine-years-old when teachers and other school officials begin to think of them as 'men.'" (Ladson-Billings 10)

For black children, living outside of this hallowed realm of stories and protective care, demarcated by notions of African Great Time, the conventional temporality of childhood is accelerated by the premeditated fiction of race:

> youth gangs in the street, on the corner, that murder their own youth, that don't play, don't waste energy seeking fathers, don't need anyone telling them who they are or what to do because they manufacture and enforce their own rules, step into the vacuum and become their own fathers and mothers, creating a world where childhood has disappeared [. . .] For these sons there is no past nor future, only the sheer exhilaration and terror of *now*, the only time that counts, the only time you're ever alive. (*Fatheralong* 76)

Wideman speaks, in *Fatheralong*, of the loss of connection to tradition, for young black people, startlingly, as "a second Middle Passage [. . .] afflicting black communities in America today" (xxii), where "young African Americans" are "separated from traditional cultures, deprived of the love, nurturing, sense of value and identity these cultures provided" (xxiii). For Wideman, key to the social order that could revitalize the experience of childhood, and that can undo the dehumanizing fiction of race, is the realm of stories and speech , in which adults might begin to understand their own identities in context, and begin to shepherd a realm in which children could establish their own sense of "becoming:"

> Ideas of manhood, true and transforming, grow out of private, personal exchanges between fathers and sons. Yet for generations of black men in America this privacy, this privilege has been systematically breached in a most shameful and public way. [. . .] Fathers in exile, in hiding, on the run, anonymous, undeter-

> mined, dead. The lost fathers cannot claim their sons, speak to them about growing up, until the fathers claim their own manhood. Speak first to themselves, then unambiguously to their sons. Arrayed against the possibility of conversation between fathers and sons is the country they inhabit, everywhere proclaiming the inadequacy of black fathers. (64-65)

With black fathers' "power to speak [. . .] withheld," the argument follows, the process of "becoming" is neither protected nor shepherded for young black people, the fiction of race instead proclaiming loud and clear, relating linear past to present to future in a long unyielding line (65). This sense of the murderous tyranny that Wideman attributes to linearity is apparent in "The Killing of Black Boys" when he writes: "A so-called lost generation of young Black men dying in the streets today points backward, the way Emmett Till's battered corpse points backward, history and prophecy at once: This is the way things have always been, will always be, the way they're supposed to be" ("The Killing" 280). Far from denoting an ordered and neat version of human experience, "Beneath our nation's pieties, our lies and self-delusions, our denials and distortions of history, our professed certainties about race, lies chaos" ("The Killing" 288). For real change, for chaos to be calmed and diversity nurtured, a conscious revolution is required, where the notion of race is ultimately destabilized and abandoned. For Wideman, this occurs as part of a complete reconceptualization of time itself.

If childhood is identified as a European-derived discourse that, over the course of (at least) the past three centuries has built and afforded domains of privilege and protection for (some) young people, Wideman's account, in *Fatheralong*, figures race as a discourse, established in the same period, "complete, closed, and pervasive as a religion," and with the power to dismantle the protective period known as childhood in a single blow: "once race enters the discussion doesn't a net settle over our heads, capturing nothing but destroying what passes through its deadly weave? Chaos looms because race can mean everything or nothing. A denial of diversity" (*Fatheralong* xii, xv). Separated from the circular, polytemporal realm of stories gestured to by a connection with African American and African tradition, the chaos of linear time overwhelms a young person's quest for selfhood.

The new social studies of childhood has helped to identify the ways in which childhood is understood to be a process grounded in, and indivisible from, linear time. As Chris Jenks writes: "'Development,' an essentially temporal notion, is the primary metaphor through which childhood is made

intelligible, [in which] the idea of time [is] left inviolable" (34).[9] Emma Uprichard observes the opposition, posited by sociologists of childhood, between the "dominant framework" of the child as "becoming," as is visible in the above history of Western childhood ("an adult-in-the-making"), and the "emergent paradigm" of the "being" child—the child as social actor or agent—whose interests are particularly explored by this new field (Uprichard 305). Clearly, the process of "adultification" is rooted in the temporality of childhood, and in the capacity of race, as a fiction, to obliterate the process of "becoming" to the point that the "being" child—that child who has agency in the social world—is indistinguishable from the adult. Interestingly, Uprichard turns to physicist Ilya Prirogine's notion that time itself is always both "being and becoming" and "that these alternative concepts of time interact together and complement one another," in order to enable an understanding of children "in the real situation of being present and future agents of their present and future lives, and ultimately of the social world around them" (303, 312).

In recent thinking about the conceptualization of diaspora, also, there is a move toward the need to understand time itself, as the medium we live within, as more fluid and malleable than notions of linearity typically allow. Kamari Maxine Clarke writes, "we have entered a moment in which a new ontology of diasporic theorizing about Africanness and African Americanness is necessary," in which "new approaches to diasporic formations [. . .] must take seriously the complexity of simultaneous, and at times inequitable, inclusion and exclusion, formed as new cartographies of power are redrawn" (Clarke 50-51). According to Michelle M. Wright, there is an appeal to "what [physicists] refer to as "B series time, [. . .] sometimes called the 'tenseless' view of time," that "quickly and clearly invokes all black communities because there are several points of entry rather than the fixed timeline of the Middle Passage Epistemology in which past, present and future can only be accessed by those willing and able to interpellate themselves through this epistemology" (Wright 72, citing Falk 146).[10] Clarke and Wright, among others, make clear that in order for the notion of "African diaspora" to function meaningfully in contemporary society—that is, just as well for a Kenyan living in Los Angeles since 2008 as for an African

[9]See also James and Prout 1990, 216.

[10]See also Brent Hayes Edwards, *The Practice of Diaspora: Literature, Translation and the Rise of Black Internationalism*. Harvard University Press, 2003.

American whose great-grandparents migrated from Georgia to Ohio in the 1920s—a fluid, nonlinear temporality must provide the unifying medium between peoples who identify as African and African American. Such an understanding of time might connect that identification not only to the history of transatlantic slavery, but to the multifarious, interlocking, old and new histories of migration made by African peoples.

Fascinatingly, it would seem both from Uprichard's contribution to thinking through childhood, and from these latter theorizations on diaspora, that conventional ideas of linear time serve in each case to inhibit possibilities for individuals to claim agency and participation in the world as fully competent human beings. In the case of the black child, then, and against the context of persistent histories of "adultification," the conventional bonds of linear time must be loosened if the individual is to find a meaningful relationship with community which could help them make sense of their identity.

Chris Okonkwo introduces an interview conducted with Wideman in 2004, in which Wideman discusses how "ogbanje," the West African spirit-child who is reborn many times to the same mother, represents the notion of historical experience as a series of encounters with a scenario that has been known before but presents new possibilities for change with each replaying (Okonkwo 347). Ogbanje is a figure of salutary importance in the constitution of community memory in *Things Fall Apart*, and is revisited by Wideman to establish a revised temporal basis for childhood. Okonkwo writes:

> Ogbanje is the Igbo name for spirit children who undergo many life journeys through the same mother. Readers of [. . .] *Things Fall Apart* [. . .] would have encountered an "ogbanje" character in Ekwefi's and Okonkwo's daughter Ezinma. [. . .] Wideman [. . .] finds in ogbanje a paradigm so pliable, yet familiar, it has racial, universal and subjectival implications. (Okonkwo 347)

Wideman notes that he "came across the idea [of ogbanje] specifically for the first time in Achebe," and that "a very important idea suddenly had a specific name, a specific provenance, for me. [. . .] It was like meeting an old friend." (Okonkwo 348). The figure of the spirit-child who represents endless new possibilities for encountering known stories corresponds clearly with a notion that Wideman calls, variously, "African time" or "Great Time."

Karen Wells writes that "the widespread view in sub-Saharan Africa that infants remember the world they came from and indeed that, to stay in this world or even in a way to become human, they have to forget this

other life" "contrasts very sharply" with the European notion of "the newborn child as being a 'tabula rasa'" (Wells 2-3). Strikingly, the notion that a newborn child has already travelled through many lifetimes shakes the foundations of any belief in the immaturity of children as a fact of life. The contrast that the spirit-child presents with the developmental notion of childhood as a distinct, linear process is also profound, introducing a temporal state whereby childhood agency potentially inhabits past, present and future simultaneously. As Alma Gottlieb comments:

> The doctrine of reincarnation is based on a cyclical trajectory with no beginning and no end, and death as another kind of life. With this orientation, one's sense of time must sit on a different axis from the one on which sits the common Western sense of time, with its discrete, unilinear notions of past, present, and future. (Gottlieb 80)

Wideman, in his nonfiction as well as in his fiction, is centrally concerned with undoing the fixedness of any connection between linear temporality and Western childhood. Yet instead of turning to the language of physics, Wideman finds his grasp of this alternative temporality in West African cosmologies that allow the space of childhood to offer a template for life itself.

The notion of historical experience as a series of encounters with a scenario that has been known before but presents new possibilities for change is a dynamic that is reminiscent of jazz and, in its fluid negotiation of temporality, also has something in common with Audre Lorde's descriptions of the "erotic," a "sharing of joy, [that] forms a bridge between the sharers which can be the basis for understanding much of what is not shared between them, and lessens the threat of their difference" (Lorde 56-57). For children to gain knowledge of such a realm undoes the absolute sense of opposition between childhood and adulthood that is a premise of childhood studies, and allows nurturing to be experienced not only as a condition of protected youthful innocence but as part of an experience of past present and future within the same communal space of identification. It is also a concept that is like "B series time," that notion of time which could allow diversity of African and African diaspora subjectivities to inhabit a common discursive space untroubled by the difficulty or obscurity (for some) of relating to a Middle Passage Epistemology. In conditions where race has set the agenda for African American childhood, where "adultification" can literally lead the child to an early grave, the experience of this alternative temporality ap-

pears as an immediate and fragile hope in an otherwise desperate situation.

Necessary Rituals: Time and the Global Child

Wideman ends "The Killing of Black Boys" with a narrative tapestry of black community standing shoulder to shoulder, across space and time: "The line of my brothers and fathers and sons stretches ahead of me, behind me [. . .] girding the earth, holding the sky down. So many of us at one time in one place, it scares me" ("The Killing" 287). Through "continuous muted shout and chant and benediction," a kind of healing and coming together is felt to accrue around loss ("The Killing" 287). The story's ending, however, reveals that healing alone does not signify cure: "We have yet to look upon Emmett Till's face. No apocalyptic encounter, no ritual unveiling, no epiphany has freed us. The nightmare is not cured" ("The Killing" 288). Wideman has commented upon this pattern of repetition he perceives in global history, and reads within this a specific role for the figure of the spirit-child:

> Why in the New World have African Americans been so "passive" in terms of the oppression of the slave master. [. . .] That's always been a mystery to me. It's always been something I've wondered about. It's bothered me. Now, where does the ogbanje fit in? Well, maybe, maybe there's some kind of taint, or some kind of poison, that is part of the original contact between Europeans and Africans that we have still to shed, and it keeps returning in many, many different forms, because we have yet to undergo the necessary ritual. (Okonkwo 350-51)

In a recent public appearance, Wideman read from a story he claims is "not a published work, [. . .] not a finished work," that "at this point I'm calling 'Precious Love'"("An Evening with John Edgar Wideman," 10:03). Wideman evokes the figure of Precious from Sapphire's novel and the film based on the work, as part of a commentary drawing a link between a specific unease with the status quo of African American childhood, and the broader global upheavals signified by the political uprisings in the Middle East known as the "Arab Spring" of 2011. Through the unlikely figure of Precious—"all sixteen-year-old, two-hundred-fifty-pounds-plus, Nat King Cole-colored bulk of her" ("An Evening," 25:05)—Wideman examines these global upheavals with a clear insight into their relationship with the violence inflicted upon the African American child. He remarks that "the 'Arab Spring' could just as well have been called 'the *African* Spring,'" thus

invoking again the "taint [. . .] that is part of the original contact between Europeans and Africans" as a poisonous aspect of a global history that remains unresolved ("An Evening," 13:20). He goes on:

> when I became aware of what was going on, and then became aware of how interested my fellow countrymen were in that situation, in those revolutions, [. . .] I think there was a real vicarious identification of the root, the grassroots of this country – [. . .] as a country, as a nation, as a people, I think we were envious. [. . .] Something deep was touched. Why are we passive? Why aren't we in the streets? (13:24)

In the identification of the revolutionary roots of the United States with the revolution in the Middle East and Africa, Wideman recalls his earlier comments upon African Americans as "passive" in the New World. The figure of ogbanje the spirit-child is implicitly recalled, as Wideman asks "What would it take to get us to the streets?" and positions Precious, as the African American child-victim of violence, as emblematic of a galvanizing of revolutionary consciousness regarding global tumult and conditions of inequality ("An Evening," 15:34):

> What finally brought us into the streets, you could say, was Precious. Or you could say the election of a man of our color to the White House, or say greedy bankers and no jobs, or say revolutions overturning dictators in Tunisia and Egypt and Libya, or say all the young colored men and women jammed up in the slam, or say the earthquake in Haiti, or the yellow peril of China, or women everywhere still being slaughtered and squashed like flies, or wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, or no room too much misery in the ghettoes where we're stuck living with no god-damn place else to go. Or just say Precious, Precious, brought us out here in the streets, and you wouldn't be very far from wrong. ("An Evening", 15:37)

Precious is read as the refiguring of the West African spirit-child who represents ancient unrests that return endlessly seeking resolution, and is positioned by Wideman as a kind of totem on a continuum linking multiple sites of suffering and inequality on a global scale. In this African-centered cosmology, the figure of the child is identified with realms that reach far beyond any notion of childhood as protected space, a preserved arena kept away from the vicissitudes of adult life. Here, the protection afforded to children is seen as arising not simply from deference to the "immaturity" of children, but more broadly from an ethic of right and loving behavior that applies to all relation-

ships, and transcends cultural boundaries; an ethic in which *all* human beings, living, dead and yet to be born, can expect to be protected from violence. Aptly enough, given Wideman's choice of title for the piece, the child Precious comes to stand for *love* itself.

Cornel West, also writing in the context of the Arab Spring, asserts the material relevance of love as an ethic motivating political action:

> We must embody a universal embrace of all those in the human family, and sentient beings, and consolidate an unstoppable fortitude in the face of systems of oppression and structures of domination. We will suffer, shudder and struggle together with smiles on our faces and a love supreme in our souls. Just as justice is what love looks like in public and tenderness is what love feels like in private, deep democratic revolution is what justice looks like in practice. (West, "A Love Supreme")

With love as a governing concept, the fluid notions of time evoked by Wideman and Achebe, as well as by Uprichard, Clarke, Wright and others, become conceptually more accessible than ever, revealing that it may be linearity after all that is dysfunctional, that may arise from some mistaken notion that organizing life according to notions of linear time and development somehow renders experience comprehensible. It may be that the realization of love itself, and its power to protect all beings from violence, is the "necessary ritual" that Wideman's imagining of Precious, as modern-day spirit-child, yearns for in order to heal the breach beyond which many African American children reside. Wideman's work, by looking at African and African American pasts, establishes a coherent vision for the ways in which society might support a journey away from violence for African American youth, and his deference to the circular space allowed by the ethics of love, may be understood to negotiate a more fluid dialogism than is allowed by linearity. Wideman's narrative communicates to us a recognition that it is children's *likeness* to adults, and to all living beings, *not* their difference, that calls for our protection. Perhaps then the "taint," which Wideman perceives as represented by the ever-returning figure of the spirit-child, is the specter of violence that will persist until a turn can be made toward the ethics of love, that threshing-ground of compassion that must enable full understanding between sentient beings.

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