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The Great White Hope: Black Albinism and the Deposing of the White Subject in John Edgar Wideman's *Sent For You Yesterday*

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Abstract
John Edgar Wideman cleverly liberates the African American community from the destructive pretense of racial essentialism by employing the racial ambiguity of the albinic body. In his novel *Sent For You Yesterday* (1983), Wideman portrays Brother Tate, a black albinic character, as both a catalyst for challenging the limitations and inconsistency of our Western mythos of identity and a medium for preserving African American culture. He critiques Western culture's grand racial classification in that he interrogates the supposition that race is a natural and indisputable aspect of the human condition. The Darwinian hierarchy through which race is expressed inherently privileges one expression of humanity (the original white subject) over the implied inferiority of all others. By positioning the albinic body as the a priori condition of the human condition, Wideman is able to de-naturalize the racial inferiority of blackness and discredit the notion of white superiority. With this, the reputed racial whiteness of the "original man" is discarded and supplanted by the fluidly of the albinic body. As a racially indeterminate character, Brother Tate offers an unmediated investigation into the black condition without the convoluted misrepresentations of blackness manufactured to subjugate, coerce, distort, and censure the black community for generations.

Key words: Albinism (albino); Race; Blackness; Community; John Edgar Wideman

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INTRODUCTION

In 1967, novelist John Edgar Wideman introduced his reader to the lyrical, candid autobiographical exploration that has distinguished him as a writer with his first novel, *A Glance Away*. It is here where the passionate stories of the African American neighborhood of Homewood first appear and we come to know and understand the beauty and tragedy of this community through the eyes of Brother Tate, Eddie Lawson's faithful friend. As a black albinic character, Brother serves as a medium by which Eddie is reintroduced to his community and educated about his history and identity. In Wideman's fifth novel—third in a highly celebrated Homewood trilogy—*Sent For You Yesterday*, Brother reemerges as an integral character. In this text, Wideman names character Brother Tate who is portrayed as the lifelong friend to Carl French and Lucy Tate. Again, Brother functions as a conduit of black cultural memory and communal knowing. In both texts, Brother performs an indispensable role in the preservation and evolution of Wideman's Homewood community. Wideman effectively employs the racial ambiguity of Brother's albinism to explorenot only how the black community constitutes and reconstitutes itself in postmodern America, but also the manner in which the black albinism displaces the a priori concept of white subjectivity on which Western ideals of race a founded.

One of the most salient early examples of how Brother functions in the Homewood community as a racial mediator comes from a scene in *A Glance Away*, Wideman places Eddie, black rehabilitated drug addict, Thurley, a white English professor struggling with

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his homosexuality, and Brother around a hobo's fire, drinking. In the ensuing moments of self-reflection, Brother forcefully asserts "-But we're all bruvers any way, aren't we? I mean to say under this. . .–All the same is what I mean. . . I ain't nobody's fool you know" (Wideman, 1983, p. 44). As Brother literally rests between his black and white companions, he offers an innovative assessment of the epistemology of racial discourse. As his gestures to colorlessness of his own hand, he declares them "bruvers" because underneath their skin they are "(a)ll the same." Wideman cleverly mitigates the polarity of Eddie's blackness and Thurley's whiteness with the white blackness of Brother's albinic body. In a seemingly innocuous moment, Brother suggests that underneath the differently pigmented skin of both his black and white friends is a man indistinguishable from himself. Brother is not simply gesturing toward a monogenetic conception of mankind; he more aptly conveys the notion that beneath the racial subjugation of their divergent identities, histories and culture lie an indeterminate albinic body. Brother evokes his name— "bruver(s)" and his body as a means of erecting a more egalitarian racial model.

Sixteen years and four novels later, Wideman again employs the black albinic body to both unravel and trouble the discourse of race. In *Sent For You Yesterday*, Doot, the narrator, artfully interrogates the legitimacy of race as he attempts to contextualize Brother Tate, his father's close friend. Doot explains that "Brother was like somebody had used a chisel on him. A chisel and then sandpaper to get down to the whiteness underneath the nigger. Because the little bugger looked chipped clean. Down to the first color or no color at all" (Wideman, 1983, p. 62-63). In this strikingly poetic and deeply philosophical passage, Wideman's narrator contemplates the ontology of race by addressing one of its most rudimentary questions—is there such a thing as an original human color?

At the heart of Western culture's grand racial classification rests a presupposition of authenticity founded on the idea that race is an innate and inescapable feature expressed in a Darwinian hierarchy. This hierarchy inherently privileges one expression of humanity (an "original" expression) over the implied inferiority of all others. Historically, Western racial theorists from British historian Edward Long[2] to American physician Samuel George Morton[3] have maintained that the Caucasian subject is the original man and premiere expression of humanity. In turn white skin—European whiteness in particular—has been long posited as an indication of superiority. Accordingly, communities of color are forced to define their own humanity in dialectical opposition to this Western racial classification. Although this claim to originality cannot stand the test of scientific scrutiny, it obstinately resides in the historically conditioned social subconscious of the West. The alleged uncontaminated purity of the white race is overwhelmingly indebted to this claim of authenticity for its privileged status in Euro-American society. Recent "whiteness studies" theorists have demonstrated that the presence of white superiority is camouflaged in a naturalized political structure which advantages European people and culture over all others[4]. In the above passage from *Sent For You Yesterday*, coloration (i.e. blackness) is envisioned as a superficial characteristic of the Western subjectivity that covers the "true" and "real" albinic body "underneath." Here again, race is expressed as a posterior feature of one's indeterminate conception of the self. Race is an attribute that can be metaphorically "chisel(ed)" and "sandpaper(ed)" away.

By fictionally supplanting ethnic whiteness with the "waxed paper" colorlessness of albinism, Wideman disrupts the myth of white originality by dislocating the tacit Western subject at the center of Euro-American epistemology: The "first color" is "no color at all". In doing so, Wideman devalues whiteness by linking it to absence and then asserting that race is an exterior phenomenon subsequently layered onto a "colorless" human canvas. That is to say, in Wideman's imaginary, the human body is initially raceless. By theoretically positing albinism as the original condition of the body, Wideman is able to de-naturalize blackness and discredit white superiority.

1. CRITICISM OF *SENT FOR YOU YESTERDAY* OVERLOOKS ALBINISM

Curiously, while many critics have endeavored to better understand Wideman's literary portrayal of the black experience in the United States, relatively little attention has been given to Brother's utility and symbolism as the

[2]Edward Long was born in Cornwall, England in 1734. As a member of the colonial ruling class of Jamaica, Long held several administrative positions in the colonial government. In 1774, Long published his widely read three volume work entitled *The History of Jamaica*. In this text, he documents the colonial history of Jamaica in which he asserts the natural inferiority and debasement of Negros.

[3]Samuel George Morton was born in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania in 1799. After working as a merchant for some time, Morton earned a M.D. from the University of Pennsylvania in 1820. He would later serve as a professor of anatomy at Gettysburg College where he would conduct the comparative anatomy (i.e. cranium sizes) of human beings. Morton's work would empirically support the work of Johann Friedrich Blumenbach who held the human beings could be definitively divided into five separate races. His work would be extensively used by pro-slavery advocates.

[4]Critical examinations such as bell hooks' *Black Looks: Race and Representation (1992)*, Toni Morrison's *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination (1992)*, Charles Mills' *The Racial Construct (1997)*, Richard Dyer's *White (1997)* and Nell Irvin Painter's *The History of White People (2010)* document the historical, sociopolitical and aesthetic construction of whiteness in Western culture.

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only black albinic character in Wideman's work. Despite the fact that John Edgar Wideman's work has been widely celebrated and assessed by African American literary scholars, substantially less attention has been given to *Sent For Fou Yesterday* for the same reason. Since the novel's publication, only a handful of scholars such as Bonnie TuSmith (1993a, 1993b), Charles Martin (2002), Yves-Charles Grandjeat (1999), Ashraf Rushdy (1991) and Claudia Benthien (1997, 2002) have made small forays into the significance of this novel and Brother Tate as central character. Claudia Benthien's (1997) "The Whiteness Underneath the Nigger: Albinism and Blackness in John Edgar Wideman's *Sent For You Yesterday*" stands as one of very few texts which provide a sustained examination of pigmentation in the novel. However, Brother Tate's albinism, rather than simply his skin color, has not been subjected to sustained analysis, even though it is his albinism which fundamentally shapes the novel and recalibrates the Western racial taxonomy. The reason for this reluctance to directly examine Brother's albinism is not hard to imagine. Often, communities of colors define themselves in terms that reinforce Euro-American racist ideologies. In Wideman's novel, for example, Brother's racial eccentricity threatens to dismantle the essentialist notion which stabilizes and galvanizes the implicit homogeneity of both the black and white communities. Likewise, a failure to assess what role albinism performs in the novel inadvertently adopts rather than challenges Western racialization.

Benthien, in her seminal text *Skin: On the Cultural Border between Self and the World*, contends that "blackness is supposed to serve as a badge of authenticity: the darker the speaker's skin, the more credible his membership in the group of the socially discriminated" (p. 165). By implication, dark pigmentation serves not merely as an external covering of the body; rather, it is a compulsory layer in the formation of subjectivity. But without a dark pigmented epidermal layer, as Benthien shows, the albinic body cannot be assigned a correlating place in the Euro-American racial matrix. The profound "absence of any kind of color makes the body into something that is radically open to interpretation" (Benthien, 2002, p. 168). As a result, the colorless, unmarked, albinic body is violently commandeered by the black community and becomes "a surface on which others project their desires and fears" (Benthiem, 2002, p. 174). The resulting complications generate a tenuous and often antagonistic relationship between the black albinic character and the black community in which he or she lives. The repercussions of this hostility manifest themselves in certain harmful situations which further degrade this already marginalized character. In this essay, I argue that Wideman characterizes and employs three characters in particular—Brother Tate, Samantha, and Junebug—as a means of demystifying the nostalgia of race.

2. HOMEWOOD IS NOT QUITE HOME: HOMEWOOD'S REACTION TO BROTHER TATE

By closely examining the community's unsettled reaction to Brother Tate, Wideman illustratesthe interpersonal and sociopolitical ramifications of essentialized racial constructions. The complexity of Brother's albinism disrupts Homewood's understanding of what it means to be black. *Sent For You Yesterday* begins by abruptly thrusting the reader into the distorting presence of this common but alienated member of the black community. Wideman (1983) writes about Brother's albinism:

> His strange color and silence were part of Homewood, like the names of the streets and the night trains and hills. But it wasn't exactly color and wasn't exactly silence. If you looked closely Brother had no color. He was lighter than anybody else, so white was a word some people used to picture him, but he wasn't white, not white like snow or paper, not even white like the people who called us Black. Depending on the time of day, or how much light was in the room, or how you were feeling when you ran into Brother Tate, his color changed.I was always a little afraid of him, afraid I'd see through him, under his skin, because there was no color to stop my eyes, no color which said there is a Black man or white man in front of you. I was afraid I would see through the transparent envelope of skin to the bone and blood and guts of whatever he was. To see Brother I'd have to look away from where he was standing, focus on something safe and solid near him so that Brother would hover like the height of a mountain at the skittish edges of my vision. (p. 15)

Wideman contextualizes Brother as a long-standing and widely acknowledged member of the black community in Homewood, Pennsylvania. Brother Tate is not described as "biracial" or "mulatto." His racial affiliation is an established fact. Brother is a "part of Homewood, like the names of the streets and the night trains and hills." His connection to this neighborhood is widely acknowledged by its members, yet in a community characterized by its dark pigmentation, "Brother had no color," or at least no color which fit neatly into the Euro-American spectrum of race. As literary scholar Bonnie TuSmith (1993b) argues, Brother's albinism "transcends or circumvents the polarities of Black and white" (p. 89).Wideman employs Brother's condition to "transcend" the prevailing and essentialist construction of race by demonstrating the descriptive functionality of racial discourse. Race no longer properly functions as a guide to distinguish one type of human being from another. It does not relay an individual's *racial essence*. By inserting Brother into the narrative, Wideman shifts racial discourse from the empirical sphere of science to the speculative realm of social discernment. And for this reason, "depending on the time of day, or how much light was in the room, or how you were feeling when you ran into Brother Tate, his color changed."

Brother's lack of skin pigmentation deeply unsettles the cultural and political practice of seeing—that is, the

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picturing of the black body. As a regulatory ideal, race malfunctions in the absence of color. Brother is white "but he wasn't white, not white like snow or paper;" he wasn't "even white like the people who called us Black." His irregular, unconventional light skin displaces the narrator's racial reference points in his cultural rationale white people. The people of Homewood are "always a little afraid of" Brother Tate because, the cultural indicators such as skin tone that definitively convey "there is a black man or white man in front of you" are clearly missing. The racialized color meant "to stop my eyes" from further investigation of this particular individual so as to mentally and systematically place him in a stereotyped category of similarly pigmented people is absent. Homewood is "afraid" to "see through" Brother Tate for fear of seeing themselves differently.

The inability of a person with albinism to wholly and ideologically fit into either the white or the black racial classifications socially renders him a racial anomaly and freak of nature. Bonnie TuSmith, in a 1993 essay entitled "The Inscrutable Albino in Contemporary Ethnic Literature," observes that:

> While the word 'albino' stems from the Latin word *albus* meaning 'white,' applied to humans its usage is somewhat inaccurate. Albino humans may appear white due to a lack of pigmentation, but they are certainly not 'white' people as in American society. In fact the lack of coloring in albino humans engenders great fear in people of all colors, including Whites. (p. 86)

The "lack of coloring" in Brother's albinic body appears to be something it is not and therefore threatens the prevailing political structure of Euro-American society by subverting the supposed correlation between color and racial community. In a culture full of symbolic meaning, ideologically driven constructions of race and oversimplified identities, Brother Tate stands out as different. Wideman's novel suggests that Brother's albinism provides readers with an opportunity to "see" race in a new and profound way.

The paradoxical and circumventing property of Brother's albinism destabilizes the prevailing notion of race so much that the onlooker has "to look away from where he was standing, focus on something safe and solid near him" (Wideman, 1983, p. 15). The unusual materialization of black albinism has Doot searching for the words to describe this racial oxymoron. The language to convey this reality escapes him because Brother is, for him, an ideological impossibility. Doot only understands Brother through his Euro-American racial context. He must "focus on something safe and solid" like ethnic whiteness in order to comprehend Brother's particularity. It is very difficult for Doot to think black albinism in the essentialized rhetoric of skin color. Brother's effect on Doot's racial consciousness is so staggering that he characterizes the black albinic body as a massive "mountain" hovering in the background of Western racial discourse. Brother serves an indubitable discrepancy in the artifice of race.

In order to contain the caustic effect black albinism has on our Euro-American notion of race; Brother Tate is codified into what Western society calls an "Albino." First introduced into European discourse by the explorer Hernando Cortez (2002), in 1519, "the albinic body" is described as a strange being with "white faces and bodies and white hair eyebrows and eyelashes" (p. 110). This individual loses all affiliation to his community. The implied inferiority of his physical condition summarily suspends his humanity, thereby making his all-prevailing whiteness the totality of his existence. Wideman demonstrates how this historical process is used to dehumanize Brother Tate. This process is best exemplified by Freeda French's (Carl's mother) view of Brother as a freakish, ugly, subhuman thing. He is no longer a black male with albinism; he is an "albino". After being frustrated with her failed search for Albert Wikes, Mrs. French notices:

> The albino stood slack-jawed, his eyes on the floor. This is when he is ugly she thought, ugly as sin. When he stops moving and humming and has nothing for his hands to do, Brother dies.He is lumpy colorless pie dough. His skin is raw and wrinkled like a plucked chicken before you wet it and roll it in flour and drop it in bubbling grease. If she let him, he would stand there, dead in that bag of white skin till Carl returned. (Wideman, 1983, p. 36)

Through the eyes of Mrs. French, Brother Tate is "pie dough" and "a plucked chicken," but never fully a black male. Brother is "ugly as sin" and at times "dead," and yet never quite human. The systemic manner in which Western notions of pigmentation, community and humanity overlap and inform one another necessarily renders Brother a lifeless "bag of white skin." According to this ideological practice, Brother Tate, as a animalistic and inanimate "albino", is assumed to not have feelings, desires or aspirations. His psychological and physical well-being is inconsequential in comparison to his albinism.

Brother Tate, the character, is marginalized and silenced as a member of the black community while simultaneously serving as a metaphor for its collective pain. His albinism makes him "less nigger and more nigger at the same time" (Wideman, 1983, p. 17). Like a mountain, Brother is a profound presence. As a social pariah, his persona is insignificant and yet his influence on Homewood is unparalleled. As "the albino," Brother's depiction oscillates between characterization and caricature. While, his black albinic presence acknowledges and explores the complexities of this often disregarded portion of the black community, Brother serves as a metaphor for the ever emergent racial consciousness of Homewood. He brings together the contradictory idealisms of essentialism and existentialism which jointly reside in the historical consciousness of this community.

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3. IN SEARCH OF AUTHENTICITY: RADICAL AFROCENTRICITY AND THE BLACK ALBINIC BODY

Wideman chisels away at the essentialist distortions ascribed to blackness by foregrounding the biological-racial theory of blackness. Wideman critiques this notion of blackness by juxta posing Brother's racial ambiguity with the racial authenticity of Samantha. Samantha is described as "a beautiful African queen." She is the quint essential "image" of the black womanhood. She is described as "black and comely . . . Ninety-nine and forty-four one hundredths percent Black. Yes indeed.Ivory snow black" (Wideman, 1983, p. 123). Samantha's essentialized black identity is the antithesis of Brother's "colorless pie dough" skin. Within the framework of this essentialist aesthetic, Samantha's rich, dark skin is privileged over Brother Tate's "ugly" white skin. Ironically Samantha's pigmentation is paradoxically described as "ivory snow" black. This characterization of her uncompromised blackness illuminates the supremacy of the white referent which undergirds Western racial identities. Samantha's blackness is measured in relation to inferred purity of racial whiteness.

Samantha is a champion of black authenticity. She aspires to restore black people to their primordial state of racial purity. Her personal quest is to sleep "only with the blackest men. Men black as she was because in her Ark she wanted pure African children" (Wideman, 1983, p. 134). Samantha desires to retrace and undo the traumatic middle passage that marked the beginning of black miscegenation and subjection and thereby avert the ensuing tragedy. Her hope is to restore the rich pigmentation and reinstate the robust heritage of ancient Africa to her fallen community. On their first encounter, Samantha explains to Brother that she plans "to build shelves round the walls after there ain't no more room on the floor. Build me some sleeping shelves around the wall and make a perfect Black body for each one." Samantha envisions that when her "old Ark docks be a whole lotta strong niggers clamber out on the Promised Land" (Wideman, 1983, p. 132). Her edenic dream, as the mother of the black race, is to rescue her people from the terror of economic and political enslavement. For Samantha, centuries of rape, cohabitation and intermarriage have genetically weakened the Black community, and she longs to restore them to their proper place of prominence.

In the face of Brother's obvious difference, Samantha recognizes the familiarities of his mannerisms and facial features. As she intently looked into his white face, Samantha contemplates the legitimacy of race. Brother is "white, a color she hated, yet nigger, the blackest, purest kind stamped his features. The thick lips, the broad flaring wings of his nose. Hooded eyes with lashes clinging like blond ash" (Wideman, 1983, p. 131). Although Brother is enveloped in a "bag of white skin," Samantha is able to distinguish the "blackest" and "purest" traits of her people. His connection to Africa is "stamped (in) his features." With this, Wideman repositions the black albinic body within the grand narrative of Africa. Samantha's acceptance of Brother Tate as a suitable mate guides the reader toward an understanding of identity outside the concept of race. Brother's albinism allows Samantha to see beyond an essentialist notion of blackness. For the first time, Samantha come to recognize "the thick lips, "flaring . . . nose" and "(h)ooded eyes" in the face of someone who is "white, a color she hated." Wideman reinterprets blackness as a quality that cannot be confined to, or defined by, the skin. Skin becomes a way of seeing, imagining and interpreting the world. Skin is not an external medium which verifies the distinctiveness of an internal or unseen truth. Rather skin is the surface on which society projects its pathological mythos. Samantha's recognition of this fact not only validates Brother's black identity but also realigns the racial hierarchy. All racial constructs, including racial and ethnic whiteness, are relegated to the superficial status of mere external coverings[5].

Wideman's characterization of Brother Tate closely resembles Martin R. Delany's use of albinism to supplant the Western white subject. Abolitionist and black nationalist Delany, in a brief anthropological text from 1879 entitled *Principia of Ethnology: The Origin of Race and Color*, deposes the Caucasian subject at the center of our Euro-American notion of race by centralizing the "transparent," "colorless(ness)" of albinism. In "Chapter VI: How Color Originates," Delany (1991) delicately explains the complex biomechanics of coloration and skin pigmentation. He writes,

> The human skin . . . consists of three structures; the cuticle or epidermis at the surface; the rete mucosum immediately next and below; the cutis vera, corsium, dermis, or true skin, lying at the base of all… The rete mucosum is a colorless jelly-like substance, composed of infinitesimal cells like a sponge or honey-comb. The cuticle or external surface is an extremely thin structure, colorless, and as perfectly clear and transparent as crystal glass. The upper surface of the cutis vera or true skin -- that part in contact with the rete mucosum -- is perfectly white. White is simply negative, having no color at all. . . all human beings by nature are first white, at some period of existence, whether born white or not. (p. 22)

In Delany's ontology, the albinic body serves as the archetypical man. For both he and Wideman, "all human beings by nature are first white." The human body's "first

[5]As Charles Martin (2002) in *The White African American Body: A Cultural and Literary Exploration*, argues that "the 'white Negro' reenacts the whiteness of the colonizer and serves as its interrogator. The transparency of whiteness, its pretensions to naturalness, ends in the body of this white mimic" (p. 6).

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color" is "having no color at all." Albinism is strategically appropriated and posited as the authentic and untainted condition of all human beings. Thus, the hierarchical structure of race is effectively dismantled creating the potential for a more egalitarian racial model.

Likewise, Delany's monogenetic theory endorses the unity of the races by utilizing the albinic body as concrete and conclusive evidence of God's architectural artistry. In a climactic summary of chapter seven, he asks,

> And what of the Albino, the clearest and whitest of which are born of pure black, African or Negro parents? Could not a pure white and a pure black child have as easily been produced from parents of a precisely medium color as this extreme, especially when designed to subvert the ends of perfecting the establishment of race in the economy of the Creator? Certainly, they could, and we think this point undisputed. Concede this and nothing more, and we shall have incontrovertibly established the unity of race and color of the whole human family. (Delany, 1991, p. 35)

By foregrounding albinism as the default condition of humanity, all human beings are ontologically, biologically, and racially identical.Within the racial framework that Delany (1991) constructs, the egalitarian "method" of the "All-wise Creator" makes itself evident (p. 15). Albinism transforms the antagonistic nature of racial discourse into one of acknowledged but inconsequential difference. Skin pigmentation is no longer a contaminating agent to be loathed and feared as it is represented in the Euro-American essentialist model; rather, it becomes a natural and divine instrument of the Creator. No longer characterized as the product of deformity, disease or decay, pigmentation is now celebrated and found in all things. As Delany (1991) later writes, "whatever has color, whether animal, vegetable or mineral, receives these colors directly from the sun." And for this reason he confidently believes that the varying shades and complexions of "the human [body presents] the most beautiful and comprehensive illustration of God's wonderful providence in the works of creation" (p. 21).

For Wideman, like Delany, albinism serves as the canvas on which racial difference is superimposed. It is the biological space where the ethnocentric politics of essentialism are removed from the racial fabric of the Euro-American psyche. In Wideman's revisionist narrative, he is able to dismantle the presumption of Caucasian originality underlying Western racial discourse and thereby emancipating black people, and all people of color, from the rhetorically, politically and economically imposed subordination of white supremacy. As a racial anomaly, Brother Tate "said what he needed to say in his own way. . . (and) was a man who could be whatever he wanted to be" (Wideman, 1983, pp. 121, 199).

Samantha, "an educated Negro," through a diligent search to unravel the manipulative, mischaracterizations of Western racial constructions begins to understand the shortsightedness of her convictions (Wideman, 1983, p. 133). After further consideration, Samantha understands blackness as something that "would come to rest in the eyes; blackness is a way of seeing and being seen. Blackness . . . would be a way of being unseen" (Wideman, 1983, p. 135). Samantha recognizes Brother's pigment deficiency does not diminish his identity as a black man. Blackness is not the result of pigmented skin; it is "a way of being unseen." Being black is a "way of seeing and being seen" through certain cultural and historical contexts. K. Anthony Appiah refers to this process as "racial identification." Racial identification "shapes the way people conceive of themselves and their projects… including her plan for her own life and her conception of the good" (Appiah and Gutman, 1996, p. 78). Accordingly, the black subject materializes as a specific kind of racialized body, with a specific racial identity, with an equally specific constructed cultural history, always already contextualized over and against other racialized beings. Samantha had always imagined that "melanocytes, the bearers of blackness, descended from royalty, from kings whose neural crest contained ostrich plumes, a lion's roar, the bright colors of jungle flowers"; however, now she recognizes that blackness was "seeking a resting place, a home in the transparent baby . . . And of course blackness would keep on keeping on to the furthest frontiers" (Wideman, 1983, p. 135). Black people are bound together by a common condition, a common culture, and a common hope—not a common color.

In contrast to Samantha's perceived racial legitimacy, Brother Tate's albinism places him in the precarious position of what Yves-Charles Grandjeat (1999) calls the "br/other figure." The br/other figure is "a peculiar, closer-than-usual intimate figure of the other" (p. 614). Brother Tate is a constant in the community. As Mrs. French attests, Brother Tate "had been a part of Homewood for as long as she cared to remember. He was just a boy but seemed older than she was" (Wideman, 1983, p. 38). He "was almost like one of her own children" (Wideman, 1983, p. 37). And yet Brother was one of the "strange things in her life" (Wideman, 1983, p. 38). He is paradoxically both a "closer-than-usual intimate figure" and the "other." As a br/other figure, Brother Tate serves as "a survivor from another time, a vital trace, a reminder. He is the one who bridges past and present, memory and consciousness" (Grandjeat, 1999, p. 614). As an unlikely pair, Brother Tate and Samantha compel the Homewood community to grapple with the eccentricities and complexities of their black identity. This is best illustrated in the dynamics of their blended family.

4. THE HIGH PRICE OF RACE: JUNEBUG AND THE WHITENESS WITHIN

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Samantha and Brother's relationship flourishes and soon she gives birth to a son who they name Junebug. Junebug, like his father, suffers from albinism and similarly functions as a br/other figure. This literary detail is significant for two important reasons. First and foremost, Junebug's albinism is a condition which requires that both his father and mother contribute recessive genes to his genetic code. If only one parent carries the gene for albinism, then the child is not physically affected, but simply becomes a carrier of the condition. Thus Samantha, and obviously Brother, must both carry the trait for albinism in order to produce an albinic child. Wideman challenges the perceived abnormality of albinism by placing the genetic trait in both the African "queen" and the racial "freak." He makes the narrative assertion that there is a strange whiteness at the center of the African American notion of community, whether recognized or not. Junebug's birth undermines the polarity and distinctiveness inherent in racial discourse. Secondly, the name Junebug is not distinctive to any particular insect. In actuality, the term "June bug" is utilized by various regions of the world for numerous scarab beetles. Junebug is an intentionally indeterminate label for the fluidity of this character.He is not simply the peculiar albinic offspring of this particular couple, he could be the child any black couple.Ngaire Blankenberg in an article entitled "A Rare and Random Tribe: Albino Identity in South Africa" (2000) argues that

> a recognition of Albino identity challenges both these meta-narratives. The questions the Albino possess, his/her very existence, heralds a much more postmodern reality, where identities and realities are constantly shifting. Albino identity defies the easiness of the old apartheid labels, and the relative fixity of an old African cosmology. (p. 43)

The instability of the albinic body stimulates a great amount of hostility from those who benefit from or find comfort in the "fixity" of the prevailing racial paradigm. An "Albino identity" initiates a "postmodern reality" which condemns monolithic notions of race as inadequate for understanding the "constant(ly) shifting" of "identities and realities." Junebug's albinism contests the "old apartheid labels" of black and white identity as well as the ethnocentric "meta-narrative(s)" of "an old African cosmology." Andrew Curran (2009) in his brief history of black albinism explains that "more than any other construct during the eighteenth century, the "white Negro" altered the conceptual, genealogical, and categorical understanding of the human" (p. 153).

As a br/other figure, Junebug's unsettling effect becomes evident in Samantha's family dynamic. This family unit, comprised of children by different fathers, is emblematic of the diversity found in the African American community. Although this blended family celebrates its patrilineal variance, it finds strength, pride and validation in a common aesthetic. Samantha's Afrocentricity unifies her family in a mythologized ancestral history and heritage. This African cosmology capitalizes on the intrinsic strength of uniformity by promoting the suppression of difference. As a result, when Samantha introduces Junebug to her other children, they do not recognize him as one of their own and coldly react to his non-conformity. Samantha urges them:

> …C'mere and give little Junebug some sugar.
>
> Nobody stepped toward the bed. She watched them clasp hands.Slow motion, the oldest two first, then on down the line around the ring, like a secret whispered into each ear, her children silently joined hands till none stood outside the circle.
>
> It's just kids. It's just children scared by something they ain't never seen. Junebug is a warm lump against her shoulder. A part of herself drained of color, strangely aglow. Her children don't understand yet. Perhaps they can't see him. Perhaps they look through his transparent skin . . . She lowers her gaze to his pale, wrinkled skin, his pink eyes, then stares across him to their dark faces.
>
> C'mon you all.
>
> But as if a secret voice has whispered another command, they all step back.
>
> They're scared, she thinks. They're just kids and scared. Like I got a ghost in the bed with me or a little white kitten laying here. It's your baby brother. It's little Junebug.
>
> When they burst from the room, she could not tell whether they were laughing or crying, whether the door when it flaps closed behind them is shutting them out or shutting her in.(Wideman, 1983, p. 138)

The children's reaction to their "pale, wrinkled skinned . . . baby brother" is alarming to their mother. Samantha recognizes the stark contrast of this "part of herself drained of color' and the "dark faces" of her older children. She empathizes with their fear. However, there is something quite troubling about the way "her children silently joined hands. . . (and) all step back. Their reaction to Junebug as an "intimate figure of the other" is both collective and definitive. The communal consciousness is more profoundly influenced by their mythologized ethnocentricity than the reality of their "baby brother." The children's essentialized notion of their black identity organized them over and against Junebug's terrifying whiteness.

So with bitter indifference for Junebug who failed to materialize in compliance to the idealistic mandates of race, Samantha's children "burst from the room" expelling their br/other from the community. The children makes it clear that Samantha must learn to "hate the white one cause the Black ones hated him." She must hate "little Junebug and curse his white skin and his ghost daddy cause [she] had to make a choice. If [she] loved Junebug [she] had to hate the others when they did those terrible things to him.[Samantha] had to choose…" (Wideman, 1983, p. 138). Wideman illustrates that a belief in racial quiddity compels a choice in a false dichotomy. Samantha is coerced into choosing between white-blackness and black-blackness. Although Junebug's matrilineal linage, and therefore racial authenticity, is unquestionable, he is still not black enough. Irresolvably, Junebug's albinism disaggregates the black community from the aesthetics of

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blackness. In doing so, Wideman asserts blackness as an existentialist convention. For Wideman, like Henry Louis Gates (1983), "there can be no transcendent blackness, for it cannot and does not exist beyond manifestations of it in specific figures" (pp. 721-722). Put simply, Brother and Junebug's lives and experiences as black men are equally as valid, real and significant as that of any other "normally" pigmented black figure.

In an act of concession, Samantha ends her relationship with Brother and offers her children another "sister and a brother to make up for Junebug." She wishes to "make this Ark ride steady again" (Wideman, 1983, p. 141). Nevertheless, "the new ones sucked the evil at (her) titty. . . (and) they lined up against Junebug too." After five years of watching her other children "whip on Junebug unmerciful . . ." Samantha "just let it be." Each day she witnessed Junebug go "off in a corner by himself, crying and them blue bruises showing through so plain on his skin" (Wideman, 1983, p. 139). Then one Fourth of July, Samantha's children douse their younger br/other with kerosene and push him into the fire pit. The lynching of Junebug symbolizes the numerous African Americans who were slain in the name of racial supremacy. The radical Afrocentricity sucked from Samntha's breast destroyed the very community she strove to rebuild. Junebug's tragic and brutal murder is not the result of a personal vendetta or a random act of violence; rather, his albinic body is figuratively consumed by the romantic ideals of a community deceived by the pretense of race.

Junebug's blackened corpse is conclusively pigmented by the abhorrence of his own community. His charred remains denote the tortured bodies of innumerable unidentified black men, women and children whose lives and sacrifice inform the cultural memory and consciousness of the black community. This tragic image of hatred and cruelty dares question the nostalgia of race by criticizing the way Western racial constructions distort African American perceptions of themselves. Junebug's unacknowledged black identity and unappreciated experience proved too disruptive to the status quo. He and his father's ability to move beyond the political delineation of racial identity destabilizes the racial taxonomy and facilitates a nuanced discourse of hybridity and mutual inclusion. Junebug's albinism gestures toward a humanity that existed outside his racial characterization. His fragile life is a symbol of those who chose to define themselves on their own terms.

5. MEDIATING BLACKNESS: BR/OTHER's VISION OF THE BLACK COMMUNITY

Similar to Junebug, Brother Tate, as a br/other figure, refracts and mediates the eclipsed experiences of this small Pittsburgh community. Analogous to his original role in Wideman's *A Glance Away*, Brother Tate helps enrich the lives of those in the present by (re)presenting the stories of the past. In 1941, during the onset of the United States involvement in the World War II, Brother Tate plays the piano for the first time. Instead of playing the elementary riffs of a novice pianist, Homewood again experiences the jazz melodies of legendary bluesman Albert Wilkes. Brother musically mediates the distinguished audacity of his predecessors of the Harlem Renaissance. His muse, Albert Wilkes, had been a fellow foster child in the Tate home. After seven years on the run for killing a white policeman, Albert Wilkes returns to Homewood. Shortly afterward, he is brutally shot to death by the police while he played the piano in the Tate's parlor. This intrepid man who dared sleep with white women on Thomas Boulevard played "a moody correspondence between what his finger shape and what happened to the sky, the stars and the moon. . . Wouldn't be Homewood if you couldn't hear Albert's music when you walk down the street" (Wideman, 1883, pp. 60, 70). Albert Wilkes lived outside the prescribed definition of blackness. He transgressed the limits placed on him by both the larger white society as well as his own community. As an eccentric, Wilkes personified the black community's desperate desire for equality. His improvisational blues playing characterized the new possibilities the prior generation salvaged from the deflated dreams of Reconstruction. As one critic argues, "the blues are intent on appreciating the ways that previous generations' sufferings are imbricated in this generation's experiences" (Rushdy, 1991, p. 314). So after seven years of silence following Wilkes' death,

> Brother Tate sat down at the piano and started playing. Nobody cared that Brother hadn't ever played a note before Thursday because what they heard Saturday was so fine you just said Thank Jesus a day early and paid every iota of attention you owed to what was dancing from the Elks piano. And it wasn't strange at all that somebody got happy and shouted, Play, Albert. *Play, AlbertWilkes. Albert's home again*, because good piano playing and Albert Wilkes were just about the same word in Homewood. (Wideman, 1983, p. 89)

Brother Tate's character oscillates between the past and the present, black icon and white pariah, fiction and music. According to Fritz Gysin (2002), Brother is "a prince of boundaries" who stands in for Albert Wilkes, "the ideal erotic black hero." He possesses "the power to re-enact the tale that contains the essential wisdom" (pp. 279-280). Through Albert Wilkes's music "Brother could see way down the tracks . . . he could see everything" (Wideman, 1983, p. 163). Brother Tate transcends time and place. His blues performances are fictional representation of a collective consciousness. His translucent skin serves as a permeable membrane which allows him to transgress the boundaries of time and history so that like he "could be in both places at once" (Wideman, 1983, p. 172). As a br/other figure, Brother Tate "makes clear that consciousness involves looking at the present through the prism of the

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past, looking at what one is through the eyes of what one was" (Grandjeat, 1999, p. 615).

While Brother allows the community to celebrate the fervor of a previous generation, he also helps Homewood aptly situate the lingering anguish and terror of slavery. The enchantment of Brother's character is his capacity to mediate the black experience because he is able to see "(t)hrough it, around it, over it and under it." His task is to teach Homewood that there "wasn't nothing to be afraid of" (Wideman, 1983, p. 181). In one of the last conversations he would have, Brother shares this secret with his dead son Junebug. Brother explains:

> I told him the secret. . . That I had crossed the ocean in a minute. That I had drowned in rivers and dangled like rotten fruit from trees. That my unmourned bones were ground to dust and the dust salted and plowed. That I had been chained and branded like an animal. That I had watched my children's brains dashed out against a rock. That I had seen my mother whipped and my woman raped and my daddy stretched out on a cross. That I had even lost my color and lost my tongue but all of that too was just a minute. (Wideman, 1983, p. 171)

Brother narrates the tale of a people who were unable to speak for themselves. His is the communal voice of "unmourned bones." He is a firsthand eyewitness to the brutality, murder and torture of countless black peoples. His colorless skin and profound silence denotes the lingering effects of Africa's colonization which led to the loss of both its "color" and its "tongue." Brother's transcendent memory transmits the echoing tragedy of these men, women and children to his son Junebug, Carl's son Doot, and the reader—the community's remaining sons and daughters. This is not a cautionary tale of paralyzing fear but one which makes clear that the black community's devastating loss through centuries of slavery only lasted for "a minute" in its expansive history. The atrocities that Brother references are not the immutable failures of a race; they are but momentary obstacles in the progress of a people. Brother educates his son about the verve and resilience of black people regardless of their contemporary circumstances. Wideman employs Brother Tate to construct what Sheri Hoem (2000) describes as "a sense of racial wholeness and historical continuity" (p. 250). The secret that Brother reveals is one of assurance and perpetuity. As he explains to young Junebug, "as long as I am, there's you. As long as you are, I am. It never stops" (Wideman, 1983, p. 171).

Brother mediates the promise of the community for the other characters. Although the impending challenges of the present are disheartening, their black community would prevail—their blackness would endure. Brother's transcendent gaze witnesses all of Homewood. As a br/other figure, he mediates the promise of the future through the bygone faces of an earlier time. As Lucy cleans Brother's room after his death, she finds a bag of pictures that Brother had drawn. Upon making the discovery of the pictures, Lucy examines them more closely under the bright light of the piano lamp. To her amazement, "she began to understand why some faces she couldn't name looked so familiar. Brother had drawn the old people young again. The old clothes made their faces young again. Mr. and Mrs. Tate. John French. Freeda French. Young again. Owning Homewood again" (Wideman, 1983, p. 194). In his portraits of Homewood, Brother Tate is "re-membering" his community. Rushdy explains that "gathering one's body together is an act, literally, of re-membering one's self and therefore one's racial history" (p. 337). Brother reconstructs the youthful majesty of "Carl's mother and father, Albert Wilkes . . . All the good old people and good old times." Lucy imagined she could see Brother's pale "white hands and see through them to the old Homewood streets, the people coming to life at his touch" (Wideman, 1983, pp. 194-195). Brother Tate reassembles the crumbling community of Homewood by re-membering and celebrating its past.

CONCLUSION

John Edgar Wideman brilliantly utilizes the racial ambiguity of the albinic body as a means of liberating the African American community from the destructive pretense of racial essentialism. By characterizing Brother as both a catalyst for challenging the contradictions of the West's pathological racial mythos and a medium for preserving cultural legacies, Wideman creates a space for understanding identity beyond essentialist paradigms—a space where racial coloration is no more the result of dysfunctional skin cells, neither a sign of God's disapproval nor a mark of natural inferiority. In this space all racial constructs (including racial and ethnic whiteness) are relegated to the superficial status of external coverings. With this, the presumed racial whiteness of the "original man" is deposed and replaced with racial indeterminate universality of the albinic body. As Wideman would later declare in an interview, Brother Tate's albinic body "throws everything into chaos… showing how arbitrary (race) is, and at the same time, how dangerous it is (Wideman 1998, pp. 202-203). Brother Tate's albinic body is a narrative attempt to understand the black experience outside the obtrusive layers of colonization, institutional prejudice, and racialization successively used to conceal it for centuries. Wideman replaces the opaque façade of the black body with "skin like waxed paper that you could see through".

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