

The Black Male as Ancestor in John Edgar Wideman's *The Homewood Trilogy*

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ABSTRACT: This article focuses on John Edgar Wideman's representation of the black male's role as ancestor in his short story collection *Damballah* and novel *Hiding Place*, the first two parts of *The Homewood Trilogy*. It illustrates how Wideman recreates male ancestry to empower the current generations of young black males. My study illustrates how the larger narrative work of *The Homewood Trilogy* creates African American ancestral figures to establish connections with the past, reclaim a forgotten history, and better understand the social and historical role of African American male elders.

Keywords: John Edgar Wideman; African American; Masculinity; Ancestor; *The Homewood Trilogy*

In his memoir *Fatheralong: A Meditation on Fathers and Sons, Race and Society*, John Edgar Wideman stresses the absence of contact among black generations and the subsequent lack of guidance afforded to younger generations:

Separated from traditional cultures, deprived of the love, nurturing, sense of value and identity these cultures provided, enslaved Africans in the New World found it necessary to reinvent themselves, if they were to survive as whole human beings in an alien, hostile, chaotically violent and threatening environment. Those are the precise conditions, the awesome tasks confronting young African Americans again. A configuration of devastatingly traumatic forces have severed a generation from its predecessors. The poor are most immediately at risk, though economic class alone doesn't determine which young people feel rootless and deserted in a world no one has prepared them to understand. A void behind, a void ahead, they've been abandoned in a tractless wilderness where the natural instinct to survive exacts behavior that reflects the raw, brutal circumstances trapping them. (xxiii).

Wideman describes such a situation as a 'second Middle Passage.' He suggests that black youth today confront estranging circumstances, in some ways similar to those their ancestors faced arriving in chains in the ports of Colonial America, since the mainstream culture remains hostile to contemporary generations of black men who are seen as threats to society: "[i]ndeed, the popular imagination, the media, and social science literature have focused on the Black male as criminal, violent, family deserter, lazy and shiftless predator, and extremely self-centered . . . African American males emerge from these venues as dangerous, menacing, and a drain on the resources of the larger society" (Jenkins and Hine xii).

Living in the harsh Northern city where work is to be had, the black man's roots are nevertheless the weakest, as the community is more individualized and unable to retain its traditional heritage as a unified community. No doubt this is why, in Wideman's modernist meditations, ancestral figures emerge to mitigate the fragmenting effect of the city on the black community. Likewise, Toni Morrison knew that the mere presence of a parent can transform the ghetto into a pastoral; Morrison writes: "The city is wholesome, loved when such an ancestor is on the scene, when neighborhood links are secure" (*City Limits* 39). *The Homewood Trilogy* is set in Homewood, a modern wasteland populated by poor black people who stick to it because they have no alternatives. However, the presence of some ancestral figures, whether male or female, on the scene offers a resourceful resort that would minimize the fragmenting effects of urban life. I argue along with Sheri I. Hoem that "[i]n all of his texts, Wideman creates a lineage of ancestor figures in an effort to invigorate and recuperate characters in racial memory that have been excluded from mainstream literary/historical narratives" (251). This paper deals with two illustrations of establishing African American male ancestry in *The Homewood Trilogy*.

From the very beginning of *The Homewood Trilogy*, Wideman connects the present to the past, raising the specter of the patriarchal ancestor, "the great father of whom one asks nothing save his blessing" (*Homewood Trilogy* 1). Next, Wideman quotes Maya Deren's experimental documentary, *Divine Horsemen: The Voodoo Gods of Haiti*, pointing out that Damballah is the Haitian figure of human paternity: "the venerable father" (1). And throughout his modernist triptych on the contemporary black community, he builds a fractured but insistent trajectory, a formal manifesto to achieve a renewed domestic orientation, to "Gather up the Family" (*Homewood Trilogy* 1). From this perspective, *The Homewood Trilogy* can be read as a family gathering. Poignantly, the novel opens with the image of a family tree that puts the current generation of the family in direct connection with the ancestors, symbolizing traceable roots and a current of ancestral heritage and tradition flowing from one generation to the next. While the trilogy offers examples of both female and male ancestry, the focus of this paper is the foundation of the black male as an ancestor.

In the introductory section of *The Homewood Trilogy* “Damballah: *good serpent of the sky*” Wideman quotes Maya Deren’s statement that Voodoo religion associates Damballah with

the sky Pantheon . . . Badessy, the wind, Sobo and Agarou Tonerre, the thunder . . . [who] give, like Damballah’s detachment, a sense of the ancient origin of the race. To invoke them today is to stretch one’s hand back to that time and to gather up all history into a solid, contemporary ground beneath one’s feet. (*Homewood Trilogy* 1)

By invoking the spirit of Damballah, Wideman attempts to create the same effect of exploring history for solid ground by means of digging into the family and community past.

The story “Damballah” retrieves the character of the male ancestor who, above all, is marginalized in accounts of the past. James Coleman suggests that what Wideman is trying to do in “Damballah” is to see “black history and tradition not as oppressive . . . but a mythic resource and archetype . . . it shows how black American tradition is tied to African tradition and how this tradition is a river flowing back and forth in black history” (81). That way Wideman emphasizes the need to keep the flow of black tradition undisrupted.

African American tradition, for Wideman, flows from Africa. Missing the essential connection between what is African and what is African American severs the culture’s potential from its original roots. ‘Africa’ (so rarely put on the map in discussions of African American experience) is the missing link which has the potential to reveal the uniqueness of the African American odyssey, its richness and significance as a diaspora. Hoem suggests that “[o]ne of the hallmarks of discourses often differentiated by the term *minority* is that they evoke some form of ancestor as a means of negotiating the presence of the past” (249). By revisiting the past, contemporary generations would have the means to understand the experiences and challenges that had faced their ancestors and eventually become more conscious of their own position and have access to a repository of experiences that should help them face their own challenges.

Wideman revisits the past in “Damballah” by telling the story of Orion, an African who is freshly brought to Northern America as a slave. The narrative of the story “Damballah” “carries the spirit’s name and thereby announces itself as a narrative of origins” (Byerman, *Short Fiction* 4).

Orion represents the long forgotten past and roots of African America identity, as well as its immediate, continuous and inventive modes and means of resistance to white hegemony. The story of “Damballah” opens with the slave Orion fishing for his own food. Rejecting the slave name of Ryan imposed on him by the master, Orion rejects European-American food and values. Orion is vehemently aware of his black identity and the danger of losing it in the new world, unlike other slaves on the plantation who succumb to the master’s religious and cultural impositions and eventually lose their identity. As Keith E. Byerman puts it, he “provides a useful myth for African Americans in that he is a New World figure untainted by white influence. He is powerful yet innocent and ‘benevolent’” (*Remembering the Past* 160). Orion “could feel the air of this strange land wearing out his skin, rubbing it thinner and thinner until one day his skin would not be thick enough to separate what was inside from everything outside. Some days his skin whispered he was dying” (Wideman, *Homewood Trilogy* 9). His main concern is always his identity, and its potential death, that is not his physical extermination, but his social death as Orlando Patterson terms the slave’s inability to have social existence outside the master (38). Orion counts himself dead the moment when he believes that he relies on his master to provide everything: name, food, language, and belief.

Astonishingly, even here, the reader is shown that Orion is not afraid. He claims strength from his ancestors: “The voices and faces of his fathers bursting through would not drown him. They would sweep him away, carry him home again” (Wideman, *Homewood Trilogy* 9). It is this kind of ancestral presence, whether male or female, that Wideman brings to attention, the spiritual ancestry that would strengthen contemporary African Americans and help them navigate their fears and dilemmas. Wideman puts it directly, through the character of Orion, that guidance is always sought from the forefathers and ancestors and that the past can offer a way out of the suffering and riddles of the present. He suggests that like Orion, African American young generations can seek strength from the experiences of their ancestors to face their present challenges. Wideman gives a direct example of how that can be useful for young African Americans, in the second part of *The Homewood Trilogy*, “Hiding Place.” Wideman’s brother Tommy takes part in a murder after a failed robbery; he is scared and the police is after him. He resorts to the family house where his encounter with the ancestral figure of Aunt Bess makes

him aware of the history of his family, his male ancestors, as well as his current position, and he becomes more prepared to face his destiny.

Orion recalls the image of the men in his village who could fish with their voices, and how his enslavement prevented him from learning that magic, and becoming the man his ancestors would have liked him to be. Orion detests everything about the “blood-soaked land [where] everything was different” (Wideman, *Homewood Trilogy* 10). Maintaining a resistant attitude towards his enslavers, he never lets them control his spirit. He does not eat their food, would not speak their language or embrace their lifestyle. This may seem, at first glance, like a trivial image of individualistic revolt; however, it represents an example of resistance against the master’s will to dominate his black slaves. Wideman’s insistence on idealistic recreations of slave history is certainly not meant to be utopian or unrealistic: Orion’s resistance eventually costs him his life.

Wideman is not merely trying to create simplistic heroisms for contemporary blacks; he entirely refuses to stigmatize the black community that surrounds the main character. Orion resists, that is true, but many other slaves around him do not. Orion’s stand against the master’s oppression by means of his spiritual resources, rejecting the master’s language, religion, food, and name are always juxtaposed with the other slaves on the plantation, who are fully adapted and who find Orion not only crazy but even blasphemous. For other slaves on the plantation, Orion is different: “nobody never saw him touch victuals Master set out” (Wideman, *Homewood Trilogy* 11) and “[n]ot an English word has passed through his mouth” (Wideman, *Homewood Trilogy* 13), while all of them labor hard in the fields, eat whatever food is given to them, respond to the names given to them, and believe in the master’s God.

Far from presenting the reader with a universal image of resistance, Wideman also presents the spectacle of learned obedience adopted by those powerless and without spiritual means. Enduring the violence of the slave system and internalizing ideologies that subordinate them (in the absence of any other traditions due to the master’s imposed prohibitions of cultural and religious practices he does not approve) makes them unable even to recognize Orion as a model of courage and inviolable selfhood. They keep themselves from any “contamination”

with “that Ryan, he a crazy nigger. One them wild African niggers act like he fresh off the boat. Kind you stay away from less you looking for trouble” (Wideman, *Homewood Trilogy* 10). They see him exactly the way the master sees him: as uncivilized and heathen. In fact, these slaves, having internalized the master’s ideologies, are mentally colonized as well.

Yet Orion finds a marvelous hope in the possibility of sharing his wisdom with a young character referred to as ‘the boy’: “He could be the one. This boy born so far from home. This boy who knew nothing but what the whites told him. This boy could learn the story and tell it again. Time was short but he could be the one” (Wideman, *Homewood Trilogy* 10). Significantly, the boy is never given a name, and hence remains a symbolic figure of the potential of future younger generations who can carry on with keeping the tradition. The fact that the boy is given no name opens up possibilities for other young people to fit in his position. Likewise, it is essential that the boy is not African-born like Orion. Although the boy is a cultural hybrid who lived all his life on the plantation, he is nevertheless an ideal recipient for the message of a guardian ancestor, as he has not yet fully absorbed the master’s values and is still open to Orion’s teachings, unlike other slaves on the plantation who reject Orion’s ‘heathen’ ways: the boy “stands at the center of a cultural crossroads. He is the true African American. But this is not a moment of choice, of either/or, but rather a sacred space in which he embodies both worlds in all their difference” (Byerman, *Short Fiction* 5). While it is hard to say which world the boy belongs to (the plantation community or Orion’s world), it is clear the boy reconciles both; he does not reject either, and he is eager as a young boy to join older slaves in their cultivation activities, while he also enjoys watching Orion fishing. He thus serves as a connection between the two worlds. The boy shows a level of tolerance towards both ways of life.

While the boy watches Orion fishing,

he saw Orion move. After the stillness, the illusion that the man was a tree rooted in the rocks at the riverbed . . . when motion came, it was too swift to follow. Not so much a matter of seeing Orion move as it was feeling the man’s eyes inside him, hooking him before he could crouch lower in the weeds. Orion’s eyes on him and through him boring a hole in his chest and thrusting into that space one word *Damballah*. (Wideman, *Homewood Trilogy* 11)

Orion speaks the word 'Damballah' to the boy, by which he "gives him the name of the true father, and thereby connects him to his true ancestors" (Byerman, *Short Fiction* 4), the same father that Wideman presents in the prologue as "the great father of whom one asks nothing save his blessing" (Wideman, *The Homewood Trilogy* 1).

The message is delivered; "Damballah was the word. The boy said it to Aunt Lissy and she went upside his head, harder than she had ever slapped him" (Wideman, *Homewood Trilogy* 12). Unlike the boy, Aunt Lissy along with the other slaves cannot tolerate such 'heathen talk' and instructs the boy: "You talk Merican, boy" (Wideman, *Homewood Trilogy* 13). However, the boy has already internalized the word, regardless of what Aunt Lissy thinks about it. His connection with his ancestors and his present is established through learning the word 'Damballah' from Orion. The word is a symbol of origins and roots, and by learning it the boy is aware of his ancestors' African origins. However, Aunt Lissy's reaction proves that Wideman does not idealize the past completely. He makes it clear that she, like many slaves, is complicit in the master's endeavor to dominate them and wipe out their identity.

Orion rejects every aspect of the Christianity preached (though hardly practiced) by the white preacher Jim. Jim writes in outrage to Orion's previous slave holder about his intractability: "Among other absences of truly human qualities I have observed in this Orion is the utter lack of a soul . . . the words of scripture are wasted on these savage blacks" (Wideman, *Homewood Trilogy* 14). However, what concerns the slave master Jim is the sight of Orion practicing a deeply held faith in the face of his own Christian righteousness. Orion stubbornly interrupts the preacher's endeavors to convert him to Christianity by stating the word 'Damballah' over and over again.

The word Damballah becomes a joke and ghoulish threat to Christianity, to Aunt Lissy, and the slave community. Sheri I. Hoem suggests that only the boy

seems to interpret the word as a sign of his personal identity and as a feeling of hostility to what he perceives to be unmanly, house-related work. . . . For the boy, the word is far more gendered and promises to empower him to be a (black) man and do what (black) men do, including working in the fields along with the other men in slavery. For Orion, the spirit of Damballah functions in the

parameter of active political intervention against Christian beliefs and mastery. For Christians, in contrast, the same spirit threatens spirituality itself. (253)

In Wideman's fiction, the utterance of 'Damballah' is finally ground-breaking, bringing the entire plantation community into dispute over a single word. The same word is interpreted with radical differences: a source of strength and resistance to Orion, a discombobulating anathema and source of anxiety to the community at large, "the boy" interprets it as an injunction of his urgent need to be a man. Ultimately, Orion is killed for breaking "half the overseer's bones knocking him off his horse" (Wideman, *Homewood Trilogy* 14). Orion does not run away as expected after attacking the overseer, but rather stays to face his destiny. Having delivered the message of his fathers to the coming generations, he is ready to die. Orion has managed to survive the middle passage and life on the plantation up to that point. However, right after the encounter with the boy he is not keen on keeping his life anymore and shows a single sign of violent resistance for the first time, the consequences of which he realizes are inevitably deadly, and yet he does not try to avoid that destiny. It takes four men to carry him, "[f]our grown men struggling with one string of black flesh. The boy had never seen so many white folks dealing with one nigger" (Wideman, *Homewood Trilogy* 15). The master and his men return from the barn without Orion. To the last he never gives in. One scream alone is all that is heard from inside the barn which nobody on the plantation dares even to approach, "everybody afraid to go down and get him. Everybody afraid to open the barn door. . . . that barn starting to stink already with crazy Ryan and nobody gon get him" (Wideman, *Homewood Trilogy* 16). Only the boy, as the spiritual heir, dares to go into the barn to get Orion's decapitated head.

The boy wiped his wet hands on his knees and drew the cross and said the word and settled down and listened to Orion tell the [Damballah] stories again. Orion talked and he listened and couldn't stop listening till he saw Orion's eyes rise up through the back of the severed skull and lips rise up through the skull and the wings of the ghost measure out the rhythm of one last word. (Wideman, *Homewood Trilogy* 17)

The boy throws the head in the river where Orion used to fish. By doing so, as Byerman suggests, "the boy chooses to embrace his heritage" (*Short Fiction* 6) that Orion represents.

The stories go on after Orion's physical death, because "Orion's knowledge of the [African] tradition is not limited to perception through normal senses. He becomes an all-absorbing repository of the tradition" (Coleman 81). His stories transcend time and space; that is, they are not limited to a certain location or time period, and hence their validity is not limited by physical factors, and Wideman adopts a magical realist approach to an otherworldly appearance. For exactly the same reason, Coleman argues that the black literary trope of transmitting heritage through ghosts is appropriate as "the tradition is supernatural, not limited to the scientific and rational, in the same way that Orion as absorber of the tradition is not limited to normal sense perceptions" (Coleman 82). According to Toni Morrison, "ancestors are not just parents, they are sort of timeless people whose relationships to the characters are benevolent, instructive, and protective, and they provide a certain kind of wisdom" (*Rootedness* 330). In precisely Morrison's sense, Orion's ancestral functionality is not limited to his physical presence, and his message is not limited to any moment in time.

"[T]he boy" would carry on and convert the spirit of Orion/Damballah as "the inarticulate attributes of the ancestral entity as benevolent father from the African tradition" (Hoem 254). Byerman suggests that the boy's discourse blends African tradition and Christianity, and that while the boy respects Orion, he is also not bound to be identical to him, and hence Orion is the end of something and the boy is the beginning of something new (*Remembering the Past* 161). The boy identifies with Orion on the basis of his need to become a man. He receives the stories, but it is not suggested that the boy must merely imitate Orion or identify with his beliefs. The main intention is broader and more capacious, to establish a connection with ancestral values that can empower the boy/blacks to survive their contemporary circumstances. A cycle of hybridization has already started, but Orion's role is to emphasize the African component before it is wiped entirely from American black identity.

Only an ancestral figure is able to deliver the message of the forefathers to the disconnected generations who, born in slavery and after it, are deprived of such ancestry. Even though the slaves view Orion as a 'crazy nigger,' "he is connected to them by that which he has passed on through the boy and by the common tradition that they share" (Coleman 82). The ancestral

figure of Orion is a symbolic spiritual father who nurtures black tradition and extends bridges to lost roots. Wideman's attempt at establishing a connection to his own ancestry continues throughout his trilogy albeit always in a different context. Orion is the only male protagonist not yet defined by the urban modern black experience. All other ancestor figures are situated in the ghetto of Homewood, and faced by an urban landscape of social and economic hardships, except for Aunt Bess, who secludes herself from the community of Homewood by living in the family house up a hill. Yet, even in the twentieth-century ghetto of Wideman's trilogy, ancestral presences dominate, recreated through the storytelling to provide the bedrock of values for new generations.

Likewise, in his memoir, *Fatheralong: A Meditation on Fathers and Sons, Race and Society*, Wideman accompanies his father on a trip to South Carolina undertaken to trace their roots. In his search for 'Promised Land,' the Southern hometown of his father, he realizes that his biological ancestry has vanished and that he must create an ancestral background from scratch:

You won't find Promised Land on most maps, just as you won't discover any mention of Africans or slaves or slavery in the closely printed eight-page outline of the 'Chronological History of South Carolina (1662-1825).' . . . Perhaps that's okay, perhaps it's better Promised Land does not appear on most maps. Maybe Promised Land lies where it does to teach us the inadequacy of maps we don't make ourselves, teach us the necessity of new maps, teach us how to *create* them, *reimagine connections* others have forgotten or hidden. Maybe we need Promised Land to be born again, 120 years after its founding, the only word on a blank page, a word not written yet, not completely spelled out. . . . Perhaps Promised LAND IS ONE OF THE MAPS I'VE RETURNED TO South Carolina with my father to learn to read. Or draw, even as we search. (94-95, italics mine)

Sheri I. Hoem suggests that in his texts, Wideman creates the motif of the ancestor figure, to recover such characteristic of the African American experience that tends to be marginalized in literary and historical narratives, which Hoem considers the result of "a scandalous absence of sufficient historical documentation of African American experience" (251).

John French, Wideman's maternal grandfather, stands out as an ancestral figure in the partly autobiographical *Homewood Trilogy* and holds the community of Homewood together, while keeping the flow of tradition going from one generation to the next. Although French is long

dead in *The Homewood Trilogy*, stories about him bring him alive to fulfill a vacant ancestral role. A key characteristic of Wideman's ancestors is that they are brought to life from the deepest past. Like Orion, John French is finally a spirit recalled to serve a function no one is available to fulfill any more. French is presented in *The Homewood Trilogy* as a stalwart man; however, unlike Orion, he is not a divine spirit, nor a native father of supernatural characteristics. By contrast, he is realistic, and functions from a modest stand point of knowing his place in the practical world.

The source of French's strengths is not his relevance to the broader, mainstream world of white America, but the ancestral qualities that enable him to hold his black family/community together. He is a voice from the past that reminds the community of its collective past and the value of its family attachments. In the story "Daddy Garbage," Strayhorn finds a dead baby in the garbage and seeks help from John French to give the baby a proper burial. French cannot fathom that anyone could commit such an act:

Some things people just ain't supposed to do. If that hound of yours take up and die all the sudden, I know you'd find a way to put him in the ground. . . . Something is happening to people. I mean times was bad down home, too. . . . Crackers was mean as spit, but they didn't drive people to do what they do here in this city. Down home you knew people. And you knew your enemies. Getting so you can't trust a soul you see out here in the streets. White, black, don't make no difference. Homewood changing . . . people changing. (Wideman, *Homewood Trilogy* 30)

John French represents an image of the black community as fraught with traditional values and connected to a past that cherishes love and respect. While he cannot change the alienation of the urban North, he functions as keeper of a Southern-based tradition. In that sense, he shares integral qualities with Orion in "Damballah" although he is at the other end of the African American experience. No longer able to do magic or connected to Africa, he is still in touch with forms of his own past.

John French's role as an ancestor is extended further in *Hiding Place*, even though after his death he is portrayed as the ancestral figure whose loss dismays his grandchild Tommy and leaves him with no real authority or guidance. Tommy is a symbolic figure of the lost generation

of young African Americans who lack the guidance of the forefathers and the connection with their roots. As mentioned above, after an accidental murder during a robbery, Tommy is a fugitive sought by the police. He finds nowhere to turn to but the family house at Bruston Hills. By going back to Bruston Hills, Tommy is returning to his origins, where the “family started up” (Wideman, *Homewood Trilogy* 210), even though he goes there mainly because there “ain’t got no other place to go” (Wideman, *Homewood, Trilogy* 213). The house of the ancestors is his last resort.

That house is particularly significant for Tommy, as it is the place “all my people come from” (Wideman, *Homewood Trilogy* 219); he is aware of the traditional value of the place. The incident takes place long after John French’s death, but he remains a key ancestral figure even after his death. For Tommy, his grandfather John French represents a role model of black manhood; his spirit dominates Tommy’s world long after his death, and he looks back at him in admiration: “His granddaddy was in the stories, old John French one of the baddest dudes ever walked these Homewood streets. Old, big-hat John French” (Wideman, *Homewood Trilogy* 244). From Tommy’s perspective, John French was the power that brought all the family together, and his death shattered such unity: “He had grown up in John French’s house. . . . The best time of his life. . . . Then it all went to pieces when John French died” (Wideman, *Homewood Trilogy* 305). John French represent a genuine model of manhood for Tommy, and nobody else can fill in the vacuum his death has caused: “Keep seeing this big hole in the middle of John French’s house, in the middle of everything” (Wideman, *Homewood Trilogy* 311). For Tommy, French represents what Orion represents for the boy, a guiding spirit.

Tommy is an illustration of Wideman’s argument of the lack of ancestry and gap between generations of black men. Coleman argues that

[a] large part of Tommy’s problem is that he has almost lost touch with tradition. Tommy . . . is a part of the 1960s generation. The 1960s were a time of significant disruption in the Homewood community, when the place was physically devastated and the black youngsters turned to drugs and vicious crimes. During these years the flow of tradition between generations slowed (74-75).

Thus, Tommy belongs to such a generation that lacks real guidance from the older generation and echoes Wideman's own vision of the "discontinuity tradition" of black manhood: "each generation approaches the task of becoming men as if no work has been accomplished before. Treats an unfinished building as if it is decaying, useless building and feels compelled to tear it down, start over, instead of utilizing solid foundations bought and paid for with the ancestor's blood" (*Fatheralong* 71-72).

In the family house up Bruston Hill, Tommy hides in a shed outside the house, where his feet are visible. Aunt Bess pulls him out by his feet and wakes him up, "[h]owever, Tommy is not just being forced to wake up, he is being reborn" (Beckham 418):

Someone pulling on his foot. Have him by the foot and dragging him out the cave where he's been hiding. A deep, dark, warm cave. A cave as black and secret as his blood. Yes. He is hiding deep in the rivers of his blood, in a subterranean chamber where his own blood is gathered in a still, quiet pool. But they have him by the foot dragging him out. He feels himself sliding, slipping. (Wideman, *Homewood Trilogy* 253)

Such symbolic rebirth represents a new beginning for Tommy that demarcates a line between what came before and what will come after hiding in his ancestors' house. The house acts like a womb, and getting out of his voluntary cocoon becomes a necessity. Aunt Bess wakes him up from his symbolic sleep to face his problems like a real man, and guides him through the process. According to Denise Rodriguez, "Tommy rejects his community and withdraws into a space that echoes the Invisible Man's underground chamber, a 'deep dark, warm cave. . . . Tommy's escape points to the generational discord that plays a central thematic role in the text . . . and stresses the need for a collective resolution" (135). One suggested solution in the novel is going back to the roots and reclaiming guidance and strengths from the experiences of the long-gone ancestors as well as Aunt Bess.

By presenting Aunt Bess on the scene, Wideman admits and commemorates the role of black women as tradition keepers. It is in Aunt Bess's house where Tommy experiences a kind of life that he is not used to:

old-timey place where niggers still live like Africans or slaves. He looks for a light bulb or a lamp, any sign of electricity, any object which would bring him back to the world, to the time in which he belonged. Could be one of those huts in slave row, one of those niggertown shacks clustered around Massa's big white house. All she needs is a kerchief around her head. All he needs is a watermelon and some chains. If the city is still there boogeying at the foot of Bruston Hill somebody has turned the volume down, way down so you can hear the blood behind your ears. (Wideman, *Homewood Trilogy* 259-60)

By letting him in, Aunt Bess lets him have a look at what his ancestors' life looked like and thus allows him to reclaim strengths from their past experiences and to live their lifestyle without the interferences of the modern city, and she shares with him the stories of his ancestors. In that way, she fulfills Tommy's need to guidance, reaffirming the significance of the role carried out by female ancestral figures in keeping the tradition and bringing up the young. Since Tommy's source of inspiration, John French, is already dead, Aunt Bess is there to show him a version of the life he lived.

Tommy, for the first time, is in the world of his ancestors and experiences it firsthand. At least he is away from the noise of the city and is able to look closely at how his ancestors probably lived, but more importantly he experiences a period of silence which proves essential for him to rethink his life and values. Silence is the key to Tommy's metaphorical birth process mentioned above. In the city, people do not listen to one another, and nobody afforded him the time to listen to him or identify with his problems:

Once upon a time, he thought, if them stories I been hearing all my life are true, once upon a time they said God's green earth was peaceful and quiet. Seems like people bigger then. They had time to listen, time to talk and room to move around in. Aunt Aida talking about people like they giants. That world was bigger, slower and he'd get jumpy, get lost in it. Like now in this stillness and quiet each sound seems too loud . . . you're in a story. There's room enough to do what you need to do, what you have to do. (Wideman, *Homewood Trilogy* 260)

For the first time, Tommy listens to himself: "And he listens to the voice and it's not his but he can't remember what his should sound like" (Wideman, *Homewood Trilogy* 26).

By the end of *Hiding Place* Tommy is a new born, and he is thus more empowered to face an unjust society:

Ain't no reason to be scared now cause ain't nothing they can take from me now. . . . Let them find me and kill me if they can but *I know who I am* and know what I did, and I'm ready to live now. I ain't ready to die. Hell no. I'm ready to live and do the best I can cause I ain't scared. (Wideman, *Homewood Trilogy* 337, italics mine).

After his stay at his ancestors' house, Tommy restores his sense of belonging, and becomes ready to face the grim realities of his life.

In *The Homewood Trilogy* Wideman presents the black male as the connection to the roots, establishing a model for contemporary young black males who lack a social support system. In the story "Damballah" Wideman evokes the spirit of the African slave Orion. The story demonstrates Orion's attempts to revive his African tradition by teaching the boy the 'Damballah' stories which represent his African tradition. Orion is portrayed as a tradition keeper who resists his master's endeavors to westernize him. In *Hiding Place*, Tommy is confronting a grim reality and an uncertain future. By staying in his ancestors' house and reliving their lifestyle Tommy is able to restore connections with his roots. Such an experience helps Tommy rediscover himself and face his fears. Eventually Tommy turns from being a scared confused fugitive into a more determined man aware of his position and up to confront his challenges. Wideman sees strength in the past, and by reviving the experiences of the ancestors, he attempts to heal the pains of the present.

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