Measured Achievement

Sent For You Yesterday's and Philadelphia Fire's Failed Artists

Critics of the African American novel rightly emphasize its successes, but this tradition also includes defining moments of failure. With the recent appearance of Three Days Before the Shooting (2010), Ralph Ellison's second novel, the literary world returned to one of the most discussed failures in the African American canon. Among the Black Archivists, David Bradley, with a roughly thirty-year gap between The Chaneysville Incident and his unfinished third novel, provokes wonderment. These examples of authors failing to produce books join fictions about artist characters failing to complete songs, stories, and paintings. From James Weldon Johnson's The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man (1912) to William Demby's Beetlecreak (1950), miscarried artistry forms an integral part of black literary history. Few narratives of artistic failure are as celebrated as John Edgar Wideman's Sent For You Yesterday and Philadelphia Fire.1

1. Sent For You Yesterday and Philadelphia Fire mark major transitions in Wideman's writing career. If Sent is a part of the Homewood Trilogy, a set of books—including Damballah (1981) and Hiding Place (1981)—that announced his investment in folk resources, then Philadelphia rounds out a middle period in that experiment. Wideman's embrace of the folk usually gets tied to his seven-year publishing hiatus from 1974 to 1980. Analyzing this lull, James Coleman has argued that by studying his family and the Homewood section of Pittsburgh where he grew up, Wideman brought the "intellectual characters [in his fiction] out of their isolation and into contact with the needs, concerns, and traditions of black people more generally" (Blackness 3). Although Coleman first notes this reconnection with the black community, Bonnie TuSmith (All 85–88), Jerry Bryant (166–69), and Raymond Janifer (60–65) all offer illuminating treatments.
As previous chapters in this study have suggested, all of the Black Archivists invest their prizewinning fiction with themes or structures that take up their professional development. Wideman, perhaps more than anyone else, has made his career a subject of his novels. On the one hand, his autobiographical interpolations could be understood as a postmodernist technique. His strategies certainly partake of the authorial defamiliarization that marks texts as diverse as Frank London Brown’s The Mythmaker (1969) and William Gaddis’s A Frolic of His Own (1994), but his approach also harkens to the Black Archivists’ fascination with submerged, obscured, and hidden black experiences. Put more precisely, Wideman’s inclusion of so much about his family could be considered a reaction against American society’s attempt to trivialize folks like his family. If Wideman recurrently puts his kin in his novels, then how he does so illuminates both his books and issues tied to prestige, esteem, and style.

Wideman compels writers and their readers to ask what achievement really means given the overwrought events that form black life. He inquires what results when your work of art fails the object of your love. Examining the artist figures in Sent and Philadelphia, this chapter argues that his interest in creative failure reflects his convictions about the ineffable. He experiments with literary strategies, yet he concludes that artistic mastery is a fallacy. By looking at how his prizewinning novels emphasize miscarried art, this chapter determines that the final lesson the Black Archivists pull from the black literary tradition is the yawning gap between technique and solace, a lesson that actually tightens their grasp of the ethics of swagger.

“Thwarted and Prepared”


2. James Coleman argues that “writing about the personal has become a primary aspect of Wideman’s quest to center black reality in his work and of his overall development as an experimental writer” (Writing xi).

3. In the introduction to The Homewood Books, Wideman states, “It became clear to me on those nights in Pittsburgh in 1973 that I needn’t look any further than the place I was born and the people who’d loved me to find what was significant and lasting in literature. My university training had both thwarted and prepared this understanding, and the tensions of multiple traditions, European and African-American, the Academy and the Street, animates these texts” (x).
[I] was born the wrong color. . . . I have the form, the techniques, but no substance” (265). Clive notes racism’s effect on his work, but his final word about failed creativity concerns technical skill and emotional depth. Throughout *Sent*, Wideman expands Clive’s meditations. Using artist figures, among them pianists, a budding writer, and a painter, he considers the differences between success and failure for these black creators. Most critics have analyzed the musicians as reflections of the novel’s Homewood setting, and in treating Doot, the writer, they have linked his story scavenging to the pianists’ abilities to hold the community together. The galvanizing force of *Sent*’s musicians and writer cannot be disputed; however, the novel’s portrayal of a failed painter complicates the collision between “mainstream modernist and existentialist discourses” and black vernacular expression (Janifer 65). Wideman’s interest in such a complication relates to questions separating technique and commitment.

*Sent* is largely a “tri-generational” narrative that spans “a period of roughly forty years (from the 1930s to the 1970s)” (Rodriguez 137). Despite reinforcing these chronological boundaries with chapter titles such as “1941,” “1962,” and “1970,” the novel occasionally steps outside of that frame and engages the nineteenth-century roots of Homewood, the black Pittsburgh community where the book is set (159, 173, 183). Just as *The Chaneyville Incident* and *Song of Solomon* tied post–*Brown v. Board* black life to the expectancy of the 1890s, *Sent* also allows readers to see the durable yet veiled networks of care that bolstered Homewood. These retrospective moments hint at the ultimate significance of black art. When elders—such as Sybela Owens—established the neighborhood, they put in place values that would refute the material and spiritual ravages of racial inequality. As each subsequent generation inherits Homewood, they wonder whether these founding principles will be preserved. Some of such wonderment centers on what function artists serve. Albert Wilkes’s piano playing in the 1920s and 1930s is illustrative.

4. When Freeda visits her Uncle Bill and Aunt Aida in 1934, the year of Albert Wilkes’s return to Homewood, the episode simultaneously conveys her worry about her husband’s safety and allows Wideman to push his novel’s events back at least to the 1920s and perhaps further. Uncle Bill states that before he bought his house at 725, he had been playing that number for “twenty years.” This means that by the time Freeda walked through the door in 1941, he had at least been around since 1921. Given that Bill is an old man in 1941 and at least old enough in 1921 to muse on “having worked all them years for O’Reilly,” he perhaps pushes the chronology of *Sent* back to the nineteenth century (45).

5. Wilfred Samuels once asked Wideman whether Homewood was a “real, physical” neighborhood and “not just a fictional community.” Wideman replied, “Oh, no. Homewood is very real. As I said, [my] family history coincides with the history of the actual community” (15).
Described with blues-tinged imagery, Wilkes gets loosely associated with that musical genre. His artistic skill emerges chiefly through the way that he grants his listeners their identity. His best friend, John French, expresses this quality in Wilkes’s playing: “It was after . . . the music started coming out that you could find yourself, find your face grinning back at you like in a mirror” (68). Given the vicissitudes of city life during the Roaring Twenties, Wilkes no doubt clarified the shift from rural to urban space that many Homewood blacks experienced. He took the uncertainty of new streets, new people, and new challenges and grounded them in the nervy search for selfhood. While new black residents from the south found a GPS in Wilkes’s playing, John—a staunch proponent of Albert’s mastery—also detected his identity there. He discovered the logic that transformed him from a put-out-the-lights woman-chaser into a family man. Even though Wilkes exposes John’s reasons for changing, he also questions him about the change. Albert states, “French . . . how come you a family man?” (63). At once playful and earnest, his query shows the gap between performance and effect. The ambiguities in this gap unleash Sent’s major tensions, which are embodied in Freeda French, John’s wife. Although many in Homewood experience Wilkes’s playing as a humanizing affirmation, she sees signs of demise in it.

Freeda views the blues and the “black tide of immigrants from the South” suspiciously (41). Instead of detecting an anchor amid flux, she believes that the music is an agent of corruption. It especially threatened sexual immorality and undignified carriage, traits she perceived in “young girls” who “switched their narrow fannies” and “funky undershirts the men rolled down off their chests” (42). If these general consequences of the music disturbed her, then Wilkes’s particular effect on her husband was more alarming. The two men drank together, stayed out until night became morning, and the devilment of one attached itself so closely to the other that dirt done by one could get the other killed. While Freeda’s sentiments echo those of Jazz’s Alice Manfred, her motherhood and her multigenerational connection to Homewood make her outlook something more than self-righteousness. She sees Homewood as a place shaped by “older people who had always loved and supported her” (47). To see that love and support carried away by “Devil music” saddened her (51). More than that, thinking that the wake created by the music might leave her husband dead frenzied her. Freeda’s quandary pulls virtuosic artistry out of the aesthetic realm and into the sphere of morality; through her attitude, Wideman contemplates the ethics of swagger.
Wilkes epitomizes creative swagger. He lucidly expresses black life without adjusting his style to suit white expectations. Despite his culturally astute playing, his ethics, vis-à-vis the Homewood community, are questionable. Interracial romance, as evidenced in The Chaneysville Incident, produces charged confrontations with America’s tortured racial past; nonetheless, such a relationship is not immoral. Wilkes’s affair with his white mistress, though, imperils Homewood’s safety. In 1927, when a white policeman, apparently an intimate of his girlfriend, tried to shoot him, Albert murdered him while the man was wearing his uniform. Wilkes left Homewood and did not return until 1934. Upon his return, he goes to the Tate house, the place where he grew up, and with his arrival, everyone in that house lives under the threat of death. Lucy Tate, one of the orphans that Mr. and Mrs. Tate took in, described the scene: “Sometimes I think I’d be willing to die if I could play one time as fine and sweet as Albert Wilkes played that afternoon. Maybe he did know he was gon die. Maybe he didn’t care. I sure didn’t. Didn’t nothing matter but the music” (102). While he was playing the piano, police shot Wilkes, and in that juxtaposition of white aggression and black performance, Wideman raised questions about the meaning of art that open out to the Black Archivists.

Opposition to white artistic expectations defines a noble struggle for the Black Archivists. Though each writer in the cohort personalizes his or her strategy, all of them believe that black autonomy is an ethical imperative for African American literature. Their commitment yields the canon that this study has examined; yet, Wideman asks what happens when “style and imagination,” the practical fuel of swagger, run up against “a deterministic reality” (R. Miller, Black 97), one that threatens the very community the black artist seeks to nourish. With Wilkes’s predicament at the Tate house, this rumination moves from a philosophical abstract to a literary concrete. Is Freeda correct in concluding that Albert’s music robs him of the moral compass that would keep him away from a house where children and an old woman are present, or is Lucy accurate in stating “didn’t nothing matter but the music”? These questions propel black novelists out of their aesthetic debates and into the controversies that raged around other black art forms in the 1980s.

6. During the 1980s, Tipper Gore led a campaign that culminated in the use of “parental advisory” stickers to identify potentially offensive music. This campaign was not aimed at black music per se, although Prince’s song, “Darling Nikki” sparked her efforts. Impressed by Gore’s results, C. Dolores Tucker initiated scrutiny of rap music, especially so-called gangsta rap. See Robert...
The night after Albert has returned to Homewood, John French makes it home and finds his worried wife waiting for him. Reprising the trio structure that surfaced in *The Women of Brewster Place* and *Jazz*, Wideman allows these three characters to range across an ideological continuum. He uses them here to contemplate communal preservation. Homewood is in John French’s phrasing, Albert’s “briarpatch” (79). Although he is “the traditional badman in a once stable and close-knit community,” Albert’s music made it his job to keep the neighborhood in place (Bryant 166). Freeda believes that preserving Homewood entails keeping it safe for the families that live there; thus, to her, playing music that drives “a bunch of drunk niggers crazier” contributes little to Homewood’s survival (84). Poised between these two, John blends their positions. He acknowledged the need for safety as his children walked the streets; however, he also feels that friendship lashes individuals and communities together. The stakes of black artistry surface vividly in this triumvirate, but Wideman defers answering his provocative questions until he explores another aspect of creativity, namely contorted perception. Probing this idea requires a look at the painting career of John and Freeda’s son Carl.

In the 1930s, when his mother and father struggle with the ethics of Wilkes’s swagger, Carl launches his own reverie about his neighborhood’s fate: “What would happen to Homewood if he ran away? What would happen to his mother and father if one morning, a bright, lazy spring summer morning, he didn’t wake up and start the dream of Homewood?” (28). His questions—carrying equal traces of pubescent narcissism and existential angst—ponder imagination’s power, but they do so from the perspective of a frightened boy. After World War II, Carl’s musings about Homewood’s future is as poignant as earlier generations.’ His military experiences, including having pushed “stacks of dead Japanese marines over the edge of a cliff,” tie him to Albert Wilkes’s time on the lam, since in both cases the men are gone for seven years and return at a moment of crisis (115–16). Just as Wilkes did after the disorientations of his trip, Carl seeks out his woman and his best friend as reference points for a full return home.

Lucy Bruce, who “became a Tate after her mother burnt up in the fire on Hamilton Avenue,” exists as a fixture of Homewood (38). Beyond that though, as Lucy matures, Freeda bestows a pejorative, “fast Lucy,” on

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Siegel’s “Tipper Gore and Family Values” (2005) and George Curry’s “C. Delores Tucker’s Fight Against Offensive Lyrics” (2007).
her that connects the younger girl to communal decline (95). In Freeda’s mind, to be fast is to be “dangerous,” and that danger, linked here to sexuality, threatens because of its unpredictability (50). While his mother offers one perspective on Lucy, Carl sees things differently. One of a passel of “orphans and strays” that “Old Mr. and Mrs. Tate had raised,” Lucy, the putative sister of his best friend Brother, is the young lady to whom Carl loses his virginity (38–39). If that intimacy conveys personal significance, then, Lucy, who “nobody told . . . what to do so she told herself,” also emerges as a communal agent who binds folks to one another (96).

When she was a child, she compelled the roguish bachelor Albert Wilkes to the domesticity of administering a bath (124–25). She visits Samantha, the mother of Brother’s only child, who languishes in an insane asylum amid the fallout from that child’s murder by his own siblings. These offices frustrate Freeda’s simple conclusions, and even though Lucy and Carl never marry, they exist as lifelong companions. Because Lucy symbolizes in many ways the horde that comes to define Homewood, Carl’s love for her is affirming; however, his relationship to her as an artistic subject becomes an intriguing parable of creativity.

Carl first makes love to Lucy when both are thirteen years old. By 1970, the present of Sent, he tells his nephew Doot, “Been looking at [that woman] nearly fifty years now and still can’t even finish her picture. Started one once . . . when you was little . . . Only thing right about [it] is one cheek and one eye” (147). He contends, “I could really draw. Ever since I was in grade school I could draw things, and they look just like real” (149). To Carl, a talent deficit did not explain his struggles with Lucy; rather, the trouble stemmed from faulty perception. Proximity, whether born of physical closeness or duration of acquaintanceship, convinces the brain that an individual has apprehended a subject. In justifying his flummoxed project, Carl explains, “People ain’t easy to see. Can’t see them cause half the time they ain’t all there. I mean if you look, and look closer the way you have to do if you’re trying to paint a picture . . . a person subject to go all to pieces and won’t be nothing there to see” (148). His statement seems to endorse objectivity. While Carl’s creative failures suggest a need for adjustments, his dilemma reflects a longer-standing hurdle. The reason that he abandoned his formal artistic training reveals that hurdle.

7. In some ways, Freeda’s view of Lucy anticipates Violet’s and Alice’s understanding of Jazz’s Dorcas. Both Lucy and Dorcas become daughters of the city.
8. Wideman’s phrasing evokes Toni Morrison’s The Bluest Eye where she writes about Claudia and Frieda: “Nobody paid us any attention, so we paid very good attention to ourselves” (191).
Subsequent to World War II, Carl seriously considered a fine art career. Supported by the GI Bill, he “tried some art classes at Tech,” and many of his teachers used his “work to show the others how a thing could be done” (149). Despite this exemplarity, one professor, “a white dude, shit they was all white dudes” (149), delivered the following speech: “You’re good. We all know that. Best student we have but you’re wasting your time here. Can’t earn a living with what you’re learning here . . . Companies don’t hire colored artists.” The instructor declared himself sorry to be “saying what he had to say,” but in his opinion, “the rest of the teachers” were “hypocrites” who were “leading [Carl] up a blind alley” (150). On one level, this scene presents a well-worn account of segregated America’s glass ceiling. That said Wideman’s juxtaposition of Carl’s humiliation and his inability to draw Lucy raises fascinating questions about black artistic insecurity.

The post–World War II era featured a resurgent economy, and programs such as the GI bill promised a chance for training and social advancement. Although Carl pursued these chances, his confrontation with one white instructor’s version of racial reality sent him out of art school and back to the same Homewood corners where his father John had waited for day labor hanging wallpaper. Carl when he tells Doot about these events circa 1970 speculates that in the forties and fifties, the “time just weren’t right” for a black man to be a fine art painter (149). While his observation captures the accumulated effects of prejudice, it ignores the example of Romare Bearden, the world-renowned black painter who went to high school in Pittsburgh in the 1920s. Perhaps, as Jerry Bryant has argued, Homewood is a community defined by generational decline. That would explain why Bearden in the 1920s might fare better than Carl in the civil rights era. The difference between Carl and Bearden no doubt reflected shifting structural realities, but Wideman by contrasting Carl’s failure with the artistic successes of his main man Brother suggests that the trouble may not be seeing the subject rather it may be seeing the artist.

Despite the fact that his literary company includes Uncle Josh White from Bradley’s *The Chaneysville Incident*, Brother’s status as an albino orphan who barely spoke and then never spoke distinguishes him.

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9. This episode recalls Charles Johnson’s conversation with his father about the advisability of studying illustration with Lawrence Lariar (Byrd, *I Call* 9). Unlike Carl French, Johnson’s ambitions actually ran up against his father’s pessimism. Lariar actively encouraged Johnson. This perhaps unintended overlap between reality and fiction shows the pervasiveness of these sorts of encounters.
Another of his distinctions is the fact that from 1941 to 1946, he played the piano in Homewood so mellifluously that neighborhood people thought Albert Wilkes had been raised from the dead. Brother’s playing roughly matches the years of America’s involvement in World War II; thus, he experienced the war as an artistically fecund moment. Though this differs from Carl’s time pushing dead bodies in the Pacific, it provides an interesting continuity since Brother rounds out his musical career when Carl starts his art classes. The link between Carl and Brother as artists acquires even more complexity when one considers each man’s creative response to love. Even when Lucy poses nude for him, Carl’s formidable technique will not yield a satisfying picture. His love provides insufficient resources for masterful expression. Untrained and unbidden, Brother swaggeringly plays the piano until his first and only son’s death stills his fingers. His music exudes intimacy because it successfully documents parental ecstasy. While he does not marry the mother of his son, he—like Ciel in *The Women of Brewster Place*—mocks narratives of black urban pathology with tender gestures. These gestures cannot save his son’s life, and his music cannot survive his son’s death. Thus, Wideman again focuses on art’s function and Homewood’s survival. Though the deeply personal bond between a father and a son seems remote from preserving community, the novelist adds another dimension to Brother’s art that brings *Sent’s* artistic meditations full circle.

Brother’s creative efforts are often linked to his piano playing, so when the music stops in 1946, most folks felt his creative contributions to the neighborhood had ended. Shortly after his death in 1962, Lucy found a “shopping bag full of pictures” that extended his legacy. She discovered that “on one side were [Carl’s] sketches of naked women from the art school, but on the back side . . . were Brother’s pictures” (193). This conflation suggests that their social rituals of sharing beers, drugs, and pain intersect with the aesthetic project of making sense out of experience. Despite the convergence symbolized by these back-to-back pictures, the differences in each artist’s style suggest alternate visions. Where Carl achieves a technical mastery that marks him as distinguished in the Tech professors’ traditions, his virtuosity withers in the face of racism. Brother’s drawings are devoid of art school virtues, yet they bring “Homewood people” to “life” (194, 195). This enlivening stems from recognition (“the faces are like cloudy photographs yet she can recognize the person right away”) and independence—“Brother is saying they’re my pictures and I can draw my people any way I want to.” The most prominent markers of Brother’s liberty are his decision to draw neighborhood people with
“wings” and “old-fashioned clothes” (194). Distinct from the raucous collectivity of his piano playing, Brother’s drawings constitute more solitary chronicles. They do not earn him drinks nor do they facilitate the slow dancing of couples; however, his pictures “imposed significance . . . on life” (Coleman, Blackness 106).

When Carl evokes a nebulous “they” to blame for Homewood’s sorry state circa 1970, Lucy objects: “Ain’t no they doing nothing . . . We’re the ones standing by letting it happen. Those old folks our people” (197). She continues, “Maybe you never had a chance. Maybe it’s not your fault. But you gave up too easy . . . You and me, Carl. We got scared and gave up too easy and now it’s gone” (197, 198). While the giving up that she references could name drug addiction, dropping out of college, or not starting a family, Lucy’s comment also addresses Carl’s art. Lucy romanticizes Homewood’s past; nevertheless, she, better than anyone, possesses a mature grasp of life’s paradoxes and ambiguities. For this reason, she knows that Albert Wilkes’s sublime music spawned violence and peace. By extension, she recognizes that Brother’s creativity inhabited the wounded and the healed places of the human spirit. Carl shrinks from the chaos sacrificing love to lament, and this withdrawal marks a transgression of the ethics of swagger.

When John Gardner shared with Charles Johnson his belief that great art had the capacity to change the world, he propelled his student into a full-fledged contemplation of how literature could improve black life. Similarly, Toni Morrison and Gloria Naylor’s convictions that the novel could teach black people sustaining cultural wisdom reflected an optimistic view of literary work. Wideman in Sent registers artistic vitality, but in addition to matters of technique and topic, he engages issues of commitment. The central question regarding artistic ethics in Sent is are you as an artist more committed to the craft than you are to the people? The depth of a black artist’s investment conditions his or her awareness of how “environment[s] influence the development of creative forms.” In Wideman’s mind, the cost of such environmental influence is an artist’s enduring “commitment to those surroundings” that nourished him (Rodriguez 140). Carl fails because he shortchanges Homewood’s investment in him. By subordinating his ambition to racial repression, he plausibly yet tragically stints the gift that would affirm his community’s

10. Jerry Bryant views these utterances as evidence of Lucy’s penchant for “nostalgia.” He sees her as an “irascible and argumentative” character that oversimplifies her neighborhood’s “dynamic tension” (177). I disagree since Lucy recognizes the neighborhood’s tensions better than most.
concern. Art cannot reverse communal decline until the artist embodies communal worth. The Black Archivists note this reciprocity throughout the black literary tradition, and Wideman builds on these meditations by probing a site of failure in *Sent*. *Philadelphia Fire* expands his commentary, this time making the black writer the recipient of a lesson in defeat.

**Advanced Studies in Failure**

In a 2005 preface to his nonfiction classic *Brothers and Keepers* (1984), Wideman asserted, “Writing can be a means of knowing and being in the world. That kind of writing requires self-examination, self-awareness, consciousness of the process of writing and reading. I could not write my brother’s story without writing mine” (xv). Though he suggested that this inextricability is especially acute in nonfiction, his fiction in the 1980s, especially *Philadelphia*, took up these very questions of who owns experience and how writing relates to such experience. The techniques that Wideman used to explore these issues, particularly the autobiographical interpolations, led some critics to place his work within the postmodern tradition of John Barth. Since his postgraduate research dealt with narrative innovators such as Laurence Stern, Thomas Mann, and James Joyce, these placements are perhaps understandable. Still, although Wideman incorporates voices as disparate as Alberto Giacometti, Mazisi Kunene, Herbert Blau, and Gaston Bachelard into *Philadelphia*, his central post-1980 concern had been with his family’s role as a spur to his art. If *Philadelphia* at first glance seems a departure from that concern, the novel actually weds his testing of his family’s fictional possibilities to his fuller exploration of black artistic commitment. This can be seen most vividly in the brief interludes featuring his son Jake, but the interplay between these tender, vulnerable scenes and the wistful meanderings of the novel’s protagonist Cudjoe provide an intriguing index of Wideman’s beliefs about what black art can and cannot do.

In “Visiting Privileges: A Journey to the Son” (2004), Wideman included some insights regarding writing about Jake: “My son has no desire to be visited by strangers. Hard enough, he said, to deal with visitors he loves, who love him. This story hasn’t earned the right, quite yet, to greet him, touch him, spend the allotted three hours catching up on the nine months since the last visit, catching up on a whole life adrift in the unseason of prison time” (W14). This statement suggests that the veil between Jake as a subject and Wideman’s art is purposeful, a result of the
son’s disinterest in being publicized.\textsuperscript{11} Aside from returning to quandaries that the author articulated in \textit{Brothers and Keepers}, this remark also establishes how \textit{Philadelphia}, because of the primacy and the uniqueness of its musings on Jake, is quite significant.\textsuperscript{12} The intricate ways that Wideman chooses to meditate on the black artist’s function provides a powerful testament to his talent. By registering these meditations through the public tragedy of the Philadelphia fire and the private catastrophe of his son’s incarceration, he highlights the reasons why artistic commitment remained so crucial for the Black Archivists. He also reverses the arc of Bradley’s \textit{The Chaneyville Incident} by taking a character back to the big city. The journey back is shot through with angst-filled memory.

A real historical event pulses at the center of \textit{Philadelphia}. In 1985, “a siege of several days” ended when “the Philadelphia police, with the permission of the city’s first black mayor, W. Wilson Goode, dropped a bomb on the roof of . . . 6221 Osage Avenue. The house went up in flames, killing 11 people, including several women and children” (Bray 7). The house at 6221 Osage was “home to MOVE, an armed band of cultists with dreadlock hairstyles who had been harassing their black neighbors” (Donohoe E1). By interjecting his fictional writer Cudjoe into this scene, Wideman moves from \textit{Sent’s} portrayals of family toward equally intimate depictions of urban blight.\textsuperscript{13} Such a shift, as the newspaper accounts quoted above show, implies an engagement with broader narratives of sociocultural transformations, yet Cudjoe and at times even Wideman, who appears as a character in \textit{Philadelphia}, show that part of the difficulty of art is an inability to extricate one’s self from the personal. In fact the story always entails the pursuer getting in the way of its pursuit. Nowhere is this clearer than in Cudjoe’s attempts to get information about survivors of the Osage bombing.

\textsuperscript{11} In a 2011 conversation with the author, Wideman confirmed that he limits his disclosures regarding Jake at his son’s request.

\textsuperscript{12} Jake murders Eric Kane in 1986 and the events that led to his incarceration coincide with John Edgar Wideman’s composition of \textit{Philadelphia Fire}. This immediacy of impact contrasts with the space that the novelist had to digest his feelings about his brother, the subject of \textit{Brothers and Keepers} (1984).

\textsuperscript{13} Explaining his protagonist’s name, Wideman writes, “Cudjoe, number one, was a very common name, it’s like John, that was used in slavery days. It’s also a West African name day. It’s an echo of its time. There were lots of Cudjoes around” (Olander 167). The ubiquity of Cudjoe as a moniker certainly marks the writer with allegorical qualities—specifically those tied to the African American struggle to preserve the meaning of African rituals in the face of slavery’s assault. In addition, Wideman’s link of Cudjoe to his own name John reinforces a connection that is already implicit.
Where Doot can canvas his uncle Carl, as he tries to piece together the story of Homewood, Cudjoe must seek reconnection with his old City of Brotherly Love stomping grounds through interactions with folks who are inherently suspicious of his motives. His interviews with Margaret Jones, a member of MOVE who survived the fire, demonstrate this fact. Through interactions with Margaret, Cudjoe discovers the disarming contours of his role: “The woman with the bright African cloth tied round her head had not liked him. Yet she was willing to talk, to be taped . . . [Cudjoe] only spoke once or twice while she talked. Margaret Jones didn’t need him, care for him. She was permitting him to overhear what she told the machine” (9). The writer intends to operate as an interviewer. Despite Cudjoe’s intentions, both Margaret Jones and the structure of the narrative turn him into a bystander. Wideman delivers his account of Cudjoe’s meeting via the playback of a tape, and Jones’s antipathy renders her ostensible questioner a barely tolerated intruder. Why does such tension inhere in this encounter, and what does it mean, at the outset of Cudjoe’s quest, that he is presented as someone who has to eavesdrop?

Ann Gaylin argues that “Eavesdropping dramatizes a primal human curiosity to know, and to know those aspects of others’ lives that we are not supposed to know, those that they wish to keep hidden from us” (7). Unpacking this observation, she writes, “eavesdropping represents a version of narrative’s origins, a point where curiosity takes hold and from which storytelling springs” (8). If Cudjoe in his interactions with Margaret Jones initially represents himself as someone who wants “to do something about the silence [surrounding the fire survivors]” (19), then very quickly, he changes his mind: “Cudjoe decides he will think of himself as a reporter covering a story in a foreign country. Stay on his toes, take nothing for granted. Not the customs nor the language. What he sees is not what the natives see” (45). The tension between the writer as an advocate for a black urban community and the writer as a parasite who might be “stealing from the dead” (10) reveals not only Cudjoe’s dilemma but also the cause of what Wideman has called his own “divided mind.” He offered this account of it:

I bring a very powerful, I hope healthy, skepticism into the [writing] process. One way to translate that abstraction would be to say, “Okay, here I am in Amherst, Mass., writing these books about Homewood, a black, economically depressed community in Pittsburgh—what’s all that mean, what do all these words on the page have to do with that reality, and if
I’m really bothered by that reality—of Pittsburgh—it exists now, this moment, my people are there, my relatives are there, and suffering various forms of oppression and danger and pain, why don’t I do something about it? What’s it mean to make up stories about it? What’s it mean to, in a sense, exploit it in a narrative? (Olander 166)

By making such a confession, Wideman not only allies his temperament to Cudjoe’s but also reveals the crux of black novelists’ anxieties in late twentieth-century America. In a 1980s moment when the black urbanization crises that Gaines, Morrison, and Naylor engage are metastasizing, the black novelists’ attitude toward and capacity for communal advocacy is burdened by practical and aesthetic problems. How do I as a writer stem the tide of murders, incarcerations, and assaults? What story should I tell in that situation, and how should such a story be told? A consideration of how Cudjoe and Margaret Jones’s interview recasts postmodern notions of play reveals how deeply his character probes questions about the artist’s efficacy.

Ted Lyon—in “Jorge Luis Borges and the Interview as Literary Genre” (1994)—observes that when he met the Latin American writer in 1968, Borges took control of the conversation by slipping into “verbal play,” a parodic mode that unsettled meaning and turned the questioner into a kind of toy (74). If his experiences with Borges led Lyon to conclude that the interview was a genre “caught between spontaneous overflow and meditative creation,” then Margaret Jones shows that unsettling the questioner can arise from a tradition other than that of playfulness (76). In fact, her posture evokes the seething resentment that single black females traditionally reserve for welfare caseworkers.14 The treatment that Cudjoe receives from Margaret not only reflects her cynicism about his professional motives but also marks personal insecurities. When the writer wonders whether Margaret can intuit his abandonment of his white wife and his half-white sons, he conjures issues that mock his dedication to role-playing or, as he calls it, “staying on his toes.”15


15. Cudjoe’s musings on Margaret Jones’s knowledge about “him” especially his interracial marriage and his biracial kids take place as he is replaying her taped interview (9). On one level, the questions that he attributes to her reflect his shame—shame that he had married outside his
man’s limits on his protagonist’s play challenge other expressions about contemporary agony. In place of fellowship, Philadelphia heaps more suspicion on Cudjoe’s motives.

Cudjoe interacts with the city through a telling set of activities. He stares at random panty-less white girls, gazes through windows at half-dressed female neighbors, and likewise migrates into the sex life of an anonymous white man, “Richard Corey” (173). These moments, examples of “sexual voyeurism,” justify Madhu Dubey’s contention that in Philadelphia, knowledge of fellow city dwellers is “always guilty” because such knowledge usually comes through the “pornographic modality of commodity spectacle” (Signs 127). While these interactions carry tremendous significance, an exclusive focus on these interracial moments of contact overlooks part of Cudjoe’s dilemma, his anxiety about cultural alienation. His apprehension surfaces when he interviews Margaret and again as he remembers trying to put on a production of Shakespeare’s The Tempest using inner-city black children. I will have more to say about the latter momentarily, but for now, I want to consider how Cudjoe counters a pornographic model of urban communion by playing basketball. In depicting this ritual, Wideman revises narratives of black male socialization by uniting transcendence and shared consciousness into a hope that momentarily creases despair.

A metaphor of Cudjoe’s attempt to reclaim a space in the black community, pick-up basketball reflects the challenges of moving from spectator to player, a difficulty that captures his dilemma.16 While waiting to run the court, the pick-up player must note each prospective teammate’s distinctive skills and how he fit his talents into the game’s flow. This posture, tied to the voyeurism maligned above, determines the difference between success and failure when strangers must instantly move from individuated talent to synchronized, collective effort. Cud-

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16. Wideman’s decision to depict street ball reflects tensions that erupted during his college years. Describing his time as a scholarship athlete at Penn, he states, “If the rest of the world was falling apart, at 3:30 I could go over to the gym and kick butt. Run up and down until I was exhausted. If I scored a basket, it was worth two points. If I beat my man and was on the first team, these things were unequivocal. There was a certain precision and clarity in that world that I didn’t have anywhere else.” While Wideman viewed the basketball court as a haven, he “was forced to pay for certain ‘cultural improvements’” (Plummer). William Plummer notes, “[Wideman] was, by habit, a playground athlete, capable of electrifying ad-lib moves. At Penn his wings were clipped and he was taught to fly in formation.”
joe joins a team that includes O.T., a superlative performer. Describing his teammate’s prowess, he states, “O.T. a monster, operating a foot or so above everybody else. Took what he wanted. Changed gears when he wanted to. Let the other team stay close enough to believe they had a chance. Then blew them away—steals, slams, blocked shots” (38). Cudjoe’s description makes O.T. sound like a one-man show, and his deftness does allow him to control the game. Despite this potential, he still needs support. Cudjoe tries to provide it. Assessing his contributions, he concludes that he “did his bit. Hit a layup and a couple jumpers from the wing. Fed the free man. Dealt the ball away from the dribble-happy dude. His legs gave out in game three” (38). Cudjoe is reduced to a role player, and there he, the old man of the cohort, finds a space for himself. Ironically, “his team retired undefeated” (38). Within the world of hoops, Cudjoe finds an urban sphere where “after the winning basket,” he and his mates let “their eyes” and “their fists” meet “for a second in the core of a circle, then just as quickly,” break “apart, each going his own way” (39). Such integrity within collectivity becomes the model that Cudjoe craves but cannot replicate. His failure evokes a prior instance where idealized racial unity miscarried.

Although it reprises trips that he made earlier, when he was married, Cudjoe’s run on the Clark Park basketball courts takes place in the mid-1980s, after the Philadelphia fire. The park, because it hosts multifaceted examples of urban blackness, seems like a good place for Cudjoe to close the gap between Greece, the Mediterranean island to which he had escaped, and Philadelphia, the site of the grassroots struggle that he had fled. Though his ball playing restored communal fellowship better than his interviews with Margaret Jones, parks haunted Cudjoe’s memory as spaces where his artistic ambitions soared and then crashed. Late in the 1960s, after his college graduation, he hatched a plot to stage Shakespeare’s *The Tempest* using a cast of black children from an inner city school. His friends Timbo and Charley helped him, and although the performance was ready to go, two days of rain combined with random disruptions to derail their plans. Recalling Naylor’s *The Women of Brewster Place*, which also meditates on the bard’s impact on black city dwellers, this scene reinforces the Black Archivists’ interest in how the Western literary canon influences black life. Naylor portrayed a successful performance of black collegians and artists for a multiracial audience that included black children. Because of the proposed cast and the attitudes of the play’s sponsors, *Philadelphia*’s aborted production becomes key to Wideman’s examination of failure.
Cudjoe’s brainstorm evokes the nontraditional casting experiments used by Joseph Papp’s New York Shakespeare Festival in the 1950s. While he remembers thinking that the kids’ performance would “prick pride and dignity” among the city’s black population, providing an “achievement” that could not be ignored, his outlook from the 1980s features shame (“I’ve always felt guilty about deserting them”) and an improbable vision—“I used to believe I’d hear the whole thing, start to finish, the way I rewrote it” (132, 149, 150). His retrospection acquires heightened significance since Wideman, “the fabulator,” includes the following remark in his narration: “This is the central event, this production of *The Tempest* staged by Cudjoe . . . Though it comes here, wandering like a Flying Dutchman in and out of the narrative, many places at once, *The Tempest* sits dead center, the storm in the eye of the storm, figure within a figure, play within play, it is the bounty and hub of all else written about the fire” (132). On one level, Wideman’s statement could be an attempt to put his readers off the trail. This possibility should not be lightly dismissed; however, the structure of part two of *Philadelphia*, the part in which Cudjoe’s Shakespearean reminiscences appear, casts non-linear narration as renderings of a tortured soul rather than playfulness. Blending Cudjoe’s remembrances of malfunctioning black idealism with Wideman’s expressions of severed communion with his son Jake, this part of *Philadelphia* ponders pessimism’s function in post–civil rights black artistry. Understanding these ponderings demands a look at two depictions of artists that appear in part one of the novel.

Upon returning to Philadelphia in the mid-1980s, Cudjoe looks up his old friend Timbo, who is now the mayor’s cultural attaché. Cudjoe meets with him to walk down memory lane and to get information for the book that he wants to write about the Philadelphia fire. During these meetings, Timbo is often characterized by musical references. Cudjoe compares Timbo’s pose to the “lead tenor of the Dells” and later says his friend forces him to listen like “he listens to music” (74, 83). *Sent* questioned the musician’s centrality within the black community, and in *Philadelphia* Wideman uses Timbo, a politico, to extend that critique. The linking of music and politics ingenuously conjures both the racial sincerity automatically attributed to black musicians and the opportunistic postures of an incipient class of black elected officials. Seeking to capitalize on the former’s cultural cache, the latter often appropriated their styles.

17. For more on Papp’s New York Shakespeare Festival, see Ayanna Thompson’s introduction to *Colorblind Shakespeare*. 
These appropriations produced electoral success, but these victories usually heralded black officials as pragmatic survivors rather than revolutionaries. If Timbo confirms the mayor as “a simple, devious, practical man,” then his characterization not only reflects W. Wilson Goode’s specific outlook but also the widespread perils of all who represent black constituencies (80–81). Part one’s second major scene of artistry explores an alternate facet of this quandary.

Before they divorced, Cudjoe and his wife Caroline took a trip to visit his mentor, Sam, a man he described as “the tough new critical priest of the text speaking for itself” (67). Cudjoe brought a manuscript for Sam to read, and while he awaits the older white man’s response, he wonders, “Would [Sam] know what the fuck he was reading?” (61). Where representing blackness, for the politician/musician, carries threats of exploited authority, Cudjoe, the writer, shows how black expression—even for someone as sympathetic as Sam—could be unintelligible, either because of inadequacies of the composer or the reader. Philadelphia never clarifies how Cudjoe’s manuscript fares; nonetheless, the text’s repeated inclusions of these scenes of literary evaluation are always paired with episodes of familial stress. By combining these elements, Wideman reveals how the traumatic discontinuities that test the artist’s faith and feed his fears are precisely the reservoirs that he must draw on to retain relevance. Thus, his turns to Jake and the ways that he frames these turns through King, the leader of the MOVE cult, and J.B., a homeless man, provides interesting answers to Cudjoe’s artistic struggle, a struggle figured prominently in the never performed script of The Tempest that he wrote.

King and J.B. are the unfulfilled promises of America’s post–civil rights experiments. The former, a dreadlocked Gramscian intellectual, 18

18. As mayors from Carl B. Stokes to Maynard Jackson rose to power, questions arose about whether their black faces would mean a better representation of black interests. Timbo as an attaché to a black mayor focuses Wideman’s exploration of this issue. For more on blacks and mainstream politics, see Carol M. Swain’s Black Face, Black Interests: The Representation of African Americans in Congress (1995) and Cedric Johnson’s Revolutionaries to Race Leaders: Black Power and the Making of African American Politics (2007).

19. Grant Wiggins and John Washington are prime examples of black intellectuals who are paralyzed by lack of faith. While Grant repudiates religion, John’s problems stem from hyper-rationality. These ideological positions, agnosticism and positivism, connect intriguingly with what Eddie S. Glaude and Cornel West see as the natural philosophy of black existence, pragmatism. See Glaude’s In A Shade of Blue (2007) and West’s The American Evasion of Philosophy (1989). For a consideration of black pragmatism’s aesthetic consequences, look at Walton Muyumba’s The Shadow and the Act: Black Intellectual Practice, Jazz Improvisation, and Philosophical Pragmatism (2009).

20. Wideman’s decision to name his cult leader King produces several interesting resonances. First, the monarchical imprimatur that inheres in the title creates a paradox. On the one hand, King
possesses an Afrocentric orientation, and the latter symbolizes an “urban zone of scarcity” where “inhabitants have no choice but to feed on waste” (Dubey, Signs 61). Though these two men differ in ideology and behavior, they are united in their remoteness from the governmental authority symbolized by Timbo. This distance makes them “a thorn in [the] side” of the powers that be and insures that they will eventually be pushed “off the map” (81, 79). Although Timbo seemingly supports renovating the black community’s consciousness, he, for the sake of dignity, would literally burn up offending aspects of urban blackness. His convictions relate to adults like King and J.B. and “little runty-assed no-hair-on-their-dicks neophytes” who “ain’t twelve years old yet” (89). While Timbo’s remark addresses the youth gangs such as “Kaliban’s Kiddie Korps” that want to “run the world their way,” his sentiments also reflect the twentieth century’s final generational tension (88, 89). The Chaneysville Incident and Song of Solomon represent the conflict between the civil rights generation and the Black Power vanguard, but Philadelphia examines Black Power’s clashes with the hip hop generation. When Timbo engages the juvenile court system and youth’s murderous capacities, he not only references a new delinquency fear but also evokes the cynicism that surrounds Jake’s situation.

In one of Philadelphia’s most direct references to his son’s fight for justice, Wideman laments “the unmitigated cruelty of the legal system,” a system that will not render a decision on an “appeal to remove [Jake’s] case from adult to juvenile court” and will not allow him to be treated for the “childhood personality disorders” that are “almost certainly coalescing into incurable adult schizophrenia” (115, 116). This lamentation is an anti-establishment figure, an antagonist to mainstream authority. Alternately, his claims for divinely inspired wisdom connect him directly to notions such as “de de los reyes.” Of course, the civil rights leader Martin Luther King, Jr., also lurks within the morality that King cultivates. Blending these connotations allows Wideman to reinforce notions of unforeseen cultural braiding and anticipates Charles Johnson’s interest in the Buddhist dimension of King’s thought. See John Whalen-Bridges “Waking Cain: The Poetics of Integration in Charles Johnson’s Dreamer” (2003) and John Malkin’s “Buddhism is the Most Radical and Civilized Choice” (2004).

21. For more on Gramsci’s relation to black radicalism, see Cornel West’s “Black Theology and Marxist Thought” (1979).

22. Bakari Kitwana “established 1965–1984 as the age group for the hip hop generation” (xiii). While Wideman’s inclusion of rap lyrics in Philadelphia Fire signals his engagement with this group’s culture, his depiction of middle-aged former black student radicals and their grappling with the hip hop generation is one of the first of its kind.

23. America’s preoccupation with juvenile delinquency emerged powerfully in the 1950s, and their effects were evident in both academic and popular venues. What I am calling the new delinquency discourse focuses on African American youth and their involvement in the legal system. For more on this idea, see Janice Joseph Black Youth, Delinquency, and Juvenile Justice (1995).
tion, a quiet impugning of American civility, joins with musing on “the emptiness” of a loss, an “absence” that is like an amputation “without a name” (120). Braiding these two themes, the writer defines language’s expressive limits. He notes the difference between felicitous execution and “consolation,” ultimately concluding that though it is his most earnest aim, he is incapable of the latter (151). Recognizing these facts, Wideman writes prayers for renewed hope. Cudjoe’s dispersed drama troupe swirls around these prayers, signaling the mysteries of battles with canonical power.

August Wilson once observed that “colorblind casting is an aberrant idea that has never had any validity other than as a tool of the Cultural Imperialists . . . It is inconceivable to them that life could be lived and even enriched without knowing Shakespeare” (A. Thompson 1). Although Wilson’s remark emphasizes a generic scuffle where white culture-brokers wield Shakespeare as an artistic gold standard, his statements also clarify the specific stakes of Cudjoe and Wideman’s focus on black children who are deemed expendable. Cudjoe wrote a script for his troupe that he thought would compel a mainstream world to take notice. Betting on the unlikely confluence of inner city blackness and an iconic English playwright, he tried to translate emotional maelstroms through language. He discovers the intersection of experiences and emotions where ineffability marks failure, a spot haunted by the schoolchildren who never performed his play. At that crossroad, he, like John Edgar Wideman, abandons epic gestures of rescue and consolation and settles for hope that is a flickering candle in gale winds. This commitment becomes the artist’s most fruitful gift.

**Failure’s Swag**

The distance from Carl French’s wasted talent to Cudjoe’s fractured narrative could be explained as a journey from the deceptive comforts of post–World War II blackness to the bankruptcy of post–civil rights self-delusion. While Wideman accepts this premise, he likewise documents both via his characters and his autobiographical renderings a more coherent tradition. Lucy indicts Carl not because his attention to racial prejudice is inexplicable but because he allows that foul incursion to occlude his view of her—the person that he claims as his most precious company. When Carl and Cudjoe are examined in light of their compromises of such intimacy, Wideman’s thoughts about failure and the way
forward both for his own writing and for black writing more broadly can be detected.

In both *Sent* and *Philadelphia*, the struggling artist is confounded by faulty perception. The difficulties here are not technical; rather, they result from discounting empathy. As much as Doot receives a lofty ordination, only in his reincarnation as Cudjoe does the arsenal of black expressivity get fully stocked. For if Doot represents the post–civil rights generation’s discovery of their families’ legacies, then Cudjoe, marking Wideman’s return to Morrison’s depictions in *Beloved*, reflects how the basis of community is never experiential commonality. Rather, the cultural connection begins with love and the vulnerability of caring. Michael Cooke contends that intimacy “takes the form of reaching, or being invited, out of the self and into an unguarded and uncircumscribed engagement with the world” (9). Wideman believes that artistic failure destroys the final hurdles to such communion. In many ways, this is the final lesson that he learned from trolling through the black literary tradition, and the autobiographical interludes in *Philadelphia* suggest why.

The interpolations related to Jake intrude on Wideman’s worthy commemoration of the Philadelphia fire. Though these passages chop up the narrative, they do so with talk about elemental aspirations—“I breathe into the space separating me from my son. I hope the silence will be filled for him as it is filled for me by hearing the nothing there is to say at this moment . . . Not because it is enough but because it’s all we have” (104). This passage grapples with the ineffable, yet it casts that struggle, that site of failure, as the crux of intimacy. In place of technical felicity, it situates a gesture toward fellowship, a commitment to connection. The necessity of this substitution becomes Wideman’s finest legacy. His main characters walk along the avenues of refulgent inspiration and, hemmed in by their failures as husbands, fathers, and lovers, experience the humiliation of art that will not give. Notwithstanding these realities, Cudjoe, like Carl, gets another chance, a chance that hinges on a studious exploration of “all we have.” It is here that both the character and the author overcome their insecurities. In a 2001 essay, Wideman observed that “one of the worst trials for Americans of visible African descent (and maybe for invisible crossovers too) is the perpetual fear of not measuring up to standards established by so-called white people” (“More” 1204). By shedding such self-consciousness and attending to the simple exigency of breathing, he replaced the tangled measurements of literary merit with the ethics of swagger. Ironically, this replacement inspired mainstream applause.