

## **Conjuring Ancestral Gods in African American Fiction: Legba Representation in John Edgar Wideman's *Reuben***

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### **Abstract**

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*This article analyzes the fiction work of the African American John Edgar Wideman, *Reuben*, in which it sees the eponymic protagonist Ruben as crystallizing all the main imagic and essential attributes of the West African deity Legba. This endeavor of black authors to ingrain their quest for the self and the expression of their cultural identity in a vivid awareness of ancestral divinities and myths, and their need to connect to them, bring up the issue of whether collective cultural memory can fade through time, in a historical and social context such as that of African Americans, with deportation, severe repression, and oppression. The major critical approaches used in this research work are Afrocentricity, psychoanalysis, and poststructuralism. It comes up with the conclusion that, despite all these challenges, ancestral culture and religions are well alive and thriving in Black America, thanks to cultural resistance to assimilation and the culture of resistance.*

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**Key Words:** identity – cultural memory – marginalisation – Africa – African American – deportation

### **Résumé**

*Le présent article analyse l'œuvre de fiction de l'Africain Américain John Edgar Wideman *Reuben* dans lequel l'éponyme et protagoniste Reuben est perçu comme cristallisant tous les principaux attributs imagiques et essentiels de la divinité ouest africaine Legba. Cet effort d'auteurs noirs d'enraciner leur quête de soi et l'expression de leur identité culturelle dans une prise de conscience aiguë des divinités et mythes ancestraux, et leur besoin de se connecter à ces derniers, soulèvent la question de savoir si la mémoire culturelle collective s'estompe à travers le temps, dans un contexte historique et social tel que celui des Africains Américains, avec la déportation, la répression sévère, et l'oppression. Les principales approches critiques utilisées dans le présent article sont l'Afrocentricité, la théorie psychanalytique et le poststructuralisme. La conclusion à laquelle il parvient est qu'en dépit des multiples défis, la culture et les religions ancestrales sont bien vivantes et en plein épanouissement en Amérique Noire, grâce à la résistance culturelle à l'assimilation et à la culture de résistance.*

**Mots-Clés:** identité – mémoire culturelle – marginalization – Africain Américain – déportation

### **Introduction**

The experience of slavery registers not only in a dynamics of removing Africans from their native communities, but also, of as much importance, severing them from their roots and stripping them from cultural, historical, and social identities. One important issue worth considering in analyzing the evolution in the cultural identity induced by the trans-Atlantic crossing in the black people's persona is examining retained ancestral cultural complexities, since references to the past remain a vital link for marginalized and dominated social communities in the definition of their cultural identities.

Excluded and marginalized cultural minorities often depend on the call to the past in their narrativization of the self. But black slaves underwent severe cultural repression in their masters' attempts to deal with slave rebellions. They were stripped of their languages, religions and customs, and the black family, institution which is in charge of making the transmission of cultural memory, was disrupted. All these factors, most expectedly, should make the rooting of African American culture in the African tradition really disrupted, doubtful, if not almost impossible. But important features of ancestral culture are found, and African divinities portrayed, in African American literature. These attempts of black writers at "marking" literature, through African ancestral gods, creates a space for self-expression which deserves to be analyzed.

The objective of this article is to demonstrate the resistance of cultural bonds and religious vestiges in African American culture at large, and particularly in literature, in spite of social repression, and separation by time and space, as the token representation of African ancestral deities can be viewed as an evidence of the resistance culture in African American modern cultural expression. This analysis is carried out through the African American author John Edgar Wideman's novel *Reuben*.

## 1. Literature Review

The use of African deities as cultural marker in Wideman's literary production, especially the portrayal of Legba in *Reuben*, has already been underlined by Andrade in Race, representation, and intersubjectivity (TuSmith & Byerman, 2006). But Andrade points to the presence of Legba in Wideman's narrative technique and literary aesthetic, and on his reliance on the effect of imagination to induce social change. The author, according to him, draws on Postmodernism but relies on black aesthetics to reject its indeterminacy. Black narrative construction consists in passing on fore parents' stories, with each narrator freely enriching these ancestral narratives by re-appropriating them. The synergy obtained in quilting old and new, "myth, history, parable, parody, folklore, fact, and fiction" is the fingerprint of the Legba divinity who "stand[s] at the crossroad of discourse" (2006, p.52). "As mediator, Andrade goes on, Legba facilitates communication between humans and gods. A person can apprehend meaning only as it is divined and revealed by Legba" (2006, p.52). Andrade also emphasizes the duality of meaning construed in simultaneous unveiling and concealment in discourse, and the art of shape-shifting, as the trademark of Legba in Wideman's narratives, the same features which Bonnie TuSmith identifies in a few of Wideman's works.

TuSmith, in "Optical Tricksterism", emphasizes the use of cinematographic shape-shifting and dissolve techniques in Wideman's narrative, which in West African tradition, are characteristics of Legba the Trickster. Narrative tricksterism consists, among other techniques, in slipping hard truths in light jokes, in double senses, palimpsestic narration, and filmic "melt-downs." This approach to the study of *Reuben* through its narrative techniques shows some similarity to Jacqueline Berben's: *Voice as persona*. Berben focuses on the narration voice or voices in *Reuben* to scrutinize the multiple focalization and the repetitive violation of diegetic barriers in Wideman's aesthetic. In Wideman's fiction, she also argues, "religious and mythic credence [become] medium as much as message."

Contrary to these essays which analyze the traces of Legba in Wideman's narrative aesthetic and storytelling devices, this article identifies the presence of Legba divinity in *Reuben*'s character and in the function he serves in the novel. Thus, it first analyzes the character as presented in the novel and then what role he plays, both in connection with the ancestral divinity.

### 1.1 Physical Presentation of *Reuben*

#### 1.1.1 *Reuben*'s Introduction

*Reuben* tells the story of a young and poor black lady, Kwansa, whose only son Cudjoe is abducted by the latter's father. To help her find the young boy and face the necessary legal formalities needed to get her son back, she turns to the protagonist, Reuben, a strange and mysterious legal adviser of Homewood with a bearing most akin to the West African deity Legba.

Reuben, in the Bible, is the name given to the first son of Jacob (*Gen. 25.26*). Among all his brothers, Reuben was the only one who really cared for Joseph and tried, although unsuccessfully, to save him from their hands. He first prevented his brothers from spilling Joseph's blood, and would have prevented them from selling him if he had been present.

Literally, Reuben means “see, a son”, with the concept of *sight* here connoting a “highly tuned level of Godly awareness that is so real that it is as if the person perceived God with his eyes.” (Davidson,n.d.). The role of ‘seer’, and then intermediary between gods and human beings, is the role that the Fon-Yoruba cosmology confers to Legba-the-Trickster, the Divine Messenger, Door Opener and Lord of Crossroads.

Legba/ Esu-Ilegbara, in the Fon-Yoruba cosmology, is believed to have the power to grant requests, propitiate undertakings and remove obstacles. He is the messenger god who crosses between the spiritual world of gods and the physical universe of living beings (Idowu,1991,p.170). Legba is one of the commonest voodooos found in West Africa. The commonest locations of Legba’s shrines are, among others, public places, crossroads, roadsides, convents, public gathering places, sacred forests, homes, and riversides. He is often represented in Fon and Yoruba cultural areas as a mound of earth, with two cowries for the eyes, a mouth, and with an extraordinarily outsized phallus heightening his attribute of lustful and trickster deity. All these characteristics, mainly those of intermediary, problem solver, and benevolent and inoffensive jester, are what Wideman’s Reuben stands for.

Reuben is introduced to the reader in the very first lines of the novel with a strange physical appearance which already sets him aside from the ordinary normal human being.

Reuben was a small man. His face was long and his hands long, but Reuben never grew older than the average twelve-year-old boy. That long head atop a puny body. The way he carried one shoulder higher than the other reminded people how close Reuben had come to being a hunchbacked dwarf. He wasn’t built funny enough to be pitiable, but he wasn’t put together quite right either...The pitiful thing Reuben wasn’t what he almost was. (Wideman, 1987, p.1)

Reuben’s singular appearance is the token physicality of the trickster god. Described as “half a man” (Wideman, 1987, p.9), Reuben maintains a difficult, borderline balance between physical disability and normalcy, as he both “wasn’t” but still “almost was” a crippled person. On this account, he is “hard to talk to without your mind straying” onto his funny look (Wideman, 1987, p.1) for his visitors consulting him about serious legal issues. The oddness of the man’s physical appearance most likely trips his visitors’ minds into laughing at the expense of the serious issues which press them into asking for his assistance. This paradox of venerable entities of wisdom embodied in funny, jocular physical representations which Reuben impersonates, is the paradox Wideman highlights in describing Reuben’s self-assigned patron, the supreme Egyptian god Thoth, usually represented as a “a baboon, brow furrowed in deep thought, middle finger searching his asshole” (Wideman, 1987, p.67). An additional parallel may be drawn between Reuben, claiming to be the earthly representation of the supreme Egyptian god Thoth (Wideman, 1987, p.67-68), and the role assigned to Legba, that of messenger, representative and “inspector general” of the arch divinity in Fon cosmology, Mawu-Lisa (Idowu, 1991, p.170).

The personification of majesty, venerable wisdom in a debasing flawed physicality is also expressive of the futility of secluding wisdom from the practical necessity of the lowly people, and furthermore, points to the paradoxical closeness between what is usually deemed very high and the very low. The circle of high and low closes in Reuben. A handsome, well-to-do, and urbane Ruben would have been unapproachable and therefore of little use to the neediest people of his Homewood community. Siding with the humblest members of his community, he voices their needs, “performing these tricks for the poor and worse than poor” (Wideman, 1987, p.2). One major ‘trick’ Reuben succeeds in working is the degree of closeness he creates with his “clients”. Viewing Reuben as a trickster is assimilating him to an “illusionist”, an entity with a more sage vision of things or with too large wisdom to be fully understood by ordinary people who are endowed with a narrower understanding capacity.

Reuben nurtures with his clients a spiritual communion which often stands beyond the lawyer-client proximity. He empathizes with his most desperate clients, as he does with Kwansa, sharing their grief to an extent which a lawyer hardly dare go. He is presented as if he were reading on the mind of the visiting lady, with his long lashes closed in a silent and unstirred daydreaming. This immediacy is however mixed with a strange remoteness required by his status of divinity. Reuben swings forth and back between his two worlds, spiritual and physical, his two statuses, deity and human being, his two stands, close and aloof, by shape-shifting.

Kwansa’s first encounter with Reuben, really disconcerting, reveals to her a man who is very considerate to the down-and-out, strangely close but still mysterious, empathic and aloof, seemingly forgetful of the lady sitting across from him(Wideman, 1987, p.5). He looks both so close and so far, surfing to and fro between two worlds, “slipping further and further till you want to scream” (Wideman, 1987, p.108).

His prolonged silences and absences in the present are escapes in the abyss intime and inspace: “You’d think he was far away dreaming his own dream, or steady grooving on it [...] in another world...he whispers low likes he don’t want to wake his ownself up” (Wideman, 1987, p.9-10). But his standing astride between two worlds connects present-time Homewood, the present life in exile, to the original home of plenitude. “He’d walk down Homewood Avenue talking to ghosts, oblivious to the folks he passed, the client at his desk waiting for a simple answer to a simple question” (Wideman, 1987, p.14). This silent nonchalance he sometimes shrouds himself in is the customary silent atmosphere that visitors find in Legba shrines, the venerable, and still joker, god.

Reuben himself is ageless, with no beginning or a foreseeable end to his presence. “Kwansa has been seeing him her whole life”(Wideman, 1987, p.2). A similar oddness appears in Reuben’s relations to another character, Wally. Reuben does not belong in the same age bracket as Wally. But Reuben’s presence is so intimate to him that he uses Reuben to mediate his own youth memories as he tries to evoke them to himself. Wally cannot talk to himself or imagine his own past without Reuben’s mediation:

Reason he asked Reuben how long he stayed in Philly was because there are times, now, looking back, when Wally has memory of those school years that don’t make sense without Reuben around. If not Reuben, somebody like Reuben talking to Wally... Reuben’s trailer’s older than Wally and God only knows how long its raggedy ass been planted over there behind Hamilton Avenue. When Wally deserted Homewood for college and all that knowledge, he’d left Reuben behind so how could the old man be in both places. (Wideman, 1987, p.113)

Wally is unable to tell exactly where and when Reuben’s presence crosses into his own life. He just realizes the old man’s pervading presence, and cannot tell if Reuben has been living, like a faint shadow or a ghost, a reflection of his own conscience, or like a palpable material presence, side by side with him all his life (Wideman, 1987, p.114). Reuben appears as a metaphor of Legba straddling, and striding between, two worlds: “...the outsider. A dwarf has been stolen from the Land of spirits, the black land. Both stolen and unreal”(Wideman, 1987, p.108). It is this supernal yet pervasive presence that the camera eye is unable to pin down and encapsulate in one shape and fixed colors. Reuben is no material substance: “No matter how many cameras, a different Reuben in each frame, a slightly altered pose, a separate reality” (Wideman, 1987, p.127).

Reuben is presented but in his trailer. Apart from his own story he relates about his visit to his murdered lover, Flora, Reuben is not introduced to the reader but in his time-worn, “ageless and colorless trailer. Like the physical presence of Legba in his shrine, Reuben’s physical presence cannot be thought of out of his trailer. He has no home, no wife, no child, no parents, no relatives, all in all, no private life out of the trailer. Reuben has no existence out of the links uniting him to his Homewood clients. Even his visits to the court and his legal intermediation for his clients are sparse evocations which bear no material significance apart from reinforcing his status of rescuer in his trailer. This absence of private social relations, the visual image Reuben projects on his visitors’ eyes and the impression he works on their psyche dehumanize him, metaphorically deify him into Legba, the intermediary. Reuben is sketched just like the metaphor of divinity that escapes human gravity.

Another distinctive peculiarity Reuben shows, likening him to the “god of indeterminacy,” Legba (TuSmith & Byerman, 2006, p.52), is his ability to “balance [the] contradictory logics, meaning, and interpretation” (Andrade, 2006, p.52), the shape-shifting duality lying in yes and no. “Yes and no. Always yes and no”(Wideman, 1987, p.199). Reuben offers this perspective of “contradictory similarity” in no fewer than five occurrences, to key existential issues: whether Black people are free or not (p.199), possibilities of improvement of interracial relations (p.201), black people dying sooner or later (p.91), relations between physical traits and brotherhood (p.170), having imprisoned siblings (p.171) . His answers evidence the undecidability of truth and point to the nonsensicality of options. For Reuben, yes may be no and no can be equated with yes.

Marcel Proust, discussing Flaubert, argues on the function of metaphor in the writer’s style: “only metaphor can give a kind of eternity to style” (Fiser, 2000, p.169). Reuben emerges as that metaphor of black divinity as a whole that breathes eternity into the narrative of *Reuben*, as he crystallizes the attributes of the divine and, in addition, impersonates the other paradigms of religion. He dissolves and reemerges, consecutively, but in the same extension, in divine entity, in celebrating priest and intermediary, in follower/worshipper, in propitiating sacrifice, and in victim needing help. He metaphorically ‘condenses’ the attributes of the exiled divinity strayed out of his own land (Wideman, 1987, p.204), knowledgeable sorcerer/celebrant voodoo priest (Wideman, 1987, p.67,68), ghost cast from the lands of spirits (Wideman, 1987, p.100), ordinary worshipper of divinity, and dwarf entertainer (trickster) for the mythic Egyptian female Pharaoh Hatshepsut’s (Wideman, 1987, p.204-205).

Woven of all those religious and cultural strands, the figure of Reuben appears most of all to evoke the idea of a return to the wholeness of cultural and religious past. Reuben embodies various religious entities now lumped together in a Freudian condensed “dream image” of cultural redemption, with Freud’s concept of “condensation” explaining the possibility for a single idea (in his context, cultural redemption) to stand as a signifier for a diffuse variety of other ideas.

In his various capacities, all seemingly different but one, Reuben stands as the lexical metamorphosis of the same signified. In this single fiction character, Wideman throws forward the Egyptian, the Guinean and the Kongo cosmologies. Egyptian divinities are evoked throughout the book (p. 67, 68), Egyptian mythic Pharaohs, gods of Guinea (17-18), and the deities of Kongo are also referred to as source of inspiration for the book (page of acknowledgement). The clear-cut drive sustaining Reuben’s character is his dogged obstinacy in the search for healing, care, and plenitude. The strands Wideman weaves him in are those acknowledged by Idowu to Legba who, as “the divine messenger [...] in African pantheons, is assigned the role of liaison officer between Mahu-Lisa [arch divinity and creator] and the other offspring and between the offspring themselves”. Legba is furthermore known to be the link between all those divinities and human beings. Reuben, in the image of Legba, is the link that brings together, unites and condenses black religious and cultural expression. In the context of the African American social marginalization, this cultural memory appears as an expression of pride and self-centeredness. “For oppressed peoples, cultural memory engenders the spirit of resistance; not surprisingly, some of its most powerful incarnations are rooted in religion” (Rodriguez & Fortier, 2007, p.154).

Reuben is created and assigned the mission of saving his black Homewood community. He works for African Americans’ redemption. Portrayed as a writer, in the image of Wideman himself, he is doomed to perish if he does not unwind his narratives of redemption. He is bound to fight to save his people, denounce injustice and voice the plea of his community, “Telling time, the job he must do” (Wideman, 1987, p.69). Reuben’s self-assigned mission, in this regard, is similar to that of the female narrator of the Arabian nights who lives and is made alive in and thanks to her own narratives. Like her, if Reuben stops his narrative, he will die, as his people will perish in the wide white sea of depersonalization when severed from their cultural memory. The ordinary relation the narrator nurtures with the narrative is subverted, and the narrator lives through and thanks to his narrative.

The narratives Reuben tells are not those of his own. He “performs” communal stories that can sustain hope and save his community. As a performer, entertainer and public trickster, he becomes precious and vital to his community:

Come northward to the court immediately.; thou shall bring this dwarf with thee, which thou bringest living, prosperous and healthy from the Land of Spirits, for the dances of the god, to rejoice and gladden the heart of the king of Upper and Lower Egypt, who live forever... When he sleeps at night, appoint excellent people who shall sleep beside him in his tent, inspect him ten times a night. My majesty desires to see this dwarf more than the gifts of Sinai and of Punt. (Wideman, 1987, p.204)

The public tale-teller and joker masters the art of slipping subversivity in his tales, and as Wideman recognizes, surreptitiously “change[s] the joke and slip[s] the yoke” (TuSmith, 2006, p.245). In the middle of a poetic description of a boat gliding on a peaceful sea, the narrator comes up with: “Chains binding you do not rattle and bump in the night. They are fragile as a spider’s web, delicate as its eggs” (Wideman, 1987, p.204). Freedom then is easily attainable provided the chained victim is willing to engage in the act of self-liberation. This is the message Reuben stands for and transmits. The visual identification of Reuben to Legba can be extended to the resemblance of the puny trailer where he receives his visitors to Legba’s shrine.

### **1.1.2 Reuben’s trailer**

Reuben is in the image of Legba who fades and dissolves into the decorum of junctions and roadside in cities and villages along the coastline of West Africa. He becomes almost invisible unless you plan specially to seek him. The narrative presents Reuben’s trailer as a central fixture which lends its soul to the Homewood neighborhood. Its description is most akin, in all respects, to this commonest scene of Legba shrines in the West African landscape. Reuben’s “raggedy trailer been there so long and weeds growing all around it you pay it no mind. Like tires and broken bottles and garbage people dump round there where the trailer sits” (Wideman, 1987, p.5).

At the middle of streets, at roadsides, at junctions, in public places in southern Benin, Togo and Nigeria one commonest vision encountered is that of small and low-roofed Legba shrines in front of which, sometimes, his celebrants squat, chanting, with heaps of indescribable rotting filth of animal sacrifices, ritual kit, and other litters, piling up, inside and outside. It is in this environment that Legba the jester is said to feel the happiest and most comfortable.

Kwansa, on her first visit, feels jammed in Reuben's doll trailer. She has no air to breath. There is no room to move and "the walls, the low ceiling, squeeze her" (Wideman, 1987, p.5). As for Wally, he has to "to stoop to enter" (Wideman, 1987, p.35) and then "squeeze" himself in (Wideman, 1987, p.36). Reuben's trailer is so tiny that entering it is likened to getting through the needle's eye. The resemblance between Reuben's trailer and Legba's shrine in size is extended to the acutely distinct image of untidiness and disorder. In the slovenly shrine of the joker and trickster god Legba, the picture one sees is that of fresh or weeks-old leaks of palm oil, cracked blood, carcasses of decaying animal sacrifices, amulets, black, white and red hand-spun threads, rolled doll-sized mats, grossly carved wooden statuettes, flies, lizards, junk, hotchpotch of unimaginable mixtures. It is in the same disorderly heap of filth that Reuben sprawls in his trailer:

Didn't have any notion where most of it came from... A mess was what it was. Different each time he looked. Junk piling up faster than he used it, discarded it. When had he begun collecting such nonsense? A rag, a bone, a hank of hair. Ancient grains of rice, feathers, stones, a plastic baggie of grave dirt, a string of jingle bells, leaves, dried insects, pebbles of colored glass, seashells, bits of broken mirror, needles and thread, more stones. He'd sift through and discover something he'd never seen before. As if deep down in the bottom of the box, a stew percolated, the ingredients churning and turning and propagating new ingredients. (Wideman, 1987, p.69)

It is to be expected that the same distinctive odor, sometimes bitter-sweet stench distinctive of Legba shrines, emanates from this junk which Reuben collects, further likening his trailer to Legba shrines.

Unwashed, funky. The little man hides his dirty socks in here. His nasty underwear and dirty shirts somewhere in heaps. Rusty slits for window....Kind of room you get in and don't want to put your hands on nothing, rub up against nothing. Piles of boxes. Yellow papers everywhere. A ratty kinda couch nobody would sit on less they's close to death. (Wideman, 1987, p.5) ...Always smelled like bug spray inside the trailer. Kills-Em-Dead perfuming every nook and cranny. Roaches not dying, though... Stink of roach spray and the buzz of them snoring (p.36)

The resemblance in size and view is thus reinforced by the olfactory sense. "Smell, Stephen Casmier writes, offers an alternative model of memory" from the visual (TuSmith & Byerman, 2006, p.195). The resort to this alternative model of physical representation, the olfactory sense, to mediate cultural memory, frees the African American from the visual, photographic representation which categorizes him/her as black and therefore inferior. Indeed, the atmosphere of stench, apart from evoking the African deity, may be analyzed as opposed to the rigidity of the visual race paradigm which classifies the black person as inferior and pushes him/her out into the margin. In a postmodernist posture of refusal of order, cleanliness and categorization, Reuben accepts and blends the used to the new, mixes objects of high with those of little value, the most important with the least important. Reuben does not cling to objects because they have an unquestionable usefulness in the present, but he clings to them and cherishes them because they have that power of bringing him back to the past. This past, for him, is idyllic: "what had been, [...] a lost time when he had been more, and the more was better" (Wideman, 1987, p.65). That is why he preciously preserves "exhausted yellow pads, inkless souvenir pens, cuff links that had lost their mates, paper clips, pennies, matchbooks from overpriced, far-flung restaurants" (Wideman, 1987, p.65). These things are as much precious to him as the image of his twin brother, as he puts them all in the same file box.

## **2 Reuben's Presence in his Community**

### **2.1 Reuben's Relation to his "Twin" Brother**

Reuben thinks that his life is halved by the disappearance of his twin brother. "Always he had heard only one heart, strong, firm, its beat a fire within him, warming, pumping light. Then the sound was halved. Two hearts beating, the slightest syncopation, his brother or himself off by a quarter beat as he discovered he was two, not one" (Wideman, 1987, p.64).

Reuben harbors an obsessional and paranoid attachment to a twin brother he is sure he had in a previous life, a brother whom he has lost to prison forever. Reuben's experience mirrors Wideman's own feeling of responsibility and guilt for his younger brother Robby who took the wrong path in life, eventually committed a murder, and got sentenced to prison for life. Reuben's commitment to his brother kept in "a vast, gray prison in a cell too small for a dog, from which he'd never be released" (Wideman, 1987, p.65), and whose body he pledges to keep chained as a statuette around his neck as long as he is alive, articulates the responsibility of each black man to his kin. The practice of representing deceased twins in statuettes and carrying them around everywhere to keep their memories alive is a widespread practice in Fon and Yoruba cultural areas which strangely emerges in *Reuben* to express mutual obligation to the memory of lost kindred. Reuben fashions his brother alive in prison but paradoxically encapsulates him in a cultural expression of death and permanent loss. This brings closer together the two concepts of prison and death.

The immediacy of prison/death to Reuben is reinforced by this that his brother has no other name than Reuben. His intimacy to the duality of prison/death is closer than the experience he would have through mere "twinness". His brother's otherness merges with his own ego and reinforces his urge to watch over him. Still the weight of that "singularly ugly" brother, "utility and worth questionable" (Wideman, 1987, p.65) for Reuben to bear is heavy, as the easiest way for the black intellectual, lucky enough to have made it, is to dissolve into whiteness, or blind his eyes in individualism. Disowning the murderer, drug dealer, gangster, and violent criminal brother is a quick and easy solution. But Reuben understands that the scourge which plagues his black siblings and sends millions of African Americans rotting into detention facilities is his too. Prison cuts into every single black family, snatching away a relative, a loved one. Reuben sees his own freedom as a deferred prison sentence, so he will never be free. His twin brother is nothing but a "reflection of himself"(Wideman, 1987, p.65):

Perhaps he'd lost a precious part of himself forever. A loss Reuben needed his brother to heal. All those lives he'd lived would not restore the missing part; he needed his brother to complete a Reuben larger than both of them. He needed his brother's eyes to see around corners, just as his brother needed Reuben's oversize crippled fingers to worry the clasp each morning. His brother's glowing eyes could see through stone, X-ray eyes piercing to the heart of the matter. Reuben's failing parts much less flashy. Yet he taught his arthritic fingers to be doggedly loyal. Doing what had to be done to keep his own twin safe, close. Remembering, trying to atone for so much forgetting. Sloth. Fear. For so much missed. (Wideman, 1987, p.68)

Reuben's "split personality" goes further than the extension of his self into just a single twin brother. Like Legba, he is connection, wholeness, and therefore the link between present, past and future, and all the various parts of present, "doubles, twins, *other*[emphasis mine] lives he might or might not have lived" (Wideman, 1987, p.170). As expressed in photographer Muybridge's images, he stands for "our immersion in a great sea, drowning, spewed forth endlessly [...] Each time different, each time the same. Many in the one; one in the many..." (Wideman, 1987, p.62).

Reuben's story (and mission) is similar to the story he tells of a woman whose son is torn into thousands of pieces scattered all around the earth. She mourns seven times seven years then gets up to gather the scattered parts of her son, breathes life into the body and spring and joy return again (Wideman, 1987, p.107). The woman he speaks of is Africa, and the morsels of the son scattered around the world are the children of Africa scattered in the Diaspora. His "twin" brother he develops an obsessional mania about is the African sibling in general, whatever the hue of his complexion or the texture of his hair. Reuben's biblical eponym tried to scheme to save his younger brother Joseph. The most important characteristic of Reuben's conception of brotherhood goes beyond mere physical appearance and embraces all sons and daughters of Africa, scattered at the four corners of the globe. As he says, "your twin didn't have to live in a body exactly like yours. Maybe yes. Maybe no. Things that the eye can't see are what makes him your double" (Wideman, 1987, p.170). Reuben means to be the real son of Africa and the close and intimate "twin brother" of all Africans with whom he empathizes as if they were made of his own flesh and bones. Therefore, the role of reminding shared history which belongs in the realm of the "things that the eye can't see", nurturing that history through narratives, is what makes collective memory alive and makes us a people. As cultural memory is both a product of history and a construct nurtured through narratives of the self, collective memory dies without revivifying narratives. "Culture is simultaneously the fruit of a people's history and a determinant of history" (Ojo-Ade, 2009, p9).

History, as a conscious selection, and identity, are mutually generating, through narratives of the self. We are what we say we are. Stuart Hall defines racial identity as a “floating signifier which can be linked to other signifiers in a representation”, with a relational meaning that is constantly redefined across culture and time (1997). It is that redefinition which weaves the strands of cultural identity, constantly represented, articulated in language. This necessary articulation, however, is based on the premise, like Proust says, that narratives have an enacting power, the ability to engender a life of flesh and bone: “le miracle supreme de la transubstantiation des qualités irrationnelles de la matière et de la vie dans les mots humains”, that is to say “the supreme miracle of the transubstantiation of the irrational qualities of matter and life into human words” (Genette, 1966, p.142).

Reuben usually puts as first step to his action the evocation of African deities and cosmology, and in those African religious frames, he entrenches his action. Before he looks into Kwansa Park’s affair, he decides to “start [emphasis mine] things [this]way”: evoking the Dogon sage story of the genesis: “the mist, then woman, then the word” (Wideman, 1987, p.18). Once again, before he starts studying the pile of papers on his desk, he evokes the Egyptian god “Thoth, patron of scribes” (Wideman, 1987, p.67). Reuben gives primacy to African divinities and religious rituals in his cultural representation, in helping his community’s poorest out of “pesky troubles” and leading them to find a sense to life. His most powerful symbols of cultural expression are religious.

Religion is paramount in the myths Reuben makes, although obviously, these religious rituals and divinities serve no observable function in the success of the legal steps he must take. Those myths are necessary, first and foremost, for the negotiation of cultural survival. The loss of religious connection is a threat to cultural identity and survival. Ojo-Ade writes that the [foreign] Christian religion is the chain with which the West has enthralled African minds: “Christianity is sophisticated slavery” (2009, p.31). Reuben, in his capacity as a “legal representative”, running in the same vein, several times evokes the ancient Egyptian divinity Thoth, “patron of scribes” (Wideman, 1987, p.67), “the Great inkspotter and Inkblotter” (Wideman, 1987, p.68). In fact, Reuben serves just as an alibi for the writer to construct this religiously marked cultural frame, whose importance, all in all, supersedes Reuben and Kwansa’s narrative.

Reuben serves the purpose of installing the decorum propitious to the expression of cultural and religious values conducive to welfare and development, since “National liberation is necessarily an act of culture” (Ojo-Ade, 2009, p.9). Some scholars do contend the importance of the return to traditional religions in the African Diaspora as pivotal in the expression of their cultural identity. Ojo-Ade asserts in *Color and culture in literature*:

In Africa today, Christianity has become a vector of culture. It is significant that while many sons and daughters of Africa are still wading in the baptismal waters of Christian civilization, their kin across the seas are making gargantuan efforts to return home. The reason is simple: the continental African, as a result of his experience of colonialism, has not lost all notion of authenticity and has not been dehumanized as the enslaved. On the contrary, the African of the Diaspora, in slavery, has experienced white hell. De-personalisation, de-cultration, de-humanisation, in essence, super-Christianisation, through slavery. (2009, p.31)

The ultimate solution for the “de-personalisation, de-cultration, and de-humanisation” lies in the return to African original values and a politics of cultural resistance to brainwashing and oppression. Cultural re-centeredness is said to be *sine qua none* for the economic and political development of Africa and its diaspora. These culturally nurturing narratives meant for resistance against westernization is what Wideman calls “father stories.” They serve in “establishing origins and through them legitimizing claims of ownership, of occupancy and identity” (1994, p.63).

The sense of identity, as conceived of by Reuben, is achieved only in full unity. It is in this vein that Reuben’s mission in the narrative is to find the abducted child Cudjoe and to bring him back to his mother, an allegory of reuniting all the scattered children of Africa to the motherland, Africa. However, as the narrative trails along toward its end, after his own humiliating sojourn in prison, Reuben grows pessimistic at the success of his mission to save Cudjoe. His fervor and enthusiasm decline into despair and anguish. It is necessary to understand that two parallel narratives are polysemically superimposed, woven into one. The surface narrative is Reuben rescuing Kwansa’s son Cudjoe. This hides and serves as metaphor for the second narrative: that of the African divinity depicted under the attributes of Legba, set out to gather the morsels of the scattered body of Africa’s son(s).

A Freudian conflict emerges however between the “pleasure principle,” i.e. what Reuben would have liked, finding Cudjoe and bringing him back to his mother, and the “reality principle”, his failure in face of an almighty legal and political system which catches him himself and sends him to prison. He is bailed out by his friend Wally. But his humiliating arrest debases him and deprives him of the legitimacy to stand as a “lawyer” and intermediary. The reality of “power relations” finds its way through Reuben and Kwansa’s story. The rest of the story, the recovery, is narrated in poetic language where all human presence disappear in an “oppressive silence...[in] the trick of invisibility” (Wideman, 1987, p.214):

Abeam of light fuses them [Cudjoe and Reuben]. We are momentarily blinded. We see nothing but a luminous, smoky shaft, as for an instant we are surrounded, drowned by light. The sides and backs of our skulls have dropped away. It’s scary, but seemly, doesn’t hurt. If others are in the room, they shouldn’t be. So we lose them and lose ourselves and ride the wave of light... (Wideman, 1987, p.215)

The poetic scene describing how Reuben finds Cudjoe looks dreamlike, in complete loss of touch with the tangible reality of his abduction, which at its opposite, is narrated in simple prose. There is rupture in the story line, a schizophrenic delusion, loss of touch with reality. Of course, *Reuben* complies with the usual narrative pattern of loss and finding. A child is abducted and it would be sad not to find him reunited to his mother. What seems quizzical though is that contradiction between the abduction of Cudjoe described in “sensible” down-to-earth prose, and his recovery presented in poetic language.

Freud defines Schizophrenia as involving “detachment from reality and a turning in on the self, with an excessive but loosely systematized production of fantasies” (Eagleton, 2008, p.138). He attributes the same affective but illogical associations which schizophrenic delusion creates between ideas to poetic language too: “Schizophrenic language has in this sense an interesting resemblance to poetry” (2008, p.138). It is the same delusion which shows through the description of Reuben finding Cudjoe. Maybe the meeting never really happens. The second narrative hiding behind the first, that of the African divinity - Legba - standing to collect all the scattered parts of the woman [Africa]’s son, is consequently affected. The loss of hope seeps to the surface, evidenced by the omniscient narrator’s tirade:

You know..that they’ve stolen you and stolen the women from home and the only way home again is on beetle’s back [after death], a journey like this, far from home as this, the scattered pieces of you rolled in a ball, the ball rolling as this broad river rolls toward the sea, your gimpy-legged funeral barge inching forward, scratching its mark in sand till wind seals the wound. You know what you’ve known forever, that the sea carries you till it tires of you and the wind buoys you till it wearies of your weight and then the drowning, the falling through space till there is a last dark corner where you crouch like a seed crumbling, the scales dropping away, the bandages dry as a camel dung... (Wideman, 1987, p.204)

Reuben knows that the redemptive journey back home alive for the wholeness of Africa’s children is impossible save through imagination and subverting narratives of identity. So, Cudjoe’s homecoming may, as well, be a poetic lie that the narrator tells. The black writer knows very well that the original peace and order of things, ancestral Africa, can never be restored. The body of the lady’s son is scattered at the four corners of the word, some parts mutilated and destroyed. The body maybe will never be whole again. The politics engaged in is that of mourning, at realizing that the Sankofa will never succeed in recreating the Maat again. The role of the Trickster, telling “good lies”, is what we readers get “tripped up in” (Wideman, 1987, p.100)

## **2.2 Reuben’s Esoteric Social Mission**

The novel stages Kwansa who asks for Reuben’s legal assistance not to have her young son Cudjoe taken away by his rich father. At the end of the novel, Reuben finds the abducted boy and sets out to lead him to his mother. Still, what approach he adopts, how he goes about it to find Cudjoe, is not clear. Where Ruben collects the boy is unknown. How he finds his way to the place the boy is been kept, the role Ruben plays in the legal system to find Cudjoe are not discussed. Reuben just appears in front of the boy.

In the same vein as with Cudjoe, no clear picture is given of how Reuben, as a legal advisor, manages in the judicial system to provide his assistance to his other clients. He is nonetheless credited with being able to do little less than everything to the down-and-outs:

Peace bond, bail bond, divorce, drunk and disorderly, something somebody stole from you, somebody catch you stealing from them, child support, a will, a birth certificate, driver's license suspended or applied for, permit to tear down or build, paper to put people away or free them – for as long as anybody could remember Reuben had been performing these tricks for the poor and worse than poor in Homewood. (Wideman, 1987, p.2)

The levels of the judicial administration on which he directly intervenes, his university law credentials, are not clear. Reuben saves his clients through arcane scheming and bargains. When Kwansa first comes to see him, Reuben gives his consultation like an Ifa priest's divination, with incantations, Reuben states: "Certain steps must be taken. Papers filed, judgement rendered, hearings. There's a process. A routine. There's always a procedure. One thing must be done after another in a certain order, a certain sequence. That's the law. The way it works" (Wideman, 1987, p.11). He evokes another like esoteric ritual when Wally asks him: "Tell me something first. Who are you? What are you? You called me your client. Client of what? What do you call yourself doing, Reuben? Who do you think you are?" Reuben replies that he is a "*quid pro quo*" bargainer who, through "a sort of sleight of hand," makes the "the mountain come to Reuben – whatever it takes," and "presto chango!" (Wideman, 1987, p.197). In concrete terms, he proves to be nothing more than a charlatan-handyman since in practice, there is hardly anything consistent and permanent in this to make up a job. Reuben is an ugly and shriveled gnome who offers an arcane quasi-legal aid, managing his assistance service like a set of magic rituals, with, in addition, an ubiquitous presence: "Reuben's shingle is his presence, all day, every day, *whenever* he's needed (emphasis mine). Reuben's practice is being Reuben, taking care of business being Reuben brings" (Wideman, 1987, p.132). As a legal trickster, he helps his clients duck the law. He summons Egyptian divinities and African lore, pronounces incantations, and performs rituals. But even his own existence looks cabalistic. Does Reuben really exist? Isn't he just an illusory presence without substance? Reuben resembles a "role" played out in a dreamlike postmodernist plotline, healing black bodies and minds through magical incantations, and connecting children to mothers, Africans to Africa. This is what he thinks of his own role:

Turns out I'm sort of go-between. I stand between my clients and their problems. I intercede, let them step aside awhile. I take the weight. For a while at least ease a bit of their burden. I invite my clients to depend on me, lean on me. When I retire from the picture, things are often better. And if they're not, I'm available to blame. I'm not the agency of change but I'm my clients' bona fide agent. (Wideman, 1987, p.198)

### 2.2.1 Kwansa's and Cudjoe

Kwansa's relation to Reuben evidences the inevitability of resorting to Reuben's assistance to iron out the desperate situation in which she finds herself. Kwansa crystalizes the down-and-out African American female crushed under the double weight of blackness and femininity. She is there to voice the need for help in the left-out black community of Homewood. She takes pride in her new self-given name. She changes her birth given name Lilly [read Lilly white] into Kwansa, the Swahili harvest celebration. She is poor, illiterate, disorientated, parentless, forsaken by her grandmother when she falls pregnant. Her living condition which condemns her to prostitution to survive open her eyes to her real debased condition of black female in a white world: being black, and furthermore, female, is the very expression of vulnerability. "She wished away the blackness of her skin. [...] If you had that special look, the bright skin, the good hair they [men] liked, you could have things your way sometimes" (Wideman, 1987, p.57). As her former lover Waddell abducts their son Cudjoe, the only solution she has is to call for Reuben's assistance. She comes to Reuben's trailer with no more than ten dollars as fees (Wideman, 1987, p.10). Reuben's hands are what she needs to heal her pain and reunite her son Cudjoe to her.

### 2.2.2 Wally's Internal Voice and Connection to the Past

Wally is a former basketball player turned recruiter. Like Reuben, he is an intellectual. But at analysis, Wally is the reversed version of all the values Reuben stands for.

He suffers white oppression and has developed his own “Europhobic” stance he calls “abstract hate”.

It’s a deep hate you can’t get over no matter what happens. You can live among them, thrive, love one or two, but you never move beyond the abstract part. It’s in your gut and there’s righteous cause for it to be there, so it stays there, like a sickness, a cancer, unless you root it out. [...] Inside, the hate still eating away. Abstract...Invisible but strong enough to choke you down. (Wideman, 1987, pp.116-117)

Wally fancies, or maybe he really does it – the narrative is not clear about this – wantonly stabbing a white man in a public toilet to quench his thirst. (Wideman, 1987, p.43) Is Wally’s murder imagination or reality? Wally Carter lives a fragmented, disjointed life, secluded from his black community. He even grows schizophrenic about his own memory which he plays like a cassette. Reuben becomes the mediator through which he can remember his own past: “Wally needed Reuben that first year at the university. So many questions he wanted to ask someone like Reuben... talking to Reuben could have been like talking to himself that first year at college” (Wideman, 1987, p.110). However, rather than re-immersing himself in his black community or catering to the needs of the most underprivileged of his community, Wally runs out of blackness and severs all connection to his Homewood community except from the one that he needs: Reuben. “His legs ache. If he falls asleep his legs will run him awake again. Remind him they never stop running. He scared them one day into fleeing from blackness, from having nothing, and now they never stop, don’t know how to stop” (Wideman, 1987, p.29).

### **3 Reuben’s Humiliation**

Reuben’s seamless cabalistic world topples as he is arrested and mercilessly dragged with Homewood people watching. He is imprisoned for illegal practice of the lawyer profession. Reuben’s imprisonment can be interpreted to be an attempt by the “white brotherhood” at destroying what Reuben symbolizes in Homewood, as he works against the system, helping his community to dodge the traps the American society sets on their narrow path. Reuben’s imprisonment is nothing more than a humiliation. Wally has him released with a bail set at its very modicum: hundred dollars. However, it is in prison that the revelation comes to Reuben as to the “hiding place” of his mythic twin brother: jail. Throughout the narrative, Reuben mourns the loss of this mythic brother whom he has never really known, but whose presence he feels as intimately as his own.

Wideman, in *Hiding Place*, outlines the irony of the prison located just two blocks up from the mortuary (p.38). The discovery that his lost twin brother is, but in prison, builds a direct relation between prison and death. The concept of prison is one of the major devices of the American system which thwarts hope for the black and directly leads to death. It is all the more so as once prison bars close behind you, they seal your life forever. Working one’s way out becomes impossible, which leaves you with only one choice: “You are free to die any time you choose” (Wideman, 1987, p.205). Not even Reuben can resist prison bars. Behind the bars, “Reuben didn’t sound like Reuben” anymore (Wideman, 1987, p.184). He loses his power and melts down. “Reuben would need all the days of his life to examine the black cell, become acquainted with the brother sealed there” (Wideman, 1987, p.66).

Structuralists postulate that the way human beings negotiate meaning, understand the world, and interpret reality is heavily dependent on language. Language shapes the world and its understanding. For Structuralists, “Reality was not reflected by language but produced by it: it was particular way of carving up the world which was deeply dependent on the sign-systems we had at our command, or more precisely which had us at theirs” (Eagleton, 2008, p.94). But as a tool of appraisal of reality, and therefore a leverage of power, often insidiously, but sometimes most obviously, language is worked out into a tool of domination and is fraught with ideologies. Literature is one field where the societal power relations and ideologies contained in language can be analyzed, to accrue meaning. On this account, Terry Eagleton contends that “The meaning of the text is not just an internal matter: it also inheres in the text’s relation to wider systems of meaning, to other texts, codes and norms in literature and society as a whole” (2008, p. 89).

As a matter of fact, the American dominant ideology expressed in literature reinforces the subjugation of black people. Toni Morrison gets it right, saying that “*Uncle Tom’s cabin* was written for Uncle Tom to read or be persuaded by” (1992, p.16). Hence, against the backdrop of mainstream American literature, the act of writing ancestral deities into literature, for the black writer, appears as a subversive act of reappropriation of agency in defining his/her own identity and in fighting oppressive ideologies.

The role of ideologies, according to Post-Structuralists, is to give intolerable social situations the innocuous seal of the 'natural': "It is one of the functions of ideology to 'naturalize' social reality, to make it seem as innocent and unchangeable as Nature itself" (Eagleton, 2008, p.117). Mainstream American culture, with its ideologies conveyed in literature, cannot conceive of fine and high cultural expression, and particularly literary expression, but as pertaining to European cultural references. Writing African ancestral deities into literature is an act of subversivity through which, speaking for their people, African American writers take action to redefine blackness in their own terms. By conjuring Legba in *Reuben*, Wideman underlines the necessity of projecting the world as seen and conceived of by black people. "As people and as individuals, Wideman says, if we don't jump into the breach, if we don't fight the battle of defining reality in our own terms, then somebody else will always come along and do it for us" (TuSmith, 1998, p.69). The author opens up new possibilities to voice the experience of the black person in America by staging Legba in his narrative:

The fact that I have the opportunity to tell it [the narrative] my way – that creates a little bit of space for me as a person, as an identity. We need to perform the stories. They'll inevitably be different because we bring different experiences to them... We have to feel that we have a legitimate right to perform stories...if you don't tell your own story, somebody else will tell it for you. They'll have an interest, they'll have a reason for telling it – and it won't come out quite the way you want it to come out. (TuSmith, 1998, p.122)

## Conclusion

*Reuben* may be seen as a long postmodernist poem in which the eponym engages on the journey in his communal past, delving into it to get the clay necessary for shaping the present and future conditions and identities of African people in general, and of African Americans in particular. Eagleton writes that in literature, and especially in poetry, the meaning of the text accrues from what Lotman calls the "reader's 'horizon's of expectations'" (Eagleton, 2008, p.89). "By virtue of certain 'receptive codes' at his or her disposal, he writes, [the reader] identifies an element in the work as a 'device'; the device is not simply an internal feature but one perceived through a particular code and against a definite textual background"(2008,p.89). As a West African reader of *Reuben*, I acknowledge one of the major devices, if not the most important cultural and religious "marking" tool Wideman uses in characterizing Reuben is the West African deity of Legba.

Wideman creates a character who registers his action, the professional assistance he brings to his community, in the furrow of African cultural resistance and in African resistance culture. As a matter of course, it is mandatory no to let go of hope, reclining on the master narrative of Eurocentric America which breeds and nurtures African Americans in and for oppression. This is an obligation. Claude McKay wrote: "There is no white man who could write my book" (Ojo-Ade, 2009,p.VI). Prospero's version of the tale will always be different from Caliban's. As narratives breed life, fiction shapes reality, Wideman addresses black religious symbols to first shatter the collective unconscious of black castrated self and create redemptive myths and identity.

Some scholars contend that the greatest achievement of the white people which made black people most vulnerable is depriving them of their ancestral divinities, and converting them to Christianity. "Conversion here means far more than conversion to Christianity. [...]The real object of worship turned out to be neither Jesus Christ nor His Father, God, but Western man and Western civilization"(Williams, 1987, p.56). Reuben's myths and incantations do not always "make sense". But identity and cultural expression do not always "make sense" either. They fall more often within the expressive/poetic realm of feelings and emotions rather than in the referential language with an obviously 'sensible' content. That is what language Reuben, and by extension, Wideman, uses in his healing mission. The black writer's mission is to stay committed to his/her community. In oppression, his/her task is to create redemption narratives that show the richness of black history and culture. Wideman marks Reuben with the black ancestral religious entity of Legba. Lieven de Cauter, de Roo, and Vanhaesebrouck analyze the concept of subversivity as "a disruptive attitude that tries to create openings, possibilities in the 'closedness' of a system" (2011, p.6). Reuben embodies that subversive attitude which, mutatis mutandis, works at creating liberating openings for black people in the 'closedness' of the American system. The African cultural memory is alive in African American cultural expression and nurtures their narratives of redemption.

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