



## PERSISTENT SEARCH OF THE PROTAGONIST FOR IDENTITY IN BLACK COMMUNITY IN JOHN EDGAR WIDEMAN'S *SENT FOR YOU YESTERDAY*

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### ABSTRACT

Of the Homewood trilogy, *Sent for You Yesterday* is the last novel which appeared in 1983. Just as *The Lynchers* is the last novel of the early period, and it is the transitional shift from white perspective to the Homewood's black perspective, *Sent for You Yesterday* is the last of the Homewood trilogy, and it exhibits transitional shift from the Homewood's perspective to the full-fledged Homewood life and its representation in the form of traditional black culture. The main protagonist of *Sent for You Yesterday*, Doot, is again a black intellectual, who hears the black folk stories and forms his own subjective opinion on the music and literature of the black community. Moreover, Doot tries to relate to the black culture, and make himself an inseparable ingredient of the black tradition.

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### INTRODUCTION

In *Sent for You Yesterday*, Wideman creates a black intellectual, who tirelessly looks for a constructive role for himself in the growth and development of the community. The shift from the earlier books lies in the fact that, here in *Sent for You Yesterday*, the protagonist shows his acute desire to form a bridge between his alienated self and the family and the community in general. Thus, in the earlier books, the protagonists remained completely detached from the family and the community. They looked at the family and the community from the perspective of elite white. In general, they remained alienated. Their inclination towards the family and the community was gradual but steady. It is true that they were all in search of their self, family, and the community. But, then, they were in the preliminary stage of their search. They did not have well-defined idea of the self, family, and community. Their comprehensive faculty grew slowly. In *Sent for You Yesterday*, the

protagonist appears to have been nearing the destination he had been looking for inadvertently from the beginning. The change in the protagonist's outlook towards the family and the black community has been progressive from extreme alienation to becoming the black voice with participatory involvement in the family and the community affairs. The black intellectual makes his appearance in *A Glance Away* as an individual with the attitude of white elite, and becomes a regular member of the black community in *Damballah* located four books apart. And in *Sent for You Yesterday*, he comes before the reader as an inseparable member of the community, solicitous to prove his utility as an enthusiastic constituent.

The relentless search of the chief protagonist for the self, family, and the community which he had begun earlier is nearing his destination in *Sent for You Yesterday*. The novel presents a black intellectual, who has become very much a part of the black culture, and is enthusiastic to redefine the

tenets of the black tradition for the good of the community. He is no longer alien to the inherent black tradition despite his training in elite environment and with civilised white of Europe. Now, it has to be ascertained whether the black intellectual, with his unusual mind and training, can be of some help to the community, and if it is so, to what extent.

Wideman presents a black voicing through *Sent for You Yesterday*, that propels the black intellectual ahead into the black community and instigates him to analyse the age-old black tradition with connotational objective. The novel is, in fact, a record of the newly obtained knowledge that the black intellectual has achieved with regard to the black tradition, especially, the oral tradition. Newly acquired knowledge tempts the intellectual to regard the oral tradition as something on par with the personalised fiction. The black intellectual concludes that his understanding that all conceptions are reality is greatly personalised opinion, and cannot be generalised. Thus, he creates his own system of opinion to analyse the black tradition and the psychological behaviour of the community that the tradition assists. He makes the adherents of the black tradition realise the depth and reformative capacity of his emphasised opinion in order to make him indispensable for the community. Doot's subjective interpretation of the black tradition, therefore, becomes acceptable to the black community, and his pronunciation forms a creative basis for him to accept the tradition and his commitment endears him to the community.

As perceives, black music is the most powerful adhesive having capacity to work as greatest unifying tool in the entire structure of the black experience, individual or collective. Even in the chaotic ambiguity and noisy disorder, music exhibits its potential to bring in clarity and order. In particular, for an intellectual, music serves the purpose with its colourful abstractions far better than the words, written or spoken. And, in this respect, the protagonist of *Sent for You Yesterday* stands distantly apart from the protagonists of the earlier novels. Naturally, Doot stands as a distinctly visible person quite at variance with Cecil of *The Hurry Home*. Cecil symbolizes the confused and

erratic humanity of the modernist temperament with no strength to act and face the reality. He sticks to his world of fantasy standing miles away from the reality of the self, family, and the community. Though unconsciously, he creates an illusion that makes him believe that he can bring about a positive change in the format of reality. On the other hand, Doot always remains awake and conscious while creating his own subjective fictions. And this creation is not without purpose. He creates the personalised fictions that serve him in his pursuit of intellectual analysis. At the same time, these fictions fall into his hand as tools that he uses to get himself conditioned to the black tradition and the black community. Moreover, he puts the created fictions make himself indispensable for the family and the community.

Being a black intellectual, Doot has his own way of interpreting the community experience. It is a peculiar way of interpreting the experience, at least, for an intellectual, because his interpreting mode is greatly subjective, and beyond the comprehension of the common folks of the black community. And here lies the difference between John of *Damballah* and Doot. Whereas John, while interpreting the black experience, leaves the pessimism of the modern world, Doot gets into the periphery of the black community as a foreign element but adopts the black tradition with his eyes on the requirements and likings of the black people. This approach of Doot makes it convenient for him to help the black community as an integrated member, and, at the same time, continue his interpreting the traditional veracity of the community as an intellectual.

Black tradition is cyclic and globular. It moves backward and forward. Doot, after entering into the mainstream tradition of the black community, tries to comprehend the unifying capacity of folk music which moves through generations between the past and the present. It is always vibrant and alive in the past and past is nothing but the treasure-trove wherefrom the music emanates to enliven the present. And since Wideman is free from the extra baggage of modernist pessimism, he can take up the issues, complicated in tone and tenure, with much ease. Hence, it becomes comfortable for Wideman

to portray such characters, which survive and triumph only with the supportive attitude of the cultural tradition of the black community. Naturally, Wideman finds it much convenient to express himself in black voice.

Doot has assimilated himself in the traditional torrent of the black community, and is solicitous to engage himself constructively in the cultural flow of the black community. He wants to be an active and participatory constituent in the continuum of black culture. As a pall-bearer of black legacy, he is required to remain intellectual and march ahead from the base of intellectual prowess so as to allow his intellect to percolate down the spine of the black community.

Doot plays dual role. He is a protagonist experiencing the impact of most of the actions enunciated in the novel. In addition, he is a self-designated narrator. As a narrator, he has omnipresent observation, and as an activist he remains confined to a certain limit of action. Moreover, he continues to shift from being a first person to a first person adherent. In the beginning and the end, he presents himself as an indulgent narrator in the first person. And in the second section of the novel, he is an assertive activist with all round presence. Coleman writes:

He creates the most abstruse fictions when he drifts farthest into his omniscient posture. Participating as he does in the surface actions of the story as well as in the depths of its essence, Doot can be a part of the folk community in the present, as it tries to invoke the folk spirit of the past, and he can also create fictions and overall mythical reality that sustain him as an intellectual.<sup>1</sup>

Life and tradition are continuous flow that runs through a living and vibrant society. The epigraph to the present novel underlines this aspect of human association. The pastness retains itself through the present existences. Past is never an excluded and isolated entity. It keeps itself flowing through those who are the integral constituents of the present. In the same way, those present extract the juice of life from the past, otherwise they cannot "live [their] lives to the fullest". And Doot presents himself as a

linking entity that retains its vibrancy in the sustained tradition that keeps oscillating to and fro with regard to present and past.

Before the beginning of the first section of the novel, Wideman has attached a chapter "In Heaven with Brother Tate". It gives a picture of the black community that survives through all odds using varied tools and traditions. It may be a foreword to the main story. In the chapter, Brother is described to be talking to someone in the heaven about a dream that made him "fraid to open [his] mouth for sixteen years cause I knowed I'd hear that scream".<sup>2</sup> In fact, Brother and his companion are in inebriated state of mind because of wine they are consuming, and are talking in a lighter vein. The dream Brother is talking about is related to his being in heaven and the dream is frightful. The comic conversation is symbolic and metaphoric in two ways. First, it portrays Brother as a person who has the ability to rise above the realities of life. Secondly, it presents Brother as a man great improvisation, and as a man who has the ability to endure great difficulties of life without being heart-broken. And this individuality of Brother becomes a generalised trademark of the black tradition. The black community has cultivated the power of endurance, and has learnt the skill of survival amidst the most painful realities of life. Doot, in his relentless search for the self, family, and community, tries to be an integral part of this great tradition of improvisation. Therefore, he learns the indigenous language and traditional music the black community has kept close to its bosom for remaining erect as a human in the most trying circumstances.

Doot appears as a first person narrator in "The Return of Albert Wilkes", a chapter in the first section of the novel. In the beginning, Doot locates his position in the Homewood community by using the parameters of the past and the present antecedents. During this period, he forms a bridge between himself and Brother Tate. This bridge unites Doot with Brother Tate physically as well as spiritually. And here emerges the situation that propels Brother Tate at the core of the entire scheme of intellectual myth that Doot creates about the black individuals and their community. Brother

and Doot lie at different stratum of age-bracket. When Doot was merely five, Brother stopped speaking, and when he reached the age of twenty-one, Brother lost his life. Brother saw his son in the personality of Doot, and it was Brother who gave name, 'Doot', to him. Brother's son was of the same as Doot, and had succumbed to the injuries he had suffered from tragically in a conflagration. The tragedy occurred almost simultaneously with Brother's stopping talking. As the narrative reveals, Doot is "linked to Brother Tate by stories, by his memories of a dead son, by my own memories of a silent, seat-singing albino man who was my uncle's [Carl's] best friend".<sup>3</sup>

Doot begins his narrative from the time he was not even born. Most of the images and the events of the past, he recreates with the help of his own experiences and the also from the descriptions he has come across in the stories. As the narrative goes on, Brother and Carl are friendly companions going through the streets of Homewood John French, Carl's father. Freeda French, Carl's mother, is apprehensive about her husband's falling in trouble because of the arrival of his friend, Albert Wilkes, wanted in a criminal involvement in Homewood. Therefore, she asks Carl to go and find out where John is, and bring him back home. The description is a mix of abstract and concrete connotations. With his imaginative skill and innovative zeal, Doot presents a world of his grandmother's vision. He presents a point of view, in which real seems to be merging into the surreal. It is subjective in content, but it bears the notion of a general observation made by a community wife. Let us see an example of narrative's success in capturing the point of view of the lady. Freeda sees a strangely shaped bubble on her hand. The bubble diffracts the sun rays into different colours of a rainbow. The narrative continues:

My grandmother Freeda had been just a girl then. In that other room, that other world, enchanted by a soap bubble. She remembered its exact shape now. A long watermelon blister of soap quivering between her thumb and finger. Something had broken the spell, made her look away and the strange bubble had burst. She'd

never been able to recall what had distracted her from the little soapsuds' trick. But something had made her look away, and in that instant the bubble had popped. Gone before she could whisper her wish, set it free. She couldn't remember what had pulled her away, but it continued pulling, drawing her past the edges of herself. Since that day, whenever she looked away from something, she was never sure it would be there when she looked back. Alone in the downstairs of the half house on Cassina Way listening to dishwasher gurgle and burp down the sluggish drain she was afraid they would never return, not the girls [her daughters] sleeping at the top of the steps, not the man [her husband] nor the boy [Carl, her son] she sent to search for the man, not even the boy's white shadow or the shadow of herself, that dreamy part of herself just beyond the edge, not afraid to look away.<sup>4</sup>

For Freeda, God is the most important saviour, and family is the greatest anti-depressant. But Doot characterizes Freeda as a person who finds herself in a world least supportive, least satisfying and least splashy. She is portrayed as an individual who thinks that the entire world conspires to prevent her from enjoying the beauties and bounties of life. She suffers invariably from the feeling of threatened existence. The feeling of threat and insecurity is so powerful that the patronising impact of family and God is woefully neutralised. This way, Freeda appears to be entirely different from the protagonists of *Hiding Place* and *Damballah*, who access religiosity and other rituals to keep themselves abreast and aligned the black tradition of Homewood. Hence, despite Freeda's inclination towards God and attachment with the family, she finds herself longing for a defined self, a more potent family and patronising community. Her search continues.

Doot, thus, creates a narrative which deals with the black experience won through the power of music. It is the music that creates images, spectrum of seven colours on the soap bubble, and provides solace to

the distracted mind of the protagonists like Freeda. Coleman opines:

Music puts things in their place and makes them stay there, thereby eliminating the insecurity and uncertainty. Music is the language that, in a postmodernist context, brings certainty and security to an indeterminate experience. In the overall context of his myth, Doot will not be saying that black life and tradition are impoverished; rather, he will be choosing one specific aspect of the tradition, black music, to convey its sustaining essence, an essence he will cloak in his fictions.<sup>5</sup>

Attachment to the black tradition and its religiosity is so intense that the protagonists don't get enthused to enjoy anything else related to other tradition. The protagonists take secular insinuations, such as secular music, as something not capable of providing unifying spirituality. For instance, Freeda has no interest in hearing secular music, and even exhibits strong dislike for blues. Naturally, such protagonists may not subscribe to intellectual myth that Doot creates.

When Doot switches over to the role of third person narrator, he resumes the personality of an omniscient individual, and observes the events and eventualities, people and the personalities, and aims and overtures. He speaks of Brother Tate and Wilkes. As Doot narrates, Brother has ugly looks with white hair, white skin, and red eyes. Sometimes Brother's conduct becomes awful to Freeda, he remains integral to her life, and continues to enjoy her proximity even in his physical absence. Whenever she thinks of Brother, the memory of her mother, Gert, gets revived. It is equally true that Freeda does not appreciate most of the things that Brother does, and for which he is known in Homewood. But, it is also true that Brother continues to be an important part of her existence. In addition, it can also be said that Brother is a central figure in the life of Homewood.

Albert Wilkes is a character of disturbed attitude and unclear intentions. Throughout his course of action, he continues to define himself, his family, and also the community he belongs to. For about seven years, he remains away from the

hullabaloo of Homewood, and suddenly returns. The reason of his being away from Homewood lies in his criminal act that he committed years ago. It is because of a woman that he one day shot a white policeman dead, and ran away. Prior to the crime he committed, he was known for his musical prowess and for his expertise as a blues musician. The musical notes he played signify his relentless search for something missing in his life:

One more time. Somebody had named the notes, but nobody had named the silence between the notes. The emptiness, the space waiting for him that night seven years ago. Nobody ever would name it because it was emptiness and silence and the notes they named, the notes he played were just a way of tipping across it, of pretending you knew where you were, where you were going. Like his footsteps in the snow that night. Like the trail he tramped that was covered over as quickly as he made it.<sup>6</sup>

The protagonist, in this novel, associates the black experience with black music, and the black musician plays the role of an adhesive in the process of unification of the split structures in the ambivalent and undefinable reality of the black community. As the above quote signifies, Brother is integrated with Homewood and its tradition so rigidly that he cannot escape the reality of Homewood and its blackness, even if he endeavour hard to do so. As long as Brother is away from Homewood and its identity, he is nameless, deprived of familial intimacy, and without the sense of social belonging. Moreover, music is significant in another way also. It defines "emptiness" with meaningful connotation, and gives wordless expression to the experience of "silence". It is this music that gives proper shape to Freeda's experience, and fills her heart with the feeling of secured and meaningful existence. In fact, the experience of blackness is itself silent, and music gives an expression to it. To black existence, music is something "tipping across it, of pretending you knew where you were, where you were going". In the absence of brother and his music, Homewood and the black experience would have deprived of an

outlet to express their reality of silence. Coleman opines:

The emptiness and silence would overwhelm Homewood if Albert and his music did not exist. These ideas suggest a view of the indeterminacy of reality that undercuts the ability of language to organize and unify. Music is, perhaps, more abstract than language, and is consequently more suited, for the black intellectual at least, to carrying the abstract and indeterminate but rich essence of the black experience and tradition.<sup>7</sup>

Return of Wilkes after an interval of seven years fills his heart with mixed experience. In some way, Homewood appears to be familiarly the same old township with black community living in the ghettoised mind-frame. But, when he looks at the people around, he finds a changed or refined familiarity. He “believed he held every detail of Homewood exact in his memory, but now he wasn’t sure”.<sup>8</sup> However, he knew it well that it was bound to happen in long seven years. Time changes all that is old and familiar, and brings new parameters as substitutes. He had “been here before, [he] knew this was going to happen.”<sup>9</sup> Before his fleeing, he represented the music world of Homewood. He was the symbol of Homewood music. And when he was away from Homewood for so long, music occupied a place of honour and spiritual sanctity in his memory. However, with every passing moment, Homewood became an entity of dimmed experience, and music lost its place of paramountcy, and became a semi-forgotten entity that sustained his Homewood life.

But once he is back in Homewood, in Brother’s home the memory of old precious days becomes fresh and familiar. The old familiarity overwhelms him and he desire to go straightway to the piano and “begin playing the seven years away”.<sup>10</sup> He regains his old confidence, and finds himself potent enough to define his own self, his family, and the community through his music. He regains the old strength to fight out his “emptiness” and “silence”. Albert Wilkes communicates through his music. It is the music that gives shape to the world he belongs to. His fingers play on the musical instrument, and there appears a “moody

correspondence between what his fingers shape and what happens to the sky, the stars, and the moon”.<sup>11</sup>

Wideman tries to make a moot point through ‘music’. While away from Homewood, Albert feels lost in seclusion. He feels that he is deprived his self, family, and the community. During the long period of seven years, he has been relentlessly in search of the ground lost because of his one mistake of killing the white man. But, during this period of his absence the Homewood community has also remained devoid of its meaningful existence. So, the black community of Homewood too searches for Albert Wilkes who has the capacity to add meaning to the prosaic existence through his well-played music. John French, Albert’s bosom friend, feels that it is Albert’s music that makes the beauty of the world visible to the common eyes. And it is Albert’s music that makes a softening bridge between him and his wife, Freeda. French is so confident of the prowess of Albert’s that he thinks aimlessly scattered lives of Homewood can be reunited and reshaped by Albert’s music. After Albert’s return, the entire life of Homewood would change for the better, and it will become like the “good old days when Albert playing and Homewood hanging on every note”.<sup>12</sup> French believes that Albert’s music can reshape Homewood life like before, and make it lively, animate, and meaningful. During Albert’s absence, Homewood lived and sustained by the memory of Albert’s art of socialization. And now once Albert is back in Homewood, The town and the black community would get back the life and vibrancy of the past. Even during his absence, Albert kept his ghostly presence and made the people going their usual way. Moreover, during Albert’s absence, the people of Homewood moved like the machines working in the controlled atmosphere, and under a systematically controlled pattern. They were, then, ghosts moving around under a well-defined scheme without any enthusiastic overtures and vibrant liveliness. They appeared to be waiting for the arrival of Albert’s music to be taken back to the life and vibrancy. Therefore, the search of the people of Homewood was destined to culminate with the return of Albert and his music. And that was

imperative for re-enlivening the people and reviving the social fabric of Homewood. Let us see an illustration substantiate the rationale:

You could roll over in Hell and if there's a clock on the wall and it's saying four-thirty in the afternoon you can bet they doing what they always do that hour in the bucket of Blood. Nobody forgets, nobody worries, and nobody gets tired. Look around. Everybody busy, everybody in place. Albert Wilkes gone seven years but if he walks through the door this afternoon he'll know who to speak to, what to say, where to stand and nobody's hardly notice. Like he never left. Like he got a brother ... and that brother could hang around in Homewood and save Albert's place till Albert gets back. Almost see him sometimes. Albert's shadow moving around in the Bucket of Blood like a natural man. Nobody bothers him, nobody gets in his way. Wouldn't be the Bucket of Blood if they did. Wouldn't be Homewood if you couldn't hear Albert's music when you walking down the street.

So it wasn't so much a matter of missing Albert as it was a matter of having him around when he's gone. All those shadows and pieces of Albert moving through the bar but you can't call him over; you can't tap him on his shoulder because it's just that ghost holding his place till Albert gets back. Albert Wilkes around like that fine piano music around and it's not a matter of being gone but being here and being gone both. Like a tune you can start and hum some of but you can't get the best part, can't hum it through and finish it like Albert would.

Nobody this morning looks like they miss Albert Wilkes and nobody believe they might be the one missing tomorrow.... [But] if you counted back, used your toes and fingers a couple times to count the years, these bloods in this bucket all be down home, be in the cotton patch sweating for Massa. If you counted ahead a

short minute, touched your fingers and toes two or three times apiece all these boys be dead. All be lost as Albert's ghost haunting these walls if Albert doesn't come back.<sup>13</sup>

As the above quote exemplifies, Albert is the catalyst behind all movements of Homewood life. His absence from the community is as striking as his return after a gap of seven years. In his absence, the Homewood life flowed through its memory lanes where the spirit of Albert Wilkes continued to reside through his unforgettable musical notes that he had spread before his departure from the Homewood scene. And he comes back to the Homewood streets, the black people get back new lease of life soaked with hopes and happenings. Thus, Albert relentless search for the self, family, and community comes to a positive halt after he returns to Homewood. And the people of Homewood get back the source of inspiration for life, and something that has strength enough to motivate them back to the enthusiasm and liveliness. As the above quote suggests, Homewood is as important to Albert Wilkes as Albert Wilkes is to Homewood. Both complement to each other. Albert Wilkes is the most powerful cementing force between past, present, and future of the Homewood life.

The intensity of effort that Homewood and Albert exhibit during their search for each other is evident when French sees "shadow" of Albert in the Bucket of Blood in his absence, and Albert says that his return to Homewood is "like I was invisible" to the Homewood people. After his return to Homewood, nobody seems to be excessively excited because his invisible presence has always been experienced, and the event of his return passes practically unnoticed. His presence is strikingly noticed only when he picks up his piano at the residence of Brother Tate, and begins to play blues on it. And it becomes fatal for Homewood as well as Albert. It is because of the fact that it is the police that notices his presence in Brother Tate's house, and immediately shoots him dead.

Albert continues to live in Homewood through his music. His music has the power to renew the dead spirit of the community. His music has the strength to awaken the oppressed faculties of

Homewood people, and it also has ability to enliven Albert's spirit so much so that he can recognise his self, his family, and the community he claims to be his own:

But with the gift of his music that is the saving spirit of the community, with the gift of music that articulates his identity and is generally a source of insight and revelation, there comes a bitter fate of recognition. Albert embodies the core of the tradition in the black community, but in that role he attracts the deadly fury of white oppression, which is the major harmful force that, directly or indirectly, the supportive tradition allows black people to withstand.<sup>14</sup>

Albert is not the only protagonist who identifies himself with the music and tradition of the Homewood community. Again, he is not the only individual, who suffers at the hands of the white detractors for his being a flag-bearer of the tradition of the black community, and for being identified with the Homewood tradition. Moreover, he is not the last of the great sufferers because of their search for the identity in their own community. Even those who take up the flag of black tradition from Albert and his likes after their departure from the scene also remain vulnerable to physical torture and death at the hands of the oppressors, and it is merely because they have the gift of identifying with the people of the black community. In fact, it has become imperative upon the adherents of the black tradition to suffer and sacrifice. Those who have ability to carry forward the black tradition through music and other performing art are destined to make extreme sacrifices. And it is the mockery of fate that life and tradition perpetuate in Homewood only through such sacrifices. However, Albert and his music continue to inspire the people of Homewood even after his demise. And those who sacrifice continue to rule over the hearts of the people of Homewood even after they go into the other world. Hence, the endeavour to define oneself through art and music continues indefinitely, and the community remains enlivened.

In this regard, section two of the novel is very relevant. It is in this section that Brother Tate and

his adopted sister, Lucy Tate, take up the mantle to carry forward the legacy of Albert Wilkes. The chapter, "The Courting of Lucy Tate", deals with Albert's last music performance of his life in the house of Brother Tate after his return. Brother Tate and Lucy Tate were listening to the music when police entered the house and eliminated Albert from the physical world. While Albert plays on his piano, Brother Tate imitates him by moving his fingers as if his playing piano. As Lucy notices, Brother is "fidgeting beside me and moving his fingers like he's playing a piano so I said [to Albert], *play*. And Albert Wilkes did".<sup>15</sup> It is obvious to note that Albert has great influence on Lucy, and she is overwhelmed by his fascinating music. And as the imitative Brother reflects, he too is under the spell of Albert's music. Naturally, Brother and Lucy are the formidable carriers of Albert's legacy. And Lucy's first work as an inheritor of Albert's legacy is to pass the inheritance on to Doot's uncle, Carl. When Carl enters the dwelling place of Lucy, he observes the invisible presence of Albert Wilkes, because he feels he "landed in the footprints of Albert Wilkes". Carl realises that Brother Tate and Lucy are the medium through which music casts its spell on individuals. He further observes that their residence is "a haunted house full of chain-dragging, piano-playing ghosts".<sup>16</sup> When police shot Albert dead, a piece of his skull fell on the ground, which Lucy picked up and saved as a relic. This relic is symbolic of her being spiritual heir of Albert, and the carrier of his legacy. The symbolic piece serves as the unifying agent between Lucy and Carl when they initiate themselves into love. It was merely a bone-piece but invaluable for the couple, and looked like a "rare, white pebble from the grimy hillside where the trains run".<sup>17</sup> In almost all the Wideman's fiction, trains stand for danger in the enunciation of Homewood experience. Thus, the skull-piece is invaluable and rare, and it is found in the dangerous lanes of black reality. It symbolizes the paramountcy of Albert's legacy in the dark realms of the Homewood experience.

Brother Tate is another character who represents the traditional black left behind by Albert. And it is he who plays the role of a facilitator for the relationship between Carl and Lucy. He does it through his scat singing. Like Albert's piano-music,



Brother's scat-singing catalyses the process of love between Carl and Lucy to fruitful culmination. His scat-singing transforms silence into vocal expression and ambiguity into clarity in his efforts to impose meaning and significance on Homewood life. In the company of Carl and Lucy, he forms a microcosm of the black community of Homewood which needs an identity and a motive to live a sustained life. The Homewood community itself is a protagonist longing for a defined entity, with its own ways and culture which are denied to it by the oppressing forces since ages. Wideman portrays the community as a living entity ready to take up all challenges by using traditional canons. Brother represents that traditional spirit.

However, in its voyage to search for the self, a defined family-structure, and a traceable identity, the community meets many hurdles, and is required to get through them with the energy it has built through its spirit of endurance against oppression. The microcosmic community of Brother, Carl, and Lucy falls a prey to drug addiction in the post World War II scenario. But soon, Brother gets rid of marijuana, and makes Lucy stop consuming it any more. Brother could do it because he "was different from other people".<sup>18</sup> Brother, in fact, carries forward the community tradition from where Albert Wilkes had left it. Coleman writes:

As an embodiment of the powerful, traditional, saving spirit of black people, Brother is playing a more directly practical role in solving the problems of the black community than did Albert, his predecessor.<sup>19</sup>

The protagonists, from Albert to Brother to Doot, persist with their search for an identity, not only for themselves but also for their community. And they do so through the legacy Albert persisted with, and left for others to pursue. Albert takes up music to pursue his objective of defining a working tradition for the community's entitlement.

As the narrative reveals, Brother recreates Albert's music in 1941 at a tender age of twenty-one. The spontaneous recreation of traditional spirit through music places Brother at the high pedestal of community representative. Moreover, the spontaneity with which Brother succeeds in taking

up the mantle of Albert is amazing. Until Thursday, he watches with Lucy Albert play on his piano, and on Saturday, he recreates the same musical spirit at the Elks Club. Carl thinks that it was not Brother who played on piano, because he did not look "to see who it was"<sup>20</sup> creating music originally attributed to Albert. As Carl believes, it is traditional spirit that flows through music, and music itself chooses Albert and, later on, Brother for its medium of propagation.

For Brother, language of any sort, whether words or music is not the essential requisite to express his feelings. As Carl believes, Brother "said what he needed to say in his own way", and he "didn't need words".<sup>21</sup> The way he presents scatting music on the outset of the relationship between Carl and Lucy is testimony to his expertise as a proficient communicator. Moreover, the presentation on the Saturday night makes him a true adherent of Albert's legacy. Again, after the sad demise of his son, Junebug, in a conflagration, he stops playing music. Not only this, but he stops even talking. But that does not prevent him from his search for the traditional identity of his black community.

Doot's presence is felt in the second section, when he appears as a first-person narrator. From his own confession, it becomes evident that, instantly after his birth, he takes up the mantle to carry on the legacy of Albert and Brother. As he says, he "was born about six months before that evening in 1941 [when Brother played Albert's music]. So already I was inside the weave of voices, a thought, a way things might be seen and be said".<sup>22</sup> His apprenticeship under Brother's shadow makes him realise that he is integrated to Homewood community, and is affiliated to the musical tradition represented by Albert and, later, taken up by Brother. In fact, it is Brother who gives Doot a scat word, "Doot", for his name. As Coleman opines, "Doot is very much a physical part of the community in the past and present and is also closely tied to Brother Tate and Albert Wilkes as cultural figures in the community".<sup>23</sup> And it is merely a coincidence that Carl asks Doot to fill the void created by Brother's sad demise in the threesome relationship with Lucy.

Junebug exhibits the capability to carry on the Brother's legacy. He hums to the musical tune of

scat music. But his white features produce the feeling of jealousy in the minds of his brothers and sisters, who eliminate him by pushing him into fire after dousing him with kerosene. It is true that Albert's death is caused by the oppressive attitude of the whites, while Junebug dies of jealousy of his people. But it is also true that both of them are black with extraordinary genius. Brutal murder of Junebug at the hands of his own people put the community to blight and blame. Brother stops talking and playing music, and Lucy, Carl and Brother stoop to be dope-addicts. Junebug's death underlines the horrible realities of the black community. Coleman writes:

Junebug's story is a part of the intellectual myth that focuses heavily on the tragedy of the black community and shows horrible realities of black life severely testing the ability of the traditional spirit of music to provide the strengths, insights, and revelations able to sustain and revivify the community.<sup>24</sup>

Junebug's mother, Samantha, is another protagonist who lives for a mission but ends up in a mental asylum. She has strong desire to strengthen the black community by populating the entire world with the black kids. However, she gives birth to Junebug, an albino, although she never had any familiarity with a fair-skinned man white or black. Death of Junebug by extreme violence perpetrated on him by his own brothers and sisters cast terrible impact on her psyche, and Samantha retires to the state of insanity.

Brother's problem is that he has always to look for a mirror to see his own face. And, since does not have an identity of his own, he relentlessly looks for it. He defines himself as the carrier of Albert's legacy. In the dream sequence, he sees himself as Albert "coming back to Homewood ... until the lights went out ..., the doors slammed ..., the bodies began crashing into him ..., the screaming began".<sup>25</sup> Brother, as Albert, creates the same frenzy with his music that Albert created earlier. And the music creates atmosphere in which people could forget their horrible black experiences and find ways to lead sustained lives.

To Brother, Albert is guide, philosopher, and friend. Albert is almost a prophet for Brother. And, as customary with the prophets, Albert must give utmost sacrifice for his people. It is this attitude of Brother towards Albert that makes him go to the police and tell about the presence of Albert in Tate's house, and the policeman shoots Albert dead:

Albert Wilkes's life was hanging on him like a skin to be shed, a skin he couldn't shake off, so it was squeezing, choking all his other lives. It would kill him forever if he didn't shrug it off, so he ran from the living room and up Tioga to Homewood and Frankstown and said to a white policeman he'd never seen before that Albert Wilkes was back.<sup>26</sup>

Thus, the search of Albert Wilkes for the self and the community comes to an abrupt end, and thereafter Brother and Junebug take up the charge to continue the search. In fine, Brother and Junebug take birth out of the coffin of Albert Wilkes, and persist with the traditional spirit of the black community and the legacy left behind by Albert, the ambassador of the black experience.

After the death of Junebug, Brother's search for the self and the family becomes more intensely evident. He becomes almost cynical, and goes on narrating a story to his dead son:

Listen, son. Listen, Junebug. It all starts up again in you. You are in me and I am in you so it never stops. As long as I am, there's you. As long as there's you, I am. It never stops. Nothing stops. We just get tired and can't see no further. Our eyes get cloudy. They close and we can't see no further. But it don't stop.<sup>27</sup>

About sixteen years after the death of Junebug, in 1962, Brother dies. At the time of his death, Brother is transformed into the spirit of the reality of Homewood life. In his life, he did what was needed, and spoke what he thought fit. At the time of the setting hours, he has a little time to play "the scare game [with the train] one more time [before he died]. Teach Junebug wasn't nothing to be afraid of. Teach them all [in Homewood]."<sup>28</sup>

Brother's story rests on the surreal level as long as it remains a part of the Doot's fiction.

However, it becomes a living episode dealing with routine life of the Homewood community, and Doot picks up the thread from Brother's life to become an activist by himself in the black community. In all this propagation of traditional outflow, Lucy has silently remained a pivotal character. She is, in fact, courted not only by Carl, but also by the Homewood tradition. Her centrality is certainly defined by the Homewood tradition importantly represented by Albert and Brother's music. The narrative says, "Albert Wilke's song so familiar because everything she's ever heard is in it, all the songs and voices she's ever heard, but everything is new and fresh because his music joined things, blended them so you follow one note and then it splits and shimmers and spills the thousand notes it took to make the note whole, the silences within the note, the voices and songs".<sup>29</sup> Lucy has strong feeling for the Homewood tradition that brings the black life to glare of the world in its entirety. It is true that she does not have the gift of musical skill as do Albert and Brother, but she has ability to assimilate her person into the black tradition of Homewood more meaningfully than any other protagonist.

Lucy was an orphan and so was Brother. It was Lucy who introduced Brother to Tate family, and made him a member an integral part of the Homewood community. Brother was, then, a nameless boy without an identity, without a family, and without a community to associate himself with. Brother's relentless search for a name, and a family could meet a fruitful pause only through Lucy, his big sister, although she was younger in age.

Lucy was also instrumental in facilitating an avenue Brother could walk through to exhibit his potential as a formidable member of the community. In order to accelerate the pace of his search for the self and the family, Brother too had been tirelessly endeavouring. He had drawn pictures of the Homewood ancestry, which won him instant name and fame in the Homewood community as, later, his music did:

[Looking at his drawings] was like listening to people who can really sing or play an instrument. Doesn't matter what they play or sing, they put you in it and carry you away. Carl's mother and father, Albert

Wilkes, the Tates. All the good old people and old times. She could see Brother's hand, pale as the paper, moving across each sheet. Like the magic hands of the old-time healers. See him laying on his white hands and sees through them to the old Homewood streets, the people coming to life at his touch.<sup>30</sup>

### Conclusion

Like the whole ancestry of Homewood, Brother is not a person to give up his efforts of searching for the self and the family. He continues his efforts, and, to some extent, succeeds. The initial settlers of Homewood were "solid, real", and it is because of their endeavour that made Homewood "real once". Brother, in all faculties, is similar to the old folks. Like the initial settlers, Brother decides to live life in his own way, and on his own terms. Even he chooses his own way to die.

Doot has been very curious know about Brother and his legacy, and, at the end, we find him occupying the same chair in Tate house Brother once sat on. Doot is prepared to carry forward the search from where Brother had left. The entire set up is ready to make him take up the mantle: "The piano, spotlighted on an empty stage, waits for someone to materialize from the dark corners of the room and play".<sup>31</sup> From the shadows of the stage and surrounded by the "pattern of the light and darkness",<sup>32</sup> emerges Doot to affirm, with confidence, here "I am". And the relentless search goes on.

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