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The Writers' Forum: John Wideman

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John Wideman

I'd like to call your attention to the fact that this is Saturday afternoon in the good ole U. S. of A., and that in cities all over this country, and in some small towns also, there will be many young black men waking up with knots upside their heads, with a terrible drug or alcohol hangover, with charges against them that are going to influence and destroy the rest of their lives, and you won't hear them talking; they don't have a voice. That's why I'm reminding you of their predicament this Saturday. And in some futile gesture, I'll dedicate these remarks to that particular group of voiceless people. And the other side of that is this: there will be many black women waking up in this country who are connected to those men in intimate ways, and their lives will be suffering a blight as well.

In my fiction, I work with language all the time, and I'm going to speak rather narrowly about language now. Since we're treated as marginal—politically, economically, and culturally—African-American writers have a special vexing stake in reforming, revitalizing the American imagination. History is a cage, a conundrum we must escape or resolve before our art can go freely about its business. As has always been the case in order to break into print, we must be prepared to deal with the extra-literary forces that have conspired to keep us silent; for our stories, novels, and poems will continue to be treated just as marginally as our lives. Editors know that their jobs depend upon purveying images the public recognizes and approves, so they resist our fictions and almost never choose those which transcend stereotypes and threaten to expose the fantasies of superiority, the bedrock lies and brute force that sustain the majority's power over the "other." Framed in foreign inimicable contexts, our stories appear at best as exotic slices of life and local color, at worst as ghettoized irrelevancies. However, as Sembène reminds us, the battle for acceptance into the European-American mainstream must not obscure our primary responsibility to express ourselves fully, truly, to ourselves, and to the generations that follow. We must both invent and achieve an audience—the audience of fathers, mothers, sisters, brothers, and children who share with us and need the alphabet of African-derived cultures. When we remember our roots—the social conditions, slavery, oppression, marginality, and the expressive resources we employ to cope with these conditions, the counter-reality we elaborate through art—when we don't allow ourselves to be distracted, that is, we keep telling the truth which brought us into being—when we remember the necessity of remaining human, defining human in our own terms, resisting those destructive definitions in the master's tongue, attitudes, and art, then our tradition remains alive, a referent, a repository of value, money we can take to the bank.

Afro-American traditions contain the memory of a hard unclean break with the African past. This partially accounts for key postures that are subversive, disruptive, disjunctive. To the brutality that once ripped us away and now tries to rip us apart, we turn a stylized mask of indifference, of malleability, a core of iron silent refusal while our feet, *feet, feet* dance to another beat. I look for and cherish this in our fiction.

Is there any difference between sitting in at an all-white lunch counter and an

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African-American writer composing a story in English? What's the fate of a black story in a white world of white stories? How do we break out of the dangerous circle of majority-controlled publishing houses, distributors, critics, editors, readers, and reconnect with our primary audience? Vernacular language is not enough. Integration is not enough. If what a writer wants is freedom of expression, then somehow that larger goal must be addressed implicitly and explicitly in our fiction. A story should contain clues that align it with tradition and critique traditions, that establish the new space it requires, demands, appropriates, and that hint at how it may bring forth other things like itself where these others have, will, and are coming from. This does not mean defining criteria for admitting stories into some ideologically sound privileged category, but seeking conditions that maximize the possibility of free, original expression. We must continue inventing our stories—our lives—expressing, not sacrificing, the double and triple African consciousness that is our heritage.

Black music illuminates the glories and pitfalls, the possibility of integrity, how artists nourished by shared cultural roots can prove again and again that even though they are moving through raindrops, they don't have to get soaked. Their art signifies they are in the storm, but not of it. Black music is a moveable feast, wedded to modern technology. It illustrates the power of African-derived art to change the world. What lessons are transferable to the realm of literature? Is musical language freer, less inscribed with the historical baggage of European hegemony, exploitation, racism? Is it practical within the forms and frequencies of this instrument—written English—to roll back history, those negative accretions, those iron bars, and "White Only" signs that steal one's voice, one's breath away? Our fiction can express the dialectic, the tension, the conversation, the warfare of competing versions of reality the English language contains. One crucial first step may be recognizing that African/European, black/white, either/or perceptions of the tensions within language are woefully inadequate. Start by taking nothing for granted, giving nothing away. Study the language, the way our historians have begun to comb the past. Contest, contest. Return junk mail to sender. Call into question the language's complacencies about itself. At the level of spelling and grammar, how language is taught to our children, but also deeper, its sounds. Decode its coded pretensions to legitimacy, gentility, exclusivity, seniority, logic. Unveil chaos within the patterns of certainty. Restate issues and paradigms so they are not simply the old race problem relexified. Whose language is this, anyway?

Martin Bernal, in *Black Athena*, has traced the link between European theories of race and language, how 19th-century models of language development parallel, buttress, and reinforce hierarchical concepts of race and culture—the same text we're using now. He examines how social sciences—the soft core posing as the hard core of academic humanities curricula—were tainted at their inception by racist assumptions and agendas, how romantic linguistic theory was used as a tool to "prove" the superiority of the West. And he shows how uncritical absorption of certain hallowed tenets of western thought is like participating in your own lynching. Be prepared to critique any call for back-to-basics in light of the research Bernal gathers and summarizes. The great lie that systems of thought are pure, universal, uncontaminated by cultural bias continues to be brought forth by the "killer B's"—people like Bush and Bennett—for public

consumption. Whose great books—in whose interests—must be read? Whose stories should be told? By whom? To what ends?

Language grows and changes; we should study the dynamics that allow individual speakers to learn a language, to adapt it to the infinite geography of their inner imaginative worlds and of their outer social play, as well as the constant intercourse of both. The writer can love language and also keep it at arm's length as a medium, foregrounding its arbitrariness, its treacherousness, never calling it his/her own, never completely identifying with it, but making intimate claims by exploring what it can do, what it could do, if the writer has patience, luck, skill and practices, **p**ractices, *p*ractices. In it, but not of it, and that stance produces bodies of enabling legislation, a grammar of nuanced tensions, incompatibilities, opens doors and windows that not only dramatize the stance itself, but implicate the medium. This language I'm using constantly pulls in many directions at once, and unless we keep alert, keep fighting the undertow, acknowledge the currents going my way and every other damn way, I drown. I'm not alone but not separate either. Any voice I accomplish is really many voices, and the most powerful voices are always steeped in unutterable silences, the silences of our ancestors, and children denied a voice in this land. A story is a formula for extracting meaning from chaos, a handful of water we scoop up to recall an ocean. We need readers who are willing to be co-conspirators. It's at this level of primal encounter that we must operate in order to reclaim the language. The hidden subjects are always: what are we saying when we use this language? Where does it come from? Where do I come from? Where do we meet and how shall I name this meeting place? What is food? What is eating? Why do people go to lunch counters? Black music offers a counter-integrative model because it poses fundamental questions about music and fills us with the thrill of knowing yes, *y*es the answers and the questions are still up for grabs, and my, **m**y answers and questions count at least as much—and maybe more—than anyone else's.