

“The Whiteness Underneath the Nigger”: Albinism and Blackness in John Edgar Wideman’s Sent for You Yesterday

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Knew he was a ghost first time he come to my door. He stands in the doorway. A white blackman. He watches her dance. Kids out in the yard playing so she’s dancing alone, humming a song her feet follow. She’d never seen a ghost before. Brother Tate had passed her a hundred times on the street and he was part of Homewood like the storefronts and trees, but in her doorway the albino was different. She knew his name and knew he didn’t talk much. She’d heard people say he was feeble-minded and crazy. Nothing she’d heard or seen accounted for him standing silent as the moon grinning in her doorway. If she looked away he’d be gone so she smiled back at him and beckoned him into her dance. (Wideman, Sent for You Yesterday 131)

Brother Tate, the albino in John Edgar Wideman’s novel Sent for You Yesterday (1983), is in many respects an exemplary literary figure. In a society such as the American one, in which the word “color” has itself become a synonym for “race”—for example, in the positive “in-group” designation “people of color” or in the dichotomy “Whites”/“Colored”—the absence of all color makes the body into something transparent and radically open to interpretation. Wideman’s novel focuses on the anthropological and ideological question of the meaning of “colorfulness” and “colorlessness” for the identity of those who bear these labels, in that he sketches out an African-American community, in the middle of which the paradox of a *white blackman* resides. In this way, Wideman tests the treatment of radical difference in the midst of one’s own culture. The use of free indirect discourse—a characteristic of the “speakerly text” (Gates 191)—grants Wideman a view of the albino from many perspectives, which renders clear how subjectively and divergently his “otherness” is perceived.

Sent for You Yesterday is the third part of Wideman’s Homewood trilogy. Like both other volumes, Hiding Place and Damballah, it was first published as a separate edition. The associative, fragmentary structure and the constant change of perspectives and narrative voices in the *stream of consciousness* style represents a characteristic of Wideman’s work, which does not assume a “coherent,” closed narrative.¹ Therefore it is legitimate to focus on the significance of one character alone, as I will do here, without discussing the text as a whole.

With regard to Brother Tate, the association, current in African-American culture, that (ethnic) whiteness and (epidermic) colorlessness are connected, is not to be dismissed. The connotations that “colorful” means lively, vivid and full of variety, or that “colorless,” on the other hand, means dull and uninteresting, are to be taken into account here. Ralph Ellison’s statement in Invisible Man, that whiteness “is not a color but the lack of one” (577), reappears as an intertextual reference in Wideman’s description

¹Concerning Wideman’s narrative techniques, see Rushdy.

of the albino; his "lack of color" makes him "less nigger and more nigger at the same time" (17). Brother Tate is "more nigger" as far as he serves as an example that membership to an ethnic group can not be tied to skin tone, but rather is primarily cultural. Wideman depicts—even more radically than in so-called "color-line fiction," where a light skinned protagonist "passes" for white²—the extent to which a concept of "races" that rests on the visibility and unambiguity of skin tones must inevitably break down, in that Brother lacks the actual characteristic but nevertheless qualifies, unasked, as a member of the group.

It is evident that the status and the abundant functions of (skin) "color" in African-American literature go far beyond a conventional scheme of color symbolism³ or the mediation of individual characteristics. Always at stake are the questionable racial identities of the figures and the social hierarchies and judgments connected with skin tones. While the heroes and heroines in early texts were often very light-complexioned "mulattos"—what was justly criticized and labeled by Alice Walker as intraracial "colorism" (290)—very dark-complexioned protagonists make more frequent appearances in the novels of the last few decades, especially in the literature of female authors. There has been a conscious attempt to establish blackness and African features as positive aesthetic and sensual categories and to expose the desire for lighter skin as a "color fetish."⁴ Wideman, in his own way, contributes to this tendency and to the investigation into the "blackness of blackness" (as Ellison calls it).

The "one-drop rule" passed during the era of slavery proclaims that according to the law, every American possessing a single drop of "black blood" qualifies as "colored." What is indicated through the metaphor of blood is that the person has at the very least some distant African ancestors. The dichotomous logic that pretends to refer to differentiable "skin colors" goes in fact far beyond a visual epistemology, such that "color" becomes a bare construct of difference. Even today there is no legal concept of biraciality in the United States. As Russell, Wilson and Hall explain,

Depending on the state, biracial offspring automatically acquire the race of either the mother, the father, the minority parent or the black parent. Although a few states do not adhere strictly to the one-drop rule, an infant's physical appearance is rarely taken into consideration, and no state gives adults the right to change their original race designation, even if they feel they have been categorized incorrectly. (78-79)⁵

Every subject is unambiguously classified. The concepts "black" and "white" establish a binary structure of thinking (and of *seeing*) which—in the words of Robyn Wiegman—brings an "epidermal hierarchy" into force. This "equates the racial body with a perceptible blackness, while defining, in its

²In these texts, especially popular at the turn of the century and in the first decades of this century, a *Quadroon* or *Octoroon* (someone with a quarter or an eighth, respectively, of "black blood") consciously passes himself or herself off as "white" and denies his or her African ancestors in order to attain a higher social status.

³For an attempt (albeit unsuccessful) at such an analysis, see Lange.

⁴On this issue, see Morrison, "Black Matters" (23); see also Lindberg-Seyerstedt.

⁵On the one-drop rule, see also Williamson (1-4); also Gatewood (2444-49).

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absence, whiteness as whatever an African blackness is not" (8-9). Whether this "blackness" is in fact *perceptible* remains a question. Frantz Fanon, in Black Skin, White Masks, goes so far as to say that the individual body schema is replaced by a "racial epidermal schema" in the course of the subject's socialization; in the individual's consciousness, the skin ultimately stands synecdochically for the entire identity of a person.

In Sent for You Yesterday, a consciousness of being "inside the skin" is repeatedly thematized, for example when Brother looks like he is "dead in that bag of white skin" (36), when his son Junebug is "traveling in a bag of skin" (145), or when Junebug's siblings "run around black and shining in their skins" (141). In these descriptions the skin becomes something that involuntarily encompasses, shelters, but also captures, the subject; it inevitably determines the individual being. As Wideman elsewhere observes, skin color itself becomes a prison, as "[c]olor can be a cage and color consciousness can become a terminal condition" (qtd. in Riley 67). Skin is the primary agency which individuates people and molds an enclosed world "around" them. Thus, the narrator-figure, John Lawson, stresses, in describing the street where he grew up, that skin (and its individual color) is the first and most fundamental thing that separates the people there from one another:

The life in Cassina Way was a world apart from Homewood and Homewood a world apart from Pittsburgh and Pittsburgh was the North, a world apart from the South, and all those people crowded in Cassina Way carried the seeds of these worlds inside their skins, black, brown and gold and ivory skin which was the first world setting them apart. (21)

In this world of brown and black shades, Brother Tate is an outcast, "ugly as sin" with his skin, "wrinkled like a plucked chicken" or "colorless pie dough" (36).

With the defamation to which Brother and his son Junebug are exposed, Wideman reaches back into a long cultural history of exclusion. Especially in African, South American, and Indian cultures—that is to say, in those in which a flagrant "lack of color" is immediately striking to the eye—albinos have been traditionally subjected to special superstitions and myths. They were viewed as superhuman in many religions, and normal social rules did not apply to them. Thus they were often forbidden to marry and were cast out of society or even killed immediately after birth. The relationship to them fluctuated between amazement or privileged treatment and shame or disdain (especially on behalf of the parents)—because it was assumed either that they stood under special, divine protection, or that they were the living dead (Robins 180-82).

In early Western anthropological discourse, it was assumed that albinos only appeared in non-European cultures. It was even for some time believed that they constituted a separate race. A connection to the pigment-lacking people of European, white culture was not proposed for many centuries. In a 1777 volume of Buffon's Histoire Naturelle, the thesis that albinism is only an individual variant within the species—a "genetic, biochemical disorder," as one says today—appeared for the first time. Not until this point was the analogy to the same phenomenon among Europeans

recognized; albinism was from then on ruled out of the discussion on "races" (Kutzer 205-217).

In spite of the demystification of the *colorlessness* of the skin, which accompanied the scientific findings concerning the occurrence of albinos as well as the causes of their lack of pigment, the anxieties and uncertainties evoked by the birth of such a child are not fully gone from the world, as Wideman vividly shows. Not coincidentally, Brother grows up with adoptive parents; his son Junebug (an albino as well) is finally cast out of the community of his siblings and, at the age of five, cruelly burned by them. Despite the trauma of giving birth to a child from whom "the color has been drained," Junebug's mother, "a coal-black beautiful woman named Samantha" (17), tries to understand the hatred of her other children toward the outsider. She explains her rejection of the little brother by the difficulty of even looking at the albino, let alone of recognizing him as related:

It's just children scared by something they ain't never seen. Junebug is a warm lump against her shoulder. A part of herself drained of color, strangely aglow. Her children don't understand yet. Perhaps they can't see him. Perhaps they look through his transparent skin and see only the pillow on which she's propped his head. She lowers her gaze to his pale, wrinkled skin, his pink eyes, then stares across him to their dark faces. (138)

As Samantha saw Brother for the first time, she believed he was a ghost or revenant standing at the door (see the citation at the beginning of the essay). Wideman is possibly implicitly playing here on the slang expression "spook."⁶ By depicting a *white blackman* in this way, the inherent irony of designating a man who is actually black as white is reversed to such an extent that the literal meaning is suddenly re-established. Despite the lack of color and his ghostlike appearance, Samantha recognizes the unambiguously African expressions on his face when he stands before her: "He was white, a color she hated, yet nigger, the blackest, purest kind stamped on his features" (131). Although she consciously chose only the blackest men as her lovers ("because in her Ark she wanted pure African children" [134]), Brother still becomes her lover on that same day. The contact with his colorless skin becomes an ambivalent experience for Samantha, not free of anxiety and disgust:

She could see through his skin. No organs inside, just a reddish kind of mist, a fog instead of heart and liver and lungs. She was afraid his white sweat would stain her body. [...] As soon as he left she inspected every square inch of her glossy, black skin in the piece of mirror hung on the bathroom door. (134)

The irrational fear that Brother's "white" sweat could stick to her (an ironic turn of the defamatory notion that *dark* skin "washes off") leads Samantha to inspect every spot of her shining, black skin after he is gone.

On the following day, she goes to the public library and looks up everything about "Melanin" and "Disorders of Melanin Pigmentation" in

⁶Sisney makes a similar connection regarding the famous opening of the prologue to Ellison's *Invisible Man*, where it is stated: "I am not a spook like those who haunted Edgar Alan Poe" (Sisney 82).

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order to put her mind at ease. She learns that the pigment-containing cells (the melanocytes) are of neuro-ectodermal origin (from the outer layer of the nucleus). Before the third month of pregnancy, the melanocytes move into the skin, between the epidermis and the dermis (the "epidermal-dermal junction", as Wideman calls it [134]), into the eyes, along the uveal tract and into the central nervous system, where they are deposited. From this information, Samantha derives a completely new theory of what *blackness* really is:

She read the words again, this time listening to their sound and dance and understood that melanocytes, the bearers of blackness, descended from royalty, from kings whose neural crest contains ostrich plumes, a lion's roar, the bright colors of jungle flowers. Even before birth, before the fetus was three month's old, the wanderlust of blackness sent melanocytes migrating through the mysterious terrain of the body. Blackness seeking a resting place, a home in the transparent baby. Blackness journeying to exotic places with strange-sounding names. [...] Blackness would come to rest in the eyes; blackness a way of seeing and being seen. [...] Blackness something to do with long journeys, and eyes, and being at the vibrating edge of things. (135)

Only after she has driven from her thoughts everything that she learned in school about the biological, rationalist models for skin color and racial difference, does Samantha come to the understanding that *blackness* is not more and not less than "a way of seeing and a way of being seen." Here, Wideman implies a liberating, African-American form of knowledge and understanding differing from the Western, enlightened concept of "objective racial differences." To speak of the "royalty" and "wanderlust of blackness" and of travel "to exotic places with strange-sounding names" is indeed actually a misinterpretation of the biological connections and terminology; on a symbolic level, however, this is simultaneously an implicit re-interpretation of the status of African-American identity within the dominant culture. It is a positive re-notation, in which qualities such as mobility, activity, and vitality—which are also not coincidentally concurrent with the connotations of "colorful"—are determined to be essentially *black* particularities.

As Samantha finally looks up "Disorders of Melanin Pigmentation," she is relieved to learn that Brother is "the healthy type" and that albinism is generally not contagious—thus that his lack of pigment is not a skin disease (like vitiligo):

Enough blackness in his body to counteract the runaway evil affecting his skin. Nothing in Brother to rub off on her, to transform her into one of those pinto-pony-looking people with white patches on their faces and arms, the vitiligo and phenylketonuria which were sicknesses, wars in the body between the forces of light and darkness. (136)

Despite his objective colorlessness, Brother possesses "enough blackness" within his body to offset the "running away" or "rubbing off" of his skin. Here it becomes clear that what Samantha defines as *blackness* represents most importantly a *metaphysical condition* that needs no visual manifestation.

Also, through the fact that not only Brother looks "white," but also his friend Carl French (a very light-complexioned "mulatto"), Wideman decodes

a binary, racial system that is exclusively based on visibility. Lucy Tate, Brother's sister and Carl's lover, describes how Carl and Brother looked as children:

Carl pale. Blue veins like a spiderweb on his tight bubble belly. Sometimes looked white as Brother. From a distance, looked like two white boys playing with a bunch of colored kids. Closer you would notice how Brother's skin was soft cellophane you could see through and Carl one of those light, bright, pretty Frenches like his fabulous sisters. (189)

Lucy's narration renders clear that what and whom one sees only depends on the observer's *distance*; while from far away both Brother and Carl look like "white" children, one recognizes only from close up that they are, firstly, not "white boys," and secondly, that there were great differences between them (especially regarding the *transparency* of the skin).

John French (Carl's father) wonders about whether there is an "original," first, fundamental color, on which all others are layered. While he waits outside for his friends at daybreak, he first looks at his work boots, blackened by shoe-polish and covered in countless spots, then studies the morning sky and finally relates the question to Brother's skin. At the base of the question lies implicitly—exactly because of its rhetorical detour—nothing less than the question of the origin of humanity: which is the "primary race"? At the same time, this sequence, like no other, renders clear the extent to which "color," in all dimensions of the concept in Wideman's text, represents in fact a *master trope* that structures the form and content of the novel.

What was the right color of the sky? The first color? Did it start one color before it began going through all these changes? Was it one thing or the other? Blue or white or black or the fire colors of dawn and sunset the first day it was sky? You could use a chisel on his shoes and never get down to the first color. Carl's friend Brother was like somebody had used a chisel on him. A chisel then sandpaper to get down to the whiteness underneath the nigger. Because the little bugger looked chipped clean. Down to the first color or no color at all. Skin like waxed paper you could see through. (62)

John French imagines that a white layer of skin is located *under* the dark skin pigments. This "whiteness underneath the nigger" is indeed identified as "the first color"; it is, however, not to be equated with the *whiteness* of the so-called "Whites," but rather, it actually possesses no color whatsoever. This form of *whiteness* as *colorlessness*, which is evident in Brother, could only be uncovered in a non-albino by "chiseling" at the color pigments. In this notion, color "lies" on neutrally imagined ground.

Wideman makes reference here to several cultural contexts. On the one hand, he refers to the fact, known since the polychromy debate of the 19th century, that the Greek statues were originally *colorful*; what we know today as completely white marble sculptures were actually figures coated in a colorful layer of paint—which very much complicates the question of the "origin"! On the other hand, the image implies, in a sarcastic manner, the popular, discriminatory notion that the darkness/blackness of people of

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African descent is plain, external "dirt," which could be washed off.⁷ Similarly, it is said explicitly in another passage that Brother looks "like soap" (125) and that "Brother was so easy to soak it had stopped being fun" (94). In Toni Morrison's *Sula*, a similar fantasy is found, that the blackness from Ajax's body could be rubbed off with a chamois, if only one would rub hard enough (130).

In the oldest scientific encyclopedias as well as in medical handbooks and dermatology textbooks, the question of the emergence of skin colors is principally discussed under the heading "Skin." Historically speaking, the search for the cause of the "black color" was already at the center of research from a very early time. Analogous to printing or painting, "white" skin was understood as a color-neutral screen or a blank page—a *tabula rasa*—whereas dark skin was seen as its painted or inscribed counterpart. "Colored" skin, as opposed to the "color-indifferent" skin of the Caucasian, was interpreted in Western discourses as *marked*; it was made into a deviant from a "neutral norm." As early as the 17th century, researchers made various attempts to destroy or remove color from black skin cells (and not to darken light skin cells, which would also have been possible). The pigments in the skin were determined to be "color-fast" in these experiments, when only the surrounding layers could be de-colored; the color could not be removed from the pigments themselves.⁸ An encyclopedia from the early 19th century states in an exemplary fashion that skin coloration emerges "as the oxygen in the air stimulates the Negro's blood, filled with carbon, to draw to the surface" and deposits it there "in the epidermis in irregular pellets held together by cell tissue." "Coloring" is described here as a chemical process (similar to oxidation) that is first complete after birth: "The Negro-fruit in the mother's body is not yet black, rather the newborn are first reddish, then become yellow, after that, dirty brown, and finally black" (Ersch and Gruber 205).⁹ The skin color of the "Negro" is described as a successively originating *discoloration* that only reaches its ultimate tone after exposure to air.

Such derogatory thinking toward dark skin as *discoloration* and *dirtiness* is kept in check by Wideman in his novel, in that he re-interprets blackness positively. Colorfulness is not understood as a form of degeneration, rather as a desirable and necessary "layer" for the existence of subjectivity. Brother, who lacks this subjectivizing layer, has no actual "core" of identity; he is a projection surface for the desires and anxieties of the others, just as he also lacks an individualizing name and does not express himself verbally. He is colorless as well as voiceless.

The notion that it is only the pigments which normally keep the gaze from *seeing through* the skin is central for the relation of the albinos to the other figures in the novel. Brother's "unsettling lack of color" (134) disturbs and frightens the people around him; on the other hand, a secret

⁷Cf. the illustrations from detergent and soap advertisements, in which a dark-complexioned person hands the cleaning product to the (already) white person, or a "white" attempts to wash or remove the color from a dark-complexioned person. Pieterse ironically calls this "Washing the Moor White" (195-98).

⁸See Mazzolini on this note.

⁹This is my translation.

fascination also surrounds the man with the transparent skin. John Lawson, Carl's nephew, retrospectively gives a detailed, subjective description of his uncle's light-complexioned friend—from a childhood perspective. He speaks of the anxiety, also mentioned by Samantha, of *seeing through him* and of the difficulty of even focusing a gaze on Brother:

If you looked closely Brother had no color. He was lighter than anybody else, so white was a word some people used to picture him, but he wasn't white, not white like snow or paper, not even white like the people who called us black. Depending on the time of day, on how much light was in the room, on how you were feeling when you ran into Brother Tate, his color changed. I was already a little afraid of him, afraid I'd see through him, under his skin, because there was no color to stop my eyes, no color which said there's a black man or a white man in front of you. I was afraid I'd see through that transparent envelope of skin to the bones and the guts of whatever he was. To see Brother I'd have to look away from where he was standing, focus on something safe and solid near him so that Brother would hover like the height of a mountain at the skittish edges of my vision. (15)

The pigments are that which would hold up the gaze and categorize a person in a dualistic racial schema. The presence of a *colorless black*, however, radicalizes the question of the locality of "race" in the body, which cannot be the skin, for Brother, even without the significant color, is considered to be an African-American from the viewpoint of the community. The classification as a white also fails, among other reasons because his skin is an "other" white, and the tone changes according to influence of light and the angle of the gaze.

There is yet one further level of cultural signification that plays a role in the interpretation of Brother from the other figures' viewpoints. It analogizes the presence of pigments with a psychical "shield," which protects one from seeing into some kind of inner "essence." Brother's lack of color, which leads to the fact that one unintentionally sees through his skin, is consequently also understood as a moment of fragility and a lack of substance. This is indicated by the fact that no "core" (like a "heart") becomes visible in the interior of the transparent man, but rather only an undefined mass. In one of the seldom sequences in which his own thoughts are reported, Brother himself wishes that he were able to conceal and protect his "nakedness," "the bare white" (174), from the gazes of the others.

A long physiognomic and literary Western tradition analogizes lightness and transparency of the skin with sensitivity and a positive *shining through of the emotions*. In literature, blushing, for example, which shows on the screen of the skin, or turning pale, are often supposed to indicate an honest, genuine, and "open" character. As the very dark skin, seemingly impenetrable (from a "white" perspective), does not visibly alter and is therefore not readable, it is often interpreted as *hiding*—thus, it becomes "hide" in the literal sense. Additionally, the fact that the concept "color" has its origin in the Latin "celare" (= to conceal) points to a collective notion of pigments in which they simultaneously protect and conceal. Wideman picks up such a strand of interpretation when he writes about Freeda French (Carl's mother):

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Her hand was brown as it ever got and that no browner than a cup of milk mixed with a tablespoon of coffee. Not even brown enough to hide the pink flush after it had been sloshing all morning in a sinkful of soap and dishes and pots and pans. (31)

Freeda's skin, which is too light to conceal its blushing, would qualify her to become a member of a "blue-vein society." Existing between the late 19th century and the middle of the 20th century, these elite clubs of the fair-complexioned Black upper class only took on members whose skin was fair enough to reveal one's blue veins. This intraracial racism, with its fixation on fair complexion, is indirectly parodied by Wideman, in that "the web of blue veins crisscrossing [Brother's] skull" (37) is described as just as unaesthetic and sickly as the "spiderweb" veins revealed on Carl's pale stomach (see Lucy's description above).

When the figure Tea Cake in Zora Neale Hurston's novel, Their Eyes Were Watching God, is called a "lucky man" by his friend because his wife, Janie, is so fair-complexioned that the bruises on her skin are immediately visible when he hits her (140-41), this is a further stereotype connected with fair skin; unlike black skin, one can leave marks on fair skin which bear witness to the power exercised over the stigmatized subject. In Sent for You Yesterday, on the other hand, the "blue bruises showing through so plain on [Junebug's] skin" (139), evidence of the abuse from his siblings, become for Samantha a painful manifestation of her inability to harmonize the feelings for her albino boy and for the other children, who hate him.

In early anthropological discourse, the thesis that black skin is "thicker" than white skin was repeatedly proposed; this corresponded with an entire arsenal of negative interpretations (especially of *numbness* and a *lack of sensitivity*) (Blankenburg 134). Wideman turns this notion around, in that he exposes fair skin as "too thin" and lacking in essence. He renders clear the extent to which not only the attributed color, but, in the end, the entire self- and other-interpretation of skin are socially labeled (as is its "thickness"). In Damballah, one of the other parts of the Homewood trilogy, this goes so far that it says of Orion, an African taken away to the U.S. as a slave: "he could feel the air of this strange land wearing out his skin, rubbing it thinner and thinner" (18).

Wideman treats the skin in an original and multi-layered way, which could only be introduced here to a limited extent, in terms of the albino, Brother Tate. Next to this central figure in particular, the ambivalent portrayals of other fair-complexioned protagonists, such as Lucy Tate and Carl French, indicate the degree to which Wideman not only pursues (by literary means) Toni Morrison's project of decoding the "denotative and connotative blackness that African peoples have come to signify" (Morrison, "Black Matters" 6), but at the same time critically examines the *whiteness of whiteness*.

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