Resisting the Frame-Up: *Philadelphia Fire* and the Liberated Voices of Ramona Africa and Margaret Jones

Casmier Stephen

Pour citer cet article

Casmier Stephen, « Resisting the Frame-Up: *Philadelphia Fire* and the Liberated Voices of Ramona Africa and Margaret Jones », *Cycnos*, vol. 19.2 (Droit & littérature), 2002, mis en ligne en 2021.
http://epi-revel.univ-cotedazur.fr/publication/item/920

Lien vers la notice http://epi-revel.univ-cotedazur.fr/publication/item/920
Lien du document http://epi-revel.univ-cotedazur.fr/cycnos/920.pdf

Cycnos, études anglophones
revue électronique éditée sur épi-Revel à Nice
ISSN 1765-3118 ISSN papier 0992-1893

AVERTISSEMENT

Les publications déposées sur la plate-forme épi-revel sont protégées par les dispositions générales du Code de la propriété intellectuelle. Conditions d'utilisation : respect du droit d'auteur et de la propriété intellectuelle.

L'accès aux références bibliographiques, au texte intégral, aux outils de recherche, au feuilletage de l'ensemble des revues est libre, cependant article, recension et autre contribution sont couvertes par le droit d'auteur et sont la propriété de leurs auteurs. Les utilisateurs doivent toujours associer à toute unité documentaire les éléments bibliographiques permettant de l'identifier correctement, notamment toujours faire mention du nom de l'auteur, du titre de l'article, de la revue et du site épi-revel. Ces mentions apparaissent sur la page de garde des documents sauvegardés ou imprimés par les utilisateurs. L'université Côte d'Azur est l'éditeur du portail épi-revel et à ce titre détient la propriété intellectuelle et les droits d'exploitation du site. L'exploitation du site à des fins commerciales ou publicitaires est interdite ainsi que toute diffusion massive du contenu ou modification des données sans l'accord des auteurs et de l'équipe d'épi-revel.

Le présent document a été numérisé à partir de la revue papier. Nous avons procédé à une reconnaissance automatique du texte sans correction manuelle ultérieure, ce qui peut générer des erreurs de transcription, de recherche ou de copie du texte associé au document.

EPI-REVEL
Revues électroniques de l'Université Côte d'Azur

Resisting the Frame Up: *Philadelphia Fire* and the Liberated Voices of Ramona Africa and Margaret Jones

Stephen Casmier *

A central problem of and problematic posed by the fiction and literary criticism of John Edgar Wideman revolves around what he has called the "frame" of African American oral testimony. Wideman first develops this notion in his 1977 essay titled "Defining the Black Voice in Fiction." According to Wideman: "One can view the evolution of the black voice in American literature as the attempts of various writers to free themselves from a frame which a priori devalues black speech" (p. 79). In this paper, I plan to argue that the contest that Wideman describes between the black voice in fiction and a written, official, silencing frame is what theorist Jean François Lyotard terms a *différend*. This différend is not only at the heart of a devaluation of African American testimony that has its roots in "modern discourse"; it is also the source of the historical and continued indifference of the American legal system to African American testimony. It was the catalyst for the 1985 police bombing of a Philadelphia home and the subsequent silencing through trial of Ramona Africa, the only adult survivor of this officially sanctioned massacre of eleven people. All of this, I argue, comes together in Wideman's own literary criticism and in two of his most important literary works: *Brothers and Keepers* (1984) and *Philadelphia Fire* (1990). In both texts, Wideman stages this différend and presents its resolution through a dialogue that breaches the boundaries of irreconcilable differences in its presentation of a liberated African American voice and a loving listener that accepts without question a humanity that has been outlawed, questioned, argued over and placed in dispute since the onset of the international slave trade.

* Saint Louis University, U.S.A.
E-mail: <casmiers@SLU.EDU> and <scasmier@aol.com>.

1. The Ritualistic Dance and Contest

In his 1985 essay "Charles Chesnutt and the WPA[1] Narratives: The Oral and Literate Roots of Afro-American Literature," Wideman presents the WPA slave testimonies as examples of early attempts by a black voice to "free" itself from a frame which also "devalues black speech." In this analysis, Wideman treats the slave testimonies, which manifest a tension between the oral testimony of the former slave and the written document of the white government employee, as an archetype of a contest between two cultures. Indeed, this contest is an important trope in African American literature. Wideman compares the interview to a type of ritualistic dance (p. 65). The dance involves a struggle for control and supremacy — to have the last word — on one side and the struggle to be heard on one's own terms on the other. It pits brute power and force against cunning. The former slaves must use all of their story telling ability to elude and outwit the framing of an all powerful interlocutor and scribe who has the final say on the structure, form and content of the record — the record of slavery — that he or she is constructing. Says Wideman:

> The whites, who have the advantage of establishing the outward forms of the dance, design the ritual to display their superiority, their dominance; the dance is a metaphor of their power. For the blacks who, like the whites, must perform for two audiences at once, the objective is to find room for maneuver within the rigid forms dictated by the whites, maneuver which allows space for private communication with the other black participants. (p. 65)

At stake in this dance is the very humanity of slaves and their descendents. Indeed, the frame the slave attempts to elude is one built by 500 years of pronouncements by philosophers, theologians, clerics, jurists and journalists proclaiming that the African is not a human being. It is what Cornel West calls the frame of "modern discourse." Modern discourse, says West in his book *Prophesy Deliverance!*, produced modern racism. "The idea of white supremacy is a major bowel unleashed by the structure of modern discourse, a significant secretion generated from the creative fusion of scientific investigation, Cartesian philosophy, and classical aesthetic and cultural norms" (p. 65). Within and through the frame of a rationality and literacy that inherently devalue the slave, the African attempts to establish his or her humanity, or, in the words of Henry Louis Gates, ascend the great chain of being, through oral and written testimony. "The slave wrote [...] to demonstrate his or her own membership in the human community," says Gates in his book *Signifying Monkey* (1988). For many, this is the implicit goal of

1 Works Progress Administration (editor's note).

African American literature as distinct from American literature — protest oppression and refute racism through asserting the humanity of the enslaved and their descendents. Thus, the written frame, as discussed by Wideman and elaborated by Lyotard in his development of the différend, is problematic. Ultimately, it works to produce and then silence victims who must argue against the proposition that they are not human through the same discourse (the same idiolect) that denied that humanity.

Such arguments have ultimately forced the enslaved and their descendants to negotiate a series of inversions in order to establish "what is not" — the "undetermined." They must argue that they are *not* not human. In *The Differend: Phrases in Dispute*, Jean-François Lyotard discusses the trap implicit in such inversions.

> The undetermined cannot be established. It is necessary that negation be the negation of a determination. This inversion of the tasks expected on one side and the other may suffice to transform the accused into a victim, if he or she does not have the right to criticize the prosecution, as we see in political trials. Kafka warned us about this. It is impossible to establish one's innocence, in and of itself. It is a nothingness. (p. 9)

In other words, the situation adopts the discourse of a legal trial with a perverse inversion of roles. Normally it is the role of the prosecution to establish facts (the referent) and the role of the defense to poke holes in the prosecution's arguments. The defense cannot assert that which has not been established. There is, in the words of Lyotard, no referent for this.

To put it simply, this is the situation of a slave who must argue for his or her humanity using the discourse of the courtroom, of trials, of judgments and of contests that can be won *and* lost. The absurdity of this situation is embodied by the statement of the man who once warned that one should never argue over his or her humanity. "Suppose you lose?" he asks. The very grammar of the word human places it outside the realm of argument and debate. Indeed, subjecting one genre of discourse to the incompatible rules of another — using it to limit and frame another — is how a différend arises. Says Lyotard:

> A case of différend between two parties takes place when the " regulation" of the conflict that opposes them is done in the idiom of one of the parties while the wrong suffered by the other is not signified in that idiom. (p. 9)

Lyotard uses as his primary example the survivors of Auschwitz who are faced with establishing an un-presupposed reality — the existence of gas chambers — before nefarious skeptics. "This is why it is up to the victims of extermination camps to prove that extermination. This is our

way of thinking that reality is not a given, but an occasion to require that establishment procedures be effectuated in regard to it."

A différend is therefore a type of frame-up. It occurs when an official who designs the interview and controls the record has the last word. Such an official imposes one version of reality over another without first coming into agreement with the witness, defendant or "victim" about what that reality is — what the referent is. Such a frame gives rise to the perfect crime, says Lyotard.

> Reciprocally, the "perfect crime" does not consist in killing the victim or the witnesses (that adds new crimes to the first one and aggravates the difficulty of effacing everything), but rather in obtaining the silence of the witness, the deafness of the judges, and the inconsistency (insanity) of the testimony. You neutralize the addressor, the addressee, and the sense of the testimony; then everything is as if there were no referent (no damages). If there is nobody to adduce the proof, nobody to admit it, and/or if the argument which upholds it is judged to be absurd, then the plaintiff is dismissed, the wrong he or she complains of cannot be attested. He or she becomes a victim. If he or she persists in invoking this wrong as if it existed, the others (addressor, addressee, expert commentator on the testimony) will easily be able to make him or her pass for mad. (p. 8)

2. State of Affairs for African Americans

The situation described by Lyotard has been the state of affairs for African Americans since the end of the Civil Rights Movement in the mid-1960s. On one side, the official discourse touts the declining significance of race justifying the rollback of affirmative action. Meanwhile, members of African American communities endure the systematic extermination of black radicals (culminating with the 1985 bombing of MOVE[2]); the war on drugs and the incarceration of hundreds of thousands of African American men (there are currently nearly 800,000 African American men in prison); SWAT[3] teams and the build up of an unprecedented amount of war-zone firepower in African American communities and the police brutalization and assassination of unarmed citizens in cities such as Los Angeles, New York and Cincinnati. The disparity between these two, irreconcilable visions of American race relations renders mute many of the people who reject the official position

2 Although capitalized, MOVE is not an acronym. It is the name taken by a Philadelphia back-to-nature group founded by Vincent Leaphart in th early 1970s.

3 SWAT is an acronym meaning Special Weapons and Tactics. It was first used in the early 1970s by the Los Angeles police department which used military style weapons and tactics to control crime and urban unrest.

because they are afraid of being judged insane or silly. Rappers, who describe the oppression and brutality, are dismissed because of their profanity, sexism and homophobia. Today's crop of black leaders, such as Kwame Mfume, the ubiquitous Jesse Jackson and the rotund Rev Al Sharpton are lampooned and caricatured for their opportunism and their hairdos — never mind their message. Even leftist journalists have an easy time calling topics such as the call for reparations "silly." According to the logic of contemporary common sense,[4] the black ghetto is a concentration of the dislocated and pathological because of the inferior nature of the people who live there — not because of racism or oppression. To argue against this would be to argue for a humanity that has not been established.

3. Ramona Africa

The silencing of African American testimony reached its zenith with the 1985 bombing of the house occupied by members of the MOVE organization and the subsequent trial of Ramona Africa. Before the bombing, journalists and judges easily labeled MOVE "silly," "bizarre," and "incomprehensible." Meanwhile the group refused to subject its humanity to argument as it used gestures and profane language to underscore and unveil the violence the state used against its members. Yet, in the post Black Power and pre-Rodney King era, few listened to or believed (or sympathized with) the complaints of MOVE members about police brutality (even after it was caught on television) and police frame-ups in a city once headed by a police commissioner turned mayor whose discourse and actions (according to another former mayor) assured whites that he knew "how to keep the blacks in their place" (Harry 96). Then, police dropped a bomb on the group and placed the only adult survivor of the massacre on trial.

In this context, the différend produced by the conflict between African American testimony and a silencing frame characterizes the trial of Ramona Africa, the only adult to survive the massacre and, ultimately, the only individual held accountable for what happened on May 13, 1985. Indeed, while no criminal charges were ever filed against any Philadelphia official for the massacre, the city began its trial of Ramona Africa on January 6, 1986. She was charged with aggravated assault and

4 In this paper, we accept Stuart Hall's reading of Antonio Gramsci's notion of common sense. Common sense, says Hall, refers to the way "philosophical currents enter into, modify and transform the practical everyday consciousness or popular thought of the masses" (p. 431). It is ultimately an ideological position based on the silting down of various fashionable philosophical positions.

simple assault against police officers, conspiracy, reckless endangerment, riot and resisting arrest. In effect, the same system that rapidly concocted charges against Ramona and MOVE members to oust them from their home before bombing it and killing eleven of its thirteen inhabitants was also the system that held Ramona Africa accountable for the crime. Such a trial is what Lyotard cites as a quintessential example of a différend because in such cases "the author of the damages turns out directly or indirectly to be one's judge" (p. 8).

Indeed, the trial of Ramona Africa had all the markings of a political trial and frame-up. Robin Wagner-Pacifici supports this notion in her book *Discourse and Destruction*. Wagner-Pacifici largely holds the city government responsible for the massacre. In dealing with MOVE, the government suffered from what she calls "discursive breakdowns." Indeed, the inability of the government to control and discursively grasp the challenges presented by MOVE resulted in a confused and dangerous understanding that merged legal and bureaucratic discourses with the hyper political and end oriented discourse of sentimentality and war.[5] Ultimately, this triggered the use of an overwhelming amount of deadly force against members of the group. Yet, rather than accept responsibility for its actions, the city attempted to transfer the blame by placing Ramona Africa on trial.

The trial allowed the city to avoid the issues of responsibility and truth as it placed Ramona Africa in the position of maintaining her innocence — something that we have called a nothingness. Thus, the trial effected an extraordinary (and perhaps unprecedented) inversion. The sole adult survivor of a massacre became a defendant — the only person criminally blamed for the massacre. As noted earlier, the role of a defendant is not to establish facts, but to punch holes in the prosecution's arguments. In the case of Ramona, the prosecution limited the case to establishing facts concerning her behavior before the police launched their assault. Thus, the actions of city officials and police — dropping a bomb, confining MOVE members to the burning building with gunfire, letting the fire burn out of control, mishandling and destroying the forensic evidence, and killing everything in the house that moved except for a woman and a child — were not established as the basic facts of the case. The legal frame erected around Ramona Africa required that she respond to its establishment of reality according to its rules and procedures — its idiolect. Had Ramona resisted arrest, participated in a conspiracy, endangered lives with her words and behavior, incited a riot, and assaulted police officers? The court only considered facts related to these questions.

5 Interestingly, Wagner-Pacifici titles one of her chapters, "Decarcerating Discourse."

Yet, Ramona Africa refused to behave and speak the language of the courtroom. Indeed, during her trial, Ramona Africa rejected a lawyer. She defended herself. This permitted her to do two things: it allowed her to speak for herself in her own language and it showed her rejection of the legal inversion characteristic of political trials. In short, it allowed her to question the prosecution and its motives.

By rejecting a lawyer, Ramona emphasized the importance of speech, an unframed voice and telling her own story. Again, Ramona Africa refused to allow someone to speak for her. She rejected an advocate. Instead, to the chagrin of the judge, the prosecution and the "expert commentators," Ramona Africa defended herself by giving speeches. In her speeches, she patently ignored the rules of the courtroom and legal discourse and, to a large extent, standard English. Said Africa:

> See, all those legal words, and words about rulings and courts, that means nothing to me. John Africa [the founding spirit of MOVE] has taught people to see things simply and clearly [...]. Now if you're telling me that any court procedure that you're bound by is in conflict with the truth, then you got the problem [...]. All right? The problem is that court proceeding, protocol, procedures are in conflict with the truth, and that is the issue.
>
> (Anderson, p. 346)

Through such speeches (that suffered endless objections), Africa offered the notion that the discourse of the courtroom was merely another idiolect that lacked the legitimacy to judge her case.

Indeed, as we have already noted, she altogether rejected the inversion implicit in her trial by rejecting legal representation. At one point, she even walked out of the courtroom. In the terminology of Lyotard, Ramona did not agree with the referent of a trial that she treated as a political trial. By acting as her own lawyer, she refused to acknowledge the legitimacy of the charges against her. Instead, she attempted to foreground the absence of charges against the police and government officials. In fact, Africa insisted upon "questioning the prosecution" and ultimately adopting herself the role of the prosecution with the goal of establishing the fact of the massacre and the culpability of the police and government officials. For instance, when a judge ordered her to question a witness according to the rules, she responded:

> All that protocol and procedure — I'm interested in getting the truth out here. All this issue about procedure and protocol, I'm saying, you know, that means nothing when my freedom is at stake, when I know my family was killed because of court procedure, because of police procedure and protocol.
>
> (Anderson, pp. 336–337)

Finally, she rejected the prosecution's referent when she stated what she felt was the true nature of a trial that attempted to hold her accountable for the bombing.

> See, I understand. I'm not on trial here. You are. You're on trial. The whole City of Philadelphia is on trial, and the whole world is watching. They are watching. See MOVE people been telling people since MOVE that it ain't no justice in these courtrooms.
> (Anderson, p. 345)

And though Ramona Africa repeatedly asked the judge to dismiss the charges against her the way another judge had dismissed charges against two policemen who publicly brutalized an unarmed MOVE member, she was convicted on rioting and conspiracy charges and sentenced to seven years in prison.

Yet, even upon her sentencing, Ramona Africa rejected the legitimacy of the trial and the whole discourse of judgments with its emphasis on wining and losing. After the massacre, there could be no winners.

> Well, one of the first things that I want to state about this so-called sentencing is that because of the teaching of John Africa [...]. I'm not hallucinating, that I'm being sentenced to death [...]. This is nothing but a formality. That's all it is [...] any time I'm taken into custody, denied my freedom, any time I'm denied the love and sensitivity of my family because they are murdered, I was sentenced. You know anything about waiting until a later point, waiting for trial is ridiculous, I was tried, convicted, and sentenced on May 13. (Anderson, p. 377)

4. Accepting Judgment

Although this analysis uses the legitimate, well researched, well grounded in Western philosophical tradition and intricately written work of French theorist Jean François Lyotard to understand the actions, gestures and discourse of Ramona Africa, such an analysis is neither immediately obvious nor possible. Indeed, without the efforts of poets such as Thaddeus Davis and novelists such as Alice Walker, Toni Cade Bambara and John Edgar Wideman, most of us would have accepted the judgment that this "pouting," shrill, unschooled, irrational, irresponsible black woman (who, according to one writer, "stands something under five feet tall and is thickset, her face an oval punctuated by thick glasses and wide broad lips," who wears "long and bulky" dreadlocks," cuffed blue jeans, tee-shirts and men's shoes)[6] brought it upon herself and got what she deserved. Everything about the representation and framing of

6 Anderson, pp. 190–191.

this woman by the American media told us this because most of these "expert commentators" embraced a version of reality where Ramona's first task was to subject her humanity to argument and judgment. Because she refused to make this argument by behaving normally — straightening her hair, wearing dresses and high heels, consuming processed foods, observing the rules and above all, speaking standard English and only using Black English to release tension and tell jokes in the manner of Oprah Winfrey — she was placed within a frame that judged her "absurd" and her testimony "insane." Such a judgment is supported by the MOVE Commission report, a document that Wagner-Pacifici calls the "putative master narrative" of the massacre (p. 21). This report does not include any testimony from the lone adult survivor of the massacre. Furthermore, even when Ramona was directly quoted, or allowed to speak her piece on television, it was done with the conviction that her demeanor, her unschooled speech and her "boilerplate rhetoric" (Boyette, p. 263) would give her away, revealing the irrationality, inconsistency, disconnectedness and incomprehensibility of her testimony. Attempts to render her ideas in indirect speech were caricatures. Even directly quoting her seemed as if it were done in the spirit of giving her enough rope with which to hang herself. Consequently, newspaper stories and other texts that indirectly and directly presented Ramona's testimony always lacked something that would have enabled us as readers and listeners to play the role of anything other than her impatient, disgruntled and disapproving judge.

5. Staging the Différend

Yet, as I stated earlier, poets and novelists have worked to rescue the testimony of people such as Ramona Africa from that silencing frame that not only " devalues black speech" but renders suspect both witness and testimony. These artists have used the power of both poetry and fiction to resolve the différend and liberate incarcerated voices through a transformation of the audience from judge into participants in what Lyotard has called a "living dialogue."

In one instance, such a transformation was effected by John Edgar Wideman through his biography *Brothers and Keepers* and its representations of the testimony of his imprisoned brother Robby. Wideman also used techniques developed for this non-fictional text in the novel *Philadelphia Fire* in representations of the speech of Margaret Jones, a Ramona Africa-type character. In both texts, Wideman stages a différend that ultimately undermines the original, silencing frame. This

staging has a *realing*[7] – or ontologically transgressive impact as it implicates, involves, displaces and transforms the reader.

As noted earlier, Wideman presented the WPA Slave testimonies as archetypes of texts that manifest the tension between a white interviewer who attempts to construct a narrative form that "a priori devalues black speech" and the former slave whose story must elude the frame. We have labeled this situation an example of a différend. *Philadelphia Fire* stages this différend through an interview between the novel's protagonist, Cudjoe and Margaret Jones, a former member of a MOVE-like group. Cudjoe is an African American writer who returns from a European exile in search of a young boy who is the lone-survivor of a massacre that runs parallel to the one that devastated the actual residents of Osage Avenue. Cudjoe interviews Margaret Jones, a former member of the Family, in an attempt to discover the whereabouts of the child.

6. Margaret Jones

At first glance, the interview resembles the dance or contest described in Wideman's analysis. Cudjoe assumes the role of the "white" WPA interviewer and Margaret Jones, like the former slave, regards her interviewer with suspicion.

> How did she know so much about him, not only her but all her sisters, how, after the briefest of conversations, did they know his history, that he'd married a white woman and fathered half-white kids? How did they know he'd failed his wife and failed those kids, that his betrayal was double, about blackness and about being a man? (pp. 9–10)

Yet, we notice that though Cudjoe controls the framing, Margaret has usurped the upper hand. This is underscored by a technique similar to cinematic "zooming" which recreates the sense of passivity experienced by a spectator at a motion picture through the use of stage or camera directions.[8] In *Philadelphia Fire*, a similar effect is achieved through the operation of the tape recorder that Cudjoe uses to capture an interview

7 Realing refers to the vertigo experienced in much of postmodernist writing from the cavalier proliferation of narrative layers and crossing of ontological boundaries. It was first used by Lee Brendel, a student in "Reading Jazz," a class I taught in the spring of 1999 at Saint Louis University.

8 In his essay, "Reading Black Postmodernism: John Edgar Wideman's *Reuben*," Klaus Schmidt observes that this technique is a major element of this novel. It is manifested by inserting the idea of a "script" into the text and using camera cues such as "dissolve to," or "fading in." Zooming, says Schultz "demotes the recipients to passive spectators and, simultaneously, positions them in the center of the narrated action" (p. 91).

with Margaret Jones. To hear Margaret's story, Cudjoe must operate a machine that refuses to cooperate:

> Tape is rewinding on his new machine [...].[9] Tape's ready. He pushes the button [...].[10] Cudjoe stops the tape [...].[11]
> Cudjoe fast-forwards her story. Would she tell more about the boy this time? Or would the tape keep saying what it had said last time he listened [...].[12]
> One more thing [...] is that damned machine still running?
> Yes [...]. No.
> *Click* . (p. 20)

The tape recorder intervenes between Margaret Jones' testimony and Cudjoe's record of that testimony and transforms him into a passive listener. To make matters worse, the recorded voice actually tells Cudjoe when and when not to operate the machine. And even when he appears to be in control — when at home, alone, eating a banana and a cup of coffee flavored yogurt — he can't seem to make the recorded voice say what he wants it to say. Instead of directly answering his questions — talking directly about the boy, Simmie — the voice on the tape talks about Margaret, her mother, her feet, her relationship to King (the leader of the group), and her two children. As Cudjoe hears about Margaret's own preoccupation with the welfare of her two children, his journalistic agenda unravels and his thoughts turn to the whereabouts of his own children. The tables are reversed. Cudjoe, the supposed author of the narrative, cannot transform or bend this voice to serve his needs. And, as the voice rejects all control and says what it wants to say, Cudjoe feels like a defendant who has been accused and judged.

This is supported by the very style of the narrative, which uses free direct speech to capture Margaret's voice. This style lacks all markings of narrator control. There are no quotation marks or reporting clauses that reveal the presence of a mediating narrator. This style, accord to Geoffrey Leech and Michael Short in their book *Style in Fiction*, enables a character to "speak to us more immediately without the narrator as intermediary" (p. 322). Thus, Margaret takes her time and talks directly to the reader in her own words, style and cadence.

Indeed, Cudjoe's passivity is further recalled by the paucity of his questions during the interview. Cudjoe draws attention to this fact as he recalls the day he interviewed Margaret Jones:

---

9 *Philadelphia Fire*, p. 9.

10 *Ibid.*, p. 10.

11 *Ibid.*, p. 15.

12 *Philadelphia Fire*, p. 16.

> She'd watched the tape wind from spool to spool as she'd talked. Rasheed [whose apartment they occupied for the interview] had waited in another room for them to finish. Cudjoe might as well have been in there, too. He spoke only once or twice while she talked. Margaret Jones didn't need him, care for him. She was permitting him to overhear what she told the machine. (p. 9)

Margaret talks to the machine, which in turn talks directly to the reader. Cudjoe's presence is negligible.

Indeed, in the dyad of the interview, Margaret assumes the position of power as she usurps the right to ask the questions. She places Cudjoe on the defensive by asking him why he wants to write a book.

> Why do you want to know?
> I need to hear his story. I'm writing a book.
> A book?
> About the fire. What caused it. Who was responsible. What it means.
> Don't need a book ... A book people have to buy. You want Simmie's story so you can sell it. You going to pay him if he talks to you?
> It's not about money.
> Then why you doing it? ... You mean you'll do your thing and forget Simmie. Write your book and gone. Just like the social workers and those busybodies from the University. (pp. 19–20)

This exchange reveals that Margaret controls the interview and its framing. She asks the questions and suggests ways to interpret her testimony and Cudjoe's final record.

The interview with Margaret Jones is thus a staging of the différend or the dance that Wideman describes between black testimony and a frame that controls and devalues it. Indeed, at first glance, Jones' voice appears to win the contest for control. Through her questions, her use of African American dialect, her refusal to be controlled and her appeal directly to the reader, Margaret Jones transforms the "frame" of her story within the narrative. This is reminiscent of Wideman's own observations concerning the WPA testimonies and similar victories won by the witnesses of slavery. In "Charles Chesnutt and the WPA Narratives," Wideman writes that ultimately the "dialect comes full circle" and is "turned against the oppressor" (p. 64).

It is interesting to note that the Margaret Jones of *Philadelphia Fire* claims a victory over the narrative that is similar to the one Wideman also claims for Gayle Jones in his discussion of her novel *Corregidora*. In his article titled "Defining the Black Voice in Fiction," Wideman describes how Jones turns black speech against a devaluing frame.

> Gayle Jones is a member of a black speech community, and this membership implicates a significant dimension of her literary style [...] the fluency of Jones in two language cultures permits her to create a considerable dramatic tension between them, a tension

> responsible for much of the novel's impact and uniqueness [...].Black speech is allowed to do (the author insists that it can) everything any other variety of literary language can do. The message comes through loud and clear to the reader: there is no privileged position from which to view this fictional world, no terms into which it asks to be translated, its rawness is not incidental, not local color or exoticism from which other; more familiar voices will relieve you. A black woman's voice creates the only valid terms for Corregidora's world; the authority of her language is not subordinated to other codes; the frame has disappeared. (p. 81)

The testimony of Margaret Jones has a similar impact on *Philadelphia Fire*

Yet, Jones's emerging voice cannot be heard beyond the first thirty or so pages of the novel. Paradoxically, this intensifies its impact. It thus eludes Cudjoe and the author/narrator character who cannot control or capture all of it, transforming it into yet another of their literary creations. The strategy works. In the end, Margaret Jones' testimony frames Cudjoe, making him appear shallow and disingenuous. Thus, despite its partiality and absence, the voice of Margaret Jones and its womanist frame of black orality, looms over the novel. And for at least one critic, this voice becomes an important key to the work.

For Jan Clausen, the testimony of Margaret Jones enables at least one aspect of a feminist reading of *Philadelphia Fire*. In her essay "Native Fathers," Clausen blasts the sexism of a novel that seems to trivialize the response of black women to the problems besieging the African American community. She uses the semi-effacement of the Margaret Jones character to make her point. "Wideman drops Margaret Jones, inexplicably," she complains. This fact leads Clausen to attempt a reading of the novel through Jones' eyes, rendering Clausen highly critical of Cudjoe. She then invokes Jones in a discussion of Cudjoe's decision to cast a young girl in the role of Miranda in his version of Shakespeare's The Tempest. "What in the world," Clausen asks, "would Margaret Jones have to say?" (p. 53). The question reveals that Margaret Jones still manages to "frame" the narrative, allowing "a black woman's voice" to create "valid terms" of authority in the realing world captured by *Philadelphia Fire*.

Still, as Yves-Charles Grandjeat reminds us in a study of *Brothers and Keepers*, such polyphony may just be a ruse and convention that serves to mask the expansion of "authorial omnipotence" and "authority." It merely gives the voices of characters such as Margaret Jones and people such as Robby the appearance of having control.

7. The Loving Listener

What is needed here, then, is some way of resolving, of understanding Wideman's staging of the différend that does not involve judgments deciding the winners and losers of contests. Lyotard offers an alternative to what he calls agonistics (p. 26) in the form of the Socratic dialogue — a structure evoked, interestingly enough, by the interviews between Wideman and his brother Robby in *Brothers and Keepers* and by the one between Cudjoe and Margaret Jones in *Philadelphia Fire*. At first, this seems of little help because the "one voice" Socratic dialogue, in its projection of imagined partners, seems like the epitome of feigned polyphony and the extension of authorial control lamented by Grandjeat. This is not the case. The posited partner of the Socratic dialogue resolves the différend because he or she agrees with the terms of the basic reality — the sense and signification — of the argument's referent. The dialogue works to contrast the other voice, or imagined partner to the "Cretan," the "Spartan," the "feeble," the "materialist," the "vulgar" the "recalcitrant," people of "bad faith" and all others who believe disputes have winners and losers that must be decided by a third party (p. 25). Ultimately, the very staging of this dialogue with its "metalepsis of the partner" effects a proliferation of narrative layers that extends to, embraces and ultimately transforms both audience and reader. Lyotard summarizes this effect:

> By its principle, dialogue eliminates recourse to a third party for establishing the reality of the debate's referent. It requires the partners' consensus about the criterion for this reality, this criterion being a consensus over a single phrase regarding this reality. The elimination of third parties takes place upon a scene which is already that of dialogue. But this scene calls upon third parties, those who are in the audience, the spectators, who are the same as those who have been eliminated from the scene of dialogue [...]. "Socrates" has in view an audience attending the conversation, a public of readers who will decide who is the stronger. It is necessary then that at the very moment they think they're intervening as a third party, they cease to be third parties, or spectators, witnesses and judges of the dialogues, and take their place as partners in the dialogue. Metalepsis constitutes this change of take on the debate. By accomplishing it, they are no longer the addressees of the staged dialogue, they become the addressees of "Socrates" of the Athenian at the flanks of Thrasymachus or Clinias, just as we, readers initially, become the addressees of "Plato" dialoguing. (p. 26)

The staging of the *différend* in Wideman has much the same effect. Although readers might react suspiciously to Cudjoe's attempts to capture Margaret's voice or the representations of Wideman's manipulation of Robby's voice, they will invariably find that despite a narrative instability founded on conspicuous artifice, a proliferation of

narrative layers and numerous transgressions of epistemological, ontological and generic boundaries — despite everything — they have at the very least agreed upon the referent accepted *a priori* by Wideman, his proxies and their numerous interviewees. Neither Robby nor Margaret has to make an argument for his or her humanity — it is a given. It is the referent of their reality and the reality of the texts.

What Wideman creates in the character of Cudjoe and in himself as Robby's interviewer and brother is the underdetermined, yet loving listener. This omnipresent listener uses all of his institutional (official) legitimacy, as a Rhodes scholar, Ivy League graduate and University professor to create a loving aura around the voices and story of his interviewees. As should always be the case, he assumes the humanity of the speakers, the circumstance of their lives and understands the awesome, personal, existential, debilitating and devastating weight of racism and living in a society that pretends race doesn't matter. The magic of *Philadelphia Fire* thus germinates from the way Wideman cavalierly transgresses the boundaries between the autobiographical, the biographical, the fictional, the text and its context as he implicates and transforms all who would listen. Indeed, re-staging his interviews with his brother through Cudjoe's interviews with Margaret Jones allows him make Jones and by extension Ramona Africa parties in an immutable agreement that, once made, transcends all boundaries. Such agreements have the force of truth, says Lyotard in a paraphrase of Plato: "to come to an agreement (homologia) concerning a phrase is the mark of the true." And such a truth cannot be destroyed or rescinded. So says Walter Ong in his book *Presence of the Word*: "The tiniest truth is eternal" (p. 55).

In the novel Reuben, Wideman effectively and simply compares this metalepsis of the listener or "agreement concerning a phrase" to passing through a door. The character Wally suggests this metaphor as he imagines making up a lie to tell to a liar — a *mise en abîme* that ultimately implicates both reader and critic.

> As for the atrocity story about his family, you can take it or leave it. True as half them lies you tell, old man. Whether his story makes sense or not to you, he believes it. So a door's open. And once he steps through and takes you by the hand with him, you can't argue about what's on the other side. Cause there you are. Through the door. It's real. He's picturing a world both of us, shit all of us live in. (p. 122)

Works Cited

Anderson, John, and Hilary Hevenor. *Burning Down the House: MOVE and the Tragedy of Philadelphia*. New York: W. W. Norton, 1987.

Clausen, Jan. "Native Fathers". *The Kenyon Review*, XIV, 2 (Spring 1992).

Gates, Henry Louis. The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988.

Grandjeat, Yves-Charles. "Brother Figures: the Rift and riff in John E. Wideman's Fiction". *Callaloo*, 22, 3, Special Issue: "John Edgar Wideman: The European Response" (Summer 1999).

Leech, Geoffrey N., Short, Michael H. Style in Fiction: A Linguistic Introduction to English Fictional Prose. London: Longman, 1994 [1981].

Lyotard, Jean-François. *The Differend: Phrases in Dispute*, trans. by Georges Van Den Abbeele. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988 [1983].

Harry, Margot. *Attention Move! This is America*. Chicago: Banner Press, 1987.

West, Cornel. *Prophesy Deliverance*! Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1982.

Wideman, John Edgar. *Brothers and Keepers*. New York: Holt Rinehart, 1984.

——. "Charles Chesnutt and the WPA Narratives: The Oral and Literate Roots of Afro-American Literature", in *The Slave's Narrative*, ed. by Charles T. Davis and Henry Louis Gates, Jr. New York: Oxford University Press, 1985.

——. "Defining the Black Voice in Fiction", *Black American Literature Forum*, Vol. II, 1977.

——. *Philadelphia Fire*. New York: Henry Holt, 1990.

——. *Reuben*. New York: Henry Holt, 1987.