

Crying for my Father's Home: Poetics of Loss of the Father's Land and Mourning in John Edgar Wideman's *The Cattle Killing*

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ABSTRACT

In a disjointed narrative drunkenness that straddles oneiric language, apocalyptic vaticinations, and alcoholic delirium, the narrative of the young itinerant preacher in John Edgar Wideman's *Cattle Killing* unfurls. The narrative purports to be clear in launching the young lover into an asymptotic search for his soul mate who is nothing but a spirit akin to ogbanji, successively incarnated in deified women who experience an elusive existence and a tragic death. However, it fails to dispel, in readers, a deep doubt as to the intrinsic symbolism of this soul mate, and, finally, dissuades them that it is an ordinary love story. *The Cattle Killing* quilts the story of the deadly prophecy of Nongqawuse, decisive in the colonial conquest of the Xhosas in Southern Africa, into that of the epidemic yellow fever in Philadelphia, and plunges the protagonist into a melancholic quest on which African people's awakening is premised. Voudoun esthetics, Lacan's theory of desire, and Genettian narratology constitute the major paradigm on which the textual analysis of this paper proceeds. Its aim is to highlight the narrative devices by which the poetics of affliction, melancholy and regret is activated in the work, with the aim of echoing its call for the improvement of the black people's condition in the United States and all over the world.

Key words: Erzulie, Affliction, Desire, Africa, Quest, Nongqawuse

RÉSUMÉ

Dans une ivresse narrative désarticulée à cheval entre langage onirique, vaticinations apocalyptiques et délire d'ébriété, s'enchevêtre la narration des errances du jeune prêcheur itinérant anonyme du *Massacre du bétail* de John Edgar Wideman. Si le récit se veut clair dans son intention de lancer le jeune amoureux dans une quête asymptotique de son âme sœur qui n'est rien d'autre qu'un esprit similaire à ogbanji, celui-ci s'incarnant tour à tour dans des femmes déifiées dont l'existence est évasive et le décès tragique, il ne réussit néanmoins pas à dissiper, chez le lecteur, un doute profond quant à la symbolique même de cette âme sœur, et le dissuade, enfin, qu'il s'agit d'une histoire d'amour ordinaire. *Le Massacre du bétail* entrelace le récit de la prophétie meurtrière de Nongqawuse qui fut déterminante dans la conquête coloniale des Xhosas en Afrique Australe et le récit de la fièvre épidémique de Philadelphie, et, dans le même temps, plonge le protagoniste dans une quête mélancolique qui se veut prémices indispensables à une prise de conscience des peuples noirs. L'esthétique voudoun, la théorie du désir de Lacan et la narratologie génettienne constituent la principale toile de fond sur laquelle s'élabore l'analyse textuelle du présent article. Il vise à mettre en exergue le mécanisme par lequel procède la poétique de l'affliction, de la mélancolie et du regret dans l'œuvre, afin de faire écho à son appel à l'amélioration de la condition noire aux Etats-Unis et partout dans le monde.

Mots clés: Erzulie, Affliction, Désir, Afrique, Quête, Nongqawuse

INTRODUCTION

One of the human psychological drives which fuels the entrenchment of spirituality and religious expression in social life is certainly the dream of perfection, the attraction felt to the absolute Power, Truth, Beauty, and Righteousness. That human thirst for

the Absolute transcending time and space is all the more manifest as people's social expectations grow gloomier, scantier and more limited. Religious expression then serves as a strong empowering crucible set forth for psychological balance and redemption from the wounds of history, a clutch against oppression.

Oppression and humiliation, the interlocking of past and present hurts, failures, and treasons, in black history, serve as locus for John Edgar Wideman's poetics of mourning in *The Cattle Killing* (referred to henceforth as *CK*). The dialogue that the author establishes between black past and present in *CK* conjures and sets forth African ancestral divinities. The bewitched protagonist, sharing stories with the elusive and revolving feminine figure possessed by the spirit, tries to fasten his bond to her and give a sense to his own life. It is these back and forth motions of the narrative between the holocausts of African people, prophecies, ancestral divinities and faith in the anguish of extinction, that enable and voice the metonymic slippage from the Xhosa cattle killing to the herdspeople own slaughter, the lack of evolution between the 17th-century Philadelphia where African children were slaughtered, and today's Philadelphia. Mourning his shapeshifting beloved at grip with death, the young preacher, as a prophet seer, teller and healer, establishes a dialogue with black history in an attempt at finding a cure and healing to collective doom and wounds. This research work elaborates on the artistic weaving of the poetics of melancholy in the preacher's bonds to the shapeshifting female figure that veils and unveils the divine presence of Erzulie. The aim of this research work is to piece together into a single message the various stories woven in *The Cattle Killing*, using the narrative poetics, and to demonstrate that through the weeping of the female beloved who has fallen under the sway of death, the narrative mainly mourns Africa and its slow death.

The Cyclical Return and the Dirge of Loss

Poetics is the study and "theory of literary forms" and discourse (Genette, 2005, p.14). It is broken down into the study of the literary forms of stylistics, narratology, and figures of speech. In *The Poetics*, as Aristotle initiates the theorization of literary discourse, the "art which imitates [reality], by language alone, without harmony, in prose or in verse" (Kessinger, 2016, p.11), he distinguishes between three major components: means, objects, and manner. The attempt at establishing a rational order between forms/genres, the effects sought, and stylistics in creative literature are therefore what can be derived from Aristotle to be the definition of the concept of poetics.¹ Defining the concept as the study and theorization of artistic creation draws attention to this that poetics goes beyond the realm of mimetic mirroring of reality to embrace creation (in the divine sense), as the Greek word *poiesis* literally means "make" or "create." The author's aesthetics in *CK* unwinds in affliction and mourning which refer to the psychic or mental situation of a subject who suffers from the loss of an object (person or thing) to which he/she was bound by a libidinal energy. Mourning encompasses the lexical field of death, sorrow, lack, desire, and deprivation; and affects the bereaved person's perception of things and their motivation to live and act. The study of the narrative craft used by Wideman to actuate his "racial" rhetoric of loss and mourning is what this paper focuses on. It tries to interpret the mourning poetics in the work and the scenography of death bed tales and unfulfilled coital desire.

The divinity in the articulation of the mourning poetics

The dynamics of Wideman's literary construct in *CK* is founded on the symbolism of the recurring polymorphic female figure. Most literary theories, postmodernism, postcolonialism, Marxism, Black Aesthetics, and feminism, among others, draw attention to the omnipresence of an ideological substratum embedded in the production of discourse. Whether called "marking" in Afrocentric philosophy or "situating" in postmodernism, the proper interpretive loci underlying utterances have to be identified to enable the discourse to yield meaning. "All cultural practices, Linda Hutcheon argues, have an ideological subtext which determines the conditions of the very possibility of their production of meaning" (2004/1988, pp.xii-xiii). The cultural marker of the metempsychosis of this spirit "kin to the *ogbanji*" (Wideman, 1996, p.14), staged in a shapeshifting fashion with a more important marking figure in African diasporic spirituality, the West-Indies supreme goddess Erzulie, underlies the aesthetics of mourning in *CK* and serves as controlling metaphor for the story. The entextualization of this spirit that enralls the fifteen-year old preacher, unnamed autodiegetic narrator, into the fangs and pangs of an unquenchable love with the polymorphic female bodies the spirit inhabits, and the very circumstances in which the boy preacher's encounters with the various materializations of this spirit occur, lexify the desire for an Africa freed of its current situation of latent death.

Marking may be understood as the act by which one "delineates a cultural boundary... [among others], with the announcement of a certain symbol, the creation of a special bonding, or the citing of personal heroes of African history and culture" (Mazama, 2001). *CK*, through the successive female figures that materialize the spirit's presence, and most obviously, through the figure of the voodoo goddess Erzulie, empowers the rhetoric of liberation and self-centeredness. The voodoo/voodoo philosophy mainly relates humans to God through the mastery and respectful manipulation of cosmic elements and energies, and through the veneration of, and conversation with ancestors who have crossed the bridge of death into a second life (Kakpo and Ananou, 2018). The voodoo goddess's entextualization straddles the discourse. First, it lays the setting for the discourse as she is the female bedbound narratee who is down with an illness, present in what Genette (2007/1972) labels the *narration time*. She is the one that the young preacher tries to both court and keep alive with an autodiegetic narrative that stages the two of them (Wideman, 1996). The narration scene is patterned on Erzulie's tendency to bedridden illnesses and grieving in which her suitors and attendants have to take utmost care of her (Deren, 2004, p.143-145).

Besides, the young enslaved female under whose features the spirit first materializes in Genettian *story time* makes a godlike entrance into the narrative (Wideman, 1996, pp.36-52), and is introduced as a *bozale*, freshly brought from the West-Indies (Wideman, 1996, p.51), the African diasporic location where Erzulie is worshipped. Her beauty, her majestic, swaying gait, the elaborate lazy, slow-motion undressing ritual she performs in front of him, are physical delineations that converge to the same aim of deification. In the same vein,

her carrying a dead baby, trudging the long dusty road under a blazing sun, in utter pain, is an additional token of Erzulie's idiosyncrasy, the Mater-Dolorosa attribute of Deren (2004) and Herskovits's (2011/1937) descriptions. The image of the sorrowful mother attending to her child appears again toward the end of the narrative where the divine mother quietens the sobs of the fearful dreaming child: "In the dream she weeps. *My child. My child*, a refrain mingled with her sobs. I think she is mourning a lost child until our eyes meet, and I know I'm the child" (Wideman, 1996, p.144).

Deren (2004) indicates that the supplemental, accompanying sacred literature that usually gives shape to deities, underlines their characters and attributes, in most other religions with books, is replaced, in African diasporic and mainland cultu(r)al practices, by these "scenic" artefacts that compensate for the sacred texts. Besides, she discusses the African traditional way of embedding the whole of reality in mystical causations, mistakenly referred to by outsiders as "primitive mentality," that makes no distinction between the visible world and that of spirits. This entails that highly expressive artistic works also feed into cultural expression and corpus. Thus, the artistic creation of the fiction writer partakes in the enrichment of that cultu(r)al corpus in this that it simply comes to complement the congruent divine sketches that exclusively belong in the realm of the sacred. Intense and awe inspiring scenes present in sacred books are one of the linking dots that liken the puzzling occurrences in the *CK* narrative to biblical scenes.

The preacher's initial encounter with the materialized spirit ends in a surrealistic scene in which the young *bozale*, totally undressed, quietly walks into the river water with the dead baby and disappears, under his calm gaze. Strangely, he finds it out of the question to even stir to rescue her from "drowning" but reproaches himself with not waiting enough to see her reemerge from the water: "She returned. I know she did. If I'd waited, I might have found *you* [the preacher now addresses the bedridden narratee, another appearance of the same spirit] sooner. Before it was too late" (Wideman, 1996, p.48). Erzulie is known, as a mistress, to kindle erotic desire and delay its fulfilment in her lovers: "whether it is a large audience or small family who await her, or how long they may have to wait, ceases to be of any consequence. What is of consequence is the act itself, and the demonstration of the fact that such an act can transfigure the female into the feminine" (Deren, 2004, p.140).

The climatic encounter, as it were, of the protagonist with the spirit occurs after he is knocked down by an epileptic fit. In the absence of any visual image of her face, with an obsessive precision, he remembers her perfume and insists on the refreshing touch, most soothing coolness of the handkerchief the lady lays on his forehead (Wideman, 1996, p.74). These traits are what often indicates Erzulie's presence (Deren, 2004, pp.139, 141, 308). The narrator's violent and painful possession, his *débattement* as a *serviteur* of Erzulie, expressed as connection, fusion with the divine, is what opens his eyes to the continuum in the history of Africa-descended people. The physical numbness ensuing the preacher's fit frees his spirit to bliss (Wideman, 1996,

p.69), and lifts it to the ecstatic vision that suspends him at the crossroads between two worlds, material and spiritual, "shifting place between waking and sleep, sleep and waking" (Wideman, 1996, p.17). He is empowered by Erzulie, the divinity of dream, and by extension, of vision. So, it is no wonder that he is the only person to whom, in the small Sunday gathering, the goddess appears, with the large crowd of black faces (spirits) also unseen by others. For weeks after, he asks his fellows for information about this lady he sees in an apparition in vain:

Thusly I met her the first time. Thusly she returns. The more I've thought on it since, the more I wonder if she belonged, like those other presences crowding the arbor that day, to the world of special seeing... In the clearing I witnessed two roads crossing. One for people like us [...]. The other a thoroughfare frequented by our ancestors, our generations yet to be born. One highway solid earth, the other air, the stuff of the invisible ether where angels float... But she crossed over instead. Tended me. And perhaps because she tarried a moment, to cool my feverish brow, perhaps she was left behind, suspended between her world and ours. (Wideman, 1996, p.76)

The divinity, in its elusiveness, evolves in the narrative in superimposed shifting portraits that are expressive of black cultural memory: the ravishing bodies that the divinity successively morphs into are sought, almost caught, and lost again, actuating the traumatic mood of the narrative.

The actuation of trauma in the narrative instance of the cattle killing

The evanescence inherent in the realms of love and spirituality characterizes the ethereal presence of Erzulie as perceived by the protagonist. As Genette (2007/1972, p.207) asserts discussing Proust, "Rien ne saurait illustrer plus efficacement la «subjectivité» essentielle de l'amour [...] que cette évanescence perpétuelle de son objet: l'être de fuite, c'est par définition l'être aimé." The young preacher's metamorphosing beloved exemplifies this all-too-perfect, but slippery and elusive body and soul on which the desirer's hands will never really fasten their grip, which creates the atmosphere of loss and trauma. He sees the tale of his successive encounters with her not only as a chance to spend time with the sick narratee she morphs into (in the *narration time*), to rekindle and sustain in her the breath of life, but primarily, as a way of preventing her from slipping out of his presence once again: "I conjure your presence with each word I address to you" (Wideman, 1996, p.188). Like Scheherazade kept alive by her tales, the ailing narratee is kept alive only through these stories of hers, and of his too, that he tells her.

The narrative instance is marked by repeated transgressions of the codes of diegesis, switches from homodiegetic indicators to heterodiegetic, from the *I*-narrator to the *he*-narrator, and from *you* to *she*, referring to the narratee, without any change in the signified (Wideman, 1996, pp.27, 142). This enallage is rather suggestive of a dreamy soliloquy, of Mill's (2005/1903) overheard "feeling confessing itself to itself in moments of solitude," than of a dialog nurtured with the loved one, since again and again, it breaks

the conveniences of clarity, style and logic structure. Does mourning not usually fold the afflicted subject on himself/herself and send him/her into nursing, telling the beads of the wounds s/he suffers? The discourse, on a few instances, but exceptionally, opens itself to the external audience, the female narratee. Her presence is not even certain as it is “conjured” (Wideman, 1996, p.188). As in a prayer, the boy preacher turns to the perfect intelligence lying in his divine mistress and asks for her corrections to appropriately spin his narrative and make meaning of it: “When I stumble [in the telling], will you assist me, abide with me” (Wideman, 1996, p.40).

Still, after trying in vain, he feels forced to yield to the realization that he cannot raise her from the path of death on which she is already trekking. This image of the dying beloved/goddess, by extension, portrays the actual status of African ancestral gods dying forsaken by their worshippers. The endeavor of bringing her to life, itself, the young man finally realizes, is futile. He confesses: “I can’t bear to think that this single telling is my last chance to be here with you” (Wideman, 1996, p.39). Both lovers are already lost to themselves and to each other, as past hurts are to present attempts of straightening: “This enterprise, this speaking into the dark as if it would raise you from the dead. Why am I driven to it. Why don’t I lie down beside you. Sleep your sleep. Why the whispering in your cold ears – words, words, words, as if silence isn’t enough. Silence our proper meeting place” (Wideman, 1996, p.78). The major cause that, he feels, kills (hope for) happiness is the strange land that his beloved and he inhabit and its language:

Time now to give it up. This speaking in a strange tongue, this stranger’s voice struggle to assume in order to keep you alive. The stories are not working. I talk, maybe you listen, but you’re not better, not stronger. I’ll lose you any minute. You cannot live in this fallen place. Love can’t live here. Time to go. Give it up. Let you go and go with you. Wherever. Across the sea, the stars, as far as you’ll let me. (Wideman, 1996, p.205)

It is the pain and the lyricism of this lost love that create space for the poetics of mourning. The realization of traumatic memory and the loss of hope for an improvement of Africans’ collective fate in the future, are encapsulated in the metaphor of the dying beloved’s body. This vision of doom strikes the preacher, bright and clear, in an after-fit ekphrasis: “nothing had been hidden from me. No secret I needed to know eluded me” (Wideman, 1996, p.74). This revelation cannot do away with the profound pain lying in African history. The inherent pain is the very purpose of the revelation. Through their similarity of mood to the agony generated by the slow death of the beloved one and mourning, two painful episodes of black history are introduced: the heinous killing of African people in the aftermath of the 1793 yellow fever in Philadelphia, USA, and the 1856 Xhosa cattle killing. The anachronistic rapprochement of these two events in the narrative is one of the features that make Guzzio (2011, pp.20-21) label *CK* a *historiographic metafiction*. Erzulie, the goddess of the dreaming, here morphs into the mourning fifteen-year old prophetess Nongqawuse whose prophetic vision urged

the Xhosa people of southern Africa to kill their cattle. In the preacher’s dream, she mourns the deadly consequences of her prophecy that tolled the end of her people’s resistance to the claws of white conquest. The ironic and subversive potential of the novel’s postmodernist discursive space enables the narrative to turn the prophetess’s misleading prophecy into a heartrending mourning call for vigilance: “Beware, she [Nongqawuse] said. Beware. Beware. Do not kill our cattle. Do not speak with your enemy’s tongue. Do not fall asleep in your enemy’s dream” (Wideman, 1996, p.147).

Nongqawuse’s weeping regret after her “betrayal,” the forfeiture of her people’s future, melts again into the metaphor of Osiris [read Africa] with her son’s flesh scattered to the four corners of the earth [the diaspora], and her weeping. This is a trope recurrent in Wideman’s writing (Azon, 2017):

Tears fill her eyes. Her grief is mine. I weep with her. Afraid to wake up and find her gone. Afraid if I don’t awaken, I’ll become the weeping and perish... She sees me trembling. Her arms circle me. Fear not, she says. She says she’s only a spirit in a dream, a dream like the prophecy she preached to her people, a dream like the new day the false prophecy had promised, the day when the whites would be swept from the land, the dead return, the cattle plentiful again as nodding grasses in the meadows above the sea, a dream, a dream my child... Sleep, my child, my pumpkin, and I will come to you in another dream. This one is too old and sad, she said. I will return in a happier dream in a new land where the cattle are not dying, the children are not dying. Only our enemies dead in the new dream, the slaughter of our cattle, the slaughter of our children not dyeing our hands blood red with guilt. A love dream. Yours. Mine. (Wideman, 1996, p.148)

Wideman’s mourning poetics in *CK* is the dirge for Africa’s devastation, havoc, ruin, plunder and loss that pave the way for the domination, exploitation and oppression of Africans at home and in the diaspora. The various aspects of the psychoanalytic interpretation of the scenography of death and mourning, destruction, and flight, all present in the narrative, converge to the same conclusion.

Prophesizing on the Vale of Bones: Will the Africans’ Bones Rise Again?

The obsession with the impossible desire

In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (2004/1920), Sigmund Freud discusses the experience of an eighteen-month old infant who plays with a reel tied to a piece of string. Ernst would toss the reel where it could not be seen, and with utter joy, babble “Fort (Gone/away)!” He would then pull the reel back, hailing its reappearance with the same glee: “Da (There/into sight)!” The infant would repeat this game tirelessly. Freud (2004/1920) figures out that the fort/da game is a way for hungry Ernst to temporarily cope with the frustrating experience of having his mother leave long hours on end with the breast. The mother becomes the reel that Ernst symbolically has under control with a string that he could pull at will. This mechanism, Jacques Lacan construes, is the

way for the child to deal with the impossible since he could in no way prevent his mother from going out (Belsey, 2005, p.49). This propensity in traumatic subjects to the irritating repetition of the traumatic experience, which paradoxically seems not to bring any pleasure or satisfaction, is one of the findings identified as part of the fundamental mechanisms of human psyche (Freud, 2004/1920, p.80; 288).

The circular, repetitive pattern of the preacher boy's traumatic meeting-parting experience with his beloved occurs four times in the story. Their first encounter in the story ends with her disappearing under the lake water (Wideman, 1996, p.47); the second meeting, with her getting back from the after-life path, crossing out to lovingly care for him in his fit (Wideman, 1996, p.74-75). They third meet when he loses his way and strands to Liam's farm, nearly dying frozen in the winter night. This meeting ends with her getting burnt to ashes after their love making (Wideman, 1996, p.148). She last comes to him in the story, desperate beyond consoling, in his room above the Hart and Hare, impregnated by her master who abuses her (Wideman, 1996, p.203). These four occurrences of the same retold, yet transformed encounter-parting scene, in themselves, are a *mise en abyme*, smaller scale reproductions of the same dynamics present in the overall course of the narrative that presents an encounter whose end the narrator, through his tales, tries to delay to the limits of the possible. When he stops his tales, she must die:

How many nights has he come here to sit beside her and tell her stories. How long has he been pretending she's aware of his presence, that what he's saying matters, that give and take, call and response connected them. The others are growing impatient. They see no improvement in her condition. Any visit may be his last. He will knock and no one will answer. He'll know instantly the house is deserted. Even the ghosts gone. He'll panic. Kick down the unlocked door. (Wideman, 1996, p.178-179)

Furthermore, within the macrostructure represented by the iterative telling act which, in *CK*, is subsequent to the context of the story, one can also identify in each night's reunion, with its heartrendering parting, the reproduction of the same traumatic pattern. He meets her with the permanent anguish of not being able to cure her with his tales, with the torturing anticipation of their imminent separation. Each encounter bears in itself the seed of separation. It is this tragic twist in the story which gives the tale its scent of elegy: "My flesh moans, why can't you hear it... I must leave you soon, soon you must cure yourself. Can you hear me. Are you listening" (Wideman, 1996, pp.162, 178). This trauma accounts for the obsessive repetition of the meeting-parting motif. As a matter of fact, Freud points out this repetitive behavior in his trauma analysands when they recount their experience: "The fact that the traumatic experience repeatedly forces itself on the patient even during sleep is assumed to be proof indeed of just how deep an impression it made" (Freud, 2004/1920, p.77). "They don't in any strict sense repress it but keep circling back, Fry comments, ordinarily however displacing the event itself in some metonymic way [...] like returning the ash tray to some precise spot again and again" (2012, p.159).

The protagonist's desire to save her from the sway of Thanatos and love her confronts failure. In this, the course of the narrative, like that of the story, works in the sense of Lacan's contention of the perpetual metonymic deferral of the accomplishment of desire, the impossibility of ever realizing the very object of desire until it dies in its own terms (Fry, 2012, p.177). The protagonist's desire is this very obsession for the enjoyment of an impossible object, and his brief encounters with his beloved come at hand just to reduce excitation, or sometimes rekindle it. This permanent frame of mind of lack and its accompanying gloom is however broken by the first two encounters, very short, that bear the metaphorical token of the near-perfection ecstasy.

He first catches up with her on his way to Philadelphia. The figure he sees is the erect phallic shape of a female body adorably raised to deity on a "pedestal of flowing skirt" (Wideman, 1996, p.37). The turban she wears on a "slim backed and slim-waisted" body is a trait that concurs, with her "carriage erect" (Wideman, 1996, p.37), to her perfect, curveless phallic verticality. This uprightedness is set in the backcloth of the horizontal line of the country landscape made ablaze by the "shimmering" July afternoon (Wideman, 1996, p.36). The revealing characteristics of this silhouette which, in the blazing July afternoon, metonymizes Africa ["the baby secured there in the African manner, I know she is an African woman": (Wideman, 1996, p.37)] posit her body as *the* tantalizing object of desire. To the narrator, her *adorability*, loaded with both erotic and religious charges, falls within the realms of love and worship. In their other meeting that echoes the metaphorical fusion of love, she comes to him in a vision seizure to tend to him: "She appears as soothing coolness. Water from somewhere someone carried to the clearing. A handkerchief soaked in cool water wipes my forehead" (Wideman, 1996, p.74). These two meetings are set in contradiction with the boy's permanent state of lack and the pervasive mood of mourning which have generated his obsessive erotic musing on her: "Thusly I met her the first time. Thusly she returns. The more I've thought on it since, the more I wonder if she belonged [...] to the world of special seeing" (Wideman, 1996, p.76). The two snapshots offer him an assuaging glimpse into the lost paradise he is mourning. The subsequent meeting scenes never succeed in restoring the ecstatic bliss of these first. His thirst for her is left unquenched.

In his elaboration on the theory of desire, Lacan contends that desire itself is a signifier that belongs in the realm of the *symbolic* identity of the self (as perceived through the gaze), and as such, it operates only in an asymptotic slide, curving towards any *real*, randomly selected signifier that in fact it never fuses with (Fry, 2012, p.168). In the same vein as Freud, he contends that desire never dies due to any external influence (not even the enjoyment of the *real* object it hazily seems to dwell on), but following a natural course of its own, the "death wish": the object of desire always slips through your finger. Peter Brooks transposes this Lacan's diagram onto the knitting of the narrative plot: "Peter Brooks treats the arabesque toward completion in fictional narrative as the sustaining of desire through a series of *détours*, inadequate or improper endpoints risked and avoided, resulting

in a continuation of desire until a proper ending is reached” (Fry, 2012, p.166). To the study of plot, he applies Lacan’s assimilation of Jakobson’s concepts of *metaphor* and *metonymy*, as poles of the organization of human discourse, to those of Freudian *condensation* and *displacement*, used in the study of the unconscious. As a matter of fact, Jacques Lacan argues that the unconscious is not this hodgepodge of disparate materials but a complex and well-organized structure which functions like language, with a network of differences. He identifies the two Freudian mechanisms of the dreamwork (the process by which real events or desires are transformed into dream images), i.e. *condensation* and *displacement*, with the two poles of language organization, *metaphor* and *metonymy* identified by the linguist Jakobson (Barry, 2009/1995, pp.111-112). Jakobson indeed demonstrates that metaphor and metonymy are the two fundamental poles of the organization of human thought, present in all linguistic elaboration. The metaphoric pole is based on paradigmatic substitution and similarity while the metonymic pole is based on the syntagmatic axis of contexture and contiguity (2003/1956, p.41). Peter Brooks introduces one more element to the Lacanian language-unconscious correspondence: the narrative plot. He finds in the organization of the plot that “Condensation works metaphorically and displacement works metonymically. Metonymy is the delay or perpetual *différance* of signification. Metaphor is the gathering up in a crystalline moment of the desire that’s attempting to articulate itself along a plot line” (Fry, 2012, p.156).

Those crystalline moments Brooks refers to are the bends in the evolution of the plotline, whether close to the beginning, in the middle or towards the end, where the “final quest” of the plot seems to come closest to its completion. The plot, in its evolution, comes to metaphorical condensation when it reaches these points that give a glimpse of its overall meaning. All the other moments, the arabesque of the plot, only work at sustaining the “pleasure principle”, in delaying, postponing the end (Fry, 2012, p.157). And these play the same function that *displacement* plays in human unconscious in the fulfilment of desire. This very metaphorical function that Brooks identifies in the plot are achieved in *CK* with the narrator’s second encounter with the spirit, referred to above, that registers as primultimate experience: the apparition of the spirit as a *bozale*, and draped in Erzulie’s, tending to him in his fit. Her simple touch on his forehead bear the fully eroticized charge of a “refreshening” coital fusion. All the other numerous encounters only work at metonymically sustaining the boy’s desire, delaying the end of the narrative where, after trying unsuccessfully, he eventually gives up on the *jouissance* of the object of this desire, formulated in the narrative as the body of his beloved. Both narrator and narratee yield to the *death wish*.

Eye-I-Ay-Aye-Aie: false prophecies and mal-être in the poetics of the cattle killing

Perceiving in *CK* the general *mal-être* of the black person in a Eurocentric America is no far-fetched speculation on the poetics of the narrative. The black experience the novel focuses on is collective suffering, cutting across from the

eighteenth century to date. There was no change between the slavery-time Philadelphia packing black children in a cellar and “cooking” them alive (Wideman, 2012, p.196) and the 1985 Philadelphia firebombing black children and adults (Wideman, 2012, p.11). The homophonic utterances “Eye”, “I”, “Ay”, “Aye”, “Aie” (Wideman, 1996, p.7) are linked in the coherence between prophecy or *seeing* (“eye”), the responsibility for accepting this prophetic and leadership mission (“I”, “Ay”, “Aye”), and the lament, moan-inducing pain (“Aie”), that is inherent in the prophet’s mission. The black prophet bears the weight of his/her people left out in the miracles and mirages of the American promise. African-descended people in America will be the “always-elsewhere people” (Wideman, 2012, p.10): “When I’m moldering in my grave, when I’m mud like those clods stuck to your boots, I won’t know this land. I don’t expect to rest in peace here even then. My dead bones no more welcome than my live ones” (Wideman, 2012, p.130). As in echo to the psalmist question: “How shall we sing the LORD’s song in a strange land?” (Ps 137:4), Liam, the preacher’s surrogate father, wonders: “How could I be an artist in a land prospering from such commerce [of the black body]” (Wideman, 1996, p.127). Racial identity becomes a fundamental social sighting paradigm that forces itself into the space between the beholding eye and the black body, whether African Americans decide to shut their eyes to it or embrace it. Mrs. Trush, in her blindness, naïvely articulates the obsessive concern of this society with the estranging visual representation of the African, the question that every eye set on the human body in America, first asks: “Are you an African man... Are you black, sir... But your skin, your color, is it not black... You, sir. What about you. If I may be permitted to ask, what color are you” (Wideman, 2012, p.168-169). She needs the firm ground of identity to adjust her discourse and relations to the person speaking. The adjustment of the self, black or white, in relation to the other, depends on the answer to this question that she insistently asks. The narrator (and to some extent, the narratee), pushed to the limelight of the color-seeking eye of their society, resorts to a kind of flight.

As a matter of fact, the motif of flight recurs from the beginning to the end of the narrative. One may analyze the manner in which the motif of quest is incorporated in this protagonist’s itinerancy as a flight, a hallucinating flight from the white gaze, from fear, from the Christian faith, from England and America, from life itself, flight from oneself. Plots of quest are often woven in the journey toward a specific mission, place, person, item, and build on a joyful anticipation and relishing of the object of the quest, the symbolic “realization” of the desire. Novels of quest usually enact a move toward an object, not from it. But this is not the case with the boy preacher whose feverish journey does not start from a beloved home and who is always breathlessly running forward with his eyes turned backward. His travels are always actuated by the urge to leave something behind: the glare of a dying old man eaten by the epidemic, the fire devouring Liam, his wife and their property, Archbishop Richard Allen’s presence after he has lost faith, the death of black children killed by a criminal fire. He seems to have a large pack of howling wolves at his heels.

The contiguity Jakobson identifies in metonymy in discourse elucidates the relation between the signifier that is the body of the dying lady, whether identified with the ogbandji-like spirit, with Erzulie, or even with Osiris weeping for the body of her son torn asunder, and the signified Africa. The same discursive contiguity links Africa, the paradise lost, with Nongqawuse, the prophetess of doom. So there is no break in the plotline when the narrative focus "shifts" from the revolving figure of the mysterious lady to Nongqawuse's weepings in the protagonist/narrator's dream. Prophecy is the work of the *seer*, the *teller* and *healer*, i.e. a person endowed with special gifts working for a collective better future for his/her people. Nongqawuse is the young Xhosa prophetess who came up in 1856 announcing that she had a vision in which her ancestors asked the Xhosa to kill their cattle and destroy their food stocks so that their ancestors would resurrect their dead warriors, drive their white enemies out of their land, and make a new world of abundance and joy happen: "The ancestors will return and dwell again on the earth, bringing with them endless herds of cattle to fill our kraals... But only those who kill their cattle will be welcomed in this new world. The people must kill their cattle now if they wish to live forever in peace and harmony when the ancestors return" (Wideman, 2012, p.146 147).

This prophecy led to what Noel Mostert (1992) labels "probably the greatest self-inflicted immolation of a people in all history." The cattle killing led to the widespread death of the people themselves, and in this, stands for the people's own collective suicide: "the cattle is the people. The people the cattle" (Wideman, 1996, p.147). In the context following the call of the false prophecy which doomed the Xhosas to collective suicide, the cattle articulates the physicality, the attributed low level of wit of the lemming *mouton de Panurge*. It encapsulates all the believed attributes of the African "cattle" bought, brought, sold and "used" in America.

The cattle, in Christianity, is the Godly people of believers led by the voice of the shepherd that they know and which is the only voice the flock will follow (John 10: 27, The New King James Version). Heightened to the divinity itself in Christianity, the image of the shepherd in *CK* metaphorizes this link between the black people and the wise thinkers and knowers working the work of seeing, telling, healing, in short, the voices prophesizing for a better collective future. The stand of prophet is what the boy preacher purports to assume when he sets out preaching the word of God, in order to tend to black people stricken by the yellow fever epidemic. He is a seer: "Just as I sit beside you on this bed, speaking to you, the dead speak to me", he says (Wideman, 1996, p.153). His stand as a prophet aims to heal such false steps as that of Nongqawuse, who now appears to him in a dream, and within the discursive loci of postmodernist "metafictional paradox" (Hutcheon, 2004/1988, p.ix) and vodoun continuum between the dead, the living, and the yet unborn, reverses her false prophecy. She unceasingly laments on the havoc she has wreaked on her people. She has beguiled them into believing that the return to an Edenic Africa first demands that they sacrifice their cattle, so that the ancestors can once again propitiate their prayers, make the rain fall again, and the cattle flourish:

We'd been deceived. It was not the shade of my father's brother who spoke through me that day beside the pool. No. It was a spirit of despair grown strong inside our breasts, as the whites had grown strong in our land, during years of fighting and plague and hate. A spirit who whispered the lies of the invaders in our ears. Who tricked us into toiling for our foes. Taught us to kill our cattle, murder ourselves... Beware, she said. Beware. Beware. Do not kill your cattle. Do not speak with your enemy's tongue. Do not fall asleep in your enemy's dream... Tears fill her eyes. Her grief's mine. I weep with her. Afraid to waken and find her gone. Afraid if I don't awaken, I'll become the weeping and perish... She sees me trembling. Her arms circle me. Fear not, she says she's only a spirit in a dream, a dream like the prophecy she preached to her people, a dream like the new day the prophecy has promised, the day when the whites would be swept from the land, the dead return, the cattle plentiful again as nodding grasses in the meadows above the sea, a dream, a dream, my child... Sleep, my child, my pumpkin, and I will come to you in another dream. This one is too old and sad, she said. I will return in a happier dream in a new land where the cattle are not dying, the children not dying. Only our enemies dead in the new dream, the slaughter of our cattle, the slaughter of our children not dyeing our hands blood red with guilt. A love dream. Yours. Mine. (Wideman, 1996, p.147)

In this vision, there are centuries-old accumulated bruises, pain and mourning. The message encoded in this relatively too-short short eponymic passage devoted to the cattle killing in the novel is magnified and set as the crux of the narrative: "His book beginning and ending here. The Xhosa, seduced by false prophecy, false promises [...] Killing their cattle, destroying themselves" (Wideman, 1996, p.7). The land of the conquerors, those who inspire Nongqawuse the word that enacts the killing of her people, is this land where the boy prophet and his people are held enslaved. The American land is cursed and superimposed to *Ezekiel's* vale of bones (*Ezekiel* 37) where the whitened bones of his people stretching the land as far as eyes can see, are lying. Will he be able to prophesize for his people's resurrection? It will only take a powerful prophet-seer, -teller, -healer (the intellectual, the political leader, or the writer whose pen draws the society of tomorrow for his/her people), to speak the words of power that will raise black people from the vale of bones. "Will these bones live again. Rise again," the prophet wonders (Wideman, 1996, p.186). The most obvious answer the end of the narrative offers, while not forthright pessimistic, gives no clear hint of hope either. The young preacher is dejected with the lack of effects wrought by his words on the health condition of his beloved. The hope for Africa's resurrection will not come true, at least, not this soon.

CONCLUSION

Wideman's tale of Africa, in *CK*, is a tale of love, fully erotic and agape, love for the bewitching beauty of a mysterious woman, haunting spirit, and divinity, who metaphorizes Africa. The writer, preaching his message of call

to awareness under the cloak of the boy preacher, bares his acute physical desire for her eyes, her feet, her whole body. But it is also a narrative of mourning, of despair, and separation because this beauty fails to materialize and permanently eludes the lover's hands. It is a story that confronts Eros with Thanatos, which confrontation the latter wins after holding sway all along. The love story is thus doomed, haunting, scythed since this beautiful body has fallen under the spell of death, the death of hope expressive of Africa's poverty and the damnation of her children. This is the melodious dirge that this paper construes from the *CK* narrative.

The poetics of *CK* certainly derives its beauty from its fused entextualization of Freud and Lacan's rhetoric of desire, and Brook's theory of the quilting of the narrative plot in the vocabulary of desire. What if the narrative of *CK* appeals to us mainly because it teases our fancies by fusing the mechanisms of the unconscious, of human discourse, and of the narrative plot as theorized by Freud, Jakobson, Lacan, and Peter Brooks? The novelty of this paper lies in highlighting the common substratum of the seemingly wandering and shifting narrative focuses woven into postmodernist aesthetics, all of which concur to the creation of the mourning poetics of Africa in *CK*. One certitude is that the novel formulates in a most attractive way its motifs of loss, trauma, and mourning. The political commitment of the tale is so strong as to transgress the generic standards of the novel, linking apparently unrelated events, places and times. From this description of permanent death and lack of hope, the call to African people's awareness and their fight for a better future are identified by this paper to be the political message wrapped up in the mourning poetics of *CK*.

END NOTE

1. The essay itself does not propose a direct definition of the concept of poetics. It expounds on the definition and the characteristics of each subgenre.

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