Blueprint for Studies in the African American (Neo)Baroque
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Wittgenstein: Why did Bach have to sell his organ?
Derrida: I don’t know. Why?
Wittgenstein: Because he was baroque.
Derrida: You mean because he composed music marked by elaborate and even grotesque ornamentation?
Wittgenstein: Well, no that’s not exactly what I was getting at. It was a play on words.
Derrida: Oh, I get it.
(Everett, Erasure, 191-192)

Despite their apparent arbitrariness, puns can encapsulate wisdom, or provide indirect comment on their contexts. Everett’s play on monetary and aesthetic value in a novel marked by selling out, parody, and metafictional questionings can be seen as one more mise-en-abîme of representation, leading us to explore the baroque dimension of some of his writings. But this revisiting of the baroque seems to be a strategy shared by other contemporary African American authors, such as John Edgar Wideman. In an attempt to assess whether this line of inquiry can be enlightening and extended to other recent black or minority fiction, the present study will attempt to deal with these two very different writers, in comparative fashion, from this baroque angle. A few definitions will be in order, to probe the originality – or lack of it – of this perspective, compared to the common ground usually found between these two authors, that of postmodernism. Actually, one of them—Wideman—readily accepts the postmodern tag when it is held out to him, whereas the other—Everett—chafes under it and repeatedly parodies it. We will then focus on two essential aspects of (neo)baroque textuality: the critical mise-en-abîme of representation, especially through the theater and the mass media, opening on to a
poetics of dreams and illusions; and the Shakespearean adage that “All the world’s a stage / And all the men and women are merely players” (As You Like It, II, 7, ll. 139-140), hinting at the notion of identity as role-play, or performance, a crucial dimension in a world divided by race. Even though these developments must perforce remain sketchy, we will try to provide a provisional evaluation of the merits of this approach.

**Prelude: A Tale of Two Bubbles**

2. According to French critic Jean Rousset, the bubble, along with waters, clouds, winds, flames etc., is a quintessential baroque image, ripe with the fragility of life and the passing of time: “to soaring and fleeing motions, and instability, [it] has the merit of adding transparency and frailty”, rainbow iridescence, and mirroring reflections (Rousset, 137-138). Finding such a glassy sphere in the first pages of Wideman’s *Philadelphia Fire* may herald its flirting with the baroque. Cudjoe, the protagonist, has just been seen leaving the Greek island of Mikonos in search of a lost child, a survivor of the bombing of the black activist group MOVE’s house in Philadelphia.

Take that morning or one like it and set it down here in this city of brotherly love, seven thousand miles away, in a crystal ball, so it hums and gyrates under its glass dome. When you turn it upside-down, a thousand weightless flakes of something hover in the magic jar. It plays a tune if you wind it, better watch out, better not cry. Cudjoe cups his hands, fondles the toy, transfixed by the simplicity of illusion, how snow falls and music tinkles again and again if you choose to play a trick on yourself. You could stare forever and the past goes on doing its thing. (*Philadelphia Fire*, 5)

3. The self-contained, “hermetic” (5) world of the past, represented as a microcosm, complete with a rotation on its axis and a climate, is reminiscent of *Citizen Kane*’s “Rosebud”. Like this other snowball of memory, it includes an optical trick, a sudden shift from a close-up on the inside of the bubble to a wider context. In Orson Welles’s film, the camera zooms out from the little mountain house in a snowstorm to Kane’s hand holding the glass ball, letting it fall and explode on the floor as he dies (02:22). Illusion is reframed as (baroque) allegory: this fragile bubble is a man’s life. Wideman uses a similar rhetorical ploy, as this paragraph forces us to recontextualize the opening of the novel: a present-tense account of a stormy morning in Mikonos, which is now revealed to have been only a memory. The “rosebud” theme keeps blooming into the narrative. The metaphoric snowball hints at a “real” one, Cudjoe’s grandmother’s souvenir from Niagara Falls (6), which reminds him of the time he kept watch on her mortal agony, “she would die if he broke it” (6).

The crystal ball long gone. He can’t recall the first time he missed it. Nothing rests in the empty cup of his hands [...] He is turning pages. Perhaps asleep with a book spread-eagled on his lap, the book he wishes he was writing, the story he crossed an ocean to find. Story of a fire and a lost boy that brought him home. (7)

4. From a metaphor of memory and the brevity of life, the glass ball comes to symbolize dreams and even literature. Sphere within spheres, container and contained, time capsule and mirror of representation, it is a concentrate of the whole novel, itself a paper bubble dealing with islands, tempests and *The Tempest*, the inverted Odyssey of a quest for a lost boy that fitly starts in Greece and ends up with a flight of commemorative balloons (197). Would it be too much to talk about a monadic structure enfolding in a nutshell the whole nomadic search of the storyline? Let us not forget that, according to Gilles Deleuze,
Leibnitz’s Monad is a “unit that enfolds a multiplicity”, both closed upon itself and containing the totality of the universe, from one perspective: “there are as many different universes, which are nonetheless only perspectives on one universe from the diverse points of view of each Monad” (Deleuze, 33 / 173).

A similar view of a monadic bubble can be found in Percival Everett’s short story “Meiosis”, part of which was incorporated into Erasure. The protagonist, Tom, has a dream that almost reads as textbook baroque.

He stumbled through a crowd and found himself standing in front of a mirror and in the mirror he saw two dwarfs fighting with swords and from the blades of the weapons, he could see the whole spectrum of light refracted. He followed the colors away from the fight and then back, but he found, instead of the dueling swords, a single drop of water. He walked around the drop, wanting to reach out and touch it, knowing that it was a drop and not a bubble and then he realized that he was inside a bubble, observing the drop, the center. Then he could see himself reflected in the wall of it and he was symmetrical, like a crystal of ice. He could almost see his middle, where he came from. He could almost touch his source. (“Meiosis”, 104)

The bubble and the drop hint at frailty, transience and transparence, while the mirror redoubles these with uncanny doubts about identity, and the rainbow expresses the variegated wealth and diversity of experience. All four also refer to the dream state. Yet this dream, as Freudian ones do, duplicates and distorts the “waking” plot of the story, which itself has strangely oneiric qualities. Tom seems to suffer from partial amnesia, and has been sent–by one Homer!–to New York to compete in the TV quiz show Virtute et Armis. After winning against heavy, race-weighted odds, he is short-shrifted of some of his gains, and followed on his return train by two suited henchmen. The actual beginning of the dream features the producer and host of Virtute et Armis, Blanc and Spades, dancing like puppets, then morphing into the two dwarfs of our extract. The bubble-dream stands in for the whole story in reduction–the etymological meaning of “meiosis” is “reduction”–just as the story seems to be a short-hand allegory of race relations in the contemporary United States: a fight between Blacks and Whites–“Blancs” and “Spades”–that is staged in the media rather than on the street–even though the text ends on an Ellisonian riot. So the mirror in which Tom watches the Battle Royal between the dwarfs could be a TV screen; yet it could also be a “real” mirror, in which case the two dwarfs could represent his double-consciousness as a black man, as well as the existential reduction–“meiosis” again–that such internal conflict leads to. Confirmation is obtained when the two antagonists become a single drop, which reflects the protagonist. In rhetorical terms, “meiosis” is a litotes or understatement, which may correspond to the indirect way the story addresses racial questions, toning down the violence through absurdist humor. In the terminology of genetics, the same word refers to the splitting of the genes in the formation of sexual cells. The “drop”, the “center”, the “source” could then be identified as the egg carrying the DNA of the individual. After all the most convincing illustration of the Monad’s temporality as actualization of its virtual motifs (Deleuze 94) is that of the expression of genes in the becoming of the organism. But these DNA sequences are also considered as the basis of racial identity and therefore discrimination. The latter are a dream, an illusion, since biological races do not exist; but this illusion is transmitted by another form of illusion, media culture, which in turn is predicated on the American Dream of equality, opportunity and ten-minute fame for all.

A drop in a bubble. On another level, we are also dealing here with textual genetics: if the bubble is the book, or the imagination, the protagonist’s closeness to his “source” could...
be a quasi-perception of his fictional nature, a potential breaking of the frame. So this
understated exploration of the reductions in human potentiality is genetic on at least
three levels of reference: biology, ideology, and textuality. These little bubbles are not so
light, then; they introduce us into the fullness of the baroque world:

The games of being and seeming, surface illusions, simulacra and disguises are as
many effects of one major figure: metamorphosis, presided upon by Circe and
Proteus, a sign of the instability of identity. The confusion between being and
seeming is inseparable from the topos of the topsy-turvy world: the mask produces
reversal and inversion. All these inconsistencies figure an aesthetics of
discontinuity and rupture which find a resolution, however ephemeral, in the
language of excess [...]. This overabundance gives the lie to the *horror vacui*, the
baroque’s great obsession [...]. As for the theater, it is, unsurprisingly, a central locus
of the baroque. By effect of a tautology, the major principle of life as a dream and
the world as a stage becomes the key of dramatic writing. (Moulin-Civil, 28-29)

Wideman and Everett, then, by reframing baroque aesthetic strategies in the light of
temporary preoccupations and scientific developments, make them cross into the
neo-baroque.

(Intimate) Archaeology of a Concept

This preoccupation of mine with (neo)baroque aesthetics has a forked genealogy, one
branch leading back to Geneviève and Michel Fabre, and another one to contemporary
American cinema, within a context of personal dissatisfaction with some of the uses of
postmodern theories in African-American literary criticism. The International
Conference on Diaspora, organized in 2002 by Michel and Geneviève Fabre, which
gave rise to the publication of the volume *African Diasporas in the New and Old Worlds:*
*Consciousness and Imagination*, edited by Genevière Fabre and Klaus Benesch, was an eye-
 opener, encouraging me to widen my perspective on Afro-American literature to take
into account not only these writers’ imagination of Africa but also their literary and
spiritual connections with South America and the Caribbean. Even though writers like
Morrison or Wideman, for example, have no historical connection with the Caribbean,
they have read West Indian authors and appropriated some of their literary strategies.
Morrison has incorporated into her work the “magic realism” of Gabriel García Márquez
(Colombia) and Alejo Carpentier (Cuba), to the point of setting one of her novels, *Tar Baby*,
in an imaginary island named l’Isle des Chevaliers. Wideman gets quite close to it in *The Cattle Killing*,
when he deals in prophecies and the reincarnation of “certain passionate
African spirits” who “achieve a kind of immortality through serial inhabitation of mortal
bodies, passing from one to another, using them up, discarding them, finding a new host”
(15). As Eye, the protagonist, meets several women who might be only one and the same
woman, he becomes part of a narrative “that presents extraordinary occurrences as an
ordinary part of everyday reality” and, like Carpentier’s and Morrison’s, stage an
epistemological conflation between Western notions of reality and literary realism, and
“the residual influence of the belief systems of the African American slaves” (Bowers, 131
/ 93).

According to Carpentier, *el real maravilloso* is a product of the hybridity of the American
continent, with its *mestisaje* of European, Indian and African genomes and cultures. Later
in his career, he subsumed magic realism under an even more fundamental category, the
baroque.
Baroquism is not to be feared, it is our art, it is born of the trees, the naves, the retables, the altars, the decadent sculptures and calligraphic portraits, and even of the late neoclassicisms; it is a baroque invented from the need to name things, even if in so doing we veer away from fashionable techniques [...] the legitimate style of the contemporary Latin American novelist is the baroque style. (Carpentier 2003, 312)

With its exuberance and excess, the baroque corresponds to both the tropical nature of the Caribbean, and the mixture of peoples and cultures on its soil. As a twentieth-century reappropriation of an earlier aesthetic mode, it is already a “neo-baroque”, but insistence on continuity and inheritance tends to naturalize the concept. It is against this naturalization and co-optation by a form of cultural nationalism that Severo Sarduy, one of the foremost exponents of the neo-baroque, insists on rupture and artificiality, submitting the historical baroque to a semiotic analysis and radicalizing the break between the past and contemporary forms. For him, the baroque is not a natural exuberance, but an artifice, based on a metalinguistic dimension whose literary techniques are “substitution” (metaphor, hyperbole), “proliferation” (accumulation of signifiers around an absent signified), semantic and word “condensation”; on the level of the narrative, parody reigns supreme, in the form of a carnivalesque intertextuality resulting in part from original baroque tendencies, and in part from the superimposition of different cultural idioms on the continent (Sarduy, 1972). If the eroticism of the baroque is continued in the new form, the “neo-” differs from the “archeo-” in its subversive, “revolutionary” potential. The former, even though it depicted chaos, vertigo, excess, still retained the image of a harmonious universe, resting on the two epistemological axes of God and the King.

On the contrary, the contemporary baroque, the neo-baroque, structurally reflects the disharmony, the loss of homogeneity, of the logos as absolute, the lack that has taken the place of epistemic foundation. It is a neo-baroque of imbalance, the structural reflection of a desire that cannot reach its object, a desire for which the logos has only set up a screen to hide its lack [...] Neo-baroque: a necessarily scattered reflection of a knowledge that knows it is no longer “peacefully” closed upon itself. An art of dethronement and dialogue. (Sarduy 1972, 1403)

As seen from the references to Barthes, Foucault and Lacan, Sarduy’s neo-baroque is quite close to what is usually called postmodernism. It could then be seen as a Latin American appropriation and grounding of contemporary theoretical issues, whose specificity would be less epistemological than historical and aesthetic. In South American literature as a whole, “the seventeenth-century baroque’s obsessive concerns with illusionism and the questionable nature of reality was adapted to a new cultural context, becoming a formal strategy that could be used to contest the “truth” of dominant ideologies and issues of identity, gender, and ‘reality itself’” (Ndalianis, 12). Yet, one of Sarduy’s main formalizations of the baroque is of enormous relevance to us, students of the African diaspora in the Americas. According to him, the genetic core of the baroque is to be found in the ellipse, a figure which in Spanish and French has the double meaning of the geometric ellipse and the rhetorical ellipsis. The analogy between the Keplerian cosmological decentering, which describes the movement of planets no longer by the Galilean circle, but by an ellipse, and the dispossession of the subject in and through language—proliferation of codes, vertigo, illusions—is a characteristic of this mentality.

The ellipse, in its two acceptations, is drawn around two centers: one, visible (the marked signifier / the sun), diurnal, shines forth in the baroque sentence; the
other, obliterated (the hidden signifier / the virtual center of the planets’ ellipse), is eluded, excluded, dark. (Sarduy 1975, 112)

12 Is it fortuitous that a Caribbean author should choose to re-read the European baroque through the prism of a bifocal vision, in black and white so to speak, with all the trimmings of what could be called American “double consciousness”? Double consciousness is intimately linked with the Americas since the “Discovery”: Creole exile from the metropolitan center; European interface with an alien continent and the Other in the form of native and African peoples; and even more from the perspective of these “minorities” who were posited as the dark “excentrics” of dominant discourse. The whole enterprise of black literature in the United States but also in the Caribbean, has been to give voice to the masked, unmarked, repressed, dark center. No wonder then that Wideman went as on a pilgrimage to Martinique, the French Caribbean island of Frantz Fanon, Patrick Chamoiseau, and Edouard Glissant, all of whom he quotes in his travelogue. The latter, specifically, has a theory of the recent universal extension of the baroque, in the wake of decolonization and globalization, through the forces of hybridization: “Through the generalization of this métissage, the baroque ends its process of ‘naturalization’. What it now expresses in the world is the proliferating contact of diversified ‘natures’ […] It is no longer a reaction, but the joint product of all aesthetics, all philosophies. So that it does not only assert a form of art or a style, but moreover, induces a way of being in the world” (Glissant, 93).

13 The dovetailing of postmodernism and the neo-baroque can appear quite unproblematic in the Southern American hemisphere; not so in the field of culture and media studies. Both Omar Calabrese in his Neo-Baroque: A Sign of the Times (1987) and Angela Ndalianis in Neo-Baroque Aesthetics and Contemporary Entertainment (2006) pay reluctant tribute to the “post” while trying to place their own “neo” in a specific perspective. The interest of their works lies first of all in the fact that the cultural phenomena they scrutinize—from TV culture and popular literature to avant-garde art and contemporary science for Calabrese; film, comics and multimedia entertainment for Ndalianis – originate for a great part in the United States, a country whose Protestant ethos presumably made it immune to the influence of the historical baroque. The recent technologies of the visual and the virtual seem to have ushered in a new world view that is in many ways similar to the preoccupations of four centuries ago.

It is suggested here that, as a result of technological, industrial, and economic transformations, contemporary entertainment media reflect a dominant neo-baroque logic. The neo-baroque shares a baroque delight in spectacle and sensory experiences […] The neo-baroque combines the visual, the auditory, and the textual in ways that parallel the dynamism of seventeenth-century baroque form, but that dynamism is expressed in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries in technologically and culturally different ways. (Ndalianis, 5)

14 While Ndalianis assumes that these contemporary ways and concerns are postmodern—“A specifically neo-baroque poetics embedded within the postmodern is my primary point of reference” (16)—she seems to resent the predominantly negative outlook on contemporary popular culture in the wake of “the Holy trinity of postmodern theory–Jameson, Baudrillard, and Lyotard”–(58), stemming from an overemphasis on “economic infrastructures and ideological operations” at the expense of the enjoyment of the works (59-60). A neo-baroque approach, being steeped in art history and a preoccupation with aesthetic form, may be more congenial to such a vision. But the problem may be more one of approach than of the object itself...
Calabrese mainly finds fault with the imprecision of postmodernism as a catch-all category. “In literature the term ‘postmodern’ signifies antiexperimentalism; in philosophy it means casting doubt on a culture founded upon narrations that then become prescriptive; in architecture it describes a return to citation from the past, to decoration, and to the surface of the object being conceived in a way that contradicts its structure of use. In short three greatly differing results” (Calabrese 13). To which he opposes his own definition of the neo-baroque: “a search for, and valorization of, forms that display a loss of entirety, totality, and system in favor of instability, polydimensionality, and change. This is why a scientific theory concerned with fluctuation and turbulence is related to a science-fiction film depicting mutants: both share an orientation of taste” (xii). This formal similarity cutting across widely different fields is reminiscent of Sarduy’s notion, borrowed from Lacan, of “retombée” as “achronic causality, non-contiguous isomorphism” (1975, 7). Ndalianis isomorphically echoes this definition in the narrower field of popular entertainment and aesthetic form:

The central characteristic of the baroque that informs this study is this lack of respect for the limits of the frame. Closed forms are replaced by open structures that favor a dynamic and expanding polycentrism. Stories refuse to be contained within a single structure, expanding their narrative universes into further sequels and serials. Distinct media cross over into other media, merging with, influencing, or being influenced by other media forms. The grand illusions of entertainment spectacles such as theme park attractions and special-effect film blur the spaces of fiction and reality [...] (Neo)baroque form relies on the active engagement of audience members, who are invited to participate in a self-reflexive game involving the work’s artifice. (Ndalianis, 25)

Before trying out our brand-new theories on our authors, whose experimental writing is definitely characterized by openness of form and breaking of the frame, a provisional conclusion seems necessary. There seems to be a general convergence between expositions of the neo-baroque that come from Latin America and the Caribbean on the one hand, and from an examination of the contemporary espisteme of world culture on the other, in spite of a difference in the evaluation of the place of the political and ideological in considerations of artistic form. There exists an affinity between the baroque and the postmodern, which several critics have remarked, and many writers or film directors have used. From this point of view, the neo-baroque could just be a part of the wider field of postmodernism, and the focus on baroquisms might lend added precision to the discussion of the aesthetic strategies of literary works. Yet, beside this complementarity, the two concepts might at times be somewhat contradictory, and the emphasis different. The choice of prefix may indeed be revealing, and favoring a “neo-” over a “post-” could betray an enjoyment in the creation of form, regardless of its provisionality and incompleteness, whereas the reverse attitude would tend toward a more negative bracketing or erasure. In this study, we will consider the two frameworks as two overlapping sets, with a large intersection, but areas of undetermined size on either side, which would represent the postmodern that does not use baroque forms, and the neo-baroque that escapes the postmodern, potentially allowing us to reinterpret it in novel ways.
The Text is a Stage

That time, which said and believed, more than all others, that the world is a stage and life a comedy where man must play a part, was destined to transform the metaphor into a reality; the theater spills out of the theater, invades the world, changes it into a stage animated by machines, subjects it to its own laws of mutability and metamorphosis (Rousset, 28).

To assess the neo-baroque dimension in some works by John Wideman and Percival Everett, the most obvious starting point is to focus on the inscription and revisiting of historical baroque forms in their writings. The most spectacular of these forms is of course the Shakespearean play within the play or, more generally, the mise-en-abîme of representation. Wideman, for one, seems to have an axe to grind against The Tempest, since he alludes to it at length, first in Philadelphia Fire, then in The Island: Martinique. As a matter of fact, this play can be seen as a form of “master narrative” of American colonization, set in a West Indian island–Caliban, cannibal, and Caribbean all derive from the name of the native Caribs. Prospero the magician has often been taken to symbolize European masters, while Caliban, the deformed son of a witch who owns the island, represents the colonized and the enslaved. A reflection on the contemporary progeny of this initial violence is staged in Philadelphia Fire through the protagonist Cudjoe’s attempt at a school production of The Tempest in his hometown, aimed at fostering a contact between black children and classical literature, instilling pride into them for their achievement, and reinterpreting American history in a different light. In an exceedingly baroque move, the play is rained out, The Tempest scuttled by a tempest.

In another, more radical gesture, the very structure of the play is duplicated, superimposing more layers to an already layered text, and creating a sort of hall of mirrors, a vertigo of voices-mise-en-abîme literally means “setting into an abyss”. A large part of the play is taken up by the magician Prospero’s weaving of illusions, through his servant Ariel, in order to deceive recent castaways, his brother the usurping Duke of Milan and his train, into giving him back his rightful throne. It self-reflexively comments on the theater as dream and illusion, which can nevertheless effect changes in reality, since it is of the same texture as life—“We are such stuff / As dreams are made on, and our little life / Is rounded with a sleep” (Tempest, IV, 1, ll. 156-157). The three levels of play within the play, main play and audience are duplicated in the novel, replacing visual performance by a theater of voices. On a first plane, Cudjoe parodies the text itself, in rap-like improvisations during the rehearsals. Rolling over Shakespeare in a virtuoso Signifying performance, he operates a carnivalesque parody of the original scenario, complete with an identification to Caliban as a figure of black pride, and a consistent use of the black vernacular. He imagines a love and sex affair between Caliban and Miranda, Prospero’s daughter, who was off limits in the original, for fear of miscegenation. “Later, afterwards, we’ll rap in that postcoital snuggle and baby-babble each to each, coo-coo like pigeons, our own aboriginal, lovey-dovey tongue and that talk elaborated by generations of Calibans will grow up to be a full-fledged voting member of the United League of languages” (Fire, 142). Then there are metanarrative comments on the play, in Cudjoe’s voice (first extract), and through an intervention of “Wideman” in the text (second extract):
Amen, boys and girls. Today's lesson is this immortal play about colonialism, imperialism, recidivism, the royal fucking over of weak by strong, colored by white, many by few, or, if you will, the birth of the nation's blues seen through the fish-eye lens of a fee fi foe Englishman. (127)

Though it comes here, wandering like a Flying Dutchman in and out of the narrative, many places at once, The Tempest sits dead center, the storm in the eye of the storm, figure within a figure, play within play, it is the bounty and hub of all else written about the fire. (132)

The inclusion of a figure of the author, distinct from the extra-textual author yet pointing to him, creates a give-and-take relation between fiction and non-fiction, illusion and reality, in an even more radical way than Shakespeare’s. Neo-baroque “coextensive space”, born of the breaking of the frame (Ndalianis, 163), weaves a complex network of interconnections between the world and the word. The parallel between Cudjoe's quest for a lost child echoes Wideman’s loss of his son Jake to prison and madness, reported in the novel, but also known through Fatheralong, a non-fictional work. The pain cuts both ways: it reveals the intimate impulse behind the writing, an exploration and a supplementation of loss, a confession in disguise; in a reverse move, it shows how narrative bleeds into reality, how the fiction of race embedded in Western classics can still affect black and white lives today. In contemporary black America, the baroque questioning of the limits between reality and dream/illusion is not only a pleasurable vertigo or an academic conundrum: fictions can have very real and deadly consequences. “Race is not a set of qualities inhering in some ‘other,’ it’s the license to ascribe such qualities allied with the power to make them stick” (Fatheralong, xv). Hence the revisiting of Prospero’s island in Martinique, this time a reactualized neo-baroque preoccupation with the ideological impact of technology and virtual worlds:

Until he removes the scale from their eyes, the stranded folk are enchanted, entertained by the magician’s illusions as we are by contemporary illusions of self-improvement, self-control, self-determination in our economic, erotic, and political lives. Drugs and booze, the lies of advertising, the news media’s deterioration into for-hire entertainment and propaganda, the exaggerated promises of science and technology, the dumbing-down of cultural, educational, political institutions have turned us back toward unexamined superstitions, back into believers of myth. (Martinique, 79)

Even tourism is seen as a manufactured virtuality that gives no access to the Other: “Beware. On the island natives dream of becoming you as lustily as you dream of becoming them” (91). This picture of a maze of racial mirrors is an equivalent to the postmodern emphasis on discourse as a shaping force on reality, especially illustrated by Foucault’s analyses. “[P]ost-Saussurian or poststructuralist theory has been one of the strongest forces in moving the emphasis from linguistic and textual systems to discursive process, to semiosis or the mutual overdetermination of meaning, perception, and experience in the act of signifying” (Hutcheon, 70). This is perhaps the most crucial convergence between the postmodern and the neo-baroque, to the point where we might wonder whether this specific aspect of postmodernism is not fundamentally baroque. But, as demonstrated by the example of the dream catharsis in The Tempest, and Cudjoe’s Signifying on the racial content of this ancestor text, art can also embody strategies of resistance and counter-discourse. “Imagine our fictions imagining us”, the narrator of Philadelphia Fire declares (98). In the context, it seems to be mere wishful thinking, the desire that the MOVE bombing never took place. But this simple refusal to accept “reality” with resignation can become the root of alternative visions. “Do not fall asleep
in your enemy’s dream” is the warning that *The Cattle Killing’s* South African prophetess gives Isaiah in...a dream (147). She had encouraged her people to kill their cattle in the hope that the Whites would go away; the result was further weakening of the tribe, and increased dependence on the English colonists (Gysin 1999, 623-624). This is an example of entrapment in the dominant Western discourse of race, a theme which also pervades the other two time frames of the novel: the Philadelphia yellow fever epidemic of 1793, and contemporary urban ghettos in the United States. The text’s baroque structure is best seen in the mirroring of the three historical periods, echoed in reduction in the paradoxical dream-structure of this passage. Nongqawuse, the nineteenth-century African prophetess appears in a dream to an eighteenth-century character, in a prophecy to warn against prophecies. When he wakes up, Eye finds the dream has come true: the black population of the little town of Radnor has been victim of a collective lynching. This layering of narrative, a superimposition of inserted story, main story and extra-textual world, as well as the exchanges between fictional and non-fictional literary genres, is a baroque strategy which has been ostensibly generalized in Wideman’s recent writings. In *Martinique, Hoop Roots, or Fanon*, the interlacing of representation, character and author figure has become more playful and obtrusive, perhaps to the point of becoming a form of mannerism. But the reason for that possible excess seems to be a desire to counteract the form of discursive determinism that dominant narratives embody: baroque polycentrality allows the expression of multiple voices and points of view, while metanarrative reflection and parody deconstruct enslaving formations and allow the articulation of emancipating counter-discourses. “On the other hand, race–the doctrine of immutable difference and inferiority, the eternal strategic positioning of white over black–can be given the lie by our life stories” (*Fatheralong* xxii). As Tracie Church Guzzo expresses it: “Wideman suggests that we have the power within us to make and live by our own narratives, and warns that the only way to survive is through imagination–through stories–by imagining truths of our own making” (Guzzio, 178). Perhaps the most beautiful example of this power of the artistic / existential imagination to undo the harm that the imaginary of race has wrought is to be found in *The Cattle Killing*. It is the painter Liam’s “freeing of the colors” of his art in painting his wife, after his sexual and artistic desires had been frozen by the black-and-white world of early post-colonial America: “Not the woman stretched on this burning straw, not the woman twisting free of rainbowed serpents of paint. Not what Liam imagined or he imagined or she imagined, but what could come next. After this time. Next and next. Always unknown. Always free” (182). This painting is neither line nor shape, but only process: a work-in-progress, it is carried by the fire of desire and pure color into breaking all the frames, even those of the characters’ imagination of themselves and others. Lines of force unite a Rubenesque proliferation with allusions to Damballah, the rainbow serpent, creating a truly diasporic neo-baroque vision and narrative of freedom through metamorphosis.

Percival Everett does not usually Signify on the baroque theater, but rather on the epitome of classical drama: Greek tragedy. Two of his works are extant revisions of the myths of Medea (*For Her Dark Skin*) and Dyonisos (*Frenzy*), and the plays adapted from them. A closer look at *Frenzy* yet reveals a very baroque treatment of Euripides’s *Bacchae*, possibly under the influence of the operatic versions of the Orphic theme, which is also declined in the novel. The narrator is one Vlepo (“I see”), a servant of the god, who is made his confident and witness—“My usual place was at the side of the god Bromius as his aide, his chronicler, his mortal bookmark. I am Vlepo” (*Frenzy* 3)—and for that reason,
changed into as many animate or inanimate beings as necessary to spy it all: a goat, a thread in a tapestry, a louse in a person’s head—in order to probe the inside of his skull as through a window (24)—, a woman making love to Bakkhos... The baroque notion of metamorphosis, coupled with multiple perspectives, is played to the full here, in what could almost be a reminiscence of Wideman’s metempsychotic device in *The Cattle Killing*. The process is actually more a modification of Vlepo's size (24), or an insertion into another being, than the creation of a form *ex nihilo* (5). Perhaps the most playful aspect of this game of shapeshifting voyeurism is the moment when, in response to Vlepo's desire to have a life, he is allowed to see inside himself: “And then I was atop my own head, peering through a rather clear window into myself, and there in the deepness of me I saw nothing, felt nothing. I raised my head and eyes to Bakkhos, who shrugged, his palms turned upwards” (49-50). This Moebius-strip loop can be interpreted as the expression of radical doubt about the notion of personal identity, yet it more probably represents the device of *mise-en-abîme* pushed to the extreme, revealing the literary nature of Vlepo as a paper being, a pure fictional device. The story abounds in metafictional allegories, in which Vlepo may just stand in for the reader or, more accurately, the process of reading, complete with mechanisms of empathy and identification (Feith 2007a, 107). Through images of tapestries (10) and windows, the nature of the text is made visible, by way of the traditional metaphors of textile and theater. “The stuff that dreams are made on”, once again, stages the word, and expands the limits of the frame.

The baroque dimension of the novel is further compounded by the presence of an elliptic double center as described by Sarduy. Like *The Bacchae*, *Frenzy* represents the conflict between the two principles identified by Nietzsche as constituting the heart of tragedy: the Apollonian, embodied by Kadmos in the book and King Pentheus in the play, is on the side of clarity, rationality and the enjoyment of form, whereas the Dyonisian deals with dark, irrational impulses, orgy and the destruction of form. Furthermore, Bakkhos’s followers were usually among the marginalized people in Greek culture, women, old people and slaves; in Everett’s novel the Signifying god, master of metamorphosis, illusions and trickery, who conducts his ceremonies to the beat of the drum and whose lovemaking is “all syncopation and sure cadence”, comes to represent the African American “excentric” alternative to “classic” mainstream culture. The apparent absence of “race” in this modern version of Greek myth is actually destabilized by a hidden rhetorical center, whose interferences simultaneously enrich our reading of the ancient play, and have a subtle satirical bearing on the contemporary extra-textual world—criticizing both dominant practices of exclusion and the narrow vision that the province of the black writer has to deal exclusively with the so-called “black experience” (Feith 2007a, 117).

In *American Desert*, the theater is replaced by TV and movie culture as the primary vector of *mise-en-abîme* and cross-media hybridization. The media image also fulfils the function of another baroque theme: the mirror, with its potential for revelation, distortion and ambiguity. Theodore Street, the protagonist, lives a posthumous life throughout the novel, after his head is cut off by the windshield of his car in an accident, and stitched back together by a mortician. His re-animated body, unable to feel physical pain but endowed with new gifts of empathy and mind-reading, is a paradox that verges on the Gothic and fantastic, and, associated with his sense of humor and parody, makes him akin to a trickster figure (Feith 2007b, 188). After all, could he not be seen as an inverted reflection of Bakkhos, the trickster god who wanted to become a mortal to expand his
consciousness (Frenzy, 9-10)? There is in him something unspeakable and fascinating, which attracts the media, because of their sensationalist bias, but perhaps also because such things, like Medusa’s face, cannot be contemplated without the mediation of a processed image (Bleu-Schwenniger, 141-142). Ted is killed by a glass screen, and his wife is asked to recognize his face on a video screen (5). From then on, he will have to lead a constant battle to escape the media and the fake image it gives of him. The title seems obviously a reference to Jean Baudrillard’s pessimistic postmodernist formula of the “desert of the real” induced by the contemporary culture of the simulacrum (Baudrillard, 169). As a matter of fact, the spectral dimension of the text may also be a comment on the nature of contemporary media. The virtual world of television is a ghost world: films and series create parallel universes that absorb our imagination, while “reality TV” is just as fictional as fiction. Let us remember that, in her quest for the scoop that will keep her career afloat, journalist Barbie Becker lies about alleged abuse of daughter Emily by her living dead dad (75); she is then described as a prisoner of her own televised image of youth and ambition, an image she has created but which corresponds less and less to reality. When Ted deflates her posture by calling her a liar, she is compared to... a ghost (85). This grotesquely distorting mirror of the media takes on the qualities of an anamorphosis.

Media culture also seems to contaminate the text, perhaps echoing the recent displacement of literature by the visual media; yet the fact that these forms and themes are ironically couched in words may represent a revenge of the printed word. The text is a hybrid, a crossover between “high” literature, popular literature and the culture of the image. Everett replaces the old Latin adage “Ut pictura poesis” by the more recent one of “Ut cinema poesis”, or the less euphonic “UtTV series poesis”. Perhaps the first clue to this amphibious mode of composition is the very structure of the text, a fragmentation that closely resembles cinematic editing techniques, especially since the story is pretty linear, and reminds of quick-paced action series and films, and the literature they inspire, tailor-made for people with short attention spans. No wonder then that Colonel Dweedle (165), the man who takes Ted to Area 51 in a black helicopter, asks to be called Clancy (153), presumably after Tom Clancy, the author of such virile, easy-reading, and screen-adapted military fiction as The Hunt for Red October (1984), or Red Storm Rising (1986). Many episodes of the novel seem to have been beamed piecemeal from paranoid action and S.-F. series: the black helicopters, the underground base and laboratory at Area 51, the secret military experiments therein conducted, ring the X-Files bell of government conspiracy.

Then, the figure of the twenty-seven army-cloned Christs in area 51, while addressing a common theme of science-fiction literature and film, may also have something to say about the reproductibility of mass culture. After all, the illegally-obtained clones could be compared to pirate copies of an original, and the fact that the attempt at genetic duplication failed lamentably may allegorically point at the debased value of standardized cultural products. As in Walter Benjamin’s analysis of “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction”, what is lost from the original Christ, as from the original world of art, is its “aura”, the numinous, spiritual quality that makes it special(Benjamin, 211). According to Ndalianis, the valuation of such a contemporary “aesthetics of repetition” and seriality makes the difference between postmodern and neo-baroque tastes. Whereas postmodern critics overwhelmingly deplore the loss of original creation and meaning, “from a neo-baroque perspective, an alternative logic emerges. It is not a fractured, incoherent system that underlies the logic of the neo-baroque; rather, neo-
baroque seriality is concerned with the reconstruction of order, an order that emerges from complex and expanding spaces” (Ndalianis, 69). It seems that in *American Desert*, Everett engages in cultural critique, through the satire of cliché fragments of popular culture. Yet, the very pleasure derived from their reactivation and recombination in a comic, surrealist-inspired narrative may well redeem them. Has Everett found a way to have his postmodern cake and eat it in neo-baroque fashion?

*... And all Characters Merely Players*

And man, too, is in a state of unbalance, convinced that he is never completely what he is or seems to be, concealing his face behind a mask he uses so well that no-one knows where the mask is, and where the face. (Rousset, 28)

Everett’s *Erasure*—the pun is revealing, since this novel, like *American Desert*, starts on a mention of the “death of the author”, or narrator—is a novel of masks that erase faces, and doubles that question identity. This baroque problematic is radicalized by a focus on the racial gaze. Once again, the technique of *mise-en-abîme* is foregrounded. The text presents itself as the journal of novelist Thelonious “Monk” Ellison, and is composed of a jumble of disparate entries, which belong to as many literary genres: autobiographical sections, philosophical thoughts, fictional drafts, imaginary dialogues between famous painters and philosophers. The image of the self that is thus provided, along a temporal axis, seems chaotic, disseminated like the disconnected fragments on the page. Yet three main narrative levels are seen to develop, most of the fragmentary “asides” being thematically or harmonically connected to them, sometimes in the form of metafictional comment. The most central of these is the historical episode of Robert Rauschenberg’s literal erasing of a Willem De Kooning drawing, which he subsequently reappropriated and entitled “Erased Drawing” (*Erasure*, 226-227). As a matter of fact, erasure is the common point between the three dimensions of the text. On the “realistic” level, Monk’s family breaks down: his sister, an abortionist doctor, is killed by religious fanatics, and his mother slowly loses her mind to Alzheimer’s disease, a wiping-out of memory and identity. On the literary front, most of Monk’s writings are parodies: the two large pieces that are extant in the diary are an experimentalist rewriting of Barthes’s *S/Z*, which takes the dimension of a satire of postmodern criticism (a vertiginous form of meta-metadiscourse), and a pretend “ghetto novel”, first called *My Pafology*, then plainly “Fuck”, intended as an indictment of the clichés of the literature of the so-called “black experience”. The third storyline, which probes the connections between the “real” world and that of fiction, is Monk’s progressive “selling out” of his art for financial gain; and his donning the mask of “Stagg R. Leigh”, the putative author of the fake *Fuck*. Doublings and maskings are at the core of parody, which consists in assuming an author’s or group of authors’ style—here, Richard Wright, Alice Walker, and Sapphire—in order to take a critical distance from it. But the identification of parody implies a knowledge of the original, an understanding of the difference between the face and the mask. This is what media culture and the literary establishment are unable to do, therefore trapping Monk in the virtual image of what he wanted to debunk.

But the irony was beautiful. I was a victim of racism by virtue of my failing to acknowledge racial difference and by failing to have my art be defined as an exercise in racial self-expression. So I would not be economically oppressed because of writing a book that fell in line with the very books I deemed racist. (212)
The chiasmic structure of this conundrum duplicates the game of mirrors involved in the power of the Other’s gaze to define identity. Let us not forget that paradox is one of the main rhetorical figures of the baroque (Dubois 56). The fact that men are actors playing parts not entirely of their own choosing is emphasized when Monk’s double bind comes close to making him lose his mind, ventriloquizing for Stagg. Actually, the power of this stereotypical character, modeled on the virile “bad boy” of the vernacular ballad Stagolee (Gysin 2007, 74-75), seems to stem from Monk’s own insecurities, economic but also sexual and existential. As if it was a repressed part of his avant-garde writer’s psyche, the mask not only hiding the face but revealing it. We are confronted once more to the baroque’s dual center, revamped here as black double consciousness, and paradoxical Signifying: the trickster is tricked, the parodist deconstructed by his own parody. In other words, mask tricks make the mask stick. The final scene encapsulates the protagonist’s baroque dilemma through the dual image of the mirror and the actor, as “Stagg” stagers on stage to receive his literary prize, in front of the TV cameras:

Then there was a small boy, perhaps me as a boy, and he held up a mirror so that I could see my face and it was the face of Stagg Leigh.

“Now you’re free of illusion,” Stagg said. “How does it feel to be free of one’s illusions,” […]

I looked at the television cameras looking at me.

I looked at the mirror, still held by the boy. He held it by his thigh and I could only imagine the image the glass held.

I chose one of the TV cameras and stared into it. I said, “Egads, I’m on television.” (Erasure, 264-265)

The allusion to Ellison’s Invisible Man does not really guide us out of the maze of ambiguities; whereas it seems probable that Monk will let the cat out of the bag, the fact that he speaks in Stagg’s voice and uses the same final words as his character from Fuck, leaves open the possibility that the dark center has taken over. In the elliptic conclusion gapes a baroque vertigo.

This vision of identity as role play is very close to Judith Butler’s notion of performative identities, according to which acts and gestures are “performative in the sense that the essence or identity they purport to express are fabrications manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs and otherwise discursive means” (Butler, 185). It represents another “contact zone” between the neo-baroque and the postmodern. Whereas in Everett’s works performance is mainly a matter of images, masks and language tricks, to this visual perception Wideman adds musical and rhythmic composition. Picture and discursive frames are ambivalent: they can capture as well as enrapture, mutilate as much as liberate. Their alienating power is at one with linear time, time on the clock, whereas a cyclic apprehension, as in music or myth, leads to spiritual emancipation. A beautiful recurrent image transmutes vision into rhythm in a form of stroboscopic metamorphosis. It runs like a string of beads, a shaping metaphor for tradition and spiritual fashioning in Hoop Roots, from Reuben to The Cattle Killing, to Two Cities, and counting... Reuben admires Eadweard Muybridge’s pictures of Animal Motion decomposing movement into series of twelve black-and-white photographs, and this fascination becomes the pretext for a fascinating meditation on time. The pictures arrest time, giving the model a form of both death and immortality; they are compared to ancient Egyptian mummification: “His book of pictures a giant honeycomb of a tomb [...] When he puts you in his camera he does not steal your soul. He opens its window. He builds you a pyramid and spares you the ravages of time” (Reuben, 21). More than the freeze-frame of photography, it is the rhythmic
composition of all the shots that creates a sense of time: “All motion a series of stills, succeeding one another fast enough to create the illusion of motion” (16). Yet Muybridge did not capture the essence of movement, as he confessed in an imaginary conversation with Reuben: “motion escaped my net [...] I created rows of cells. Tiny, isolated cubicles with a pitiful little figure marooned in each one. Prisoners who couldn’t touch, didn’t even know the existence of the twin living next door” (63). The comparison of these stills with words, on the same page, draws our attention to the similarities between the writer’s project and the photographer’s: conveying a sense of life, therefore a sense of time, which necessitates to supplement linear reading with memory, as in the cinema, or in musical terms: repetition and variation. In order for Muybridge’s relative failure not to become the writer’s, the subjects, or characters, have to be able to step out of their frame. Time is at the same time fragmentation and composition, identity is together dissemination and reappropriation, i.e. performance.

In *The Cattle Killing*, Isaiah observes the old woman who has saved him from a snow storm. As she takes a bath, she metamorphoses into a younger woman, then her shape multiplies:

> Then you began to change. Turning, twisting, leaning, bending. Arms over your head. A woman's motions, gestures as old as time. Time evaporating like bath water from your skin as you dry in front of the fire.
> Perhaps I turned away an instant. Perhaps in that brief, brief absence, another woman, no, girl, took your place [...] Was the room full of women. Women stepping into the cask, out of the cask. Each one different. Or changing. Different women, different ages. Magically transformed by water, fire, air. (*Cattle Killing*, 95-96)

This hallucination of the ailing Eye announces other tricks of vision: the tell-tale kaleidoscope that warns of the possible collusions between art, science, capitalism and the slave trade (127-128), or the passage when Liam paints his wife. The same process of metamorphosis is at work, the same liberation from preconceived frames, and is possibly to be connected to the theme of reincarnation in the novel (TuSmith, 252). It also inverts Muybridge’s experiment, replacing the metonymic contiguity of the pictures by a metaphorical superimposition, reminiscent of Marcel Duchamp’s take on the photographer’s *Nude Descending a Staircase* (1912 – Richard 1999a, 608). The futurist/cubist rhythmic recomposition of the object does not scatter one moment into space but synthesizes a whole lifetime and makes memories visible. There are still breaks in time, but they lean towards fullness through polycentrality and seriality. The final elaboration on this technique of the dissolve (TuSmith, 250) is to be found in *Two Cities*, with amateur photographer Mallory’s layering his film with multiple exposures. The unidentifiable gray surfaces go beyond black and white into the world of forces and spirits, in a form of initiation to the invisible that sustains appearances, with once again the leitmotiv of freedom: “Snapshots one inside the other, notes played so they can dance away, make room for others. Free others to free themselves” (*Two Cities*, 118). Rather than an erasure of the subject behind a mask that might reveal only emptiness, these visionary performances open up to beauty and transcendence in spite of the traumas and oppression of black lives in the United States.

“In Wideman’s texts, it is not the character who creates a voice, but the contrary: the character emerges from the voice, and since this voice is plural, the characters are shaped and unshaped in the rhythm of vocal plays” (Grandgeat, 97). The “relational thought” that Grandgeat identifies in the interplays of voices is nowhere more obvious than in the complex structure of *The Cattle Killing*. The first part is composed of oral narration,
whereas the second part reads like an eighteenth-century epistolary novel. But the whole narrative seems to be told, and maybe partly read, by Isaiah to the black servant Kathryn in her sick room, as a form of word cure; "stories of my dead to keep you alive, to keep love alive" (206). In yet another twist, the novel is framed by a prologue featuring John Wideman who is about to read from his new book to his father; and by an epilogue in which Wideman’s son tells him of the discovery of letters that confirm the existence of his fictional characters, in the tradition of eighteenth-century prefaxes. Even more than a dizzying virtuoso play with the polarities or reality and fiction, orality and literacy, the novel is a complex orchestration of voices, in different keys. Frédéric Callas defines the classical epistolary novel as a baroque genre, and draws up a typology based on musical compositions, featuring one, two or more voices, structured through polyphony and variation. On the contrary, critics of African American literature usually describe it in terms of vernacular rhetorical and musical forms, like call-and-response. In the context of The Cattle Killing, we do not have to choose sides, because of the novel’s situation at the time of the Enlightenment and it reliance on the literary codes of the time. It becomes an equivalent to Alejo Carpentier’s Concierto Barroco, which fuses European and Afro-Cuban musical styles into a expanded baroque. Wideman himself told me recently that he had studied eighteenth-century literature while at Oxford, that he loved the baroque and, perhaps more surprisingly, that he recognized similarities between African-American and baroque cultural forms. The conjunction that is especially visible in The Cattle Killing may not be exceptional; I would actually say that since that novel the connection is more obvious and insisted upon, as in Hoop Roots or Martinique. Wideman’s specific form of neo-baroque is becoming even closer to that of his Caribbean counterparts, as exemplified in this passage from Hoop Roots, which yokes together black music and the baroque:

Keep your eye on me, listen for the unplayed notes at the center of this awkward, gangly syncopation, the counterpoint to this apparent cacophony and chaos of my being, and you will discover there’s always more than meets the eye, the ear, an invisible core holds the warring parts together, my sunshine, my only sunshine, unsounded notes that if recognized and loved, and you should, yes, you should recognize them cause you’ve been there too, give what you see and hear a certain rhythm, a harmony mirroring the struggle of keeping a life together, holding your own in this vale of tears where each of us must strive by any means necessary to maintain self-respect. Each sung word, each stylized gesture the men refine, their double-takes, jokes, handshakes, hats, dance steps, prayers, haircuts, curses, kisses, the explosive casts of dice or cards slammed down, moans, whoops, baroque drives to the hoop, is a refusal to count for nothing. (Hoop Roots, 222)

The same terms express a variety of existential performances, each negotiating and asserting identity in a dialogical give-and-take: in basketball playing, loving, story-telling, writing, self-image is essential to identity and dignity, yet it is asserted not at the expense of the other – lover, family, community, reader – but in partnership with them. The world, like the court, is a stage, and the community of players support each other, to keep the game going.

Coda: Time’s Arrow and the Ring Shout

Even though a postmodern and a neo-baroque approach to contemporary African American authors like John Edgar Wideman and Percival Everett are far from being mutually exclusive, we might attempt to define the specific merits of the latter. As already noted, a first aspect is an increased focus on the aesthetic dimension of the text,
in all its stylistic and formal creativity, over theoretical and political considerations. Obviously, such matters should not be forgotten, but a literary text is not an essay on ideology or a political pamphlet, and the richness of African American literature does not reside in its condemnations of racism, however subtle, but in the literary forms, the sense of beauty or horror, and the passions they evoke in the reader. It may be less postmodernism as such than its uses in recent American criticism—if I may be forgiven an excessive generalization—that may be at fault; the recourse to concepts that are primordially aesthetic may provide a desirable corrective.

The genealogies of the neo-baroque may also be a case in point. The South American and Caribbean version of it especially invites us to proceed still further in the direction of comparative studies within the context of the Americas, the Black Atlantic, and post-colonial studies. This move seems especially rewarding for John Wideman, whose diasporic preoccupations and influences are no mystery. Furthermore, the baroque has been defined, both by its European and Caribbean analysts—Carpentier, Glissant—as an art of hybridity and métissage, formal, cultural and demographic. This is also a question about which the writers seem to be well ahead of the critics, who often do not really seem to know how to go beyond the multiculturalism of “identity politics”. Let us think about Wideman’s long discussions of interracial relations and métissage in Martinique; or about Monk Ellison’s discovery of his father’s love affair with an Englishwoman, and of his having a mulatto half-sister, another act of erasure in the novel.

Of course, the best support for any theoretical or aesthetic approach is support provided by the texts themselves. We have tried to show that baroque and neo-baroque forms and themes featured centrally and prominently in the works of our authors, even though their respective literary ethos are pretty wide apart. Everett’s writing seems to be placed predominantly under the sign of the trickster: most of his protagonists are monsters, metamorphs, equivocators, manipulators and comedians; the author is also by implication associated with the trickster, as his favorite practices are parody and satire, exerted against a wide array of genres. “Variety is a way for the writer to preserve an original artistic position and a form of control over the situation of his work on the contemporary literary scene” (Félix, 31-32). Himself a shapeshifter, he tries to escape rigid categories, especially racial ones, even though in ways drawn from black folklore. Wideman, on the contrary, would be more on the lyrical, poetic side of the baroque, underwritten by a strong component of melancholy (Bergevin, 72-73), as revealed by the recurrent theme of the lost child. Other critics have tried to place his literary strategy under the sign of the trickster (TuSmith). If we agree with Native American critic Gerald Vizenor, that the trickster “is a liberator and healer in a narrative, a comic sign, communal signification and a discourse with imagination” (Vizenor187), even though there are, as we have seen, quite a few passages in Wideman’s fiction that correspond to a trickster’s rhetoric, the general drift of his writing, until recently, was not of this type. The misplaced tonal accent may stem from the ambiguity of H. L. Gates’s concept of Signifyin(g). On the one hand, it is defined as “repetition with a difference”, or creative parody, within the corpus of black literature. “We bear witness here to a protracted argument over the nature of the sign itself, with the black vernacular discourse proferring its critique of the sign as the difference that blackness makes within the larger political culture and its historical unconscious” (Gates, 45). On the other hand, this trope is seen as originating in, or being embodied by, the Signifying Monkey, a folkloric trickster character (21). So, while Wideman’s use of Signifying strategies, in the sense of
inter textual allusion and critical rewriting of Western—and other black—discourses, is quite extant, it does not generally extend to full-blown trickster rhetoric. But there is room for both types of writing in the neo-baroque: let us not forget that the baroque theater also had its jesters and melancholy characters, who sometimes could exchange roles, as in the celebrated case of Hamlet.

38 We might now try in conclusion to assess whether a neo-baroque ethos does not correspond optimally to the spirit of the texts. Percival Everett once declared, at a conference in Tours in January 2003, that he did not really consider himself postmodern because he was more interested in the significance of meaning than in its deferral. Even a relatively lukewarm definition of postmodernism, such as Linda Hutcheon’s, is still very much based on the suspension, or erasure, of most operative values and concepts. Postmodern art similarly asserts and then deliberately undermines such principles as value, order, meaning, control, and identity that have been the basic premises of bourgeois liberalism. Those humanistic principles are still operative in our culture, but for many they are no longer seen as eternal and unchallengeable. The contradictions of both postmodern theory and practice are positioned within the system and yet work to allow its premises to be seen as fictions or as ideological structures. (Hutcheon, 13)

39 Even though I guess Everett would agree with most of this, and enjoy the fictionality of concepts, which he uses at length in works like Glyph or Erasure, there sometimes can be detected some impatience with this potentially pointless zero-sum motion. Glyph, for example, is a novel about language and meaning, as the almost total homonymy between its protagonist Ralph and the title indicates: Ralph is Glyph. Amid references to Derrida, Lacan, and Barthes, who are, in the flesh or in their theories the butt of a reading-and-writing infant’s criticism, the text starts explicitly and ends implicitly with Zeno’s paradox of motion, the impossibility for an arrow to cover all the points on a line to reach its goal. Yet it does. And the same holds true for the words on the page: they do add up to some meaning: but which? That is the question. This is my understanding of the novel’s conclusion: “The point is whole, the point is complete, but the line... the line is everything” (207). In an interview, Everett stated: “We are all too aware of the talk that the tricks of fiction no longer work once they have been uncovered and exposed; but that really simply underscores the power of real fictive art [...] Unlike magicians we possess no tricks and certainly no tricks that we can pass from practitioner to practitioner. We have only the knowledge that it has been done and will be done again” (Everett, “distance”, 211-212). Deconstruction does not help here because it does not ask the right questions. You can still enjoy fiction or meaning, then, but Zeno butts back into the field on the question of the relation of storyworld to real world, and this time he is right: the twain shall never meet (212). What may be neo-baroque here is the enjoyment of form, fiction and meaning, coupled with strong doubt about their impact on the reader and the world. In The Water Cure, Everett writes a very dark tale about a man who imprisons his daughter’s murderer in his cellar and tortures him. As a counterpoint to these violent actions, his diary ponders the origins of philosophy, which were partly an attempt to counteract violence through rational discourse. Is this a hint at a refoundational move beyond the post—?

40 The historical baroque used the rhetoric of the senses to induce a feeling of transcendence, usually associated with God or King. Ndalianis quotes Deleuze: “the essence of the Baroque entails neither falling to nor emerging from illusion but rather realizing something in illusion itself, or of tying it to a spiritual presence” (Ndalianis,
210). Whereas Sarduy’s neo-baroque would presumably not be amenable to such “mysticism”, in spite of the Cuban author’s fascination for Buddhism, Ndalianis finds a resurgence of such power of wonderment in contemporary mass entertainment: technical effect produces an affect, a form of amazement and delight hinting at a “spiritual presence” (214). One aspect of John Wideman’s writing which may be difficult to reconcile with postmodernism is the African spiritual vision that pervades many of his works (Andrade, 44). The most important aspect of it connects the telling of stories, a circular chronotope and Great Time. The latter is best defined in Fatheralong: “Told countless times, countless ways, in each recounting the fabled bout happens again, not in the past but alive and present in Great Time, the always present tense of narrative where every alternative is possible, where the quick and the dead meet, where all stories are true” (Fatheralong, 62). Whatever the wisdom of Wideman’s “self-consciously assimilated African worldview” (Andrade, 52), we are not so much asked to believe as to experience it. It is less the truth of the myth than the capacity of myth, and by extension any narrative, to allow us to transcend clock time and the profane world and find spiritual freedom by reaching the realm of the sacred and eternal. Each reading of the text can resurrect it in the present, each reading opens an infinite network of temporal, emotional, visual connections. This effect can best be reached through a specific form, which Jean-Pierre Richard has called “rocking time”, an endless shuttling movement between the traumatic past of the slave trade and the present, leading out onto Great Time, in “an ever expanding palimpsest of the Trade’s voyages, when the slavers’ ‘unlove’ is undone by love’s ‘shuttles in the rocking loom’ of storytelling” (Richard 1999b, 663). To this beautiful description of Wideman’s earlier style I would like to add my own hypothesis of a “loop”, cyclical sentences and episodes which physically embody and convey the notion of Great Time. One such example could be the long last sentence of Martinique (150-167), in which a present visit at the volcano of Montagne Pelée alternates with flashbacks – in the first person – of the fatal eruption that destroyed the city of Saint-Pierre in 1902. The shuttling is there, but also a cumulative rhetoric that increases the tourist’s intimate connection with the place, and ends on their fearing to have disturbed hallow ground: the sentence comes full circle, now weighted with sacredness. The whole volume of Hoop Roots is structured thematically, formally, and musically, by this image of the basketball hoop, fused with the early communal dance of the “ring shout”, the mythical cycle of Great Time, and the circles within circles of narratives units in rhythmic repetition and variation. The following sentence is to me a great example of métissé, (neo)baroque exuberance and control, as well as a vital exploration of the powers of literature.

41 We’ve lost the fenced rectangle of court and these tough bare feet circle a ring, are the ring, ring-bearers, ring-givers, each step forming one more time what’s been outlined by other feet shuffling round and round in the grass and hard mud patches where grass has been rubbed away, a ring also of circles upon circles in the air above the ones written on the earth, under the earth, the bare feet follow these visible and invisible tracks, each stepper, shuffler in concert with the others round and round, eyes fixed not on a basketball but dreaming a shiny point at the center of this ring they animate as they go round, a pinpoint tinier than a needle’s eye, so small its dimensions can be expressed only as an idea, the idea that somewhere, somehow, the quick and the dead, past, present, and future, gods and humans must issue from the same infinitesimally small hole that’s not a hole but the idea of a crossroads, an intersection where heaven and earth, spirit and matter simultaneously come together and separate, an idea accounting for nothingness.
and plenitude, for the moment that is not life, not death, but both, neither, nothing, everything we can be, will be, and cease to be and are again (Hoop Roots, 239-240).

From bubble to circle, our exploration of neo-baroque aesthetics in Everett and Wideman has come round. If it has distorted the texts rather than illuminated them, let it be said that we have been misled into a labyrinth, deceived by the anamorphotic tricks of desire and interpretation.


BIBLIOGRAPHIE

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NOTES

1. All translations of French and Spanish sources will be mine.

2. For another discussion of a very baroque bubble in Wideman’s Sent For You Yesterday (31-32), in terms of “optical tricksterism”, which we might rephrase as anamorphosis, see TuSmith, 246-249.
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