

**Ulrich Eschborn.** *Stories of Survival: John Edgar Wideman's Representations of History.* Trier: Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier, 2011. 212 pp.

The most recent addition to the commendable Mosaic series at WVT focuses on a single author whose work has never been at the center of critical interest in the study of (African) American literature, but which nevertheless has found a place of its own away from the limelight. Ulrich Eschborn's monograph on John Edgar Wideman, entitled *Stories of Survival: John Edgar Wideman's Representations of History* concisely and clearly carves out a variety of aspects of Wideman's fiction that leave no doubt about its relevance. Eschborn concentrates on the issue of history in Wideman's works and basically argues that its representation serves to provide a "record of survival" (2), since "the survival of African Americans throughout American history forms the primary theme of his historical representation" (184). In making this argument for the centrality of history and its representational goal, Eschborn discusses a variety of aspects that (sometimes uneasily) contribute to this literary and sociopolitical function: most notably Wideman's concept of history as a "collective mental process" (2), its role in processes of identity formation with particular regard to family and community, the use of black vernacular as a representational strategy that combines notions of locality with authenticity and an oral culture that opposes the written records of dominant historiography, and in general the importance of narrative for the creation of a multiplicity of histories. Eschborn's analysis places Wideman firmly in the context of historical revisionism by African Americans that work to "make their voices heard by telling their own stories and not to allow others to silence their story" (163), and even though the literary identity politics that this practice implies is very familiar to critics in American studies, Eschborn renders his discussion of Wideman's texts more interesting and innovative than a simple labeling as he provides a detailed and varied discussion of the complexities and contradictions that characterize their particular project of "literary historiography" (6). Reviewing the existent critical literature on the subject, Eschborn makes a point of writing against attempts to reduce Wideman's oeuvre to such a political function; he convincingly argues against such a simplification and for the desirability of a more nuanced consideration of Wideman's representation of history.

Eschborn engages in this project by combining a number of critical methods, and all in all he has the balance right. The chapter on "Wideman's Literary Concept of History" provides the theoretical basis for his readings by defining central terms (such as history and memory) in his study with particular reference to Wideman's own understanding of them as he expresses it in non-fictional essays or interviews (although Eschborn also contextualizes them in a larger theoretical framework). In general, Eschborn employs a rather writer-centered perspective and often draws on Wideman's own theoretizations and remarks rather than more abstract or general texts, yet this is not necessarily to his disadvantage, and he is very careful not to make the author all too authoritative, for example by consistently referring to a "Wideman persona" in order to distance a fictional character from the author. Eschborn uses interviews with Wideman, including one that he has done himself, and he routinely relates his works to his biography, yet he mostly manages to avoid the dangers of biographical criticism and indicates clearly that he is aware of them. His readings are richer for their appropriate treatment of autobiographical elements in Wideman's writing, and one hardly ever feels that he is granting them too much room in his critical assessment.

The readings of Wideman's fiction make up the four main chapters of the study and deal with *The Lynchers*, the *Homewood Trilogy*, *Philadelphia Fire*, and *The Cattle Killing*. Here, Eschborn stays close to the respective text and focuses especially on plot and characters to the point of occasionally neglecting the aesthetics of the text, but he also contextualizes this content historically and even offers comments that may well serve inexperienced readers of Wideman as annotations as they explain events or names mentioned in the texts. Eschborn does not exclusively focus on the issue of history in his analyses but at times ventures far away from it, yet these excursions do add to the interpretation and are still part of the larger argument that Wideman is interested in creating a "record of survival." Eschborn shows how Wideman attempts to democratize history as a processual multiplicity of voices in which each individual, however marginalized or underprivileged, can participate, a "collective enterprise of the mind" (17). He analyzes how Wideman undermines the dominance of the grand narratives of history by contrasting them with an ever-changing plenitude of smaller narratives, for example by only referring to major events in world history when they personally affect the characters in the *Homewood Trilogy*. In doing so, Wideman especially emphasizes the family as a nexus of stories and histories that constitute personal and communal identity in a positive sense and thus provide the means for the "individual and collective survival of African Americans" and the preservation and development of African American culture (156-157) especially under threat in a racist society. Eschborn specifically considers Wideman's use of black vernacular as a stylistic feature that "comes to be associated with openness, directness, and authenticity" (130) and thus provides an oral counterpart to written historiography and its dominant narratives. Furthermore, he refers to Wideman's concept of "Great Time" as a counter-model to the linear "clock time" of Western historiography that "comprises past, present and future" (24) and that is thus appropriately symbolic of the collective mental processes involved in the continuous creation of history; this concept is mentioned repeatedly but would have deserved a more prominent position in the analysis of the stories and novels itself.

In general, Eschborn's readings are placed on solid theoretical ground, and he adequately discusses theories of the historical novel or the neo-slave narrative when categorizing Wideman's texts, and nevertheless this seems to me the most regrettable weakness of this notable study, since there are some occasions where the critical

discussion stops short of fulfilling its potential. The most striking example of this perceived lack of theoretical discussion concerns theories of postmodernism and especially historiographic metafiction, which seems highly relevant for this study yet is also highly neglected in it. Eschborn argues that Wideman's works, after an initial phase of uneasy influence by canonical modernists, are not postmodernist because they do not exhibit the "anti-narrative impulse of postmodernism" (16); even though he is right in rejecting Tracie Church Guzzio's highly questionable claim that these texts are postmodernist simply because of their use of "tripartite structures" (16), his rejection is based on a very narrow (and indeed also questionable) understanding of what makes a text postmodernist. This is unfortunate because Eschborn denies himself an evidently very useful and necessary line of analysis and moves himself into an argumentative position he has a hard time defending. For all intents and purposes, he reads *The Cattle Killing* as a postmodernist work of historiographic metafiction (a genre that has come to be so associated with postmodernism that it could be considered one of its major defining features), emphasizing its "historical self-reflexivity" (153), its "metafictional and metahistorical" narrative frame (151), the fact that it "intentionally blurs the line between 'fact' and 'fiction'" (148), and that it muses on "the possibility of representing the distant past in literature" (155), and yet he ultimately shies away from calling it a work of historiographic metafiction and maintains that it is "a historical novel" (147). He rejects a categorization as historiographic metafiction, the only time the term is ever mentioned in his study, or even as postmodernist on the grounds that "the main part of the novel does create a historical illusion and renounce self-reflexive elements which would break the illusion" (155), yet this argument deliberately and unduly ignores the very framing that has been analyzed in terms that are textbook elements of historiographic metafiction. A more thorough consideration of theories of postmodernist fiction might have allowed for a more insightful analysis here. This is far from saying that Eschborn's conclusions and his reading are too far off the mark to be useful – on the contrary. Yet readers well-versed in postmodernism cannot help but feel that his discussion is missing an important piece of the puzzle whose presence is already implied by those surrounding it.

A deeper engagement with postmodernism and its discourse of problematizing historiography might also have allowed Eschborn to address a second issue that presents itself clearly but is not adequately resolved. Eschborn discusses Wideman's texts with regard to the Igbo saying "all stories are true," and while he rightly rejects a reductive reading of it as an overarching guiding principle of Wideman's fiction, he fails to discuss the glaringly obvious problem such a view of history poses to his project of literary historiography. On the one hand Eschborn states that "Wideman's approach [...] reflects a relativist approach to history" in which "everybody may participate in the collective enterprise [of historiography], but nobody can claim to have 'the truth' in their hands" (160). Yet, on the other hand, Eschborn leaves no doubt that Wideman pits his truths against actual falsehoods, and that there actually are stories that are not true, since

African Americans – and other oppressed racial and ethnic groups around the world – are confronted with propaganda and distorting and degrading images of themselves passed on in daily conversations and in the media as well as false stories told about them to which they have to respond with their own stories. (172)

This is not a matter of adding one truth to another but rather one of setting the record straight in a critique of ideology, and if the "writer would like African Americans to reject the lies and false images circulating in a racist society" (172), he cannot espouse the relativist view earlier attributed to Wideman. This is a tension Eschborn neither resolves nor even addresses, and it is yet another aspect where a closer consideration of postmodernist ideas on historiography might have provided crucial insight.

Yet these points of criticism should not detract from the overall quality of Eschborn's study, and readers will no doubt find it worthwhile to engage with his analyses even where they may disagree. Eschborn is to be particularly commended for writing in a lucid and jargon-free style in a work that is not only a good read for experts but also for beginners in African American literary studies. This clarity, together with Eschborn's annotation-style contextualization of the texts he discusses, makes this a book you can gladly put into the hands of any undergraduate who wants to know about Wideman, and this is a quality that can hardly be appreciated enough in academic writing. Eschborn concisely reviews the scholarly work he is building on (or for good reason, writing against), and he clearly defines the concepts that are central to his study. Only occasionally does he get caught up in the ambiguities of his terminology, for example when he writes about "the imagined goal of changing history" (68) in *The Lynchers* when he uses the term metaphorically rather than literally with regard to the present and future, but for the most part he is remarkably precise in his use of concepts and terms. *Stories of Survival: John Edgar Wideman's Representations of History* thus is a well-written and well-argued study on an exceptional writer that manages to capture and explain the exceptional qualities of his texts through the larger context of their manifold representation of history as a record of survival, and its flaws are productive ones that invite the further debate and further critical consideration that Wideman's works have been demonstrated to deserve.