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# Othering, Mirroring, and Identity in John Edgar Wideman's Brothers and Keepers

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OTHERING, MIRRORING, AND IDENTITY IN JOHN EDGAR WIDEMAN'S

*BROTHERS AND KEEPERS*

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Bachelor of Specialized Studies

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**ABSTRACT**

Jacques Lacan's notion of the mirror stage of human development, formulated from the theories of Sigmund Freud, lies at the core of psychoanalytic theory. Fundamental components of the mirror stage include the concepts of Otherness and Identity. This examination proffers a critical reading of John Edgar Wideman's *Brothers and Keepers*, through a psychoanalytic matrix and contemporary constructions of Othering, Mirroring, and Identity.

To that end, this examination traces the evolution of the ways subsequent scholars have understood, applied, and expanded Lacan's classical mirror stage, and its components. Nancy VanDerHeide transforms the solitary, individual, experience of Lacan's mirror stage into a dynamic, relational, and reciprocal system—Mirroring—possibly involving any number of persons. Most importantly, Michal Krumer-Nevo and Mirit Sidi have expanded Othering from a merely psychological process to a larger sociological process.

Key conclusions include the identification of dangers inherent in the process of sociological Othering, and the importance of conscious resistance to that process.

Moreover, John Edgar Wideman, in the effort to write the story of his brother's prison experience, reconstructs his own self-identification, and shares larger and particularly timely revelations.

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## SECTION I

### INTRODUCTION

In *Brothers and Keepers*, John Edgar Wideman relates the real-life story of his relationship with his brother Robby—ten years his junior—who has been sentenced to life in prison for murder-robbery. The story becomes a two-headed autobiography, as Wideman not only communicates facts of his personal history, but also aspires to tell his brother's story in language that accurately conveys Robby's voice. As brothers, born and raised in the same family and virtually identical circumstances, John Edgar and Robby Wideman's individual lives trace markedly different paths. The focal point of *Brothers and Keepers* is Robby Wideman's prison sentence: the way Robby does time, and the way time does Robby--and others who know the experience of incarceration. This reading of *Brothers and Keepers* suggests that the Wideman brothers' divergent life paths resulted from the contrasting ways each of them processed the *Otherness* of their blackness.

While Robby Wideman was convicted of murder-robbery and sentenced to life in prison, the stipulated facts of the case establish that Robby Wideman did not kill anyone. He was, by all accounts, no more and no less than a conspirator in the robbery—which went bad, resulting in a murder committed by one of the other conspirators in the originally-planned robbery. In the preface to the text, John Edgar Wideman asserts that “no inmate in Pennsylvania convicted of a similar offense has served a longer sentence than my brother” (xi). These circumstances have led many to conclude—especially John Edgar Wideman—that Robby Wideman has been treated unfairly by the Pennsylvania justice system.

In his text, John Edgar Wideman writes against *Othering*, a construct deriving from the psychological theories of Sigmund Freud, and Jacques Lacan’s idea of the *mirror stage* of human identity formation. While Othering has become foundational in psychoanalytic thought and practice, modern scholars such as Michal Krumer-Nevo and Mirit Sidi have also invested Othering with sociological significance. In this paper, I identify ways in which *Brothers and Keepers* presents John Edgar Wideman’s treatment of Othering in both senses: psychological and sociological.

Finally, this paper takes a still bigger picture into view. During the last 30 years, our country has experienced an unprecedented explosion in the number of prisoners confined in the nation’s prisons—particularly from among the poor, and minorities. This process has resulted in an increasingly large proportion of citizens marginalized in our society because of their criminal backgrounds. Ultimately, I argue that the larger relevance of

*Brothers and Keepers* lies in its resistance to Othering occasioned by the prison experience.



## SECTION II

### METHODOLOGY

I adopt an interdisciplinary approach in this examination. First, I lay the psychological foundation for the concept of Othering with a brief presentation of Jacques Lacan's notion of the mirror stage of human identity formation. Edith Kurzweil, in "Jacques Lacan: French Freud," and Jane Gallop, in "Lacan's 'Mirror Stage': Where to Begin," make the connection between the mirror stage and identity formation. In "Kohut and Lacan: Mirror Opposites," Barnet D. Malin expands upon that connection, provides an explanation of Lacan's concepts of "Other" and "other," and insinuates continuous, subjective, and intersubjective elements of identity formation. In "Reflections on Mirroring," Nancy VanDerHeide derives the idea of *Mirroring* from the mirror stage and projects it beyond a one-person phenomenon. For VanDerHeide, successful Mirroring counters the negativity of Otherness, as she explains in "A Dynamic Systems View of the Transformational Process of Mirroring."

I rely heavily upon the work of Michal Krumer-Nevo and Mirit Sidi. In “Writing Against Othering,” Krumer-Nevo and Sidi translate Othering from psychology to sociology, and delineate its marginalizing characteristics. Krumer-Nevo and Sidi promote the importance of resisting Othering in academic discourse, and prescribe the necessary elements of writing that accomplishes that resistance.

Through this critical matrix, close reading of *Brothers and Keepers* highlights the presence of Othering and Mirroring in Wideman’s text, and their intricate connection to identity for both John Edgar Wideman and Robby Wideman. Finally, I draw upon the work of Bruce Western and Becky Petit, in “Incarceration & Social Inequality,” to establish a contemporary context for the larger importance of John Edgar Wideman’s *Brothers and Keepers*.

## SECTION III

### THE MIRROR STAGE

While Jacques Lacan (1901-1981) wasn't the first scholar to speak of the mirror stage of human identity formation, his thoughts on the topic remain seminal. Edith Kurzweil, in "Jacques Lacan: French Freud," explains that "Lacan finds that a child's first and usually jubilant reaction to its own reflection in a mirror, which is said to happen between six and eighteen months, is of fundamental importance .... [it] is the child's initial awareness of itself as a biological organism, as an entity bound up with the human species ..." (425). In "Mirror Stage': Where to Begin," Jane Gallop adds that Lacan saw in the mirror stage "the root stock ... of later identifications" (119). Barnet D. Malin echoes Gallop in "Kohut and Lacan: Mirror Opposites," where he writes, "Lacan's mirror stage proper takes up the beginning development of the sense of self or personal identity ..." (62), and "describes the developmental achievement of the infant and toddler acquiring his first felt sense of identity ..." (63).

Ultimately, Malin provides a broader view of the Lacanian system:

Lacan's early theory, including the mirror stage, centers on the imaginary register. The imaginary is the register of meaning, and all that is known, thought and fantasized, whether conscious or unconscious; the imaginary is malleable within changing contexts of signifiers, and so all meaning and knowledge is subject to countless interpretations, both subjectively and intersubjectively. Our consciously held sense of self and identity, along with the entirety of our subjective experience, are therefore all imaginary: never absolute, and forever ephemeral, changeable, illusory, and deceptive. (61)

Malin's view addresses the Lacanian system's distinction between the notions of "Other" and "other". According to Malin, to understand Lacan we must "imagine the Other as the locus of subjectivity of culture, signifiers, and other impressions of the external world.

The Other is living culture made available to us by our empty signifiers ..." (64).

Nonetheless, the Other does have anthropomorphic connotations. As Malin writes, "[T]he Other concept naturally has developmental ties to actual people, most importantly, but not exclusively, the mother" (64). Ultimately, "Lacan's distinction between the terms *Other* and *other* is that the former represents the abstract metaphysical concept, while the latter refers to people and/or fantasies of and about people" (64).

The mother-child relationship proves instructive in clarifying the Lacanian model. Malin explains:

The interpersonal relationship between child and mother becomes represented by the metapsychological relationship between subject and Other, and the (m)Other's responses take on the function of the mirror .... The Mother's eyes, gaze, attention, and responses of pleasure or displeasure with the child also represent the mirror and its reflections. (65)

Nancy VanDerHeide expands the mirror stage to include the *process* of Mirroring. In, "A Dynamic Systems View of the Transformational Process of Mirroring," VanDerHeide agrees with Kohut's view that "mirroring is a developmental, selfobject activity that confirms one's positive qualities of originality, vitality and ambition; it involves a delighted parent's approval that conveys to the child a sense of goodness and wholeness, thereby evoking and sustaining a more expansive, cohesive and vigorous sense of self" (433). For VanDerHeide, however, the process of Mirroring is even more:

from my perspective, mirroring is a *relational* event and comprises both *reciprocal* forms of responsiveness and mutual experiences of being recognized and appreciated. At a phenomenological level, mirroring is the mirrored individual's experience of being seen, gotten, or understood ... in a compassionate manner that promotes an alteration in the individual's sense of self. (433, emphasis added)

Key to my reading of *Brothers and Keepers* is VanDerHeide's construction of Mirroring as "relational" and "reciprocal". Indeed, VanDerHeide extends Mirroring beyond the solitary, one-directional, experience of the mirror stage proper, to "an open, nonlinear, dynamic (complex) system comprising the interpenetrating mix-up of the subjectivities

that each individual ... brings to [a] relationship”, 434). More directly, in “Reflections on Mirroring,” VanDerHeide puts it this way: “[T]he mirroring selfobject function ... remains *too easily misunderstood as a one-person phenomenon*, the mirror seen simply, and simplistically, as a mere reflection ...” (47, emphasis added).

## SECTION IV

### MIRROR IMAGES

Overt references to mirrors and mirror images figure prominently in *Brothers and Keepers*. When John visits Robby in the prison's disciplinary unit, a literally dark and unnerving place, he imagines Robby and himself enclosed in, "A curving mirror doubling the darkness .... But the image I'm creating is a trick of the glass. The mirror that would swallow Robby and then chime to me: You're the fairest of them all. The voice I hear issues from a crack in the glass" (87-88). Arriving at the prison for a different visit with Robby, John Edgar recalls, "I wasn't prepared to step through the looking glass" (181). He likens the uncertainties and vulnerabilities of the day-to-day prison routine to a fun-house mirror:

Think of a fun-house mirror, a floor to ceiling of undulating glass. Images ripple across its curved surface constantly changing. Anything caught in the mirror is bloated, distorted. Prison's like that mirror. Prison rules and

regulations, the day-to-day operation of the institution, confront the inmate with an image of himself that is grotesque, absurd. A prisoner who refuses to internalize this image, who insists upon seeing other versions of himself, is in constant danger. (183)

John Edgar sarcastically describes the keepers—the prison employees that run the prison—as a huge two-sided mirror in the space between those outside prison and those inside:

You must stand between us and them. You are not a connection between the free world and the prison world but a chasm, a wall, a two-sided, unbreakable mirror. When we look at you we see ourselves. We see order and justice. Your uniforms, your rules reflect human discipline. We see our faces, a necessarily severe aspect of our nature in the stern mask above your marshal attire. When prisoners gaze into the reverse side of the mirror they should see the deformed aberrations they've become. Keepers are set in place to reflect and sustain this duality. In between the bright mirrors stretches an abyss. (189)

Waiting for Robby to arrive at the prison visiting room, he thinks, “I have a minute or two before Robby pops in from his side of the mirror” (189).

Less overt examples of Mirroring figure even more prominently in *Brothers and Keepers*. Attempting to make sense of Robby's confinement, John Edgar realizes that, “The fact that a few twists and turns of fate could land you here with the bad guys becomes a stark



message about my own vulnerability. It could easily be me behind bars instead of you” (48). In the interaction between John Edgar and Robby, we recognize VanDerHeide’s relational and reciprocal process of mirroring which feeds a clearer sense of self. For John, a conversation with Robby during a visit seemed like a conversation with himself. “Much of what he related was familiar. The people, the places. Even the voice, the words he chose were mine in a way. We’re so alike, I kept thinking, anticipating what he would say next, how he would say it, filling in naturally, easily with my words what he left unsaid” (76). Even his consciousness of ways in which he differed from his brother moved John to pointed self-reflection. “However numerous and comforting the similarities, we were different. The world had seized on the difference, allowed me room to thrive, while he’d been forced into a cage. Why did it work out that way? What was the nature of the difference? Why did it haunt me” (77)? Malin’s description of the imaginary register appears to apply here, and accounts for the different, subjective, ways the two brothers processed their relationship to the Other, the metaphysical and metapsychological relationship to the world into which they were born.

The way Robby has processed—*is* processing—the prison experience amazes John. “The source of my brother’s strength was a mystery to me. When I put myself in his shoes, tried to imagine how I’d cope if I were sentenced to life imprisonment, I couldn’t conceive of any place inside myself from which I could draw the courage and dignity he displayed” (201). He adds, “To discover the source of my brother’s strength I found myself comparing what I’d accomplished outside the walls with what he’d managed inside. The comparison made me uncomfortable” (202). That is, John considers himself

via the “mirror” of his brother and doesn’t like what he sees. John dwells upon this unease, which clearly seems a crucial concern for him:

... something like envy was stirring. Worse than envy. The ancient instability of ego kicking up. Why hadn’t I ever been able to acknowledge a talent, success, or capacity in another person without feeling that person’s accomplishment either diminished me or pointed to some crucial deficiency in my constitution? What compound of greed, insecurity, and anger forced me always to compare, compete? Why couldn’t I just leave myself out of it and celebrate Robby’s willpower, his grace under pressure? Why couldn’t I simply applaud and be grateful for whatever transformation of self he’d performed? Were my visits to prison about freeing him or freeing myself from the doubt that perhaps, after all, in spite of it all, maybe my brother has done more with his life than I’ve done with mine. Maybe he’s the better man and maybe the only way I can face the truth about him, about myself, is to demystify the secret of his survival. Maybe I’m inside West Pen to warm myself by his fire, to steal it. Perhaps in my heart of hearts or, better, my ego of egos, I don’t really want to tear down the walls, but tear my brother down, bring him back to my level, to the soft, uncertain ground where my feet are planted. (202)

As if that didn’t get to the heart of his sense of self, John Edgar Wideman can’t help but wonder, “Does what [Robby’s] achieved in the narrow confines of a cell mock the cage I call freedom” (203)? This pointed self-reflection, as we shall see, forms a primary component of writing that resists *Othering*.

Michal Krumer-Nevo and Mirit Sidi, in “Writing Against Othering,” help us to take the intellectual step from Lacan’s “Other” and “other”, to Othering. They define Othering as a process by which “the self is distinguished from other people who are perceived as moderately or radically different” (300). Krumer-Nevo and Sidi add:

In psychoanalytic terms we project upon the Other that which is undesirable in ourselves or repressed and buried in our unconscious; thus the term “Other” can refer to anything or anybody. However, in this article we use a sociological rather than a psychological definition of Othering, which refers to Otherness as *the process of attaching moral codes of inferiority to difference*, the critical discursive tool of discrimination and exclusion used against individuals on the basis of their belonging to marginalized groups. The oppressive force of Otherness comes from the separating line or border created, and from its *exclusionary* effect, since to use Hall’s term, the Others are in effect sent into “symbolic exile.” In this context, Othering is associated with the notion of Eurocentrism, with Said’s concept of orientalism, and with everyday racism. (300, emphasis added)

This adversarial Otherness lies at the heart of *Brothers and Keepers*. Wideman makes great effort to condemn what he views as the Pennsylvania prison system’s denial of Robby’s humanity. His description of prison life exudes scorn and seeks to evoke moral outrage. It is hard to imagine a more critical tone from an Ivy-League educated college professor. Wideman excoriates the prison system for keeping his brother locked up for so long. He lambastes the court system for not granting Robby the legal relief that John

Edgar sees as the outcome demanded by justice. He laments the overtly dehumanizing arbitrariness of prison rules—and their enforcement. He charges collusion by the courts and the prison system in a conspiracy to marginalize—demonize, even—the poor and minorities. Indeed, Wideman’s portrayal of the deliberated nefariousness of this conspiracy mirrors the specter of Said’s orientalism. Alas, life for inmates in Pennsylvania’s Western Penitentiary constitutes a societal exile both symbolic and real.

Krumer-Nevo and Sidi cite Todorov’s view of the three characteristics of Othering, which include “value judgments (the Other is perceived as good/bad), social distance (the Other is perceived as distant psychologically and physically), and knowledge (the history and culture of the Other is relatively unknown)” (300). In addition, “Otherness is accomplished by means of rules of behavior and the mechanisms of discourse, interpretation, and performance set by hegemonic groups” (300).

Wideman’s self-critical recollections perfectly reflect these dynamics of Othering. Early in the text, Wideman begins a confession that recurs and expands throughout the story. He intimates that his younger brother’s trouble with the law has led him to a much-needed reckoning with himself: “The distance I’d put between my brother’s world and mine suddenly collapsed. Two thousand miles between Laramie, Wyoming, and Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, my years of willed ignorance, of flight and hiding, had not changed a simple truth: I could never run fast enough or far enough...” (4).

Why was John Edgar running? At this point, we’re not exactly sure. He adds, “My life was relatively comfortable, pleasant, safe. I’d come west to escape the demons Robby personified. I didn’t need outlaw brothers reminding me how much had been lost, how

much compromised, how terribly the world still raged beyond the charmed circle of my life on the Laramie plains” (11). We begin to sense an answer to our question. Okay, he was running to escape demons. What demons? What was lost and compromised?

Our curiosity grows deeper still, when John Edgar introduces larger considerations of a deeper history. He wonders:

Did our grandfathers run away from the South? Black Henry from Greenwood, South Carolina, mulatto white John from Culpepper, Virginia. How would they answer that question? Were they running from something or running to something? What did you figure you were doing when you started running [he asks, rhetorically, of Robby]? When did your flight begin? Was escape the reason or was there a destination, a promised land exerting its pull? Is freedom inextricably linked with both, running *from* and running *to*? Is freedom the motive and means and end and everything in between? (24)

Clearly, John Edgar sees running as a theme interwoven in the layers of history connecting his life to Robby’s, and their lives to the lives of their grandfathers. But what, exactly, was John Edgar running from, or to?

He provides an answer. “I was running away from Pittsburgh, from poverty, from blackness” (26-27), he says. “To get ahead, to make something of myself, college had seemed a logical, necessary step; my exile, my flight from home began with good grades, with good English, with setting myself apart long before I’d earned a scholarship and a train ticket over the mountains to Philadelphia” (27). And, while this mindset left John

Edgar feeling guilty, he felt a greater sense of fear: “Fear marched along beside guilt. Fear of acknowledging in myself any traces of poverty, ignorance, and danger I’d find surrounding me when I returned to Pittsburgh. Fear that I was contaminated and would carry the poison wherever I ran. Fear that the evil would be discovered in me and I’d be shunned like a leper” (27). I’d say that constitutes an identity crisis.

That guilt and fear left John Edgar torn inside, fundamentally at odds with himself: “I needed to prove I hadn’t lost my roots” (27), he says. “Needed to boogie and drink wine and chase pussy, needed to prove I could still do it all. Fight, talk trash, hoop with the best playground players at Mellon Park. Claim the turf, wear it like a badge, yet keep my distance, be in the street but not of it. Your world. The blackness that incriminated me” (27). Indeed, John Edgar Wideman holds nothing back in clearing his conscience of the clearly oppressive burden of his own youthful difficulties:

Easier to change the way I talked and walked, easier to be two people than to expose in either world the awkward mix of school and home I’d become. When in Rome. Different strokes for different folks. Nobody had pulled my coat and whispered the news about third worlds. Just two choices as far as I could tell: either/or. Rich or poor. White or black. Win or lose. I figured whose side I wanted to be on when the Saints came marching in. Who the Saints, the rulers of the earth were, was clear. My mind was split by oppositions, by mutually exclusive categories. Manichaeism, as Franz Fanon would say. To succeed in the man’s world

you must become like the man and the man sure didn't claim no bunch of nigger relatives in Pittsburgh. (27-28)

Not surprisingly, John Edgar's escape from blackness and embrace of whiteness included marriage to a white woman. He recounts the muted horror he felt during a long drive with Robby and Judy—the white wife—as Robby made it a point to find and blast the blackest music he could find on the car radio. “Didn't you know,” he, again rhetorically, asks of Robby, “we'd left Pittsburgh, didn't you understand that classical music volume moderate was preferred in these circumstances? Papa's got a brand-new bag. And you were gon act a nigger and let the cat out” (28); all the while, John Edgar “...Having it both ways. Listening my ass off and patting my foot but in between times wondering how Judy was reacting, thinking about how I'd complain later about your ... fondness for rhythm and blues .... In case she was annoyed, confused, or doubting me in any way, I'd reassure her by disassociating myself from your tastes, your style” (28).

John Edgar Wideman's inner conflict had another dimension. He describes his trips home from college as a break “from people and situations that continually set me against them and against myself” (32). Immersed in the lily white, Ivy League, experience at the University of Pennsylvania during the mid-1960's, John Edgar Wideman constantly felt “forced to pull my punches” (32). In order to keep some sense of dignity and confidence, he walled himself off from his classmates emotionally: “I had to learn to construct a shell around myself. Be cool. Work on appearing dignified, confident. Fool people with appearances, surfaces, live my real life underground in a region where no one could touch me” (32). He continues:

The trouble with this survival mechanism was the time and energy expended on upkeep of the shell. The brighter, harder, more convincing and impenetrable the shell became, the more I lost touch with the inner sanctuary where I was supposed to be hiding. It was no more accessible to me than it was to the people I intended to keep out. Inside was a breeding ground for rage, hate, dreams of vengeance. (32)

The inner turmoil all but destroyed John Edgar Wideman, simultaneously gripped by opposing dynamics, either of which had the potential to steal his sanity. “It was fear and cunning and anger and alienation; it was chaos, a yawning emptiness at the center of my being” (33), he recalls. “I was losing contact with the truth of my own feelings .... Didn’t know whose eyes stared back at me from the mirror” (33). In fact, the ordeal became John Edgar’s own prison: “I thought I was running but I was fashioning a cage” (32).

The essence of Otherness is the notion of absolute difference considered as beyond all doubt. The self rejects any idea of likeness with the Other. Krumer-Nevo and Sidi put it this way:

... [The] mechanisms of Otherness produce alienation and social distance.

We cannot find anything of ourselves in descriptions that are based on these mechanisms—because the one who is described is our antipode, the Other, somebody we do not *want* to be and someone we never *will* be. We feel absolutely certain, that is, as Lee Rainwater claims, were we in their



situation, we would behave differently ... (300)

Ironically, given the larger tenor of John Edgar Wideman's critique of the way society views prisons and prisoners, Wideman acknowledges his own preexistent complicity in this Othering during his first trip to visit his brother at Western Penitentiary. The uncomfortable animus that settles upon John Edgar Wideman when he arrives at the prison grounds isn't just about the physical prison, or its keepers. It is also about the prisoners. "Not even inside the walls yet and I can sense the paranoia, the curtain of mistrust and suspicion settling over my eyes .... black men like me, like you" (46), he offers. This seems to take him aback but he can't help how he feels. "In spite of knowing better, I can't shake the feeling that these men are different. Not just different. Bad. People who are dangerous. I can identify with them only to the extent that I own up to the evil in myself" (46).

That thought introduces what seems like an inner conflict as disarming as that he confessed to earlier in the story. "I have trouble granting the prisoners a life independent of mine" (46), he writes. "I impose my terms on them, yet I want to meet their eyes. Plunge into the depths of their eyes to learn what's hidden there, what reservoirs of patience and pain they draw from, what sustains them in this impossible place" (46). He intuitively empathizes with the prisoners, but only to a point: "I want to learn from their eyes, identify with their plight, but I don't want anyone to forget I'm an outsider, that these cages and walls are not my home ..." (46).

At the heart of John Edgar Wideman's consternation lies the unavoidable fact of his brother's confinement in that godforsaken place. Prisons exist to confine really bad

people. “That’s why you shouldn’t be here” 46), he directs to Robby. “You’re not like these others. You’re my brother, you’re like me. Different” (47).

Krumer-Nevo and Sidi also describe the dynamics and mechanics of writing against Othering. They see this writing as a deliberate process of resistance. Unmistakably, resistance lies at the heart of *Brothers and Keepers*.

One of the most striking impressions evoked by this text is the bitter contempt that John Edgar Wideman expresses toward the prison which incarcerates Robby, and the officers who run the prison. This becomes immediately obvious when John Edgar begins his account of arriving at the prison to visit his brother. He writes, “I drive through the tall gate into the official business lot because even if the weather’s summery pleasant, I want to start the visit with a small victory, be one up on the keepers. Because that’s the name of the game” (43). It is hard to believe that this Ivy-League-educated professor and writer would jettison the thoughtfulness and reason we would expect of him, simply because his brother is locked up inside that prison. Indeed, thoughtfulness and reason would suggest that prisons serve a legitimate purpose, and that the folks who staff prisons are engaged in commendable public service.

According to John Edgar Wideman, however, the real workings of the prison system—at least the system that confines his brother—belie thoughtfulness and reason. John Edgar seeks this small victory before entering the prison because the world inside the prison rarely allows any such notion (43). Writes John Edgar, “I’ll be playing on their turf, with their ball and their rules, which are nothing if not one-sided, capricious, cruel, and corrupting” (43). The reader can have no doubt about the writer’s overwhelming disdain

for the world inside the prison walls: “What’s written says one thing. But that’s not really the way things are. Always a catch. Always an angle so the published rules don’t literally apply. What counts are the unwritten rules. The now you see it now you don’t sleight of hand rules whose function is to humiliate visitors and preserve the absolute, arbitrary power of the keepers” (43).

In truth, John Edgar Wideman has a primal, involuntary, response to stepping foot on prison grounds. As he enters the prison environs, with his wife, mother, and daughters, he lags behind them all, just a little. He deliberately does so for a reason:

I need to say to whoever’s watching—guards, prisoners invisible behind the barred three-story windows partitioning the walls, these are my people. They’re with me. I’m responsible. I need to say that, to hang back and preside, to stroll, almost saunter, aware of the weight, the necessity of vigilance because here I am, on alien turf, a black man, and I’m in charge. For a moment at least these women, these children have me to turn to. And I’m 100 percent behind them, prepared to make anyone who threatens them answer to me. And that posture, that prerogative remains rare for a black man in American society. Rare *today*, over 120 years after slavery and second-class citizenship have been abolished by law. The guards know that. The prisoners know. It’s for their benefit as well as my own and my family’s that I must carry myself in a certain way, make certain rules clear even though we are entering a hostile world, even though the bars exist to cut off the possibility of the prisoners seeing themselves as I

must see myself, striding free, in charge of women and children, across the official lot. (44)

According to Krumer-Nevo and Sidi, this active resistance “returns the [subject] and [his] history to the foreground; it is written out of a situated position and uses reflexivity as an organizing principle .... [that] serves to bring to mind social injustice ...” (300). Our text exemplifies this with the introduction of Robby’s voice.

The introduction of Robby Wideman’s voice occurs seamlessly, with no formal announcement. Robby’s voice distinguishes itself from that of John Edgar Wideman with a clear shift in tone. While John Edgar Wideman’s voice is that of confession, and a struggle to understand, with a bit of indictment, Robby Wideman’s voice is that of proclamation. Robby proclaims his understanding of the truth of his life with the sense of one who has paid a high price for that truth and doesn’t owe a thing on it. One would go too far in labeling Robby’s voice defiant, yet not far enough in terming it instructive. Proud and principled, Robby’s voice signals a shift in the motion of the text’s recollections. That is, if John Edgar exerted much of his energy and attention to putting distance between himself and his blackness, Robby devotes at least as much energy and attention totally absorbing himself in his blackness.

Robby explains why so many young black men embrace the culture and lifestyle of street life. Simple enough, “their world is the GHETTO and in that world all the glamour, all the praise and attention is given to the slick guy, the gangster especially, the ones that get over in the ‘life.’ And it is because we can’t help but feel some satisfaction seeing a

brother, a black man, get over on these people, on their system without playing by their rules ...” (57). He continues:

The world of the angry black kid growing up in the sixties was a world in which to be in was to be out—out of touch with the square world and all of its rules on what’s right and wrong. The thing was to make your own rules, do your own thing, but make sure it’s contrary to what society says or is. (58)

Even as John Edgar Wideman pulled no punches in confessing his struggle with his blackness, i.e., with the marginalization connected with his blackness, pre-prison Robby Wideman pulled no punches in rejecting the imperatives of a social order that had so obviously rejected him—and everything about him. Robby’s voice puts it like this: “The world’s a stone bitch. Nothing true if that’s not true. The man had you coming and going. He owned everything worth owning and all you’d ever get was what he didn’t want anymore, what he’d chewed and spit out and left in the gutter for niggers to fight over” (64). Robby speaks directly about his criminal lifestyle:

Robbing white people didn’t cause me to lose no sleep back then. Couldn’t feel but so bad about that. How you gon feel sorry when society’s so corrupt, when everybody got their hand out or got their hand in somebody else’s pocket and ain’t no rules nobody listens to if they can get away with breaking them? How you gon apply the rules? It was dog

eat dog out there, so how was I spozed to feel sorry if I was doing what everybody else doing. I just got caught is all. I'm sorry about that, and damned sorry that guy Stavros got killed, but as far as what I did, as far as robbing white people, ain't no way I was gonna torture myself over that one. (90)

Robby does acknowledge a sense of wrong in his actions. That sense of wrong, however, is trumped by what he concludes a greater wrong. "I knew I was doing wrong. Knew I was hurting people. But then I'd look around and see Homewood and see what was going down. Shit. I ain't gone lay down and die. Shit Ima punch that rock with my bare hand till it bleeds money" (132). So, Robby embraced the underworld. He recalls, "... it was as if I slipped off and on different skins playing different roles as an actor does, always trying to shine and glitter as a star in my world, the world of the street, the world left to me ..." (169).

Krumer-Nevo and Sidi list the necessary elements of writing that resists Othering:

(1) narrative, which enables contextualization, historization, and the retrieval of the subjectivity of the Other; (2) dialog, which acts against objectification and dehistorization by bringing the presence of the Other's personal history and knowledge; and (3) reflexivity, which acts against the authoritative stance of the text or [author]. When the author turns to her own navel, metaphorically and literally, bringing to the forefront her

own feelings, experiences, and history, [he] demonstrates [his] own process of interpretation. Reflexivity can both enhance the interpretation by adding a new source of knowledge and emphasize the status of the text as personal and partial. (300-301)

John Edgar Wideman's text opens with an unattributed epigraph. The absence of attribution intimates a question that recurs throughout the text. Who is speaking? The answer to that question appears clearer at certain points in the story than at others. Still, the question begs another. Why doesn't the author tell us in the clearest language possible just who *is* speaking? The answer to that second question suggests something peculiar about this text, and its authorship.

*Brothers and Keepers*, attributed to the acclaimed and prolific writer John Edgar Wideman, is more correctly understood as a collaborative effort between John Edgar Wideman and his brother, Robert "Robby" Wideman. Sentenced to life in prison for murder-robbery committed in 1975, Robby Wideman had served eight (8) years of that sentence when *Brothers and Keepers* first appeared in print, in 1984. He remained in prison at the 2005 publication date of the Mariner paperback edition of the story that I have used for this examination, and he remains in prison today, almost 37 years after his conviction. The text tells the story of Robby Wideman. It also tells the story of John Edgar Wideman. What we have here, then, amounts to a double autobiography.

The unattributed epigraph which begins the text relates the thoughts of Robby Wideman, in the words of John Edgar Wideman. It offers a glimpse of much of the heart of Robby's story, past and present:

... while I was walking through life I had a distorted view of how I wanted things to be rather than how they really were or are. Always wanted things to be easy; so instead of dealing with things as they were, I didn't deal with them at all. I ducked hard things that took effort or work and tried to have fun, make a party, cause (sic) that was always easy. (3)

While, at first reading, we are unclear about who those words belong to, we learn to distinguish Robby's voice from John Edgar's—a necessary distinction in writing that resists Othering. In the epigraph, John Edgar Wideman succeeds in communicating a fundamental truth concerning his brother that informs the entire story: whatever and whoever Robby Wideman may have been, he *is* a man who has learned from his youthful folly; a man who views his life through eyes that have become wide and wise. The opening epigraph serves notice to the reader that the story that follows is a sober story, void of sensationalism, reflexive, and accountable; it also invests Robby's voice with the autonomy that writing against Othering requires.

Very importantly, narrative “locates the [subject] in the context of a story, giving [him] the role of the protagonist in the working out of events” (301). Moreover, narrative presents “the intrapersonal reality of the protagonist as well as the intersubjective context in which [he] exists” (301). Krumer-Nevo and Sidi expand upon this point:

A description of the protagonist that combines [his] subjectivity and the context of [his] real life, including its oppressive aspects, will reveal the relationship between the two—the [subject] and the social institutions in



[his] context. The narrativization of the [subject] enables us to explore [his] subjectivity both as influenced and created by the context of [his] real life as well as by [his] coping with it, either accepting it, partially accepting it, manipulating it, resisting it, or any combination of the above. (301)

John Edgar Wideman further demonstrates Krumer-Nevo and Sidi's explanation of the function of dialog in writing that resists Othering. According to Krumer-Nevo and Sidi, dialog, "whether between two internal voices of the self or between two persons ... put[s] into play possibilities for change" (302). Dialog, in *Brothers and Keepers*, accomplishes this by facilitating the point-counterpoint of contrasting voices of John Edgar and Robby Wideman as the precursor to the evolution of perspective and awareness. Pursuant to a conversation with Robby, John Edgar has something of an epiphany. Robby's principled honesty hits a bit too close to home for John. "[Robby's] confessions make me uncomfortable. Instead of concentrating on what he's revealing, I'm pushed into considering all the things I could be confessing, should be confessing but haven't and probably won't ever. I feel hypocritical" (97). And again, "... hearing him talk, listening to him trying to make something of the nothing, challenges me .... His story freeing me, because it forces me to tell my own" (98). Krumer-Nevo and Sidi view such dialogic engagement as "a strategy with the potential of resisting Othering" (302). In support, they reference the assertion of Pickering that "... *Otherness is a denial of dialogue, interaction and the possibility of change*" (302-303, emphasis added).

One risk associated with dialog, however, lies in the potential for the writer's voice to dominate the other voice(s) in the discourse. Appropriately constructed dialog, though, mitigates this risk. "Although all dialogs and all social contexts involve power relationships," Krumer-Nevo and Sidi write, "dialog remains one of the only viable routes to a democratic mode of expression" (303). Wideman addresses this risk in the preface to the text, where he recounts his inner struggle to get the voices of the story right: "The story confronted me with its intimidating, legitimate otherness, a resistance and weight that caused me continuously to question any point of view I could fashion to represent that otherness" (xv).

Reflexivity, the third mode, constitutes "a cognitive process that focuses on [the writer's] own thoughts, memories, or sometimes, emotions" (306). Reflexivity "posits the [writer] inside the text" (305). According to Krumer-Nevo and Sidi, "The look inward can be directed toward one's self, one's history and position, as an articulation of one's analytically situated self, what Macbeth calls 'positional reflexivity,' or toward the hidden, transparent, or unnoticed authorial and textual workings, 'textual reflexivity'" (306). Indeed, Wideman writes, "I could not write my brother's story without writing mine" (xv).

Finally, Krumer-Nevo and Sidi highlight the goal and function of Othering that animates their call for writing against Othering in academic discourse—and by extension, to all writing. They "charge Othering with political significance, moving it from psychology to sociology, from the process of developing a sense of self that occurs in the arena of interpersonal relationships to the process of developing a sense of self that occurs in the arena of hierarchical social order" (307).

Intimating as much, Wideman writes: “I couldn’t write objectively about the prison system from outside without becoming complicit with its primal Manichaeian division of the world into inside and outside, evil and good, those categories that its stone walls and iron bars claim to separate” (xv).

Conclusively, Krumer-Nevo and Sidi issue an unambiguous appeal and prescription:

We call for texts to avoid or resist Othering by containing the following aspects: It should reconstruct the content of the lives ... and the history of the people described; it has to make space for ... [their] voices and knowledges, giving particular attention not only to their experiences and emotions but also to their theories and analyses regarding their circumstances and relationships ... [and] the author’s presence as an interpretive authority should be part of the text. (307)

In *Brothers and Keepers*, John Edgar Wideman meticulously distinguishes his voice from that of his brother. He describes the writing and editing process, wherein Robby contributed his perspective during conversations in the visiting room—which John Edgar would later transcribe from memory—or in letters. Above, I presented several instances in the text where John Edgar emphasizes his own reaction to Robby’s experience, a mixture of pride, in Robby, and self-recrimination. Pertinently, John Edgar Wideman writes, “This book is part of the unlearning of my first response to my brother’s imprisonment” (221).

Ultimately, something doesn't add up for John Edgar; *can't* add up. "A brother behind bars, my own flesh and blood, raised in the same houses by the same mother and father; a brother confined in prison has to be a mistake, a malfunctioning of the system. Any other explanation is too incriminating" (47-48). It all just doesn't make sense. Out of this palpable senselessness, John Edgar asserts perhaps his clearest indictment: "...If prisons don't segregate good from evil, then what we've created are zoos for human beings. And we've given license to the keepers to stock the cages" (48).

Young, brash, Robby matures well in prison. John Edgar observes, "Prison had changed my brother, not broken him, and therein lay the story. The changes were subtle, incremental; bit by bit he had been piecing himself together" (195). Indeed, big brother loves what he sees in little brother:

The character traits that landed Robby in prison are the same ones that have allowed him to survive with dignity, and pain and a sense of himself as infinitely better than the soulless drone prison demands he become. Robby knows his core is intact; his optimism, his intelligence, his capacity for love, his pride, his dream of making it big, becoming somebody special. And though these same qualities helped get him in trouble and could derail him again, I'm happy they are still there. I rejoice with him. (195)

John Edgar sees it as critical that Robby has maintained "the consciousness, the vision in which he saw himself as counting, as being worth saving at any cost. If he had lost that vision, if he loses it now, then we will all matter a little less" (195).

## SECTION V

### RAMIFICATIONS

*Brothers and Keepers* tells us a lot—in a quite moving way—about Robby Wideman’s experience in the criminal justice system, about the relationship between two brothers, and about the impact of Robby’s experience upon John Edgar Wideman. Moreover, the text also tells us a lot about how these two brothers, born into the same family, raised in the same neighborhood, and in virtually identical circumstances otherwise, chose two markedly different paths in their lives. If we got nothing else from the story, this story would arguably deserve a place among the finest works of contemporary American literature. I contend that what John Edgar Wideman has given us in this work, however, resonates with an even larger importance.

John Edgar Wideman signals as much in the preface to the 2005 Mariner edition of the text—a text originally published in 1984:

Robby was sentenced to prison because he made bad decisions and did

bad things. He's responsible for his actions and must carry forever the awful weight of having participated in a crime that cost a human being's life. *None of this alters the fact that courts and prisons, notorious for their racism, cruelty, and corruption, operate in a fashion that creates as many problems for society as it solves.* (xi, emphasis added)

More specifically, Wideman writes, "I've watched a boom in prison construction, the growing popularity of brutal high-tech facilities, an intensifying racial and ethnic polarization among inmates, wholesale elimination of rehabilitation and educational programs, awarding of longer sentences, privatization of prisons for profit ..." (xi). He adds that, "prisons are not a solution to the problem of crime. At best a distraction from the problem, at worst an evil accomplice. If we accept cages as a fit habitat for more and more of us, we're placing into someone else's hands more and more power to incarcerate" (xvii). He laments, "America grows smaller and smaller, erecting more walls to keep out or keep in or keep down what it fears. Isolated by these walls, busy maintaining them, we neglect self-examination. Blame others for causing our immurement by fear. Locked down by the tragic error of imprisoning others to free ourselves ..." (xvii-xviii).

In "Incarceration & Social Inequality," Bruce Western and Becky Petit provide data that supports much of Wideman's concern. They write, "In the last few decades, the institutional contours of America's social inequality have been transformed by the rapid

growth in the prison and jail population” (8). The ramifications of this ongoing transformation are bigger, more extensive, than most Americans realize:

America’s prisons and jails have produced a new social group, a group of social outcasts who are joined by the shared experience of incarceration, crime, poverty, racial minority, and low education. As an outcast group, the men and women in our penal institutions have little access to the social mobility available to the mainstream. Social and economic disadvantage, crystallizing in penal confinement, is sustained over the life course and transmitted from one generation to the next. This is a profound institutionalized inequality that has renewed race and class disadvantage.

(8)

Western and Petit document the dramatic rise in prison and jail populations in our country during the last 30 years. “From 1980 to 2008, the U.S. incarceration rate climbed from 221 to 762 per 100,000. In the previous five decades, from the 1920s through the mid-1970s, the scale of punishment in America had been stable at around 100 per 100,000” (9). Western and Petit place that eightfold increase in the incarceration rate in even greater relief. “While there are about ten million admissions to local jails each year—for those awaiting trial or serving short sentences—around seven hundred thousand prisoners are now admitted annually to state and federal facilities” (11).

Yet, while incarceration rates have increased across virtually all demographic groups, “it is the profound race and class disparities in incarceration that produce the new class of social outsiders” (9). Western and Petit submit, “For the older post-war cohort who

reached their mid-thirties at the end of the 1970s, about one in ten African American men served time in prison. For the younger cohort born from 1975 to 1979, the lifetime risk of imprisonment for African American men had increased to one in four” (11). Almost incredibly, the statistical picture gets even worse:

Prison time has become a normal life event for African American men who have dropped out of high school. Fully 68 percent of these men born since the mid-1970s have prison records. The high rate of incarceration has redrawn the pathway through young adulthood. The main sources of upward mobility for African American men—namely, military service and a college degree—are significantly less common than a prison record. For the first generations growing up in the post-civil rights era, the prison now looms as a significant institutional influence on life chances. (11)

While the prison experience itself is bad enough, in most cases the greater tragedy lies in wait for the 95 percent of all prisoners who eventually return to their communities from prison. Western and Petit assert, “The negative effects of incarceration ... are related to the strong negative perceptions employers have of job seekers with criminal records” (13). As a consequence, “... clear majorities of the young men in poor communities are going to prison and returning home less employable and more detached from their families” (17). Alas, “Serving time in prison or jail diminishes social and economic opportunities .... among those already most socioeconomically disadvantaged” (12).

In *Brothers and Keepers*, John Edgar Wideman writes against the Othering of the prison experience; an experience that has not only claimed his brother, but which continues to



claim an unprecedented and growing number Americans today. The recent, explosive, growth in the number of citizens consigned to our nation's prisons and jails—a disproportionate number of whom are from among the poor and minorities—reifies specters of race and class prejudice in new and alarming ways. *Brothers and Keepers* resists this development, and the expanding net of exclusion and socioeconomic disadvantage that flows from it. John Edgar Wideman's text reads as the biblical voice crying in the wilderness of our collective ignorance and indifference, hoping in our attentiveness and responsiveness, and fearing our oblivion.

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